

**Countering Colonial Control: Imagining Environmental Justice and
Reconciliation in Indigenous and Canadian Writer-Activism**

by

Alec Follett

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ABSTRACT

COUNTERING COLONIAL CONTROL: IMAGINING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION IN INDIGENOUS AND CANADIAN WRITER-ACTIVISM

Alec Follett

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Advisor:

Jade Ferguson

This dissertation considers the role of Indigenous knowledge in Joseph Boyden's, Thomas King's, and Rita Wong's counter-discourse to the colonial control over Indigenous peoples' land relations. Boyden, King, and Wong are part of a long history of Canadian and Indigenous writer-activists who have turned to literature to comment on the intertwined social and ecological violences caused by mapping colonial and capitalist relations onto Indigenous land; however, I argue that Boyden's, King's, and Wong's early-twenty-first century writing has been constructed in relation to the notion of reconciliation. As such, their writing not only demonstrates that the recovery and enactment of Indigenous knowledge without interference from state, corporate, or settler actors is a precondition for environmental and epistemological justice, but also that justice requires the participation of non-Indigenous peoples who are willing to partake in non-colonial acts of relation building. In addition, I also address each writer-activist's extra literary efforts—some of which have proved contentious. I argue that studying the strategies and challenges associated with their cultural work is necessary to develop a critical understanding of the complicated and influential figure of the writer-activist. I conduct my analysis, as a white-settler scholar, by turning to environmental justice scholarship, which provides a framework for connecting social and environmental issues, as well as for understanding the function of self-positioning and marginalized knowledges in the justice and research processes. In chapter one, I

consider how Thomas King (Cherokee) offers an intercultural alternative to resource extraction projects that are grounded in Indigenous cultural stories. In chapter two, I read self-proclaimed Indigenous author Joseph Boyden's Mushkegowuk novels (after his fall from stardom) for the way food functions as an accessible but limited means of making legible alternatives to colonial institutions that have controlled Indigenous land relations. In chapter three, I engage with Rita Wong's self-reflexive activism and poetry, in which Wong places knowledge systems in conversation to generate sustainable and equitable intercultural relations with water. In doing so, this dissertation contributes to the study of Canadian environmental literature, which has yet to adequately consider the relationship between activist literature, reconciliation, and environmental injustices affecting Indigenous peoples.

DEDICATION

To Amanda

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Preface

“You smell that?” I holler as sweet warm air pours through the open window of our car. We are travelling north on highway 48, south of Kirkfield, Ontario, toward the Haliburton Highlands. It’s a route we—a group of white settlers—know well.

“That’s sweetgrass.” I bask in the fragrant air.

Not only does sweetgrass provide a pleasant fragrance, but also the plant’s longstanding relationship with Indigenous peoples provides me with a sensory reminder that this is Indigenous land. Pottawatomí biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer explains that the plant—known as Wiingaashk in Anishinaabemowin—is sacred to members of several Indigenous Nations (5). She writes that Wiingaashk “was the first plant to grow on Mother Earth and so we braid it, as if it were our mother’s hair, to show our loving care for her” (263). By braiding the plant, the Anishinabe demonstrate care for Mother Earth and for the plant itself. Kimmerer suggests that “The most vigorous stands are the ones tended by basket makers. Reciprocity is a key to success. When the sweetgrass is cared for and treated with respect, it will flourish, but if the relationship fails, so does the plant” (262).

Is someone tending the bed of Wiingaashk? I hope so.

Although I am not sure if anyone is making braids or baskets from that stand of Wiingaashk, I am aware that the Anishinabe from Williams Treaties communities are harvesting the minomiin, or wild rice, from the lake we see from the road only a few kilometers north of the Wiingaashk stand (Beaver). The Anishinabe have been harvesting rice from Mitchell Lake, and other shallow waters, for as long as they have lived in the region. Local Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg author Leanne Betasamosake Simpson recalls Curve Lake Elder Doug Williams’s stories of the time before cottagers when the Anishinabe created “a tiny canoe path up the centre

of Chemong [Lake] because the rice was so thick and healthy” (“Land”). Healthy minomiin is environmentally beneficial and culturally and physiologically significant to the Anishinabe whose relationship with the grain allowed for “good lives with a beautiful sustainable food system,” explains Simpson. The relationship between the Anishinabe who care for the grain and the grain which nourish the Anishinabe is mutually sustaining and, as Simpson writes, “Songs, stories, and ceremonies ... [are] interwoven with each step” of the cultivation process. Simpson’s writing and the work of fellow Williams Treaties First Nations author Drew Hayden Taylor have been instrumental in helping me better understand why Indigenous peoples desire to enact traditional relationships with the land and how settler colonial practices have controlled and disrupted these traditional relationships.¹

Although the Anishinabe continue to cultivate the grain, this traditional process has become increasingly difficult over the years as more and more settlers who disapprove of

¹ In this dissertation, I use the adjective *traditional* in front of words such as knowledge, practices and land relations in order to indicate those ways of thinking and being that are informed by Indigenous peoples’ longstanding intellectual histories. The recovery, adaptation, and application of these life-sustaining traditional ways of being and thinking are invaluable to contemporary Indigenous peoples and environments, and our collective future. My use of the adjective *traditional* follows Rick Monture (Mohawk) who explains that there are “many Indigenous scholars and thinkers who believe that it is ... vital to return to the intellectual traditions contained in cultural philosophies and to introduce these ideas back into Indigenous communities” (22). While Monture notes that the revival of traditional knowledge that informs traditional land relations is complicated by colonialism (23), traditional knowledge is well suited to overcome this challenge because “change, adaptation, and development” is at the core of Haudenosaunee knowledge (5). As such, Indigenous peoples’ traditional knowledge, practices, and land relations are not static. Rather, as Anishinaabe scholar Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair writes, “cultural adaptability, innovation and growth have always been a tenet of Indigenous culture. How could they have maintained themselves for millennia otherwise?” (47). Consequently, my use of *traditional* is aligned with current fights for Indigenous sovereignty and is in contrast to the colonial use of the term, in which “a modern/traditional binary” occurs, thereby setting Indigenous peoples and their ways of knowing and being in the past (Rifkin 4). This colonial binary is dangerous because it contributes to “the representation of Native peoples as either having disappeared or being remnant on the verge of vanishing [and thus] constitutes one of the principal means of effacing Indigenous sovereignties” (5).

Indigenous cultural practices continue to buy cottages on the lakes. Cultivating minomiin is contentious because, as Taylor writes in the preface to his play on the conflict *Cottagers and Indians*, some settlers believe the plant “hampers swimming, fishing, boating, and property values—all precious assets of the comfortable cottage summer” (ix). Here, Taylor gestures to the longstanding and engrained cultural mores that settlers hold about cottage country as a location made for their enjoyment and for their real-estate investments. Settlers, by and large, have chosen to reinforce Western, capitalist land relations and deem Indigenous land relations as illegitimate. In doing so, settlers have failed to build better relationships with the land and people on whose land they live. And yet, while the environment and Indigenous peoples’ traditional relationships with the land have been harmed, these traditional relationships nevertheless survive through the ever-adaptive development and deployment of longstanding knowledges. Consequently, Indigenous communities, such as the Williams Treaty First Nations, are working to recover and utilize traditional practices as a means of enacting sovereignty and reviving ecosystems.² There are also opportunities for settlers to develop better relationships with Indigenous peoples and with the land. These opportunities begin by learning from the water, plants, and animals, as well as from Indigenous authors and neighbours who generously share their knowledge of the land and hopes for the future.

When we arrive at the cottage, I walk down the hill to the shoreline to check on the plants. We have been planting native flora along the water’s edge in an attempt to revitalize the land that we have disturbed. Recently, we planted joe-pye weed and swamp milkweed or what

² The ways in which Williams Treaty First Nations and many other Indigenous communities are engaging with traditions is not an attempt to be “authentic,” which Mark Rifkin explains “means to preserve forms of tradition that emanate from the past in pristine ways,” thereby being “accorded status as proper Indians” (6). Rather, interactions with traditions are a means of sustaining life.

Anishinaabemowin speakers call bugissawaebugand and bigizoowin (Johnston, *Anishinaubae Thesaurus* 33-4). Embedded in their English names are warnings that these native plants are harmful, unwanted weeds. However, in Anishinaabemowin they are not weeds; rather for the Anishinabe, the plants are relatives each with their own important roles to play. According to Kimmerer, the harm caused to native plants and Indigenous peoples occurred with the advancement of settler occupation of the land: “Plants mirror changes in culture and ownership of land” (261). Perhaps encouraging native plants to return and learning their names in Anishinaabemowin can develop into something more than a simple attempt to stop shoreline erosion. Perhaps, my efforts in this dissertation can make a small contribution to change settler culture from one that has long sought to control the land and make Indigenous knowledge illegitimate to one in which sustainable relationships with the land and respectful relationships with Indigenous peoples and their practices are enacted.

While eating lunch with acquaintances at an academic conference in a big city far from the bugissawaebugand and bigizoowin, I mentioned my relation-building efforts. Responding to my comments about shoreline plants, Métis artist, curator, and critic David Garneau generously suggested that Indigenous and non-Indigenous people should walk the shoreline together. In other words, encouraging native plants to return may be a start, but walking together at land and water’s edge would be a better way for people to build better relationships with the land and with each other, across beings, cultures, histories, and subjectivities.

Like many people who are not native to North America, or what the Anishinabe refer to as Turtle Island, I have a long way to go in my effort to become a better guest on Indigenous land. As a white-settler scholar raised in Southern Ontario in a culture that normalized Eurocentric beliefs and practices and has mapped these beliefs onto Attawandaron,

Anishinaabeg, and Haudenosaunee lands, I have benefited from Eurocentric settler practices and have benefited from my whiteness. And yet, by listening to decolonial and anti-racist scholars, community activists, and writers, I am increasingly aware of the violences that these perspectives and practices enact on the land and on Indigenous and other racialized peoples. I am also increasingly aware of the restrictive and undesirable mode of existence that Eurocentric and settler colonial relations have created. As such, I am taking part in the lifelong process of unlearning these beliefs and practices and I desire to develop practices within and beyond the academy that can contribute to an alternative to settler colonial relations and, to borrow poet-scholar Rita Wong's phrase, "build better relationships than what colonization would consign us to" ("4/4"). Although relation building is a complicated and ongoing practice, especially as settler colonial beliefs and practices continue to cause environmental injustices that harm Indigenous peoples and the land, planting the seeds and tending to these ongoing and emerging relationships is essential to the process of redress and to the flourishing of all peoples and beings. If non-Indigenous peoples who are implicated in settler colonialism are going to build these essential meaningful relationships, then they must learn to listen from their own self-locations to the land and to Indigenous peoples and allies who share stories about how to live well together and the harm that occurs when we fail to do so. It is only in doing so that we might be able to unlearn colonial ways of knowing, protest colonial relations of domination, and contribute to the process of social and environmental justice.

Introduction

Settler colonialism in Canada has long relied on a management regime that aims to control Indigenous peoples' relationships with the land. This "colonial management regime" is rooted in the Eurocentric belief that Indigenous peoples' traditional knowledge and practices are incongruent with the settler state's policies and practices, populations and territories.³ The colonial management regime involves intellectual and material strategies that work to alter and ultimately erase Indigenous peoples' relationship with the land, thereby naturalizing Western, capitalist land relations that benefit settler society while causing environmental harm and perpetuating environmental injustices.⁴ Although the strategies of the colonial management

³ I borrow the phrase "colonial management regime" from Erin Kean. In her dissertation, Kean refers to the attempted settler control of Indigenous peoples as "the colonial management regime," which was "preoccup[ied] with strengthening certain affective bonds of relationality in order to naturalize dominant, Eurocolonial practices of kinship" (ii).

⁴ Adhering to the *Elements of Indigenous Style*, I use the term *Indigenous Peoples* "to refer to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in Canada collectively, and also to refer to Indigenous Peoples worldwide collectively" (Younging 64). I use this increasingly popular term in Canada when "specific identity is not at issue," but when possible I refer to specific Indigenous people and communities by their national affiliation (65); I use "the traditional names of Indigenous Nations (and appropriate spellings)" (71). According to the Martinez Cobo Study's "widely cited working definition of indigenous peoples" (Garret and Kiss 6), which this dissertation follows, "Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems" (qtd. in Garret and Kiss 6).

Settler is an important yet potentially contentious term. Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) defines *settler* as "those peoples and populations not identified as Indigenous, primarily but not exclusively of European heritage, and often representing and furthering the policies, practices, and perspectives of the larger settler state." He also explains that *settler* is often used by academics "not in self-hate but in politicized acknowledgement of the privileged histories they've inherited and the responsibilities in their work" (14). Following Justice, I use the term to describe myself as well as to describe others who uses the term to identify themselves. Drawing

regime is intertwined with government policies and practices, these strategies have received ideological fuel and support from nineteenth- and twentieth-century Canadian literature.

However, Indigenous literature and some Canadian literature, especially texts published in the early twenty-first century, have often provided a counter-discourse to the colonial management regime by depicting the ways in which Indigenous peoples' relationships with "the land" are informed by Indigenous traditional knowledge, spirituality, and customs.⁵

In this dissertation, I argue that through the early twenty-first century, Indigenous and Canadian writers contributed to a literary counter-discourse of the colonial management regime that advocates for ecologically just relationships.⁶ I examine how this counter-discourse engages

on Justice's definition, I also use the term to describe non-Indigenous peoples of European heritage when stressing individuals who support, or are complicit in, the settler state's goals, even if inadvertently. However, even this fairly typical use of the term is complicated by the many Europeans—and white/white-passing people from outside of Europe—who fled conflicts and arrived in Canada as forced immigrants or asylum seekers. Many of these peoples who have been accepted into Canada by the state have not necessarily been accepted culturally or racially by the dominant group of Anglo-, Protestant-, and Northern-European Settlers. And while forced immigrants and asylum seekers make their homes on Indigenous land, some have chosen to orient themselves in relation to Indigenous peoples and struggles, thereby challenging the inevitability of settler colonialism. Consequently, I often use *non-Indigenous peoples* when referring to a diverse group of people in North America who are not Indigenous, especially in situations when I am not making claims about an individual group's relationship with settler colonialism. Part of my decision to use *settler* alongside *non-Indigenous peoples* is also due to a concern that from my position as a white settler, describing peoples of colour as settlers could incorrectly equate complicity in the colonial project and erase difference in experiences and histories (Morgensen). For more on positionality, race, and the term *settler*, see Malissa Phung's "Are People of Colour Settlers Too?" in which she states "what concerns me ... is how we can equate the colonial status of settlers of colour with that of white settlers—how can we talk about settlers in monolithic terms when any non-Indigenous Canadian is not necessarily first and foremost only a settler?" (293).

⁵ In this dissertation, I use *land* as shorthand that refers to the land, water, and air, as well as the non-human beings that inhabit these spaces. When possible, I use more specific descriptors.

⁶ In her work on postcolonial writing, Shehla Burney provides a definition of "counter-discourse" that informs my use of the term. She writes: "a counter discourse in this context is a

with the idea of reconciliation that has emerged in response to the residential school system and its legacy. The reconciliation process began in the late 1990s, after the advocacy of former students resulted in a two-decade-long era in which monetary settlements were issued, initiatives were enacted, apologies and statements were made (Marshall), and non-Indigenous peoples were encouraged to reflect on the legacy of settler colonial violence and work toward developing respectful relationships with Indigenous peoples (*Honouring the Truth* 6).⁷ As such, the counter-discourse has continued to include a critique of the colonial management regime and depictions of environmentally just alternatives in which Indigenous peoples turn to Indigenous knowledge to inform their relationships with the land; however, also included is increased attention to how non-Indigenous peoples might develop relationships with Indigenous peoples and ecologies that support Indigenous peoples' traditional relationships with the land.

form of deep resistance that speaks through creativity, words, and actions, deliberately negating the dominant discourse of colonialism. A counter-discourse is a re-inscription, rewriting and re-presenting in order to reclaim, reaffirm, and retrieve subject peoples' ownership of their own lives, which had been appropriated by the colonizers; it is a discourse that goes against the grain to challenge assumptions of imperial power. A counter-discourse tries to generate new narratives, new paradigms of empowerment and resistance for the oppressed, colonized, and subjectified peoples and nations" (107).

⁷ The state-sponsored reconciliation process began in 1998 with the federal government's "Statement of Reconciliation" that addressed the harm caused by the residential school system; the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (1998), the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (2007), and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2008-2015) followed. Commentators have also generated valuable critiques of reconciliation. Despite moments of optimism surrounding reconciliation and despite involvement from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants, reconciliation has been met with well-thought out critique. Paulette Regan explains that some critics "envision it as a massive public exercise in either inducing or alleviating settler guilt as survivors and former staff members tell their stories. Some fear that survivors' truth telling or public testimony about very personal experiences of abuse, trauma, and grief will simply be consumed by the public as spectacle and will have little real impact on changing Native lives or educating Canadians about the past in a way that achieves social justice or facilitates a just reconciliation" (10).

In this dissertation, I foreground the ways in which the works of Joseph Boyden, Thomas King, and Rita Wong are connected, educated, and informed by a long-standing counter-discourse to the colonial management regime and an awareness of state and corporate despoiling of environments. My analysis of their work engages with Environmental Justice (EJ) scholarship because the field provides a language through which the connections between environmental and social issues are made apparent. Additionally, EJ provides critical strategies of enacting environmental justice through self-positioning and critical engagement with marginalized knowledges. As such, I trace how Boyden, King, and Wong use their self-positioning in their literary and extra-literary efforts to critique the colonial management regime, engage with Indigenous knowledge, and imagine alternative relations beyond the present in which mutually enriching relationships among peoples and environments are normalized.⁸ However, I also acknowledge that this work sometimes proves contentious—especially Boyden’s—and that exploring these challenges and controversies is essential to understanding the role of “writer-activism” in the EJ movement and providing lessons for others who are working to develop better relationships with Indigenous communities.⁹

In chapter one, I focus on how Cherokee author Thomas King uses fiction, history, and autobiography to theorize the role stories play in supporting the colonial management regime and in making legible Indigenous activism and intercultural, environmentally-just alternatives to

⁸ For more on the intellectual roots of environmental crises and how literature can help readers imagine beyond environmental harm, see the introduction to Lawrence Buell’s foundational work of ecocriticism *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*.

⁹ My understanding of *writer-activism* is informed by Rob Nixon’s use of the term to describe a form of activism that emerges through writing that works to expose and redress environmental injustices affecting marginalized communities (5-6).

colonial land relations. In chapter two, I consider the publicly interrogated self-proclaimed Indigenous author Joseph Boyden's relationships with Indigenous communities. These critiques emerged after the publication of his acclaimed Mushkegowuk novels, *Three Day Road* and *Through Black Spruce*, which I analyze for their depiction of residential schools and other forms of colonial management and for how Indigenous foodways are used as an accessible way of introducing non-Indigenous readers to Indigenous communities' traditional relationships with the land. In chapter three, I consider how Rita Wong's activist efforts to stop the colonial management regime are intertwined with her creative and critical writing, in which she turns to water as a way to articulate intercultural relations that involve placing knowledge systems in productive conversations in support of Indigenous peoples' relationships with the land. By focusing on Boyden's, King's, and Wong's efforts to critique and generate alternatives to the colonial management regime that centre Indigenous ecological knowledge, this dissertation contributes to an Indigenous turn in Canadian ecocriticism.

Although "Canadian ecocriticism to date has not focused sufficiently on indigenous texts and contexts" (Soper and Bradley xli), some ecocritics have produced important works on Indigenous writing and contexts; for example, see Tania Aguila-Way's *Fraught Epistemologies: Bioscience, Community, and Environment in Diasporic Canadian Literature*, Jenny Kerber's *Writing in Dust: Reading the Prairie Environmentally*, Cheryl Lousley's "'Hosanna, Da, Our Home on Natives' Land': Environmental Justice and Democracy in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*," and Rita Wong's "DecolonizAsian: Reading Asian and First Nations Relations in Literature." Also see writing in *The Goose: A Journal of Arts, Environment, and Culture in Canada*, which I have been honoured to co-edit since 2017 alongside Amanda M. Di Battista and Melanie Dennis Unrau, and which has published reviews on Indigenous authors and creative

writing that engages with Indigenous contexts. Moreover, some Canadian ecocritics have called on the field to better address its settler roots and listen to Indigenous communities. For example, Pamela Banting asks her colleagues to consider how the field is “imbued with ‘settler’ ideology, investments, and blindspots and in what ways those colonial assumptions may be addressed” (746), whereas Richard Pickard asks his colleagues to consider “what future do you want for yourself and your family, for your community, and for the Indigenous community or communities displaced in the settlement of this place? Perhaps most importantly, what do those communities want for themselves?” (325). Consequently, my work in this dissertation is influenced by the important, albeit not sustained or sufficient, ecocritical work on Indigenous authors and contexts and decolonial interventions into the field.

The Colonial Management Regime, Land, and Literature

In this section, I adapt Erin Kean’s formulation of the colonial management regime’s effect on kinship to the regime’s effect on relationships with the land: just as the colonial management regime works to “naturalize dominant, Eurocolonial practices of kinship” (ii), so too does the regime work to naturalize common Western relationships to the land. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the colonial management regime employed various strategies to control, intervene, and ultimately erase Indigenous peoples’ relationships with the land and naturalize Western capitalist land use through the dispossession, relocation, and education of Indigenous peoples as part of the settler state’s assimilationist policies that amounted to cultural genocide.¹⁰

¹⁰ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada describes Canada’s policies on Indigenous peoples as “cultural genocide”: cultural genocide is defined in the report as “the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group” (*Honouring* 1).

The colonial management of Indigenous peoples' relationships has not only worked to sever their relationship with the land but has also enacted violent environmental harms on the land and Indigenous peoples. For example, Cree activist and Greenpeace Canada campaigner Melina Laboucan Massimo explains how the oil industry has disrupted the Loubicon Cree's traditional land relation and caused physical harm to community members and the land. She states: "What we see is our way of life being replaced by industrial landscapes, polluted and drained watersheds, and contaminated air" (82). Community members are "getting sick": their eyes are "burning," they have "headaches," and they are "feeling noxious" (83). For Laboucan Massimo, extraction of resources—at the expense of the land as well as Indigenous peoples' land relations and health—"is very much a symptomatic problem that we see happening in a lot of Indigenous communities across Canada" (82). Attending to the colonial management regime's effect on Indigenous relations with and responsibilities for the land, Thomas King writes, "Land has always been a defining element of Aboriginal culture." "Land contains the languages, the stories, and the histories of people. It provides water, air, shelter, and food. Land participates in the ceremonies and the songs. And land is home," King explains. This conception of land stands in contrast to ideas of "non-Natives, [where] land is primarily a commodity ..." (*Inconvenient* 218). "Furthermore, when Euro-Western social and political theory is coupled with Christian religious beliefs that empower human domination over all things," write Wong and Christian, "it becomes apparent that [Euro-Western approaches to land are] antithetical to the Indigenous ways of seeing, doing, acting, and listening on the land" (3). Indigenous and settler societies have significant yet divergent relationships with the land that have resulted in land being a primary and longstanding source of conflict on Turtle Island.

In what follows, I construct a brief literary history of the colonial management regime and its alternatives through references to early Canadian and Indigenous writers, who have depicted and commented on the regime in ways that have produced ideological support for or counter-discourse to the regime. I do so because literature provides a means of organizing existence, thereby revealing a given culture's understanding of land relations. For example, in his discussion of early Canadian writing William H. New states that land-related "literary conventions ... came to influence community attitudes" and that "literary images of land conventionalize[d]—or 'map[ped]'—presumptions of power" (73). For New, early Canadian literature regularly worked to legitimate settler mapping, clearing, and ownership of the land (73). As such, critical attention to early Canadian and Indigenous literature makes clear the normalized settler attitudes towards the environment and Indigenous peoples while also demonstrating that such common-place settler beliefs were also contested in the literary realm by Indigenous authors.

The early-nineteenth-century writings of Anna Brownell Jameson and Bemwegiizhigokwe (Jane Johnston Schoolcraft) depict the colonial management regime as an in-development and contested project that was working to control Indigenous peoples' relationship with the land through material and discursive processes. In *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada* (1838), Jameson writes about her yearlong travels through present-day Ontario, including a meeting she attended on Manitoulin Island between leaders of Anishnaabe communities and Chief Superintendent of Indian Affairs for Upper Canada, Samuel Peters Jarvis. Jameson recalls Jarvis's proposal to turn the island into a permanent settlement for the Anishinaabe communities who lived on the mainland. Jarvis told the Anishnaabe that if they "cultivate the soil with only moderate industry, and exert yourselves to obtain fish, you can never

want” (504). Jameson gives support for the proposal, providing proof that the land is arable; “As far as I can judge,” writes Jameson, the plan is “benevolent and *justifiable*” (497).¹¹ Jarvis’s and Jameson’s belief in the proposal exemplifies how the colonial management attempts to alter Indigenous ways of thinking about the land.

Shortly after her visit to Manitoulin Island and the nearby settlement of Sault Ste. Marie, Jameson met her friends American Indian agent Henry Rowe Schoolcraft and his wife Bemwewegiizhigokwe (Irish-Ojibwe). The Schoolcrafts were involved in a disagreement regarding their children’s education. The idea that Indigenous children should be sent to boarding school began in Upper Canada during the 1820s and gained increasing support through the nineteenth century (Hutchings 302). Around 1839, Bemwewegiizhigokwe responded to her husband’s decision to send their children to boarding school with a poem written in Anishinaabemowin. In his analysis of the poem, Kevin Hutchings highlights how Bemwewegiizhigokwe and her children’s land-based identity were harmed through “their displacement to distant shores and immersion in a foreign culture” (301-03). However, when Henry Rowe Schoolcraft translated the poem to English, he added a phrase that provided acceptance of the children’s enrolment in an American boarding school that reads: “duty commands me, and duty must sway” (qtd. in Hutchings 302). Hutchings explains that “the maternal speaker’s ultimate willingness to sacrifice her own emotional wellbeing for the sake of ‘duty’ would have been regarded as an admirable, if highly affective, affirmation of immersive forms of colonial pedagogy” (302). As such, Schoolcraft’s editing of the poem reveals how

¹¹ Here, Jameson is participating in the longstanding Canadian settler view that intervention into Indigenous practices is a benevolent duty. For more on this belief, see Chapter 3, “Deconstructing Canada’s Peacemaker Myth,” of Paulette Regan’s *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada*.

agents of the settler state participated in the colonial management regime's efforts to justify the harm accompanying the destruction of Indigenous children's relationship to the land through relocation and enrolment in Western-style schools. Read together, Jameson's and Bemwewegiizhigokwe's writings depict how the colonial management regime was increasingly interested in expediting the assimilation process and how the regime turned to education to achieve its goal.

While early manifestations of the colonial management regime worked to assimilate Indigenous peoples by sending children to boarding schools and by moving Indigenous communities to reserves, the regime gradually intervened more forcefully into Indigenous knowledge to achieve its assimilationist goals, a process that Marie Battiste (Mi'kmaw) calls "cognitive imperialism." Battiste states that cognitive imperialism occurs when "Eurocentric educational, legal, and social systems have induced a collective amnesia that alienates Indigenous people from their knowledge, their elders, from their linguistic consciousness, from their land and spiritual connections, and from the meaning and order of their world ("Cognitive Imperialism" xix). Marie Battiste and James (Sákéj) Youngblood Henderson (Chickasaw) describe Indigenous knowledge as "the expression of the vibrant relationships between people, their ecosystems, and other living beings and spirits that share their lands" (42). The land, or "the present structure of the local ecosystem[,] is the cumulative result of a large number of historical contracts, which create reciprocal obligations of kinship and solidarity among all the species and forces which co-exist in that place" (45).

As expressions of Indigenous peoples' relationships, responsibilities, and kinship with the land, Indigenous knowledge presents an obstacle to settler colonial societies that, as Kyle Powys Whyte (Pottawatomi) argues, seek to naturalize their relationships to the land in order to make

“their own homeland in the homeland of another society” (171). Throughout the early nineteenth century, the colonial management regime exerted more control over Indigenous knowledge in order to assimilate Indigenous peoples, which would benefit settlers who were working to make Turtle Island their homeland. The colonial management regime continued in this knowledge-centred assimilationist fashion in the early years of Confederation, guided by Prime Minister John A. Macdonald who described Indigenous peoples as “incapable of the management of their own affairs” (qtd. in Canada, *Debate* 200), and culminated in the residential school system.¹²

Rick Monture (Mohawk) explains that at the turn of the century the Canadian government pointed to Six Nations as a model example of the colonial management regime’s ability to instill Western agricultural knowledge in Indigenous communities; however, in making their self-congratulatory statements government agents ignored that the Haudenosaunee people had been farming for centuries (86). E. Pauline Johnson/Tekahionwake (Mohawk and British), who was one of the better known poets of her generation, often wrote poetry that supported assimilation, but occasionally her poetry critiqued the settler state’s approach to Indigenous

¹² The management of Indigenous peoples was refined through a series of post-confederation acts including An Act for the Gradual Enfranchisement of Indians, the Better Management of Indian Affairs (1869), the Indian Acts (1876 and 1880), and the Indian Advancement Act (1884). John S. Milloy explains that these acts were developed upon the notion that as the Canadian settler state grew, Indigenous peoples would forego their culture to become ‘civilized’ (21). He explains that this assimilationist process “would be an unchanging federal determination, justified in the minds of Confederation policy makers and successive generations of politicians and Departmental officials by their sincere, Christian certainty that the nation’s duty to the original people of the land was to prepare them ‘for a higher civilization by encouraging’ them ‘to assume the privileges and responsibilities of full citizenship’” (20-1). For Milloy, the most “ambitious” and “central” effort to assimilate Indigenous peoples that emerged from the late nineteenth century was the residential school system (21-2).

peoples (84).¹³ For example, “The Corn Husker” (1903) demonstrates how Indigenous peoples retained and expressed their traditional relationships to the land. The short poem depicts a Haudenosaunee woman husking corn. For Monture, corn farming in this poem does not symbolize successful assimilation. He writes,

By using the metaphor of corn and the harvest, Johnson has invoked one of the foundational themes of Haudenosaunee cosmology. Not only do the Haudenosaunee view corn as a spiritual gift that sustains life, but it is also recognized as representative of the reproductive power of women, as one kernel of corn planted as seed can create endlessly more in the future Therefore ... it can also be read as one of empowerment and endurance, testament to the idea that elements of culture continue to exist.... (87)

For Monture, the poem depicts the continuation of Haudenosaunee knowledge and relationships with corn as a being that supports life as well as the continuation of the Haudenosaunee people. From a Haudenosaunee perspective, corn cannot be reduced to a commodity, instead it is a gift. Consequently, Johnson provides a literary counter-discourse to the colonial management regime by advocating for the ongoing expression of Indigenous agricultural knowledge.

Johnson’s “The Corn Husker” demonstrates that Indigenous knowledge and relationships persisted in spite of the colonial management regime; however, during the same era, Duncan Campbell Scott, the Deputy superintendent at the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA), worked fervently to erase Indigenous knowledge and relationships with the land. Scott enacted the colonial management regime’s assimilationist mandate to make Indigenous knowledge illegitimate and naturalize Western knowledge. He often wrote about Indigenous peoples; in

¹³ See Monture’s reading of Johnson’s “Canadian Born” for a more detailed discussion of Johnson’s pro-assimilation views.

some works, he depicted Indigenous parents as incapable of caring for their children, and represented Indigenous cultural practices as primitive, archaic customs. According to Julia A. Boyd's reading of Scott's representation of Indigenous children, Scott constructed a "*fiction of neglect*" in which Indigenous parents were unable to care for their children who were harmed by their "inherently violent Indigenous community" and their "flawed Indigenous identity" (144; italics in original). While Boyd emphasizes Scott's depiction of children, Lisa Salem-Wiseman focuses on his depiction of Indigenous culture. She argues that Scott's poetry and fiction often portray Indigenous peoples in ways that express his beliefs that Indigenous cultures have become irrelevant and thus "Native people must collectively abandon their cultural traditions and accept the customs, religion, and values of the dominant society in order to survive" (125). In her reading of Scott's late poem "Powassan's Drum" (1905), in which a Cree drummer conjures a headless person, Salem-Wiseman proposes that the poem demonstrates his concern that Indigenous practices were "a threat to the necessary 'civilization' and assimilation of Native peoples" (129). By depicting Indigenous communities and cultural practices as outdated and insufficient, Scott diminished Indigenous peoples whose lives were informed by Indigenous knowledge. In doing so, his writing helped support the colonial management regime's assimilationist goals.

Scott's poetry aligned with the assimilationist policies he was enforcing and creating as an influential member of the DIA. As Boyd explains, Scott's literary work produced an "ideologically ... subtle and insidious" parallel to his explicit assimilationist work at the DIA (158-59).¹⁴ Scott spent his entire bureaucratic career at the DIA, promoted to Superintendent of

¹⁴ By connecting Scott's writing to his role in the DIA, Boyd and Salem-Wiseman participate in recent critiques of Scott's scholarship that tried to separate his poetry from his bureaucratic

Education prior to holding the highest position in the department, Deputy Superintendent General, between 1913 and 1932 (Boyd 143). He used his authority as Superintendent General to enforce bans on illegal dances and potlatches (Titley 174,176). The outlawing of Indigenous cultural practices resulted in punishment at residential schools (Younging, “Gnartas Nullius” 131), which children were forced to attend after Scott made attendance mandatory in his 1920 amendment to the Indian Act (Titley 90). The residential schools ran from the early 1830s to the late 1990s and created conditions in which children were forced to help with the schools’ upkeep and faced physical and sexual abuse (*Honouring* 3, 73); as Omushkego historian and storyteller Louis Bird states, they also attempted to “detach the young people from the love of land” (*Telling Our Stories* 236). By punishing Indigenous peoples for expressions of Indigenous knowledge, their practices and ways of knowing were made illegitimate, and by extension so too were their relationships with the land.

Rendering Indigenous knowledge illegitimate, the residential school system then worked to instil in their students Western knowledge and practices. The schools “indoctrinate[ed] children into a new culture—the culture of the legally dominant Euro-Christian Canadian society” (*Honouring* v). The Euro-Christian settler culture that the schools were working to naturalize was a capitalist, industrial order that turned the land into a resource. Within the industrial order, trees became lumber, land became farms, rivers were dammed, and rocks and minerals were mined. Gregory Younging (Cree) explains how the schools worked to make Indigenous knowledge and relationships to the land illegitimate and make natural Western knowledges and practices that were congruent with the modern industrial era. He states:

position. Salem-Wisemen, Boyd, and the CanLit Guides’ entry on “Poetry and Racialization” rehearse the changing critical reception of Scott’s literary works.

The overriding goal of the IRS system was to divest Indigenous Peoples of their TK [traditional knowledge], and thereby their attachment to (and knowledge related to) their Territories forevermore within a few generations Resetting the child's cultural clock from the "savage" setting—the seasonal round of hunting and gathering—to the hourly and daily precision required by an industrial order was seen by the Department of Indian Affairs as an issue of primary consideration. ("Gnartas Nullius" 132)

Here, Younging draws attention to the residential schools' all-encompassing effort to indoctrinate children. Even Indigenous conceptions of time as cyclical, land-centred, and storied—that Mark Rifkin would describe "as overlapping networks of affective connection (to persons, nonhuman entities, and place) that orient one's way of moving through space and time"—were attacked (46). Consequently, Indigenous time was replaced with civil (or clock) time, which served the industrial, capitalist order. While Scott enacted and enforced assimilation policies through changes to the legal and education system, his beliefs in Indigenous inferiority were reinforced in his literary works that depicted Indigenous peoples as believers in obsolete knowledges and practices and in need of government management.

The colonial management regime's attempt to erase Indigenous knowledge and naturalize a Western understanding of the land as a commodity not only caused immense social damage to Indigenous communities and children, but also caused environmental harm and environmental injustices. Whyte explains that settlers' commitments to capitalism and their unfamiliarity with the lands they have invaded results in environmental destruction. In the contemporary era, environmental harm is caused by "deforestation, extraction, water and air pollution, commodity agriculture, urban sprawl, widespread automobile adoption and so on" (171-72). Some of these contemporary issues such as deforestation began during the nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries. The early environmental issues that occurred because of the naturalization of settler relationships with the land also harmed Indigenous peoples who, as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) reminds, “continue[d] to exist” despite assimilationist policies (*Honouring* 6). Indigenous peoples were and “are put particularly at risk relative to privileged settler populations” (Whyte 158). Because the experience of environmental harm disproportionately affects Indigenous peoples, it can be understood as an environmental injustice, which David Pellow defines simply as “the disproportionate burden of environmental harm facing ... people from communities of color, indigenous communities, and working-class communities” (2).¹⁵ However, for Whyte environmental injustices also manifest when Indigenous peoples are unable “to experience themselves in the world as having responsibilities to other humans, nonhumans and the environment” (158). This type of injustice occurs when the environments that Indigenous peoples are responsible to become harmed, but it also occurs when the colonial management regime disrupts the traditional knowledge that makes possible responsible relationships with the land. As such, the residential school and its legacy of intergenerational harm can be understood as contributing to historic and contemporary environmental injustices.

Analysing the colonial management regime’s role in producing environmental injustices is useful because it provides a way of drawing attention to the notion that management was not only a project that caused social harm but was also a project that caused environmental harm.

¹⁵ The environmental justice movement emerged in the early 1980s when an African American community from Warren County, North Carolina challenged government policy and industry that planned to dump toxic waste near their home. The movement has developed into a decentralized, transnational, grassroots, and scholarly undertaking that has worked toward goals related to the notion that no community should face an uneven burden of environmental harm. For more on the history of the environmental justice movement and its aims see Chapter one, “Environmental Justice in the Twenty-First Century,” of Robert D. Bullard’s *The Quest for Environmental Justice: Human Rights and the Politics of Pollution*.

Making visible the intertwined social and environmental harm caused by the colonial management regime is necessary because the wellbeing of the land is inextricably tied to the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples. Making visible the environmental injustices that accompany the colonial management regime is also useful because it challenges the mainstream environmental movement and its academic counterpart ecocriticism, which have not adequately understood or addressed environmental issues affecting Indigenous peoples. The mainstream environmental movement and ecocriticism have failed to do so because they regularly rely on Western notions of wilderness and nature that separate people from the environment and erase Indigenous presence.¹⁶ To make clear and obvious that environmental and social harms are interconnected and that Indigenous peoples have been and continue to be disproportionately affected is an important step in mobilizing the mainstream environmental movement and ecocriticism to engage with Indigenous environmental issues and to support Indigenous communities affected by environmental injustices.

By the time the celebrated environmentalist Farley Mowat published his first book *People of the Deer* (1952), the Canadian government was five years into a forty-year long process of dismantling the residential school system (Milloy 189). However, the colonial management regime was still enacted, albeit in different ways, as Mowat's book demonstrates.

Mowat's *People of the Deer* was inspired by his travels to present-day Nunavut as a field

¹⁶ Richard Pickard argues that ecocritics have “a relatively stable vocabulary” that includes “talking about nature and wilderness as general concepts” (322). For Pickard this vocabulary is problematic because it perpetuates “settler-colonial discourse” (322). The mainstream environmental movement also relies on the same settler discourse for talking about the environment, which is believed to be a “distant, uninhabited wilderness” (Gosine and Teelucksingh 11). The movement's focus on wilderness and “protecting plants and animals” that inhabit these unpeopled places, as Andil Gosine and Cheryl Teelucksingh explain, has obscured Indigenous peoples' presence on the land, thereby supporting the settler colonial project.

researcher where he learned of the Ihalmiut (or Ahiarmiut Inuit) who were facing famine due to the destruction of the caribou. Mowat explains that settler trappers located to the south killed caribou excessively to use as bait for their traps and traders encouraged the nearby Idthen Eldeli (or Denésoliné) to overhunt while the Canadian government encouraged the Denésoliné communities to “learn the arts of ‘conservation’” (79). Here, the state participated in the colonial management regime by attempting to limit Denésoliné hunting, at the same time that individual settlers were promoting overhunting. This conflicting attempt to manage the Denésoliné’s relationship with the land that occurred alongside the settler trappers’ wanton killing of caribou, resulted in fewer caribou migrating north to where the Ahiarmiut lived. The state’s mid-century management of Indigenous peoples’ hunting practices in the name of conservation was not limited to the Denésoliné people: in her memoir *Halfbreed*, Maria Campbell (Métis) describes how her father was arrested for hunting in the national park near their Saskatchewan home (54).¹⁷ However, unlike Campbell’s father who continued to hunt despite the settler state’s interference, Mowat proposed an assimilationist plan to help the Ahiarmiut who were facing an environmental injustice caused by the disproportionate harm they felt due to the death of the caribou.

Mowat’s plan argues that the government should introduce European reindeer that would be farmed by the Ahiarmiut for sustenance, and as a commodity would require the Ahiarmiut to change their relationships to the land. Mowat believed that “They cannot, as some

¹⁷ The colonial management regime’s legal control over Indigenous peoples’ hunting practices were acts of cultural and cognitive violence, but it also created situations in which Indigenous women faced sexual violence from authorities with little recourse. In excised paragraphs of Campbell’s manuscript for *Halfbreed*, which were recovered by Deanna Reder (Cree-Métis) and Alix Shield, Campbell recounts that she was raped by an R.C.M.P. officer who arrived at her house to search for meat that her father had poached and was persuaded from telling anyone by her grandmother who expressed that the courts would not believe Métis people (17).

sentimentalists would suggest, be left forever in their present state, anachronisms preserved as curiosities in a foreign world” (333). Although Mowat’s proposed plan was in response to an environmental injustice affecting the Ahiamut people, his suggestions to further manage the Ahiamut people’s relationship with the land would cause a secondary type of environmental injustice in the form of disrupting their interspecies responsibilities. While on the surface Mowat’s plan demonstrates some sensitivity to Indigenous cultural practices because European reindeer are similar to the native caribou, his proposal that the imported reindeer be farmed while native caribou be ignored breaks the Ahiamut people’s responsibilities and relationships to the caribou and requires their new relationship with the European reindeer as one informed by a capitalist rather than an Indigenous perspective.

Mowat’s plan never came to fruition, but the state relocated the Ahiamut people as part of the ongoing colonial management regime, thereby disrupting their responsibilities to the land, especially for those who were moved from the inland to the Hudson Bay coast where they were “treated like outsiders, losing their dialect and having to adapt to new foods and cultural practices” (“Dark Chapter in Our History”).¹⁸ Not only does environmental justice scholarship help explain the types of harms faced by the Ahiamut people, but it also elucidates why the colonial management regime fails to help Indigenous peoples, even when informed by environmental awareness and benevolent desires. Indigenous environmental justice scholars argue that “The prescriptive solutions of an expert, activist, or researcher not from the

¹⁸ Mowat’s arguments had an impact on the Ahiamut people: Journalist Tim Querengesser reflects on Mowat’s critically acclaimed book, which he explains caused readers to voice calls to “Save the Inuit!” and the House of Commons to debate its accuracy. The public response to *People of the Deer* contributed to government action in the form of relocation (Querengesser)—a disastrous undertaking that did not involve community consultation, which ultimately resulted in a government apology and monetary settlement in 2019 thanks to Inuit Elder David Serkoak’s advocacy (“Dark Chapter in Our History”).

community suffering from environmental injustice may reproduce or magnify existing iniquities” and that affected communities must be able to participate in decisions regarding changes to their existence (Haluza-DeLay et al. 5-6, 9). As such, from an environmental justice perspective, the Ahiamut people and their traditional knowledges should have been at the centre of the problem solving of the caribou crisis.

These early writers, especially Johnson and Campbell, influenced the growing field of Indigenous authors that emerged in the late twentieth century who continued to write about their relationships to the land.¹⁹ In the introduction to his anthology of contemporary Indigenous literature *All My Relations* (1990), Thomas King frames the stories through the widespread Indigenous phrase “all my relations.” King explains that “all my relations” refers to kinship, human and otherwise, and serves as an “encouragement for us to accept the responsibilities we have within this universal family by living our lives in a harmonious and moral manner” (ix).²⁰ By drawing attention to Indigenous knowledge, beliefs, and practices and the importance of relationships and responsibilities, King demonstrates how late-twentieth-century Indigenous authors continued to generate alternatives to settler land use and the colonial management regime. While environmental justice is a late-twentieth-century movement, “There *have been* environmental justice movements in Canada for centuries” enacted by Indigenous peoples (Haluza-DeLay et al. 2; italics in original), albeit under different circumstances and names.

¹⁹ Reder writes that “Campbell inspired a generation of Indigenous writers to tell their own stories.” Describing Campbell’s impact on this generation of Indigenous writers, “Delaware playwright Daniel David Moses called her ‘the Mother of Us All’” (Reder and Shield 14).

²⁰ For more on the central role of relationships in Indigenous literature see the preface to Daniel Heath Justice’s *Why Indigenous Literature Matters*, in which he argues “that relationship is the driving impetus behind the vast majority of texts by Indigenous writers” (xix).

Indigenous writers such as Bemwewegiizhigokwe, Johnson, and Campbell have advocated for actions that bear resemblance to contemporary environmental justice activism, such as arguing for the continuation of Indigenous knowledge and relationships with the land. In doing so, they have provided an Indigenous, land-based counter-discourse to the colonial management regime that was reinforced by early Canadian writing. Consequently, Canadian literature was an important site through which the colonial management regime and its alternatives have been debated. Through my readings of the writers in this section, I have worked to demonstrate that the human and material effects of colonial management on Indigenous peoples' relationships with the land caused environmental harm, and served the state's developing assimilationist policies and desires to naturalize capitalist and industrial relationships with the land. I have also worked to demonstrate the literary counter-discourse to the colonial management regime that was constructed by Indigenous writers.

Although assimilationist policies were abandoned by the early twenty-first century, the colonial management regime continued into the new century by developing alongside government policies that encouraged neoliberal forms of Indigenous self-government. Authors continued to generate a counter-discourse to the colonial management regime by interrogating the legacy of the assimilationist colonial management regime and by challenging contemporary forms of management. However, the counter-discourse generated by Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers in the opening decades of the new millennium was often constructed in relation to the truth and reconciliation process. The emergence of reconciliation saw increased public attention to the history of the residential school system and increased effort placed on relation building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Consequently, as I discuss in the following sections, recent literature that depicts and critiques the colonial management

regime and the environmental injustices it produces often does so with increased attention to re-imagining the type of relationships, often intercultural, that might allow Indigenous peoples to recover from a legacy of assimilationist management, challenge contemporary forms of colonial management, and enact traditional relationships with the land.

Colonial Management, Neoliberalism, and Reconciliation

In this section, I first discuss the contemporary colonial management regime. I propose that although the Canadian government's policies have shifted during the latter part of the twentieth century from assimilationist to acknowledging Indigenous peoples' right to self-govern, the management of Indigenous peoples' relationships to land has continued. While the early colonial management regime reinforced the state's assimilationist policies, as exemplified in the previous section, here I argue that the contemporary colonial management regime is not interested in assimilating Indigenous peoples. Rather, the contemporary colonial management regime acknowledges that Indigenous peoples and their governments are distinct from Canadians and the settler state, yet the regime attempts to inform expressions of self-government and Indigenous knowledge so that these acts align with neoliberal practices and the continuance of settler colonialism and capitalism. I then demonstrate that reconciliation coincides with the emergence of the federal government's shift to Indigenous self-government. I argue that although reconciliation is about relation building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, as well as Indigenous Nations and the settler state, reconciliation can be used as a way for state and corporate actors to facilitate contemporary forms of the colonial management regime unless conversations about land are made central to the reconciliation process.

Despite the federal government's policy shift in the 1990s away from assimilation and toward Indigenous self-government, the colonial management regime has persisted into the

twenty-first century.²¹ In 1995, the state acknowledged that “Indigenous peoples have an inherent right of self-government” (“Self-government”). The federal government describes self-government as a process in which Indigenous governments are given control over how to support their communities:

Negotiated agreements put decision-making power into the hands of Indigenous governments who make their own choices about how to deliver programs and services to their communities. This can include making decisions about how to better protect their culture and language, educate their students, manage their own lands and develop new business partnerships that create jobs and other benefits for their citizens. (“Self-government”)

The state made an unequivocal shift away from over a century of assimilationist policy that was informed by the notion that Indigenous peoples were “incapable of the management of their own affairs” (Canada, *Debate* 200). In the era of self-government that allows Indigenous peoples to “manage their own lands” (“Self-government”), and thus how they relate to the land, the Canadian government has also returned other land-related rights to Indigenous peoples, albeit sometimes reluctantly. For example, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes how Williams

²¹ Alison Taylor and Tracy Friedel explain that the Canadian government’s 1969 White Paper aimed to assimilate Indigenous peoples by repealing the Indian Act and fully incorporating Indigenous peoples into the Canadian body politic. The rescinded White Paper marked the end of assimilationist policies and the beginning of a new era in Indigenous-settler state relations, which “since the early 1990s has been described as shaped by a ‘conditional autonomy’ model” that acknowledges Indigenous peoples have the right to a form of self-government that adheres to the Canadian constitution (816-17). The period of self-government has continued into the late 2010s. In 2019 “The first-ever Métis self-governance agreements have been signed [on June 27] with the federal government marking a significant step toward independence and self-determination for a prominent group of Canada’s Indigenous peoples” (Galloway).

Treaty First Nations recently won a long court battle for their rights to harvest on treaty land.²² With these newly recovered rights, Williams Treaty First Nations began to reassert their traditional relationships with the land by harvesting minomiin (wild rice), which Simpson describes as “a cornerstone of Mississauga Nishnaabeg governance, economy, and well-being” (“Land”).

In response to increased harvesting of minomiin on Pigeon Lake, a group of settlers enacted a form of colonial management that sought to disrupt Williams Treaty First Nations’ traditional relationships with the land and rice. Simpson explains that a group of local cottage-owning settlers received approval from Trent-Severn Waterway and Parks Canada to remove minomiin in spite of the government’s court approval to harvest the grain.²³ For Simpson, this recent conflict is one of many examples in a long history of settler and state interference with Williams Treaty First Nations’ relationships with the land that has included dispossession of Indigenous land and destruction of the environment (“Land”). The connection Simpson forges between historic acts of colonial violence and contemporary actions of rice-removing settlers is useful because it suggests that these settlers’ actions are motivated by the same beliefs that motivated them in the past. As such, embedded in the settlers’ efforts to remove minomiin and thereby Indigenous presence on the lake is a desire for an assimilationist past that saw Indigenous practices and knowledges as illegal, or at very least illegitimate, and therefore not threatening to the continuation of settler society. Consequently, their effort to manage Indigenous

²² Harvesting rights were taken in 1923 and were reinstated in 2012 (“About Williams Treaties First Nations”).

²³ See Drew Hayden Taylor’s article “Wild Rice Fight: Cottagers Versus Indians” for more on this conflict, which he describes as “a battle of aesthetics versus culture, native subsistence over property rights, Muskoka chairs over Indigenous pilaf. At its heart is a fundamentally different view of what is important on a cultural level.”

relationships with the land out of existence can be read as an attempt to perpetuate their settler homeland in an era when settler occupation as self-evident and legitimate is increasingly called into question, due in part to the state's decision to abandon assimilationist policy and acknowledge Indigenous peoples' rights to self-govern and enact traditional relationships with the land.

While some settlers are enacting forms of management that bear resemblance to early assimilationist efforts to erase Indigenous practice, corporate actors are generating forms of the colonial management regime that align with the Canadian government's acknowledgement of Indigenous peoples' right to self-government. Rather than attempting to assimilate Indigenous peoples into Canada, this new manifestation of the colonial management regime instead aims to convince Indigenous peoples to participate in the neoliberal order, *as* Indigenous peoples. Within this form of neoliberal colonial management, Indigenous peoples' relationships with the land are managed by corporations that offer Indigenous people economic opportunities such as jobs and training, and disposable income, in exchange for the development of and resource extraction from their land. For example, since the recent arrival of the oil industry in Northern Alberta many Indigenous peoples have started to work in oil and related fields and fewer are practicing traditional relationships with the land (Taylor and Friedel 823). Some Indigenous peoples in the region are passionate supporters of tar sands extraction such as those who rallied in Lac La Biche in 2019 to fight for the industry. For these supporters, the industry has provided opportunities that have resulted in increased individual wealth and health, as well as a strong economy that benefits everyone (Stewart). Others such as Kevin Marten (Mikisew Cree First Nation) who works as an environmental monitor has found a way to work in the industry while also holding

corporations accountable (Thurton).²⁴ Development opportunities have thus engendered a variety of stances that have resulted in complicated conversations among community members regarding definitions of wellbeing and what their collective future might hold.²⁵ These conversations are not interrupted or made illegitimate by the oil industry; however, the industry attempts to garner Indigenous peoples' support by offering economic opportunity while also allowing traditional relationships with the land to exist as secondary to, or complementary to, capitalist land relations.

The neoliberal colonial management regime is supported by government policy. Although government policy now acknowledges Indigenous self-government, Alison Taylor and Tracy Friedel explain that since the 1990s, the federal policy regarding Indigenous peoples has “focus[ed] on economic development and limited forms of self-government” and has been

²⁴ Environmental monitoring in the tar sands has long been sought after. For example, in 2010 after an abundance of deformed fish were found in Lake Athabasca, “a broad coalition of aboriginal communities, scientists, fishermen and local politicians asked the Canadian government ... to fund a comprehensive fish monitoring program on rivers and lakes downstream of the controversial oil/tar sands” (Nikiforuk). In 2017 the federal and provincial government instituted the Oil Sands Monitoring Program, which aims to contribute to the government’s “responsible and effective management” of this “strategic natural resource and ... key driver of economic growth” (Canada, *Oil Sands Monitoring Program* 7). The program seeks to do so through “increased collaboration with representatives from local Indigenous communities” (15).

²⁵ See Warren Cariou (Métis) and Neil McArthur’s film *Land of Oil and Water* for additional discussion regarding the conversations community members are having in response to the development opportunities and environmental destruction caused by tar sands extraction. As representatives of their communities, Indigenous leaders often have a complicated relationship to development opportunities. For example, in response to potential LNG (liquefied natural gas) and hydroelectric projects in northern British Columbia, chief Roland Willson of the West Moberly First Nation explains that he is not opposed to development; however, citing environmental impact and disregard for treaty rights, he has argued “they can’t have both” projects (qtd. in Moore).

influenced by the neoliberal belief in economic opportunities for the individual (818-19).²⁶

Premier of Alberta Jason Kenney exemplifies the role that government plays in the neoliberal colonial management regime. In a statement on National Indigenous Peoples Day, Kenney celebrates traditional relationships with the land that are informed by Indigenous knowledge while attempting to incorporate these relationships into the state's capitalist, resource-reliant economic goals:

we are partnering with Indigenous Peoples to secure economic opportunity, through such initiatives as the Indigenous Opportunities Corporation. This is not only an economic imperative, but a moral obligation.

The first entrepreneurs in this land were the Indigenous Peoples. They were the first trading people. The first use of bitumen in Alberta was to seal the canoes that went up and down the river system trading from nation to nation. That spirit of enterprise still beats deeply in the hearts of our First Nations Peoples.

Alberta's government is committed to a path of reconciliation and shared prosperity, in the spirit of the treaties, with First Nations, Inuit and Métis people. We have a vision for a better future in which Indigenous Peoples have a clear path to economic success and prosperity. (qtd. in "National Indigenous Peoples Day")

Kenney, the pro-oil United Conservative Party leader, depicts Indigenous peoples' traditional relationships with the land as inherently economic and thus compatible with the dominant settler,

²⁶ The connections between economic development and self-government are made clear in a statement by the federal government that reads "Self-government is part of the foundation for a renewed relationship and is a pathway to development and economic growth that generates benefits for Indigenous peoples" ("Self-government").

state, and corporate economic desires.²⁷ Through policy, Kenney proposes that the provincial government has “a moral obligation” to help renew Indigenous peoples’ purported “spirit of enterprise” that had been hampered prior to reconciliation.²⁸ As Kenney’s statement demonstrates, the neoliberal colonial management regime runs as a public-private partnership that recognises and even celebrates Indigenous knowledge in an effort to subsume Indigenous peoples, knowledges, and practices within capitalist land relations. Consequently, this shift in government policy has not resulted in the end of the colonial management regime. Instead, it has helped the regime shift intentions from facilitating settler colonial expansion and industry through assimilation to supporting industry through inclusion of Indigenous peoples after the failure of assimilation.

The neoliberal colonial management regime takes a different approach to Indigenous knowledge than did the earlier assimilationist colonial management regime. In the assimilationist era, the regime believed Indigenous knowledge was irrelevant and incongruent with the purportedly modern settler society. By making Indigenous knowledge illegitimate, the regime could better justify its assimilationist goals. Legal scholar Boaventura De Sousa Santos describes the process of making Indigenous knowledge irrelevant as “abyssal thinking” (45). For Santos, “Modern Western thinking is an abyssal thinking,” in which a binary is constructed between legitimate and illegitimate ways of knowing and being (45). On the legitimate side of the line is

²⁷ Less than two weeks prior to his 2019 statement on National Indigenous Peoples Day, Kenney gave a speech to start the Global Petroleum Show, in which he expressed desire to help the floundering tar sands industry (“Pro-pipeline Rally”).

²⁸ Warren Cariou also acknowledges that Indigenous peoples used bitumen on their canoes and had an economic system (Cariou and Gordon 11). However, unlike Kenney who implies a connection between Indigenous uses of bitumen and the tar sands industry, Cariou suggests that Indigenous peoples had a different, less destructive, relationship with the substance (13).

Western science, theology, and philosophy and on the illegitimate side is Indigenous knowledge (47). Knowledge that falls on the illegitimate side of the line is made “[ir]relevant” and “[in]comprehensible” since “abyssal thinking” does not allow for the “copresence” of knowledges from different sides of the binary (45). Although assimilationist policies have been replaced by policies of self-government and reconciliation, “abyssal thinking” persists in the twenty-first-century through state and government actors who are prompted to accept Indigenous peoples *as* Indigenous peoples, yet do not accept that Indigenous knowledge is a legitimate way of knowing that could inform viable alternatives to capitalist modes of existence. As such, the regime still causes extensive harm to the land and to Indigenous peoples who are attempting to enact traditional relationships with the land as practices independent of neoliberal corporate goals.

The federal government’s mid-nineties effort to generate a “renewed relationship” with Indigenous peoples (“Self-government”), by way of policy that recognized Indigenous peoples’ rights to limited forms of self-government, coincides with the emergence of the reconciliation process that similarly recognized that Indigenous peoples had resisted assimilation and continue to exist as distinct peoples with their own ways of knowing and should enter into relationships with Canada as such. Reconciliation began in 1998 with Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development Jane Stewart’s “Statement of Reconciliation” (“Address”). Over the next twenty years, a combination of state, church, legal, and other institutional actors responded to the lawsuits filed by residential school survivors by generating monetary settlements, support systems, memorials, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which according to the Director of Research for the TRC, Paulette Regan, “marked a critical turning point in Indigenous-settler relations in Canada ... [and was] tasked with undertaking a truth-telling and

reconciliation process, producing a report on the residential school system and its aftermath, and making recommendations to government based on its findings” (6-7).²⁹ As Regan notes, reconciliation is about responding to the legacy of the residential school system, but it is also about what type of relationships might come after.

The idea of building relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and between Canadian governments and Indigenous Nations after the residential school system is central to Canada’s reconciliation discourse. In the “Statement of Reconciliation” that was read by Stewart in the early stages of reconciliation, the government stressed its interest in “renewing our [the state’s] partnership” in a way that sought to avoid the “mistakes” of the past and instead “find ways in which Aboriginal people can participate fully in the economic, political, cultural and social life of Canada in a manner which preserves and enhances the collective identities of Aboriginal communities, and allows them to evolve and flourish in the future (“Address”). Whereas the “Statement of Reconciliation” only emphasizes nation-to-nation relationships, the TRC’s *Honouring the Truth* report emphasizes both nation-to-nation relationships and the relation-building process between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The report states that reconciliation is about “coming to terms with events of the past in a manner that overcomes conflict and establishes a respectful and healthy relationship among people, going forward” (6). To the Commission, reconciliation is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. The emphasis on relation building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and between nations that is

²⁹ Regan writes that “over twelve thousand individual abuse claims and several class-action lawsuits [were] filed on behalf of approximately seventy thousand former IRS [Indian Residential School] students against the federal government and church entities who shared joint responsibility for the schools” (6-7).

expressed in these documents exemplifies how the reconciliation process, while generated as a way to uncover the abuses committed by the residential school system, points to future relationships as an important way to avoid repeating past mistakes and generating a more equitable existence in the present and future for Indigenous peoples living in Canada.

Although relationships are central to reconciliation, there are divergent understandings of what types of relationships are required and to what ends. Over the decades-long reconciliation process, many actors, official and unofficial, with different politics and aims, have commented on the types of relationships between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous peoples that they believe are encouraged by the reconciliation process. Certainly, a process as wide-ranging as reconciliation will engender an array of commentary regarding reconciliatory relationships. I understand the diversity of opinions—from intercultural support for Indigenous self-determination and the return of land to capitalist and industry-driven attempts at intercultural relation building—to be a sign that reconciliation is both being taken seriously by different actors and being reduced to an empty signifier by actors whose willful ignorance of language, definitions, and history allows them to deploy reconciliation to bolster neoliberal, colonial politics.³⁰ The most comprehensive attempt to map what reconciliatory relationships might be is made in *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action*, which outlines 94 changes to be made by institutions such as the Canadian governments, churches, universities, and

³⁰ Judith Renner demonstrates that reconciliation has become an empty signifier in the South African context. She writes, “the term ‘reconciliation’ emerged in South Africa as an empty universal, a vague yet powerful social ideal, that could be embraced by the antagonistic parties of the ANC and NP not because of any intrinsic value, but rather because of its vagueness and semantic flexibility” (263).

businesses.³¹ The *Calls to Action* is an incredibly important document for the way it provides a clear relation-building framework that works to ensure that reconciliation is not reduced to an empty signifier and yet the TRC's effort to give meaning to reconciliatory relationships is not without critique. The calls are limited, for example, because they do not consider non-Indigenous peoples' relationships with Indigenous peoples except when mediated by institutions nor do they provide sufficient attention to the role of land in the relation-building process.³²

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson understands why land is ignored in the TRC's *Calls to Action* but argues that discussions about land must be central to reconciliation. She explains that land was largely omitted from the calls "because the commission was set up to focus on individual suffering in residential schools" ("Land"); however, for Simpson severing Indigenous peoples' relationships with the land and its resources to make way for settler colonial expansion and industry was a key aspect of the residential school system. As such, Simpson states that "Land is an important conversation for Indigenous peoples and Canada to have because land is at the root of our conflicts. Far from asking settler Canadians to pack up and leave, it is critical that we think about how we can better share land." From Simpson's perspective, sharing the land requires non-Indigenous peoples, the state, and corporate actors to respect and support Indigenous communities who are enacting traditional relationships with the land. Because

³¹ The CBC has used the TRC's 2015 *Calls to Action* as a way to measure how reconciliation is progressing, thereby emphasizing its importance. Their interactive website discusses the calls and keeps a real-time chart that depicts how many of the mandates have been completed. As of June 2019, only ten of the calls have been completed ("Beyond 94").

³² Land is mentioned only occasionally in the *Calls to Action* and is most often included in calls to different institutions to "Repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples such as the Doctrine of Discovery and *terra nullius*" (*Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* 4). The TRC's *Calls to Action* also refers to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a guiding principle.

enacting traditional relationships cannot occur without access to land, Simpson ends her article with a call of her own: she calls on the government to “tackle the root causes of Indigenous oppression in Canada ... [which] means giving back land, so we can rebuild and recover from the losses of the last four centuries and truly enter into a new relationship with Canada and Canadians.” Here, Simpson depicts relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, as well as relationships between Canada and Indigenous Nations, as intertwined with land. By centring land, Simpson creates a different vision of reconciliatory relationships than does the TRC that ignores land through thoughtful design, or Premier Kenney who views relationships with the land as inherently economic through willful ignorance. Consequently, if detailed discussions about how Indigenous peoples relate to the land and how they envision the sharing of land are not made central to conversations about reconciliatory relationships, then reconciliation may become a way for state and corporate actors to facilitate the neoliberal colonial management regime.³³

Countering the Colonial Management Regime and the Language of Reconciliation

Joseph Boyden, Thomas King, and Rita Wong have engaged, explored, and elaborated a counter-discourse to the colonial management regime, emphasizing the idea of relation building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples that has been central to the reconciliation process. Not only have these writers worked to raise public awareness about the social and

³³ The necessity of centring land in the reconciliation process is further emphasized by those who have critiqued the state’s contradictory decisions to preaching reconciliation while supporting the oil industry. For example, the hashtag #reconciliationisdead emerged after the forced removal of land protectors who were opposing pipeline construction on unceded Unist’ot’en territory. After the arrests the Unist’ot’en released a statement in which they made clear that reconciliation is incompatible with the state’s disregard for Indigenous peoples’ sovereignty over their land: “We were holding a cremation for the Canadian Indigenous Reconciliation industry as the RCMP battered through the gates” (“Unist’ot’en Matriarchs Arrested”).

environmental harm caused by the colonial management regime but perhaps more importantly they have also engaged with the discourse of reconciliatory relationships to imagine and give definition to the types of relationships that might help Indigenous peoples and the land heal from the violence and injustice of the past and prevent future iterations of the regime. Through their writing, they give definition to the types of intercultural relations that might emerge in the wake of social and environmental injustices caused by the regime and might exist as alternatives to those relationships that are informed by the regime.³⁴ The types of relationships they envision are made possible through their attention to the land: they consider how land is used by Indigenous peoples, who are enacting traditional modes of existence, and how land might be shared between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in ways that allow for the resurgence and flourishing of Indigenous practices and the land itself, and for non-Indigenous peoples to learn and enact non-colonial practices.³⁵

Although Boyden, King, and Wong have each engaged with the idea of relation building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples so central to discussions of reconciliation and have emphasized the importance of land so often missing from discussions of reconciliation, their decision to engage with these ideas is not due to their commitment to the state's visions of

³⁴ In this dissertation, I borrow “intercultural relations” from psychologist John W. Berry who uses the term in his work on Canadian multiculturalism to describe the interplay between people from different “ethnocultural groups living in daily interaction” (6).

³⁵ David Garneau argues in support of non-colonial rather than de-, anti-, or post-colonial modes of existence because the former is less reactive than the latter. Non-colonial practices involve an effort to “describe or perform new ways of being that are cognizant that a return to pre-contact conditions is impossible and that total assimilation into the dominant ideology is unacceptable (cultural genocide)” (24).

reconciliation as a political ideal.³⁶ Rather, the reason for their engagement with concepts that have been emphasized by the process of reconciliation are twofold: first, engaging with the notion of relation building provides them with a useful framework for imagining alternatives to the control over Indigenous peoples and land, and second, articulating the specific acts of relation building that might contribute to environmental justice and Indigenous sovereignty allows them to intervene into neoliberal reconciliatory discourse that upholds the status quo. Through their timely engagement with the notion of relation building that sets their work within the cultural milieu of reconciliation, they become the type of authors that Nixon would describe as writer-activists. For Nixon writer-activists are “combative writers who have deployed their imaginative agility and worldly ardor to help amplify the media-marginalized causes of the environmentally dispossessed ... [who] have given imaginative definition to the issues at stake while enhancing the public visibility of the cause” (5-6). As writer-activists who have engaged with ideas central to the reconciliation process, Boyden, King, and Wong have generated nuanced, timely, and accessible critiques of and alternatives to the colonial management

³⁶ Of the three authors, Boyden is most closely aligned to state-sponsored reconciliation through his service as an Honorary Witness to the TRC and the story he wrote for a ballet commissioned by the TRC, *Going Home Star* (2014); however, his earlier works such as *Three Day Road* and *Through Black Spruce* are not officially connected to reconciliation organizations and their politics often lie with advancing Indigenous self-determination in ways that may align with reconciliation but are not inherently reconciliatory. King and Wong only explicitly engage with the idea of reconciliation on occasion and in strategic efforts to highlight the importance of the land to Indigenous peoples and the reconciliation process. For example, Wong suggests that in response to non-Indigenous peoples who are unsure how to begin the reconciliation process “one way to move forward together, in peace and with respect, is to cooperatively focus on the lands and waters that sustain our lives” (“Cultivating Respectful Relations” 533), while in a *New York Times* article, King shares his concern that while the government may enact some of the TRC’s calls to action it will not address “longstanding matters of land and treaty rights” (“No Justice”).

regime.³⁷ In what follows, I describe the intercultural relations that Boyden, King, and Wong depict in their writing, and how these relationships contribute to social and environmental wellbeing. However, I also draw attention to how these writer-activists have attempted to navigate the terrain of a Canadian literary culture in which celebrity status and normalized acts of appropriation can risk turning their advocacy and imaginative relationship-based alternatives to the colonial management regime into authoritative articulations of how Indigenous peoples should relate to the land. By clarifying the politics of their writing as well as the challenges associated with their activism, this section lays the groundwork for the dissertation chapters, each of which focuses on one author's writer-activism in response to a manifestation of the colonial management regime.³⁸

The types of relationships that Boyden, King, and Wong imagine as alternatives to the colonial management regime can be understood by way of Métis artist and scholar David Garneau's notion of "irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality" and "sites of perpetual

³⁷ Following Nixon, in this dissertation I take an instrumentalist approach to Boyden's, King's, and Wong's writer-activism that argues their writing works to effect social and environmental change. For a discussion of the limits of instrumentalist approaches to environmental art, see Nicole Seymour's *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age*, in which she argues that focusing solely on how art effects change can contribute to the "negative reputation of environmentalism as didactic, prescriptive, and demanding" (23). Also see issue 17.2 of *The Goose: A Journal of Arts, Environment, and Culture in Canada* from spring 2019, a special issue on environmental art and activism, which includes scholarly and creative contributions at the intersection of art and activism that may be read from an instrumentalist perspective, but need not be.

³⁸ Although in this dissertation I focus on writers who construct a counter-discourse to the colonial management regime in the reconciliation process, there are many authors who depict the residential school system in detail and critics who study residential school writing. For example, see Anishinaabe writer Richard Wagamese's novel *Indian Horse*, which follows an Indigenous child through residential school and his ensuing career as a hockey player, and Sam McKegney's *Magic Weapons: Aboriginal Writers Remaking Community After Residential School*, which considers memoirs written by residential school survivors.

conciliation.” Garneau describes “irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality” as locations where Indigenous peoples exist without the presence of non-Indigenous peoples. In these locations Indigenous peoples “simply are, where they express and celebrate their continuity and figure themselves to, for, and with one another without ...” the gaze of non-Indigenous onlookers that might cause Indigenous participants to conform to non-Indigenous presumptions about Indigeneity (27). For Garneau, these are not sites in which Indigenous “identities are suddenly resolved and constant [rather] [t]hese are sites of epistemological debate” (28). In contrast, “sites of perpetual conciliation” are where Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples work together to generate alternative modes of existence in which “generous moments of empathy and agreement beyond conventional Native/settler binaries” occur (24). For Garneau, both sites are important because they provide different ways to create alternatives to colonial existence.

Boyden’s writing contains depictions of what Garneau might call “irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality” that occur after the harm caused by the colonial management regime. For example, in Boyden’s *Three Day Road* Niska teaches and cares for her nephew Xavier as they live in forests while the residential school attempts to assimilate other characters. Then, a century later in Toronto a group of Boyden’s Indigenous characters from *Through Black Spruce* gather under an overpass to share stories and roast goose the traditional way. In these novels, Boyden demonstrates how Indigenous spaces help his Indigenous characters avoid or heal from harm by allowing them to recover, discuss, and attempt to enact traditional relationships with the land. In doing so, Boyden demonstrates the importance of these Indigenous spaces and signals to non-

Indigenous readers that one important but less obvious way for non-Indigenous peoples to build reconciliatory relationships with Indigenous peoples is to respect their privacy.³⁹

For Boyden, “irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality” allow Indigenous peoples to turn to Indigenous knowledge to help them negotiate how to be together on the land after the regime has inflicted social harm. These spaces help Indigenous peoples heal from assimilationist policies and ideology because in these spaces the once outlawed or delegitimized ways of knowing and being are instead discussed and enacted as legitimate modes of existence. These spaces also help Indigenous peoples heal from contemporary neoliberal manifestations of the regime because the regime’s desire to incorporate Indigenous experience into the neoliberal order cannot reach into these spaces. Rather, irreconcilable spaces allow Indigenous peoples to enact self-determination, even if only momentarily.⁴⁰ By enacting self-determination, Indigenous communities manage their own affairs and decide how to relate to the land.⁴¹ Self-determination

³⁹ Garneau explains that respecting the privacy asked by Indigenous peoples interacting in these irreconcilable spaces is a necessary but sometimes “delicate matter.” He writes that non-Indigenous peoples who “are front-runners who risk a great deal to be allies and work toward justice and fundamental change ... know that the lived complexity of Indigeneity exists beyond their presence” (28).

⁴⁰ Arthur Manuel explains that self-determination involves “ecological and equitable development principles, Indigenous knowledge systems, laws, relationships to the land, world views, technologies, innovations and practices and, of course, recognition and affirmation of our Aboriginal title and rights to the lands that the Creator has given each nation and which we have inhabited since time immemorial” (276).

⁴¹ A community enacting self-determination does not mean the preclusion of different opinions regarding how to relate to the land, but it does mean the community rather than the settler state is responsible for the decision making process. As Daniel Fischlin and Martha Nandorfy state, “Community ... is neither necessarily positivistic nor a site of congruence and agreement. Opposition and tension within the community are as much attributes of what we mean by community as are conflict and disorder: the key is how a community negotiates these in relation to its sustainability and its ability to be responsible in a meaningful way to tension and conflict” (*The Community of Rights* 7).

stands in contrast to limited forms of self-government and in direct opposition to the colonial management regime's effort to control Indigenous peoples' relationships with the land and is, according to Arthur Manuel (Secwepemc), "the essential decolonizing remedy to move Indigenous peoples from dependency to freedom" (276).

By allowing for the recovery and enactment of traditional relationships, these spaces also help the land recover from the regime's harm. Anishinaabe legal scholar Deborah McGregor explains that Indigenous knowledge can help restore balance to the land. She states that "humanity's relationships with the environment, particularly in contemporary times, are exploitive. These are the types of relationships that Anishinaabek and other Indigenous nations, through the development of their TK [traditional knowledge], have sought to avoid." In irreconcilable spaces where Indigenous peoples develop and enact their knowledge, exploitative relationships with the land are avoided because, as McGregor writes, Indigenous knowledge aims "to achieve harmony and balance" through practitioners who learn about and enact mutually sustaining relationships and who allow other beings to enact their "responsibilities to sustain life on earth" ("Traditional Knowledge" 495). These Indigenous spaces allow the land to heal from the regime's harm and limit the possibility of future environmental harm and environmental injustice because the dominant knowledge system is one that rejects exploitation. By including depictions of "irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality," even if only fleetingly, Boyden's novels make the environmentally-just and self-determined modes of existence that are possible in these spaces legible to non-Indigenous readers. Moreover, the novels suggest to non-Indigenous readers that supporting Indigenous peoples' fight for land on which they can freely enact their traditional practices is an essential part of sharing the land.

Sharing the land occurs when non-Indigenous peoples support Indigenous peoples' right to the land, it also occurs more explicitly in moments when Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples interact together on the land in ways that make possible alternative modes of existence. These occurrences within "sites of perpetual conciliation" are central to King's and Wong's writer-activism. For example, in *The Back of the Turtle* King's Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters gather at the hot springs to share food and an Indigenous creation story. Inspired by the story's emphasis on community, non-Indigenous characters learn to use their own skills and knowledges to construct a new intercultural community after the previous settler and Indigenous communities were destroyed by an industrial accident that resulted from a series of bad decisions. Similarly, many of Wong's poems reflect on social and environmental harm caused by the colonial management regime, especially the regime's effect on water. In *undercurrent* Wong's speakers model how non-Indigenous peoples can learn from Indigenous peoples who share their knowledge while deploying complementary non-Indigenous knowledges to help develop intercultural relations in which the land and water are better shared. In these "sites of perpetual conciliation," the non-Indigenous characters/speakers generate "generous moments of empathy and agreement beyond conventional Native/settler binaries" (Garneau 24)

In these moments of "empathy and agreement" and non-colonial relation building (Garneau 24), the non-Indigenous characters from King's novel and the speakers of Wong's poems reject "abyssal thinking" and are instead open to Indigenous knowledge as a legitimate and potentially valuable way of knowing (Santos 45). Their approach to knowledge systems can be understood through Santos's notion of an "ecology of knowledges." For Santos an "ecology of knowledges" occurs when thinkers who are informed by non-Indigenous knowledges learn about and engage with other "knowledges without forgetting one's own" (69). Within an

“ecology of knowledges,” the Eurocentric hierarchy in which Western knowledge is deemed inherently superior is disrupted and replaced by a pragmatic hierarchy in which any knowledge, or combinations of knowledges, may be deemed valuable if useful in a given situation (73). The situation faced by King’s and Wong’s characters/speakers is the disproportionate social and environmental harm caused by the colonial management regime. In this situation, Indigenous knowledge becomes incredibly valuable because it can help Indigenous peoples and the land heal. Indigenous knowledge also helps non-Indigenous peoples learn or better understand that there are alternatives to the colonial management regime and its goals of assimilation, extraction, and advancement of settler capitalist land relations. With increased awareness that there exist alternative ways of knowing and being outside of dominant Western ways of thinking, Boyden’s and Wong’s characters/speakers, and by extension their non-Indigenous readers, are encouraged to turn to marginalized knowledges that can help dismantle the colonial management regime and generate alternative anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and non-colonial modes of existence.⁴²

Through their collective depictions of “irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality” and “sites of perpetual conciliation,” Boyden, King and Wong have contributed to a long-standing counter-discourse to the colonial management regime and its various manifestations. Although each author readily critiques different aspects of the regime and its accompanying social and

⁴² Here and in my chapters on King’s and Wong’s writing I follow Santos to consider how non-Indigenous knowledges may work alongside Indigenous knowledge and practices. While my primary mode of investigation seeks to examine the productive interactions between knowledges, I acknowledge that “intractable contradictions” between knowledges do exist (Santos 75). That manifestations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge may exist in contradiction to one another does not present an inherent problem for intercultural relation building. Rather, just as there are “irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality” that exist alongside “sites of perpetual conciliation” (Garneau 24, 27), so too are there modes of Indigenous knowledge that are irreconcilable with certain non-Indigenous perspectives, which exist alongside modes of Indigenous knowledge that are conciliatory with certain non-Indigenous perspectives.

environmental harm, Boyden's, King's, and Wong's most revolutionary efforts occurs through their commitment to imagining the different types of egalitarian relationships that might emerge as alternatives to the regime. In this way, their writer-activism is aligned with Leanne Simpson's argument that while critique is important generating Indigenous-centred alternatives to colonialism is even more valuable. She writes "Our Elders and Knowledge Holders have always put great emphasis into how things are done. This reinforces the idea that it is our own tools, strategies, values, processes and intellect that are going to build our new house" (*Dancing* 32). Boyden, King, and Wong follow a similar practice in which critique remains relevant but secondary to the articulation of alternative modes of existence that encourage the resurgence of Indigenous Nations and make legible and legitimate Indigenous knowledge, traditional relationships with the land, and non-colonial anti-racist intercultural communities.

Although Boyden's, King's, and Wong's alternative-imagining writer-activism is valuable, it has not been infallible. Nixon argues that writer-activists are often "vexed figure[s]" whose relationships with justice movements "are often fraught and frictional" (5-6). Nixon's notion of "bridgework" can help explain why writer-activists are often controversial figures (26); the image of bridgework is a reminder that writer-activists forge connections between the readers of their written works and the communities affected by environmental harm who are depicted in their writing.⁴³ Writing across groups without speaking for marginalized groups is a challenge that if unsuccessful can cause additional harm. Haluza-DeLay et al. explain the harm that can

⁴³ Here, I am using Nixon's notion of bridgework to help demonstrate the problems that can emerge when writer-activists speak for rather than with marginalized community. While I am attentive to the challenges associated with bridgework, I nevertheless agree with Nixon who writes that "the bridgework such writer-activists undertake offers a mostly honorable counter to the distancing rhetoric of neoliberal 'free market' resource development" (26).

occur when an authority figure who is distant from the community tells the general public and the community how that community should solve its problems: “The prescriptive solutions of an expert, activist, or researcher not from the community suffering from environmental injustice may reproduce or magnify existing inequities, thereby contributing to disabling practices and disempowerment” (5-6). Offering what Haluza-DeLay et al. would call “prescriptive solutions” is especially problematic if enacted by writer-activists who like Boyden, King, and Wong advocate for Indigenous peoples’ right to control their own relationships with the land and oppose the settler or corporate management of Indigenous peoples’ relationship with the land. In other words, speaking for a community by prescribing a solution can be a manifestation of the colonial management regime.

Boyden’s, King’s, and Wong’s efforts to negotiate the challenges associated with the bridgework of writer-activism are exacerbated by the central role of celebrity and the historic role of the colonial management regime in Canadian literary culture. Canadian literary culture, writes Smaro Kamboureli, has “become a culture of celebrity” (38).⁴⁴ Participating in celebrity culture may be an appealing, if inescapable, aspect of authorship for writer-activists working in the Canadian literary context because celebrated authors have larger readerships.⁴⁵ The public also, according to Lorraine York, deems celebrity writers credible: “those who are given special,

⁴⁴ According to Gillian Roberts, Canadian literature’s celebrity culture has been increasingly supported and enhanced by literary prizes which result “in the promotion of particular authors and texts” (16, 19). Lorraine York also notes that in recent years “literary celebrity” is enhanced by authors who are “visible [figures] ... active in the promotion of their wares in a major way” (1).

⁴⁵ This axiom is exemplified in the Canadian context by a phenomenon known as the “Giller effect,” which Sue Carter explains is “a term used to describe the dramatic spike in sales for a book after it wins the Scotiabank Giller Prize” (“Giller Winner”).

elevated status as literary celebrities are given extra latitude to speak and to be listened to” (15). As such, cultivating a celebrity status may be a strategic way for writer-activists to share their messages with wider audiences who take them more seriously than lesser-known authors. However, in a national culture where the management of Indigenous peoples is normalized and has for centuries been expressed by those who hold positions of authority and by celebrated authors, contemporary writer-activists who oppose management may nevertheless be expected by industry, media, and readers to offer solutions to Indigenous communities’ problems.

Boyden, King, and Wong have each worked in their own ways to negotiate a Canadian literary culture in which celebrity status and how one writes about others can result in situations that betray their anti-management politics. Of the three, Wong’s status as a celebrity is the most minor; however, she received national recognition when *forage* won Canada Reads in 2011.⁴⁶ Wong works to distance herself from any celebrity or authority status that would overshadow the work of Indigenous activists, writers, and communities. She does so through a process of deferral to Indigenous writers and activists. In contrast, King is one of Canada’s most celebrated Indigenous writers. He has been nominated for many awards, has delivered the prestigious CBC Massey Lecture in 2003, and was made a member of the Order of Canada in 2004. While he strategically embraces his celebrity status as a means of reaching a wide audience, he increasingly writes broadly about Indigenous issues so that he is perceived as a generalist rather than an authority, who is encouraged to speak about any one community or issue. Moreover, instead of speaking for Indigenous communities, King works to expose the normalized violences

⁴⁶ Although there are awards devoted to poetry such as the Griffin Poetry Prize, poets have not achieved the same celebrity status as novelists. One reason for their exclusion may be because, as Warren Cariou states, “poetry has suffered a decline of readership in the last half-century” (“CanLit Afterlife” 50).

of settler colonialism and neoliberalism while also making legible and legitimate the strategies Indigenous communities are using to resist and generate alternative modes of existence. Unlike Wong who opposes celebrity, and King who strategically engages with his celebrity status, Boyden embraced his role as a CanLit superstar. Boyden's decisions to focus his literary efforts on one Indigenous community in his early works, to embrace his celebrity status and become an authority on Indigenous issues resulted in public criticism for the way he overshadowed other Indigenous voices and spoke for rather than with Indigenous communities. In this dissertation, I attend to Boyden's controversy and how King and Wong negotiate Canadian literary culture. In doing so, I contribute to scholarly understanding of the role of writer-activists and the volatile contemporary Canadian literary context.⁴⁷ I also demonstrate that although critics can appreciate writer-activists for their social and environmental justice work, writer-activists should not be uncritically reified and should instead be engaged with critically.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Nixon's foundational *Slow Violence* discusses writer-activism in detail; however, the idea of writer-activism has been eclipsed by his notion of slow violence found in the same book, which was more readily engaged with by critics. For more recent reflection on writer-activism, see Marybeth Holleman's "Writer as Activist, Activist as Writer."

Canadian literary culture of the early twenty-first century is volatile because of important critiques of Canadian authors who have been accused of reprehensible behaviour including abuse and cultural appropriation and the institutions who support these authors. In this volatile moment, Canadian literary culture has been called a "dumpster fire" by Tuscarora writer Alicia Elliott, as well as deemed "in ruins" by critics Hannah McGregor, Julie Rak, and Erin Wunker in their collection of essays *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins*.

⁴⁸ Since one of the primary aims of ecocriticism has been, as Richard Kerridge writes, "to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crises" (5), there is some concern that praising texts that provide useful responses to environmental issues may also result in uncritical praise for the authors of these texts. While praising and celebrating authors may provide writers with helpful support, praise and celebration should not erase the impetus for scholars to critically engage with authors' extra literary actions, which as York and others have demonstrated are increasingly visible and therefore produce an interesting interplay with authors' written works.

Reading, Writing, Positioning

Central to Boyden's, King's, and Wong's writer-activism is the notion that Indigenous knowledge is legitimate. Critics who analyze writing that engages with Indigenous knowledge must also recognize that Indigenous knowledge is legitimate. While making such a claim in the academy would have once been controversial, it is increasingly acceptable thanks to the tireless work of scholars who have advocated that marginalized knowledges have value and that critics should consider understanding Indigenous texts by way of Indigenous perspectives.⁴⁹

Consequently, my approach to reading Boyden's, King's, and Wong's texts is largely informed by "Indigenous-centred methods of reading," which Sophie McCall et al. explain involves analyzing "stories through Indigenous contexts, epistemologies, and ways of knowing, all the while appreciating that there is no one way to interpret a story" (2). For a white-settler scholar, such as myself, the ethical use of what McCall et al. call "Indigenous-centred methods of reading" has involved unlearning the dominance of Western modes of criticism, learning Indigenous ways of knowing and contexts, and coming to understand what situations require criticism informed by Indigenous perspectives. My engagement with Indigenous approaches to reading has also involved reflecting on the suggestion, made by Plains Cree and Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach (Sakewew p'sim iskwew), that non-Indigenous researchers ask themselves "am I creating space *or* taking space" through my research (52; italics in originals)? I attempt to make space for Indigenous voices within the predominantly settler field of

⁴⁹ Haluza-Delay et al. state that Eurocentrism is the "default position" in the academy (4). The Indigenous-centred alternatives to Eurocentric readings were popularized in part by Creek-Cherokee critic Craig Womack's foundational *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, which advocates that Indigenous texts should be analyzed from the specific Indigenous perspectives that inform a given text. For discussion of the history and manifestations of Indigenous literary nationalism in Canada see "Canadian Indian Literary Nationalism? Critical Approaches in Canadian Indigenous Contexts—A Collaborative Interlogue" (Fagan et al.).

ecocriticism by centring Indigenous scholars and authors in my dissertation. My efforts to use this approach ethically also involve ongoing efforts to acknowledge the gaps in my understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing. Although turning to this mode of scholarship is challenging, I have attempted to do so as a response to broader calls for decolonization, epistemological justice, and relation building but also to provide textual analyses that work toward the principled goal of understanding Indigenous writing on its own terms. In this section, I recount how I came to use this critical approach and further address how and why I use these approaches to analyze Boyden's, King's, and Wong's works.

In the early stages of this project, I like many scholars appreciated the longstanding academic arguments that critiqued the global monoculture of Western knowledge for the cultural, cognitive, and environmental harm it causes. Reflecting back on my early research, I realize that Santos's "ecology of knowledges" and Daniel Coleman's application of the concept to the Canadian context were particularly useful for the ways they encourage and provide strategies for non-Indigenous scholars to think beyond dominant knowledges and in relation to non-dominant ways of knowing. Specifically, I was led toward "Indigenous-centred methods of reading" by Santos's argument in support of the pragmatic use of knowledges to solve problems (73), his argument that learning new knowledge may involve "unlearning" old ways of thinking (69), and Coleman's argument that "in order to develop a functional ecology of knowledges in Canada, Indigenous knowledges must play a crucial, guiding role" ("Toward" 11).⁵⁰ After years of study, I have a working understanding of Indigenous knowledge and context, and continue to

⁵⁰ For Coleman, Indigenous knowledge must be central to a Canadian ecology of knowledge because Indigenous knowledge has long been marginalized in Canada and because Indigenous environmental knowledges are of immense value in this moment of global ecological crisis (12).

reflect on my relationship with this body of knowledge, which serves to ground the analysis in this dissertation and inform my extra-academic existence. Of course, there are moments in which I struggle to understand aspects of Indigenous knowledge and literature. As such, there are gaps in my knowledge and readings that are due in part to my attention to the knowledge of certain nations over others, my limited understanding of Indigenous languages, my distance from the land, and the fact that I am not part of an Indigenous community. While some of the gaps in my knowledge shrink as I learn, others gaps remain—and rightfully so, as there is knowledge and there are stories that are not mine to know. At the very least, through this process I have “learn[ed] enough of the heritage and trajectory of different systems of knowing so that the Eurocentric tradition cannot continue to reaffirm its totalizing claims” within my mind, and that is not nothing (Coleman, “Different” 143).

In addition to my efforts to better understand Indigenous knowledge, I have also been involved in a process of understanding how to participate in a community of thinkers and critics whose work is grounded in Indigenous knowledge. Anishinaabe scholar Niigonwedom James Sinclair’s tenets for “responsible and ethical criticisms of Indigenous literature” have been immensely helpful in this regard (48). One particularly important tenet reads: “Responsible and ethical criticisms of Indigenous literatures promote dialogic exchanges that include all interested parties, Indigenous or otherwise” (48). Clarifying this statement, Sinclair explains that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous critics should “bring their honest concerns, beliefs, and interpretations of Indigenous literatures for a true dialogue to happen, continue, and grow” (48). Sinclair’s reminder that it is necessary for all invested critics to express their interpretations and that the resulting discussion and perhaps even moments of contestation are necessary for

“growth” has helped me find my voice as a critic invested in Indigenous literature and criticism.⁵¹

Although developing one’s own opinions or interpretations of literary and critical texts is a necessary act of providing something back to the intellectual community, as a settler critic, I also find acts of deferral to and recognition of Indigenous thinkers are a valuable, complementary practice. Settler voices have often been centred in the academy at the expense of Indigenous voices. As such, settler critics can complement the necessary act of sharing interpretations with the equally necessary act of pointing the spotlight on those Indigenous thinkers and critics whose work has informed the settler-critics’ readings. Building on Rita Wong’s strategy of regularly centring Indigenous thinkers and community members and Coleman’s argument in support of “a conscious politics of citation, which refuses to recite the same authorities endlessly” (“Different” 143), I want to briefly centre, or cite, the Indigenous thinkers whose work has informed my interpretations of Boyden’s, King’s, and Wong’s writing. To develop my interpretation of King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* and *The Back of the Turtle*, I engage with Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) who writes about Indigenous stories and with Robin Wall Kimmerer (Potawatomi), Deborah McGregor (Anishinabe), Rick Monture (Mohawk), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Mississauga Nishnaabeg), and Vanessa Watts

⁵¹ One prominent type of disagreement that has occurred among those invested in reading and writing texts grounded in Indigenous knowledge relates to the question of whether a certain story or teaching should be shared in a piece of creative writing, or used to inform a piece of literary criticism. For example, Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo) argues that Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo) should not have used “a clan story ... [that] is not to be told outside of the clan” in her novel *Ceremony* (383). Moreover, Allen opposes the “ceremonial investigation of *Ceremony* done by some researchers” (383). In response to Allen’s heavily referenced article, Silko explains that “The stories that I have and work with the stories that were told to me by Aunt Alice, ... That [story] was given to me There was some kind of responsibility to make sure it wasn’t just put away or put aside” (qtd. in Arnold 178).

(Mohawk and Anishnaabe) who write about Indigenous creation stories. To develop my interpretations of Boyden's *Three Day Road* and *Through Black Spruce*, I engage with Louis Bird (Ojibwe) who writes widely on Ojibwe knowledge and experiences under colonialism, Devon A. Mihesuah (Choctaw) and Waziyatawin (Dakota) who write about decolonizing Indigenous diets, and Jack Forbes (Powhatan-Renapé and Delaware-Lenapé) and Basil Johnston (Anishinaabe) who write about the windigo. And, lastly, to develop my interpretations of Wong's *undercurrent* I engage with Dorothy Christian (Splatshin, Syilx, and Anishinaabe), Alannah Young Leon (Anishinaabe), and Lee Maracle (Stó:lō), who write about water from their respective perspectives, as well as Warren Cariou (Métis) who writes about non-extractive Indigenous relationships to bitumen, and Robin Wall Kimmerer (Potawatomi) who writes about the possible benefits of braiding together Indigenous and scientific knowledges. Without learning from and critically engaging with these and other Indigenous scholars who have shared their knowledge with other researchers, this dissertation would not be possible.

And yet, following Santos's reminder of the pragmatic use of knowledges and that learning another knowledge does not necessarily involve rejecting what you already know, there are moments in the dissertation in which I apply non-Indigenous knowledges and critical approaches (69, 73). For example, at moments I turn to environmental justice scholarship with ties to civil rights, policy, and science for what it reveals about the uneven disruption of environmental harms; I turn to new materialist ecocriticism for its explanation of the relationship between human bodies and environments; I turn to writing on neoliberalism and industrial food systems to understand contemporary economic and political developments; I turn to Western science for an understanding of environments and environmental harm; and lastly, I turn to

scholarship on Canadian literary culture for what it reveals about the celebrity contexts in which Boyden, King, and Wong practice their writer-activism. Consequently, the result of years of learning, unlearning, and reflecting on the relationships among knowledges, and my position in relation to different knowledges is a dissertation that while grounded in Indigenous knowledge, occasionally turns to other knowledges in an effort to analyze how Boyden, King, and Wong work to consider environmental injustices and their alternatives.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter one “Responding to Environmental Ruin: Responsibility, Intercultural Relation Building, and Acts of Environmental Justice in Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* and *The Back of the Turtle*” traces Cherokee writer Thomas King’s longstanding efforts to challenge harmful settler narratives that have impacted Indigenous peoples and advocates for Indigenous cultural stories as a means of developing mutually sustaining relationships within Indigenous and intercultural communities. In this chapter, I focus on how King reflects on a wide range of historical events to theorize how stories have supported the colonial management regime and the naturalization of settler land relations that have caused disproportionate social and environmental harm to Indigenous peoples. I examine King’s novels *Green Grass, Running Water* and *The Back of the Turtle* as primary sites through which he depicts alternatives to environmental injustices that emerge through the recovery of cultural stories. In the novels, settler and neoliberal narratives that devalue Indigenous peoples and lands allow for energy extraction and industrial practices that cause disproportionate harm to Indigenous communities. In contrast, cultural stories, especially “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” allow for the emergence of new forms of intercultural communities. Consequently, I argue that by critiquing harmful stories and focusing on healing stories King’s writer-activism makes legible the cooperative

relationships that might emerge as alternatives to the colonial and corporate control over Indigenous peoples and ecologies.

In chapter two, “Indigenous Cultural Continuance in Mushkegowuk: Traditional Foods, Community, and Joseph Boyden’s Celebrity Writer-Activism,” I examine Boyden’s attempts to share experiences and alternatives to colonial relations, especially those in his Mushkegowuk novels, *Three Day Road* and *Through Black Spruce*. I explore these novels in the wake of Boyden’s controversy for how they attend to the assimilationist colonial management regime’s attempt to sever Omushkego people’s relationships with the land through the residential school system and the military—a problem that is righted in the novels when characters recover traditional relationships with their foodways in “irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality.” I argue that Boyden’s focus on Omushkego traditional food practices becomes an accessible introduction to Indigenous self-determination for non-Indigenous readers who are interested in “exotic cuisine” and familiar with stories of starvation in northern wilderness spaces. As such, Boyden’s contentious self-positioning and the bridgework of his novels have provided sites through which Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples continue to have challenging conversations regarding how to support Indigenous communities who want to recover traditional relationships in response to a legacy of the colonial management regime.

In chapter three, “‘The girl who ate rice almost every day’ Walks ‘the path of peace’: Water and Knowledge in Rita Wong’s Environmental Justice Poetry,” I consider the ways in which Wong’s self-reflexive, self-locating as an Asian Canadian and settler in relation to Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous communities, as well as her politics of deferral to Indigenous thinkers, become a prerequisite for her writer-activism. I read Wong’s *undercurrent* for the way it critiques the destruction of Indigenous communities and despoiling of water that is

normalized by the neoliberal colonial management regime and for the alternative relationships that occur in conciliatory sites that emerge in fights for environmental justice. In these spaces, Indigenous knowledges are centred and placed in productive and ethical conversation with other non-Indigenous knowledges as part of the process of relation building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and with the land. I argue that Wong's poetry articulates the challenges, joys, and strategies that emerge when non-Indigenous peoples attempt to live in non-colonial relation to the environment and Indigenous peoples and how enacting these relations can help support Indigenous peoples and the water.

In this dissertation I focus on the literary counter-discourses to the colonial management regime and its socially and ecologically just alternatives in the government-led reconciliation process. Through each chapter I am able to draw attention to a different aspect of the regime's social and environmental harm. In chapter one, King's writer-activism allows me to shed light on how the regime receives ideological support through narrative; in chapter two, Boyden's writer-activism allows me to focus on historic manifestations of the regime and their legacy in the contemporary era; and, in the third chapter, Wong's writer-activism allows me to shift attention to contemporary manifestations of the regime. Just as each chapter permits me to depict a different aspect of the regime, each chapter also permits me to emphasize a different type of relationship that might emerge as an alternative to the regime. In the opening chapter one, I introduce the relationships that are made possible in "irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality" and in "sites of perpetual conciliation"; in chapter two I further consider the traditional relationships with the land that Indigenous peoples recover, discuss, and enact in these Indigenous spaces; and, in the final chapter I further consider the intercultural relations enacted in conciliatory spaces, in which Indigenous knowledge is centred and non-Indigenous knowledges are set in

respectful relation. By expanding critical attention to Indigenous texts and contexts, and by expanding critical frameworks to include recent scholarly discussions of Indigenous knowledge as well as the relationship between knowledge systems, this dissertation contributes to the study of environmental literature in Canada. This dissertation thus provides insights into the relationship between environmental literature and reconciliation. It also raises questions within and beyond the academy regarding what types of relationships with knowledge systems and with environments, and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, may emerge as alternatives to colonial and capitalist relations in a period after the initial optimism surrounding state-led reconciliation efforts has faded.

Chapter One: Responding to Environmental Ruin: Responsibility, Intercultural Relation Building, and Acts of Environmental Justice in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* and *The Back of the Turtle*

In his first official trip abroad as Prime Minister in July 2006, Stephen Harper touted Canada as an “emerging energy superpower” to his audience at the Canada-UK Chamber of Commerce. Although Canada was already a major producer of oil, gas, and uranium, Harper explained that Canada would become a “global energy powerhouse” through the extraction of “an ocean of oil-soaked sand [that] lies under the muskeg of Northern Alberta” (qtd. in Taber). At the time of the Prime Minister’s declaration, one million barrels of oil per day were extracted from the Athabasca oil sands mining developments, with predictions that this extraction could triple in a decade due to over \$100 billion worth of scheduled construction (Taber). Harper and the Conservative government aimed to facilitate the development of the tar sands regions of Alberta through minimizing the amount of government interference that could challenge corporate profits. He assured his audience that oil corporations would be able to develop the tar sands because his government “believe[d] in the free exchange of energy products based on competitive market principles, not self-serving monopolistic political strategies” (qtd. in Taber). At the federal and provincial levels, government officials in Canada continue to advocate for the ongoing development of the tar sands, emphasizing the economic benefits of the development of large scale oil-mining projects for all Canadians.

In 2019, Alberta’s Ministry of Energy stated that “The responsible development of oil sands is a key driver of Alberta’s and Canada’s economy” (“Oil Sands Facts”). The Ministry of Energy’s argument for the development of the oil sands echoes “the industry narrative” that “claims the sacrifices of human and non-human nature ... are compensated for by the profits

earned” (Gordon xxxii). While Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has advocated for policies that address our climate crisis, he and the Liberal government have supported energy corporations by approving the expansion of pipelines to ship oil extracted from the tar sands to emerging new markets,⁵² including the controversial Trans Mountain pipeline that poses grave risk to ecosystems and Indigenous communities.⁵³ Following neoliberal logics and processes, government arguments for oil sands extraction and transportation rely “on the violent rendering of whole peoples and places as less valuable, making certain people, species, lands, waters available to be sacrificed, developed for the supposed ‘common good’” (Collard et al. 469). Government support of oil sands mining development hinges on an industry narrative that overemphasizes revenue and profits as a “shared” resource and deemphasizes the unequal burden of environmental harm that the tar sands industries cause to Indigenous peoples, species, lands, and waters.

Oil sands extraction and refining in Northern Alberta has resulted in numerous environmental harms, including the contamination of water in the Athabasca River watershed and the decrease in caribou populations, which are expected to be extinct in the region by 2050.⁵⁴ Predicting that these environmental harms to the health of humans and the land will worsen as oil

⁵² Trudeau’s liberal government’s irreconcilable support for the environment and tar sands production is exemplified by his decision to approve the Trans Mountain pipeline just days after his Environment and Climate Change Minister Catherine McKenna put forth a motion declaring a “climate emergency” on June 17 2019 (Jackson).

⁵³ Trans Mountain Corporation states that the Trans Mountain pipeline has spilled 84 times since it began operating in 1961 (“Spill History”).

⁵⁴ Farther afield, pipeline failures damage ecosystems located along these transportation routes. Indigenous communities who live along pipelines and on the tar sands face physiological and social issues caused by oil-industry related environmental destruction (see the Indigenous Environmental Network’s overview article of the tar sands “What Are the Tar Sands”).

sand production increases, the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation Chief Allen Adam explains, “This [Syncrude Mildred Lake extension] project here is just going to continue to add to more problems we are having today I remember, as a kid, you could drink water from the Athabasca River I remember those days. But now, today, you can’t do it” (qtd. in Pimentel).⁵⁵ For Adam, enacting traditional land relation has become increasingly difficult due to the environmental degradation caused by the oil sand mining developments that have released harmful toxins in the soil and water.

The oil corporations developing the tar sands are responsible for the environmental harm that has disproportionately affected Indigenous communities, but Indigenous communities’ attempts “to attract sustained scientific inquiry into causes, effects, and potential redress” of oil sands developments have been hampered by corporations “disclaiming responsibility” (Nixon 16, 63). In “What do Indians Want,” Cherokee writer Thomas King declares that “We all know the facts and figures” regarding the environmental cost of tar sands extraction and refining, and yet tar sands operations continue to grow. King makes clear that Canadians and their government disregard “scientific evidence” because of an “irrational addiction to profit.” By emphasizing how profit has clouded Canadians’ perceptions of the tar sands, King demonstrates how oil—and its violence—is as Imre Szeman and Maria Whiteman state “hidden in plain sight.” There is an “enormous corporate project of hiding, an explicit machinery of deception and spin” that violently renders these environmental harms hidden or unconscious in the Canadian cultural imaginary (Pendakis and Wilson).

⁵⁵ In 2006, Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation noticed an increase in cancer rates among members who live near the tar sands development. Community members were also concerned that the environmental issues were impacting their traditional cultural relationship with the land (“What Are the Tar Sands”).

In *Slow Violence and Environmentalism of the Poor*, Rob Nixon examines “The challenges of visibility that links slow violence to the environmentalism of the poor ... [through] the complex, often vexed figure of the environmental writer-activist” (5). The writers Nixon considers are “enraged by injustices they wish to see redressed, injustices they believe they can help expose, silences they can help dismantle through testimonial protest, rhetorical inventiveness, and counterhistories in the face of formidable odds” (6). Following Nixon’s definition, I argue that King is a “combative” author who has employed his “imaginative agility and worldly ardor to help amplify the media-marginalized causes of the environmentally dispossessed” (5). King has long worked to draw readers’ attention to environmental injustices affecting Indigenous peoples. For example, in *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) King depicts how a hydroelectric dam disrupts an ecosystem and a Blackfoot community’s traditional land relations and in *The Back of the Turtle* (2014) King depicts how an Indigenous community and the adjacent non-Indigenous townspeople are harmed when a defoliant used to clear land in preparation for a pipeline spills into the watershed. By shifting readers away from the immediate horror of the disaster and toward the discursive and material landscape in which the destruction occurs, King’s *The Back of the Turtle* makes visible how the prioritization of capitalist profit by corporations contribute to a context in which environmental injustices become acceptable sacrifices to a profit-driven society.

In this chapter, I read *Green Grass, Running Water* and *The Back of the Turtle* for King’s demonstration of how colonial and neoliberal narratives disrupt Indigenous life and make permissible environmental injustices; I also consider King’s demonstration of how equitable modes of existence may emerge through the recovery and engagement with Indigenous cultural stories. I first read King’s novel *Green Grass, Running Water* for how he constructs opposition

to pervasive colonial narratives that work to assimilate Indigenous peoples into settler society, thereby allowing for the commodification of the land. Moreover, I consider how the characters' turn to a balance-restoring cultural story evokes an Indigenous-centred environmental ethics that is valuable to contemporary "non-colonial" environmental justice efforts.⁵⁶ I then turn to *The Back of the Turtle*, in which King writes little about the moment of ecological disaster. Instead, King focuses on the beliefs and actions that facilitated "The Ruin" and the post-disaster community response (159). Through the community's response to the disaster, King exhibits how non-colonial and non-exploitive intercultural relations that are grounded in Indigenous cultural stories may help restore balance and successfully ward off profit-driven assaults to land and Indigenous peoples. As such, I argue that these novels work toward an intercultural vision of environmental justice by exposing how environmental harm manifests as well as by conceptualizing how intercultural communities might work together to generate alternative modes of existence based on Indigenous notions of balance, relationality, and responsibility. Through his focus on how characters work together by way of Indigenous story to rebuild a more equitable existence, King's novels are germane to the contemporary moment, in which the settler state supports a reconciliation process that emphasizes intercultural relation building while simultaneously and contradictorily normalizes neoliberal ethics that destroy social and environmental relations.

⁵⁶ For Garneau, "non-colonial" signifies the types of ethical relationships that might emerge in an intercultural context in which Indigenous peoples acknowledge that "a return to pre-contact conditions is impossible" and that the continuation of settler colonialism is unacceptable (24).

Thomas King's Writer-Activism

For decades, King has worked relentlessly across genres and topics to cast light on environmental issues affecting Indigenous peoples and to make legible the life-giving and relation-building alternatives that occur when the cultural stories that have been pushed aside by settler colonialism are salvaged. King's first novel *Medicine River* (1989) focuses on the daily life of a Blackfoot community. In his following two novels and collection of stories King considers the social and environmental effects of settler colonialism in Blackfoot territory: *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) depicts how a hydroelectric dam disrupts the watershed and the community's cultural practices; "Borders" from the collection *One Good Story, That One* (1993) depicts settler-state borders as simultaneous illegitimate and restrictive; and *Truth and Bright Water* (1999) depicts the decimation and recovery of buffalo herds. In these works, King shows Blackfoot community members resisting and recovering from injustices, often by turning to cultural stories and knowledge. Following a prolific decade of writing novels and short stories about Blackfoot communities, King published two major genre-combining works, *The Truth About Stories* (2003) and *The Inconvenient Indian* (2012). In these works, he draws on historic events, popular culture, autobiography, and cultural stories to paint with broad strokes the history of Indigenous-settler relations in North America, which at its centre "is the question of land" (King, *Inconvenient* 218). The land remains central to his recent works, including his novel *The Back of the Turtle* (2014) that critiques the extraction industry and highlights the role of cultural stories in social and ecological recovery, as well as to his first collection of poetry *77 Fragments of A Familiar Ruin* (2019), which is described "as a eulogy for what we have squandered, a

reprimand for all we have allowed, a suggestion for what might still be salvaged” (Cover copy).⁵⁷

Like other writer-activists who depict “injustices they believe they can help expose” (Nixon 6), King writes to reveal intertwined transgressions against Indigenous peoples and the environment. Specifically, King’s writing exposes the policies, narratives, and practices that make permissible destructive land relations that harm ecosystems and Indigenous peoples. The establishment of these land relations, such as perceiving the land as a resource, as private property, and as separated by national borders is part of the centuries-long process of settler colonialism. Kyle Powys Whyte (Potawatomi) describes settler colonialism as a process in which a group of people create their home on another people’s land. To do so, settlers overlaid their social, cultural, and economic knowledges and practices onto the land they wanted to make their home. On Turtle Island, the mapping of Western perspectives onto the land has made dominant the perception of land as both resource and private property (171-72). Notwithstanding the many social and economic changes that have occurred since the emergence of settler colonialism on Turtle Island, core colonial land relations including resource extraction have remained central to how non-Indigenous peoples relate to the land.

⁵⁷ King’s efforts to share his message with a wide audience have been enhanced due to the many awards that have been bestowed on his books and the celebrity status that has accompanied these accolades. While celebrity status can be beneficial to Indigenous writer-activists’ aims, it also presents challenges. For example, as an Indigenous person and a celebrity, King’s celebrity is connected to the century old category of the celebrity Indian. Critic Daniel Francis describes that the popularity of celebrity Indians in Canada occurred due to the “desire on the part of non-Native Canadians to understand and admire what they considered to be the virtues of Indian-ness” (142). Contemporary Indigenous celebrities in Canada are thus faced with the legacy of being encouraged to enact non-Indigenous visions of “Indian-ness.” King counters this legacy by writing across genre and topic and by participating in a variety of artistic projects including taking photographs of jazz musicians and playing the flugelhorn. In doing so, King echoes a statement he made in his short video for the National Screen Institute in 2007: “I’m not the Indian you had in mind” (“I’m Not”).

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries these land relations have been reinforced due to state support of neoliberalism, which David Harvey describes as the philosophy “that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” With the neoliberal mandate that increased economic opportunities will enhance “human well-being” (2), the state has generated contexts that facilitate land relations that create economic opportunity, such as resource extraction.⁵⁸ Consequently, the extraction industry has not only been able to act largely unimpeded, but also due to the industry’s purported role in enhancing quality of life, corporations have even been depicted by the state and public relation departments as having an important role in anti-colonial initiatives such as reconciliation. Consequently, the colonial notion that “land is primarily a commodity, something that has value for what you can take from it or what you can get for it,” has not only persisted but has in recent years been championed as both necessary and virtuous (King, *Inconvenient* 218). Hannah Wylie calls the incorporation of reconciliation into capitalism “neoliberal reconciliation” (122).

Despite the pervasive notion that using land as a commodity is beneficial and that corporations are caring, resource extraction projects have devastating effects on ecosystems and Indigenous communities. At the epicenter of North American oil extraction, in the northern Albertan tar sands, open-pit and in-situ mining and related refining and transportation processes have ruined environments. The extraction industry has caused the destruction of “thousands of acres” of boreal forest ecosystems and the polluting of watersheds through “tailing ponds [that]

⁵⁸ Harvey writes that since the 1980s, “The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such [neoliberal] practices” (1-2).

are seeping millions of liters per day into groundwater and Alberta's Athabasca River" (Finkel 53). Moreover, epidemiologist Madelon L. Finkel explains that pollutants that are known to cause organ damage, respiratory problems, and birth defects among humans have been found in the watershed (e.g. benzo(a)pyrene and methylmercury) and in the air (e.g. polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons) (53). The resource extraction industry has caused extensive environmental and health related issues across North America, but the industry has negatively affected Indigenous peoples disproportionately to settlers. The disproportionate amount of environmental harm affecting marginalized communities, otherwise known as environmental injustice, poses serious threats to Indigenous communities in Canada—over 36% of which live “within 50km of mining developments and associated pollution zones” (“What Are the Tar Sands”).⁵⁹

In addition to exposing environmental injustices and their causes, King's writing also makes legible and legitimate alternative modes of existence. King regularly considers how alternative ways of being may emerge by engaging with cultural stories that hold knowledge regarding how to enact mutually sustaining relationships. However, since these stories have been marginalized by settler colonialism, by turning to cultural stories King joins a recovery project that works to salvage and champion the type of narratives that Rita Wong and Dorothy Christian (Secwepemc and Syilx) call “better stories ... that will restore our relations with one another and ourselves [that] have always existed, regardless of political agendas that sought to eradicate or marginalize them” (7). King works to recover and share cultural stories because these stories contain the strategies and knowledge that can help affected communities and ecosystems recover

⁵⁹ Robert Bullard defines environmental injustice as a process in which “throughout the world, poor people and people of color, who have the least political power and who are the most marginalized, are selectively victimized by environmental crises” (“Introduction” 6).

from environmental injustices.⁶⁰ These stories can also provide the foundation for more egalitarian and ecologically sustainable intercultural relations. King has a longstanding interest in cultural stories that predates his work as a writer-activist. His dissertation interrogates how Indigenous authors are drawing on cultural stories to create narratives that articulate “a particularly Native view of the way in which the world works and a particularly Native sense of the place of human beings within that world” (v).⁶¹ King summarizes this Indigenous understanding of relationships through the well-known phrase *all my relations*, which serves as a “reminder” of Indigenous peoples’ relationships with, and responsibilities to, each other and the more-than-human-world (Introduction ix).

Drawing on these ideas of relationality and responsibility that are often deployed by Indigenous environmentalists, King’s activist writing regularly turns to creation stories that foreground Indigenous “principles of respect, reciprocity, responsibility, and reverence, while coexisting with all the other beings on the land” (Wong and Christian 3).⁶² Consequently, King

⁶⁰ Grace L. Dillon (Anishinaabe) explains that stories are the means through which Indigenous knowledge is shared. She writes, “Many Indigenous cultures do not classify discourse genres, making ‘storytelling’ the singular means of passing all knowledge from generation to generation. Indigenous science is communicated through storytelling” (377).

⁶¹ Since the publication of King’s dissertation, *Inventing the Indian: White Images, Native Oral Literature, and Contemporary Native Writers* (1986), he has held academic positions at several schools. King’s first academic appointment was at the University of Lethbridge. He then moved to Saint Paul Minnesota where he served as chair of Native American studies at the University of Minnesota (“Thomas King”). King has since taught at the University of Guelph, in Guelph Ontario (*The Truth Cover Copy*).

⁶² The notion that creation stories contain foundational knowledge that provides guidance to Indigenous peoples is shared widely among Indigenous cultures. For example, Deborah McGregor (Anishinaabe) explains that Indigenous creation stories “provide an Indigenous understandings of our own relationship to all of Creation” (“Coming Full Circle” 386) and Umeek / E. Richard Atleo (nuu-chah-nulth) states that the nuu-chah-nulth “idea of balance and harmony is derived from origin stories” (34).

understands the environmentalism of Indigenous peoples as providing ways to “reorganize our communities and societies ... differently, in ways that contribute to shared resilience rather than mass extinction” (Wong and Christian 11). Thus, King takes part in a decolonial and environmentalist initiative that involves turning to the “necessary and urgent stories we need to nourish and guide us in order to truly build peace, diversity, and resilience through Indigenous resurgence” (19). Through his efforts to make legible and legitimate Indigenous creation stories that may provide a way out of the environmental “ruin” affecting Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples that characterizes the contemporary moment and our collective future, King’s writer-activism creates a sophisticated literary counter-discourse to those stories and policies that make permissible egregious destruction of ecosystems and social injustices.

Searching for Indigenous Stories in *Green Grass, Running Water*

In *Green Grass, Running Water*, King demonstrates that alternative models of social and environmental just relations exist within Indigenous stories. The novel intertwines the lives of Blackfoot community members, who are responding to the building and potential damaging effects of a hydroelectric dam on the community and land, with a group of Indigenous Elders, who have escaped from a psychiatric hospital with the goal of restoring balance and harmony between humans and the more-than-human world. The Blackfoot characters’ responses to the dam are informed by their internalization of colonial stories that depict Indigenous people as inherently less than settlers. The Elders have also internalized these stories, which impede their restorative efforts. Christian creation stories have displaced their Indigenous creation story, but through trial and error, they work to retell an Indigenous creation story and “get it right” (14). While the novel makes clear the destructive effects of entrenched colonial narratives on Indigenous peoples, King demonstrates that the recovery of Indigenous stories is possible and

suggests that the value systems embedded in these stories are central to Indigenous communities and their allies' efforts to generate non-colonial alternatives to environmental injustices.⁶³

Green Grass, Running Water emerged as a response to the controversial construction of the Oldman River Dam that began to threaten a Blackfoot community's social and environmental wellbeing in the late 1980s. When King drafted the novel in 1989 (Weaver), he was a professor at the University of Lethbridge, living on Blackfoot territory and discussing "tribal history" and "contemporary reserve politics" with members of the Blackfoot Indian nation for nearly a decade (*Inconvenient* 294). One topic of discussion during the late 1980s would have been the Oldman River Dam, which the provincial government was building to facilitate agricultural irrigation (Glenn xi). Members of the Piikani Nation (of the Blackfoot confederacy) opposed the dam because they held the river as sacred and used the river valley and the cottonwood trees that grew there for the Sun Dance ceremony. They were concerned that the dam would flood the valley and thus destroy the trees and their ceremonial sites (Glenn 193). The resulting destruction of social and environmental relations bears resemblance to earlier moments in which Blackfoot land relations were disrupted. During the height of assimilation, in the early twentieth century, government policy and colonial agents attempted to destroy Blackfoot land relations through the residential school system and by banning Indigenous cultural practices, such as the Sun Dance which was prohibited under the Indian Act between 1885-1951 (Gadacz). However, by the 1950s the Sun Dance was no longer banned and residential schools were beginning to close (Milloy

⁶³ For more on how King fictionalized the Oldman River controversy, see Cheryl Lousley's article "'Hosanna Da, Our Home on Natives' Land': Environmental Justice and Democracy in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*," in which she draws parallels between King's characters and historical figures who were involved in the controversy. Also, see chapter five of Jenny Kerber's *Writing in the Dust: Reading the Prairie Environmentally*.

189). Although the Sun Dance was once again made permissible by the state, this Blackfoot land relation came under threat again in the 1980s, this time in the form of a dam that would destroy the upstream riparian ecosystem while advancing settler agricultural production, industry, and standards of living.

In *Green Grass, Running Water*, Clifford Sifton, who is responsible for building the dam on behalf of Duplessis International Associates, rehearses a commonly held Euro-Western belief in human domination over all things, including the belief that dams are “necessary and beneficial—despite the documented loss of human life, culture, and livelihood, and the massive ecological upheaval that major hydroelectric projects have brought in the Three Gorges region of China, the Narmada Valley in India, or the James Bay region of northern Quebec” (Neimanis 56). Sifton expresses his frustration with Indigenous and environmentalist opposition to the “control-oriented knowledge of the land-water” that the dam represents (61). He states “You know what the problem is? This country doesn’t have an Indian policy. Nobody knows what the hell anyone else is doing” (141). For Sifton, the management of the water is tellingly connected to the order and control of Indigenous peoples and land. Lamenting “an Indian policy” that works to capture and contain Indigenous epistemologies (141), Sifton’s “techno-capitalized drive toward mastery” is interrupted by “questions of ecological and anti-colonial justice” (Neimanis 58). Specifically, the Blackfoot characters insist that the dam will stop the river from its yearly flooding thereby dehydrating and ultimately killing the trees necessary for the Sun Dance—a point which Harley emphasizes: “if the cottonwoods die, where are we going to get the Sun Dance tree?” (376). As Cheryl Lousley argues, through the novel “King reveals how consistently an ethic of management and control has been applied to both indigenous peoples and indigenous ecologies throughout Canadian history, with grave consequences for all” (17). The novel

connects early forms of assimilation and contemporary acts of management and control of traditional land relations.

In addition to exposing how colonial management and control over and destruction of Indigenous land relations continue into the late twentieth century, King's novel reveals how Indigenous peoples' responses to the damage to the community and environment caused by the dam can be limited by harmful colonial stories. By demonstrating how colonial stories affect characters in ways that result in either less effective opposition to or support for the dam, King emphasizes the powerful effects of stories on evading or resisting the historical violence that threatens to erase Indigenous peoples' land relations. King makes clear the effects of colonial stories on Indigenous peoples in the second section of the novel, oscillating between Eli Stands Alone's engagement with Western literature, which includes "sleazy little cowboy and Indian shoot- 'em-ups" (166), and Charlie Looking Bear's acting roles in Hollywood Westerns, wearing "tights, a beaded vest, and a headband with a brightly colored feather" (209). Although both characters are critical of the stereotypes of Indigenous peoples propagated in Westerns, these colonial stories inform their limited responses to the dam. Eli's resistance to the dam is only somewhat effective, due to his inability to move beyond a Eurocentric framework that he has adopted because of his engagement with colonial stories as a professor of English literature and avid reader of Westerns. Similarly, Charlie's decision to work as Duplessis' lawyer and thus his support for the dam is informed by colonial stories that he became familiar with through his and his father's experience working in Hollywood portraying Indigenous characters in Western films.

Charlie first becomes aware of Westerns and the stereotypes of Indigenous peoples that they popularize when his mother tells him about his father's experience working as an actor in Hollywood. Interested in his parents' life before they returned home to the reserve, Charlie asks

his mother Lillian about his father's acting career. She answers that although Portland starred in Westerns, he was a star in a time "before they had any Indian Heroes" (150). As King explains in *The Inconvenient Indian*, Hollywood generated "clichés" that reduced Indigenous peoples to "basic Indian types," such as the "bloodthirsty savage" who terrorized settlers and the "noble savage" who helped settlers (34). By representing Indigenous peoples as violent, lawless, and unrestrained threats to settlers, the stereotype of the "bloodthirsty savage" relied on and perpetuated the notion of Indigenous deficiency, in which "Indigenous peoples are in a state of constant lack: in morals, laws, culture, restraint, [and] language" (Justice 1-2). In order to play this limited character, Portland changed his name to Iron Eyes Screeching Eagle—which Lillian describes as "the most absurd name they [Portland and friends] could imagine" (151). By emphasizing how Portland consciously adapts to fit into restrictive Hollywood roles as well as its "absurd" misrepresentation of the reality of Indigenous life and culture (152), Lillian draws her son's attention to the artifice of colonial representations of Indigenous peoples. For Lillian and Portland, the character of the "bloodthirsty savage" was a fabrication (King, *Inconvenient* 34); it was simply a role in someone else's script, but it was a role that if done correctly could lead to financial success and social standing.

Although he understands that his father was playing a role, Charlie is skeptical of Portland's decision to move back to Hollywood to revive his acting career. Nevertheless, he follows his father to Hollywood and tries to find work in the film industry. Charlie has trouble finding adequate work in the industry and is instead encouraged to play an off-screen role at a Western-themed restaurant where he is forced to wear a stereotypical Indigenous outfit. Portland who worked at the restaurant years ago advises his son to "Remember to grunt ... the idiots love it, and you get better tips" (209). Embedded in Portland's advice is that Charlie should

emphasize a purported lack of language that is a typical trope in the story of Indigenous deficiency. However, Portland's advice also suggests that he is aware that Indigenous deficiency is a falsehood only to be performed to meet the customers' expectations and desires—and to increase his son's tips. Portland performs this falsehood in a strip club routine, in which "He looked silly, and he looked scary as he danced around waving his tomahawk and grimacing and sneering at Pocahontas and the audience" until he is fought off by a cowboy who then wins the woman's affection (212). Portland and Charlie act in roles in which they embody Indigenous deficiency just as Portland had done in the past, but unlike the past, their roles do not lead to success. Portland soon acknowledges to Charlie that he will not be rediscovered while acting at the strip club and he quits his job. He confines himself to his apartment, thinking only of his earlier achievements and chooses not to return to the reserve with Charlie who has given up on Hollywood.

While Charlie appears to have rejected the story of Indigenous deficiency by leaving Hollywood, the story informs his actions when his community is confronted by the proposed dam. He remembers from his experiences in Hollywood that when dealing with a settler industry Indigenous peoples are encouraged to play a role in a script not of their making; however, he also remembers from his father's success that those who play their roles well are often rewarded. Consequently, Charlie accepts a job offer from Duplessis to work as a lawyer in opposition to Eli Stands Alone who seeks an injunction against the dam. Charlie emphasizes his role-playing approach when he explains to his friend Alberta that he does not "call the shots" regarding government support of the dam (118). When she voices concern that the dam will be detrimental to the community, he responds with at least "some of us should" make money from the situation (117-18). As a lawyer for Duplessis, Charlie revives the lack of voice that he embodied when

working at the Western-themed restaurant where he was encouraged to enact one of the tropes of Indigenous deficiency. In doing so, he conforms to his role in which he is hired not to make decisions, as the narrator explains, but rather to act as the public face for the company that desired to depict the community as divided. The story of Indigenous deficiency thus subtly informs Charlie's response to the dam. By demonstrating how Charlie's response is informed by his past experiences with restrictive colonial stories, the novel rejects typecasting Charlie as a villain. Instead, he is depicted as an Indigenous man who is attempting to find success within a settler colonial society that limits the roles and silences the voices of Indigenous peoples. And yet, by including Alberta's challenge to Charlie's self-serving actions, the novel suggests that Charlie is not to be celebrated either.

Eli's relationship to Indigenous land, peoples, and ways of life is challenged by his engagement with colonial stories that represent Indigeneity as deficient. While studying literature at a university in Toronto, Eli becomes familiar with canonical British literature, eventually specializing in the discipline and working as an English professor. Eli's white-settler girlfriend Karen encourages him to read books written about Indigenous peoples; these books influence her understanding of Eli and Indigenous cultural practices. She gives Eli "Histories, autobiographies, memoirs of writers who had gone west or who had lived with a particular tribe, romances of one sort or another" (162). Eli is uninterested in Karen's recommendations, but he reads the books nevertheless and does so critically. As Arnold E. Davidson et al. argue, "Through these texts, Eli learns—and makes fun of—the formulas that have been used to construct and represent Natives as a racial 'other'" (138). And yet, despite becoming aware of and subsequently critiquing colonial representations of Indigenous peoples, Eli becomes passionate about Westerns—a genre that Karen's father also enjoys but describes as "junk" (166). Regardless of the genre's reductive

representation of Indigenous peoples and settler-Indigenous relations, Eli enjoys reading Westerns. He rationalizes the pleasure of reading them by comparing reading Westerns to “eating potato chips. They weren’t good for you, but no one said they were” (163). Implied in Eli’s comparison is the notion that because Westerns are not intended to be “good for you” their colonial representations of Indigenous peoples are not as damaging as those found in the purportedly accurate and informative non-fiction that Karen reads (163). With this mindset, Eli becomes both a critical reader of the colonial representation of Indigenous peoples found in literature that is intended to be beneficial for the reader and a passive reader of the colonial representations found in Westerns.

When Eli returns home to find his community threatened and his mother’s house scheduled for destruction because of the dam, he responds in a manner that is informed by colonial stories. Eli uses his critical understanding of colonial stories to challenge the rhetoric that Sifton uses to rationalize his support for the dam. As Davidson et al. argue, because of Eli’s familiarity with colonial representations of Indigenous peoples, he “is in an excellent position to argue against the notion that Natives are a dying breed whose tribal rights as individual nations are non-existent” (139). Despite being well positioned to critique Sifton’s beliefs, Eli fails to change Sifton’s way of thinking. Instead Sifton approaches Eli daily to ask him to sign over his property to the government—a request to which Eli always answers “no” (137). Eli and Sifton are locked into opposing sides of a conflict that is much bigger than their uneasy friendship and that bears resemblance to the opposition between Indigenous and settler characters that occurs in Westerns. In Westerns, so formulaic that Eli does not “have to read the pages to know what was going to happen There would be a conflict of some sort between the whites and the Indians” and an emerging romantic relationship between the Indigenous antagonist and the white

protagonist that would fail when the antagonist is driven to return to his fight against the settlers (199). In Westerns, the possibility of intercultural relation building is inherently doomed and the conflict between Indigenous peoples and settlers is inevitable.

Although Eli discounts the effect of Westerns on himself and others, the common Western genre trope of Indigenous characters and settlers fighting against each other informs his approach to the dam building conflict more than he expects. Like Charlie who returns home to find himself playing a role that bears similarities to a Hollywood film, Eli returns home and finds himself playing the role of an Indigenous person fighting against settlers that bears similarities to Western genre fiction, albeit without the violence.⁶⁴ He is familiar with the role and acts in accordance, although he attempts to subvert the ending by defeating rather than being defeated by the settlers. He fights against the settlers' dam by challenging its construction in court and after years of opposition an injunction was granted just after the dam was completed. Although he does not stop the dam from being built, his efforts results in the courts stopping the dam from becoming operational. Despite his efforts, Eli was not able to stop the dam. Reflecting on his tactics, the narrator suggests that "Eli had to admit that after all the years of arguments and threats and injunctions, he had won very little. The dam was there. It wasn't going to go away" (260). His achievement, as Lousley writes, is "more symbolic than practical" (30). Eli's symbolic victory is also symbolic of the limited possible outcomes that occur when Indigenous peoples play a role in colonial stories.

⁶⁴ The argument that Eli and Charlie are performing roles in colonial narratives is an extension of the argument by Davidson et al. that demonstrates how Eli's movement from the reserve to the city mimics a "formulaic narrative," in which an Indigenous character's exposure to settler culture in the city results in his struggle to return home, geographically and metaphorically (137).

In contrast to Eli and Charlie whose response to the dam is informed by their roles in colonial stories, King depicts a group of Indigenous Elders and Coyote who attempt to restore balance to the world by rejecting colonial stories and the limited roles for Indigenous peoples there within. The Elders are affected by colonial stories that result in their inability to remember Indigenous creation stories. The colonial stories are so powerful that the Elders have taken on the names of famous characters from colonial narratives who symbolize “‘rugged’ individualism,” according to Dee Horne (40). However, rather than playing the individualistic roles suggested by their namesakes, Hawkeye, Ishmael, Lone Ranger, and Robinson Crusoe work together to remember an Indigenous creation story. Although they begin with what Jenny Kerber calls a “series of false starts,” including “narrative beginnings that parody the folktale, the fairytale, the commodified pan-Native story, and the Genesis myth” (168), they eventually start to piece together an Indigenous creation story. The creation story stresses the importance of “Mind[ing] your relations,” as one of the characters in the story states, which is a drastically different ethic than the colonial ethics of management (39). By working together to reject colonial stories and recover Indigenous stories, the Elders are participating in what David Garneau (Métis) would call “irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality,” in which Indigenous peoples “figure themselves to, for, and with one another” (27). Through their actions, the Elders enact their desire for Indigenous peoples to have the ability to play a role in their own stories, rather than to play limited roles in colonial stories that do not generate alternatives to settler colonialism. By contrasting the Elders’ relationships with stories to those of Eli and Charlie, the novel makes legible how certain types of stories allow for the continued control of Indigenous land relations by restricting Indigenous peoples’ responses to environmental harm. Moreover, *Green Grass*,

Running Water suggests that Indigenous stories may provide relief to its victims and restore the damaged community and environment.

Thomas King and Reconciliation

While critical of contemporary settler colonialism and neoliberal reconciliation efforts, King's most recent writings work to bring reconciliation among parties involved in environmental injustice. Reconciliation began in 1998 with the "Statement of Reconciliation," in which the federal government encouraged Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to "move forward together in a process of renewal" that "deal[s] with the legacies of the past," such as the residential school system ("Address"). Reconciliatory initiatives generated a milieu of relation building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. However, the process also generated a new set of challenges for Indigenous peoples related to how the legacy of colonial violence would be portrayed and whether intercultural relation building would be used as a façade to mask continued state and corporate colonial control over Indigenous peoples' knowledge, practices, and lands. In his first collection of poetry, *77 Fragments of a Familiar Ruin* (2019), King writes,

To reconcile, here's what to do.

The rules are simple,

the rules are few.

Honour the promises,

do what you say,

restore the land

and get out of our way. (40)

Here, King presents an unobscured vision of reconciliation that jettisons two decades of state-driven dialogue and initiatives that have not yet adequately addressed the central problem of settler, state, and corporate control and abuse of Indigenous land. Reinforced by the simplistic, singsong rhyming scheme, the poem suggests that reconciliation can be a simple process if control of the land is fully relinquished and returned to Indigenous peoples.⁶⁵ King's creative writings imagine the possibilities of non-colonial, socially and environmentally equitable intercultural relations.

King's multi-genre and multi-strategy environmental writer-activism encourages non-colonial intercultural relations through helping non-Indigenous readers unlearn harmful stories, become aware of historical violences, and imagine new modes of community and kinship grounded in Indigenous knowledge. In doing so, King works to enact "sites of perpetual conciliation," in which non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples gather to generate "moments of empathy and agreement beyond conventional Native/settler binaries" (Garneau 24). King brings forth these conciliatory spaces in three of his major works, *The Truth About Stories* (2003), *The Inconvenient Indian* (2012), and *The Back of the Turtle* (2014). In these books, these gatherings of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples allow for "non-colonial ... ways of being that are cognizant that a return to pre-contact conditions is impossible and that total assimilation into the dominant ideology is unacceptable" (Garneau 24).

King's CBC Massey Lectures (later published as *The Truth About Stories*) exemplifies his early efforts to intervene into conversations about reconciliation by engendering intercultural

⁶⁵ Here, King echoes other Indigenous writers' arguments that returning land is an essential aspect of the reconciliation process. For example, in "Land and Reconciliation" Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) states "How can we 'advance the process of Canadian reconciliation' without talking about land?"

spaces that work toward encouraging a non-colonial form of relation building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples that destabilizes Eurocentrism and foregrounds Indigenous knowledge. For King, relation building begins by rejecting the notion that Indigenous stories and knowledge are inherently less than Western stories and knowledge. King starts his first lecture with a comparison between the Christian creation story “Genesis” and an Indigenous creation story “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” which is the same story told by the Elders in *Green Grass, Running Water* and by characters in *The Back of the Turtle*.⁶⁶ After sharing the creation stories he warns his audience/readers not to frame the Indigenous story through the notion of Indigenous deficiency. He cautions, “Of course, none of you would make the mistake of confusing storytelling strategies with the value or sophistication of a story. And we know enough about the complexities of cultures to avoid the error of imagining animism and polytheism to be no more than primitive versions of monotheism. Don’t we?” (23). In other words, he asks his audience/readers not to frame the Indigenous story through the Eurocentric

⁶⁶ “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky” is part of a series of creation stories told by Cherokee (Leeming 351), Haudenosaunee, and Anishinaabe peoples (Kimmerer 7). Rick Monture (Mohawk) provides a succinct telling of the story worthy of repeating here, the beginning of which bears similarities to King’s telling, which he returns to throughout his oeuvre. Monture writes, “as Haudenosaunee, we believe that we are descended from Sky Woman, who fell from the Sky World through a hole that was created when a great tree was uprooted. As she fell through this hole, she clutched at the earth around her and in doing so grabbed tobacco and strawberry plants, which were both seen as very sacred to this day. As she was falling toward this world, the animals that existed on the waters below noticed her and several waterfowl flew upward to assist her. After catching her and bringing her gently downward, the animals held a council in which they discussed what could be done for this young woman who, they also noticed, was about to give birth. It was decided that the turtle would offer his back for her to rest upon while the other animals—otter, beaver and muskrat—would attempt to bring up some earth from the bottom of the ocean. After each of the others tried and failed, the task was left up to muskrat, who finally floated to the surface, dead, but holding a tiny piece of earth in his paw. Once this piece of earth was placed upon the turtle’s back, the young woman began to walk around and as she did the earth widened and eventually grew into what we now know as North America” (3-4).

belief that Indigenous knowledge is lacking “value or sophistication” in comparison to Western knowledge (23). King implies that until the notion of Indigenous deficiency is rejected, his audience/readers will not be able to openly engage with the knowledge systems embedded in the Indigenous story.

“The Woman Who Fell from the Sky” is worth taking seriously not only because it is important to certain Indigenous communities but also because in a moment of intercultural relation building the story provides insights into how to live in better relation to one another. King makes clear the relation-building potential of the story when comparing it to Genesis: “So here are our choices: a world in which creation is a solitary, individual act or a world in which creation is a shared activity; a world that begins in harmony and slides toward chaos or a world that begins in chaos and moves toward harmony; a world marked by competition or a world determined by co-operation” (24-5). King emphasizes that the Indigenous creation story encourages a way of living that, if accepted as legitimate, helps remedy settler colonial control over Indigenous peoples and the land, which is embedded in settler stories that value competition and individualism.

King continues his examination of the harmful relationship that settlers have with Indigenous peoples in his expansive history of Indigenous-settler relations *The Inconvenient Indian* (2012). Writing historical works that uncover settler colonial violence and examine the historic challenges to relation building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is an essential step in the reconciliation process. In the opening chapter of *The Inconvenient Indian* King emphasizes the need for the recovery of a public historical consciousness about Indigenous peoples and settler colonialism. He writes: “The sad truth is that, within the public sphere, within the collective consciousness of the general populace, most of the history of Indians in North

America has been forgotten” (20).⁶⁷ Throughout *The Inconvenient Indian*, King addresses this misunderstood and conveniently forgotten history, which includes the residential school system in which Indigenous knowledge was disparaged and children faced unacceptable conditions including “Sexual and physical abuse” (114). Despite colonial oppression, King emphasizes Indigenous peoples’ agency to resist and generate alternatives to systemic violence. For example, King describes how in 1969 a group of protesters affiliated with the American Indian Movement (AIM) seized control of Alcatraz Island.⁶⁸ On the island, the group attempted to generate an alternative to settler colonial control over land and Indigenous peoples by reoccupying the land and creating Indigenous education programs, among other initiatives. Although the occupation was stopped by the police, AIM’s efforts became “an emblem of Native resistance and pride” (143). By exposing colonial dispossession of land and knowledge, and by recovering moments of resistances, however momentary, King provides readers with an understanding of the past in which Indigenous peoples have long worked to enact traditional knowledge and reoccupy the land often without the support of non-Indigenous allies. Through this necessary pedagogical work, King provides a foundation on which non-Indigenous readers can base their relation-building efforts.

⁶⁷ Regarding his use of the word “Indian,” King states “I’m not going to try to argue for a single word ... ‘First Nations’ is the current term of choice in Canada, while ‘Native Americans’ is the fashionable preference in the United States. I’m fond of both of these terms, but, for all its faults and problems—especially in Canada—‘Indian,’ as a general designation, remains for me, at least, the North American default” (*Inconvenient* xiii).

⁶⁸ AIM sought to reject assimilation, draw attention to Indigenous issues, and recover Indigenous practices. AIM was a movement that, according to Bruce E. Johansen, involved “rediscovering Native traditions, but doing so in a very assertive way that demanded attention from the dominant society. The members of AIM found that they were remaking themselves as well as changing a cultural milieu” (23-4).

Although understanding the past through history is important to the relation-building process because it helps non-Indigenous peoples to avoid reenacting past violences and to make better sense of the present, King suggests there are limits to this genre. Since history is governed by facts—such as the fact that alternatives to settler colonialism have often been quickly suppressed—the genre provides limited opportunity to depict intercultural relation building as a plausible and sustained process. While writing *The Inconvenient Indian*, King was reminded of the historic struggles to generate lasting alternatives to colonialism through his reading of the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano’s history of the Americas *Memory of Fire*.⁶⁹ Galeano’s history emphasizes the relentless violences enacted on those who attempted to generate alternative modes of existence.⁷⁰ While King, like Galeano, wrote a sweeping narrative-driven history that works to expose colonial violence, and recover the stories of those who attempted to generate different ways of being and knowing, King suggests that fiction is also a useful genre for the way it can imagine modes of existence not bound by the historical record. In the preface of *The Inconvenient Indian*, King underscores his appreciation for fiction as a genre that allows writer-activists to imagine ethical relationships. He writes, “Truth be known, I prefer fiction. I dislike the way facts try to thrust themselves upon me. I’d rather make up my own world.

⁶⁹ Daniel Fischlin and Martha Nandorfy write that King had “copies of Galeano’s *Memory of Fire* trilogy ... strewn about his workspace” while he wrote his own sweeping history of Indigenous life in the Americas.

⁷⁰ Daniel Fischlin and Martha Nandorfy write that in *Memory of Fire* Galeano depicts communities that attempt “to establish the well-being of all its members in a just, equitable, and ethical way” (*Eduardo Galeano* 338). And, for their “potential to supersede the nation-state with another form of communal organization ... in the name of different forms of human solidarity” these communities were “brutally destroyed for the crime of expressing themselves differently” (339).

Fictions are less unruly than histories. The beginnings are more engaging, the characters more co-operative, the endings more in line with expectations of morality and justice” (xi-xii).

Here, King suggests that fiction allows writer-activists to depict relationships based on “co-operation,” “morality,” and “justice,” rather than relying solely on the historical record, in which instances of individualism, immorality, and injustice are all too common.

As King demonstrates in *The Back of the Turtle* (2014), fiction allows writer-activists to articulate their visions of intercultural relation building as emergent and potentially sustainable acts. Thus, fiction allows readers to imagine socially and environmentally just intercultural relationships beyond those that flickered in the past. By turning to fiction as a means of imagining these relations, as he does in *The Back of the Turtle*, King encourages readers to imagine beyond harmful historic intercultural relations, as well as beyond government-led reconciliation efforts that co-opt relation building for corporate profit. King’s novel thus enacts what critic Jon Gordon calls “the possibility of inhabitation, for the alternative paradigm to imperial displacements and dispossessions,” that may be readily present in literature (xxviii).

Responding to Environmental Ruin in *The Back of the Turtle*

The Back of the Turtle provides a timely literary counter-discourse to corporate obfuscation and rationalization of environmental destruction by making visible this harm and alternatives modes of existence. The novel revolves around an environmental disaster that occurs on the West Coast when a defoliant used to clear a path for a pipeline travels through the watershed killing all beings in its wake, including members of an Indigenous community. King demonstrates that using land as a commodity, and the narratives that normalize these profit-driven land relations, are both violent and farcical. And yet, despite the pervasive destruction of land and community, King suggests that Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples can develop

mutually sustaining relationships that may help communities and environments recover from harm and ward off future threats. King imagines the enriching intercultural relations that may emerge when Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples' understanding of the land and of community is grounded in the traditional knowledge found within Indigenous creation stories. In the novel, the role of cultural stories in the relation-building process is emphasized when Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters gather at a “[site] of perpetual conciliation” (Garneau 24), to listen to “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky.” After hearing the creation story, the characters utilize the strategies therewith to help them develop relationships that serve as alternatives to neoliberal control over people and places. Consequently, King makes legible the intertwined personal, communal, and ecological resurgence that may occur when intercultural relationships grounded in traditional knowledge emerge and are not suppressed or dictated by the state or corporate actors.

Through flashbacks the reader is prompted to piece together a series of decisions made by numerous actors that resulted in the Kali Creek disaster. For example, one flashback occurs when a local named Nicholas Crisp has a conversation with Gabriel Quinn who has travelled to the site of the disaster. Gabriel is an Indigenous man who has suppressed his culture due to family circumstances and his role as a corporate scientist for Domidion. At Domidion he created the destructive defoliant by “rearrang[ing] the [bacterium’s] DNA” because he was “paid” to do so (454). While Gabriel was concerned that the bacterium was too dangerous for commercial use, Domidion continued the experiment thereby placing profit above public safety. Although Gabriel’s research and Domidion’s decisions contributed to the disaster so too did the actions of others. In their conversation, Crisp tells Gabriel how the non-Indigenous townspeople of Samaritan Bay accepted the company’s pipeline proposal because they were offered the “heaven

and all the stars” in exchange for access to the land (63), even though “environmental groups and First Nation communities” rejected the plan (320). In another flashback the reader learns that after the townspeople were convinced, “a mid-level manager” who was frustrated with the underbrush slowing pipeline construction “decided to try a shortcut” by applying the untested defoliant that was mixed at the wrong proportions to a mountainous landscape that was not conducive to such applications (320-22). After being applied to the underbrush, “GreenSweep had carved a path of destruction all the way to the coast It had destroyed all life in the bay and pushed the kill zone out into the ocean some twenty kilometres” (324). While the destruction caused by the application of GreenSweep is made unequivocally clear, the novel makes more ambivalent who is responsible for the disaster.⁷¹ In doing so, King challenges the normalized notion of placing blame on individuals for a failure that is more collective in nature.

Rather than place blame on certain individuals, King goes to great lengths to depict responses to the disaster, in which the characters’ ethics are exposed. Domidion, embodied by the company’s CEO Dorian Asher and several other employees, responds to the various environmental disasters caused by their projects through the relentless creation of narratives in which they attempt to manufacture consent by obfuscating harm and depicting the company as caring. For example, after the initial disaster, Domidion employees return to Samaritan Bay to pitch a pipeline project that they argue is safer than the previous plan. They also argue that if enacted their new proposal would bring “Salvation” from the disaster and “Wealth. Prosperity.

⁷¹ King’s representation of a genetically-engineered and highly-destructive defoliant is based on real world concerns that poorly-regulated corporate science is capable of having catastrophic consequences. Specifically, King draws on an event from the 1990s in which a company altered the *Klebsiella planticola* bacterium. Although the company believed that the genetically modified bacterium was safe for commercial use, independent researchers tested the modified bacterium and proposed that if used it would cause the global decimation of plant life (“*Klebsiella Planticola*”).

[and] Economic security” to all who live in the bay (84). However, the locals who critique the project by suggesting “It looks exactly like the old proposal” reveal that Domidion is not interested in making amends, or offering “Salvation,” but is instead spinning empty words in hopes of manufacturing consent for their pipeline project (84).

Dorian is also involved in generating disingenuous narratives that allow Domidion to obscure the company’s recent environmentally destructive projects. After dead fish are found on a riverbank near the company’s tar sands tailing pond, which had been leaking “rapidly for the past two weeks,” Domidion “pump[s] fresh water into the pond to keep the level where it’s supposed to be” instead of stopping the leak (113-14). Although willfully negligent, Dorian works to obscure the harm and cultivate an aura of care by suggesting that the company’s public relations representative “find a celebrity who can go on camera and talk about our efforts to preserve wilderness habitat” (129). Here, Dorian and the PR department are considering constructing a narrative that would contribute to what Rob Nixon calls “the Production of Doubt” in an effort to “keep ensuring that, in the public’s mind, the jury remains permanently out, so that irresolution rules” (Nixon 39). Although Dorian receives immense financial compensation due to his savvy ability to control the narrative about Domidion’s actions, his corporate-mandated fixation with controlling situations, people, and places comes with personal consequences that play out in the novel between his public relations efforts.

The controlling mindset that Dorian develops at work is exacerbated by his physical and psychological distance from the land. Dorian’s world consists of high-end, semi-public spaces such as office building, restaurants, condominiums, and limousines. Rarely does Dorian venture into Toronto’s public spaces or into less urbanized lands. To spend time on the land, which can include urban spaces, would require that Dorian acknowledge that he exists within an ecosystem,

in which control is not always possible or desirable and that ever-changing relationships with the more-than-human-world is the norm. Dorian avoids connecting with the land because doing so would pose a challenge to his corporate mandated worldview. Dorian's distance from the land contributes to his control over others and his inability to generate egalitarian relationships with people. For example, Dorian's relationship with his wife is stifled because he does not know how to respond when she maintains opinions with which he disagrees. Unable to reach compromises with his wife, as an equal partner in the relationship, Olivia travels alone to Orlando. Without Olivia's companionship, Dorian attempts to befriend his "servants" such as a waiter, limousine driver, and retail salesperson. While he is mostly kind to those who serve him their relationships are built not on equality but on a hierarchy in which they are paid to be friendly to Dorian. At a high-end retail store Dorian converses with a salesperson about watches. When she asks whether he feels like a "Rolex or Jaeger," Dorian—frustrated with a recent trip to the public space of the doctor's office where he met with a physician who could not be controlled—states "right now ... I feel like a Citizen" (193). As expected, the salesperson laughs at Dorian's play on words; however, the joke and the response highlight Dorian's distaste for public spaces, and by extension the land, as well as the comfort he finds in relationships in which he is in control. Consequently, Dorian—one of the largest benefactors of Domidion's projects—struggles to maintain meaningful relationships, despite preaching that economic opportunities rather than connecting with the land equate to wellbeing. If Dorian's relationships are stifled regardless of the economic opportunities afforded to him by Domidion, what wellbeing awaits those in Samaritan Bay and elsewhere who receive only a fraction of Dorian's economic opportunities and the burden of company-caused ecological destruction? By interspersing Dorian's personal issues between his public relations work, King emphasizes that corporate narratives of care and

economic opportunity are disingenuous and only serve to allow the company to continue its extractive profit-driven projects.

While Dorian's corporate-mandated response to Domidion's wake of environmental destruction is one of obfuscation and corporate irresponsibility, those more immediately affected by "The Ruin" (159), such as Mara and Gabriel, respond to the destruction through critique and reflection. Mara, an Indigenous artist, had left the reserve many years prior to the disaster to study art. Her decision to study abroad was supported by her mother, grandmother, and friend Lilly who cared for her wellbeing, notwithstanding their suggestions that staying on the reserve to "draw turtles" and "look after the river" were admirable alternatives (153-54). Despite being physically distanced from her relations due to her career, Mara feels "diminished" after her mother, grandmother, and Lilly die in the disaster (189). Consequently, Mara returns home to paint portraits. For Ana Maria Fraile-Marcos, the disaster is the impetus through which Mara "discovers that her art may help fulfill the role she had unwillingly relinquished as keeper of the water, and help to re-establish some sort of ecological balance" (75). The narrator describes how the painting process helps Mara heal herself and perhaps even the land:

Mara put the brush down. She hadn't accomplished much, but tomorrow she would do a little more. And, after that, a little more. Until Lilly and Rose and baby Riel came back to life. Life. There it was. Standing at the easel, looking at what she had created, Mara realized that she might have found a purpose, something that would help her push past the numbing sorrow, something that would help her make the world whole again. (127)

Creating portraits of her friends and family allows Mara to reconnect with those who died and to revive "life" itself. Consequently, for Mara painting becomes a ceremonial act in the sense that "Native ceremony is associated with maintaining and *restoring* balance, renewal, cultivating

relationship, and creative participation with nature” (Cajete 70-71; emphasis added). Through Mara’s ceremonial portraits that restore Indigenous life after disaster, Mara challenges the notion that “The Ruin” is the end of life (159). Instead, through her artwork Mara insists that Indigenous peoples and ecologies will continue to exist despite environmental injustices that have disrupted balance.⁷²

In contrast to Mara’s personal response that commemorates specific community members, Gabriel who lost his sister Lilly and his nephew in the Kali Creek disaster responds by understanding the disaster as one of many instances in which unchecked scientific applications caused unnecessary social and environmental destruction. He does so by writing a list of disasters on the walls of his house in Toronto. His list that includes “Chernobyl. Idaho Falls. [and] Chalk River” is punctuated by “Kali Creek,” which he writes on the front door. Hanna Straß-Senol rightfully suggests that Gabriel’s list is “an attempt to come to terms with and [is his] owning up to his responsibility ...” (131). His list making is an act that prompts Crisp to state “it’s well and proper to write what must be seen and to speak what must be heard” (143). Notwithstanding the importance of bringing to light the innumerable human-caused environmental disasters that are often obscured by corporate and state actors, there are limits to Gabriel’s response. Robin Wall Kimmerer (Pottawatomi) argues that being inundated with examples of environmental harm can be restrictive unless accompanied by strategies that allow for the envisioning of ecological alternatives. She writes:

⁷² King has elsewhere emphasized the role of visual art in the continuance of Indigenous peoples and land in the wake of oppression. For example, In *Truth and Bright Water*, the visual artist Munro Swimmer paints away the churches that are representative of colonial violence and thus “use[s] art to erase the structures of colonialism and replace it with the land” (Hubbard 172).

How is it possible that in twenty years of education they [her students] cannot think of any beneficial relationships between people and the environment? Perhaps the negative examples they see every day—brownfields, factory farms, suburban sprawl—truncated their ability to see some good between humans and the earth. As the land becomes impoverished, so too does the scope of their vision. When we talked about this after class, I realized that they could not even imagine what beneficial relations between their species and others might look like. How can we begin to move toward ecological and cultural sustainability if we cannot even imagine what the path feels like? (6)

Like Kimmerer's students who are incapacitated by stories of environmental destruction, Gabriel's list does not help him build new relationships. Although Gabriel's list making and the research it requires helps Gabriel acknowledge that he is responsible for "destroy[ing] worlds" (168), Gabriel cannot imagine being anything but a destroyer of worlds and thus can only conceive of making amends through suicide.

Gabriel who unlike Mara cannot imagine life after the disaster is having what critic Lawrence Buell would call "a crisis of imagination." Buell explains that the "environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity's relation to it." Although Buell suggests that turning to American environmental literature can highlight "both the pathologies that bedevil society at large and some of the alternative paths that it might consider" (2), King questions whether the canon of American environmental literature and what it has come to represent is able to offer robust socially and environmentally beneficial relationships. Embodied through popular perceptions of one of its founders Henry David Thoreau, American environmental literature has come to represent a mode of environmentalism based on the individual alone in nature.

Influenced by Thoreau, Gabriel enacts this individualistic and nature-centric form of environmentalism when he first arrives at the town near the reserve. While discussing the trailer he plans to rent from Crisp, Crisp encourages Gabriel to develop relationships with the people and land that he has harmed. When prompted to imagine how to develop these relationships, he turns to Thoreau for guidance. In their conversation, Crisp asks whether or not Gabriel wants to borrow chairs to set in front of his trailer, “So ye can sit and imagine to have some say in creation. Would ye object to such an assembly?” (34). Gabriel responds:

“No, a chair would be nice.”

“And what will it be?” Crisp clapped his hands together. “One for solitude, two for friendship, or three for society?”

Gabriel tried to remember if Thoreau had had a preference. “One should be enough,” he said.

‘Then I’ll do that. Nothing illustrious or imposing.’ (34)

By encouraging Gabriel to take more than one chair after he states that Gabriel has “some say in creation,” Crisp offers Gabriel an opportunity to effect positive change rather than to die by suicide. Gabriel takes Crisp up on the offer, at least for the moment, but he struggles to imagine what these relationships might look like. When Gabriel is pressed to think beyond his decision to end his life, he imagines himself alone with what remains of nature in the area. His thoughts are influenced by the myth of Thoreau, which as Laura Dassow Walls explains depicts the writer as a “hermit” who “speaks for nature” (xviii). This persistent myth of the accomplished environmentalist comfortably distanced from human relationships informs Gabriel’s decision to choose only one chair. Consequently, although Gabriel is knowledgeable about environmental disasters, and accepts his role in the Kali Creek disaster, his decision to filter environmental care

through the myth of Thoreau results in an impoverished understanding of ecological relation building.

Recovering Relationships through the Recovery of Cultural Stories

Mara and Gabriel attempt to make sense of the human and ecological loss and envision the future; however, there remains much uncertainty regarding the bay's future and Mara's and Gabriel's place there within. In contrast, Crisp, who lives by the axiom "I am well, if ye be well too" (2), has a plan to revive human relationships and ecosystems by sharing a story. Crisp, who understands the power of cultural stories, intends to gather Mara, Gabriel, and the others to participate in a telling of the Indigenous creation story, "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky." In doing so, Crisp prompts Mara and Gabriel to remember the knowledge imbedded in the story. Although Mara and Gabriel are familiar with the "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky," the story plays a less than central part in their thinking because over time it has been displaced by scientific, Christian, and other Western ways of knowing. While Mara is willing to embrace the story and participate in the retelling, Gabriel is initially reluctant to do so and even pretends not to remember "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky." However, together through the retelling they are able to help restore the story to its central role in organizing life.

Through flashbacks, the novel fleshes out how for Mara and Gabriel the creation story and other cultural practices were crowded out by Western perspectives. Although the actions of Mara's family were informed by Indigenous knowledge, the public school system worked to limit her engagement with her cultural knowledge. For example, Mara remembers how after completing a project on "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky" her school principal deems these "stories about women falling out of the sky were inappropriate in an educational setting" and suggests Genesis an appropriate alternative (46). The school system's devaluing of Mara's

traditional knowledge is not limited to the creation story. Mara also remembers completing a different project, in which she describes how she would sprinkle tobacco on the water with her mother and grandmother as “a reminder of the relationship that human beings had with the world, as well as a practical routine for ensuring that everyone got out of bed in good order” (45). At first, her teacher is interested in Mara’s culture, but after Mara clarifies that this “long-standing custom” did not involve prayers to a “water god,” the teacher loses interest in Mara’s culture (45-46). Disappointed that it lacked in comparison to her preconceived notions of Indigenous practices, the teacher gives Mara’s remaining assignments lower grades than warranted. Although Mara does not reject her culture, practicing it freely while a student was made challenging due to the faculty’s Eurocentrism.

Like Mara’s family, Gabriel’s parents immersed him in Indigenous culture and like Mara Gabriel’s cultural connection was challenged by competing knowledges. He heard the creation story from his mother and sung at powwows with his father. However, Gabriel struggled with Indigenous practices and ways of knowing, which Kimmerer explains involves “understand[ing] a thing only when we understand it with all four aspects of our being: mind, body, emotion, and spirit” (47). Instead of following “His family’s world [that] was made up of connections and emotions,” Gabriel turned to “facts” and “numbers” rather than stories to make sense of existence (184). For example, when his father told his sister she was too young to date, Gabriel consoled her by creating “a diagram to show that this particular boy had little chance of being the perfect boy for her” (185). Over time, issues such as his parent’s divorce, and having his identity questioned at powwows due to his “pale” skin (120), result in Gabriel becoming increasingly invested in Western science, which Kimmerer explains prioritizes knowing with the “mind” (47). Knowing primarily with the mind Gabriel studies at Stanford and is hired by Domidion, thereby

entering into a corporate culture that exacerbates his “tende[ncy] to keep to himself” (89). And yet, for all his appreciation of science, Gabriel still wants to revive his relationships with his family, his culture, and the land. Gabriel’s desire to reestablish relationships is made evident through his lunchtime routine in which he eats with a turtle who is the sole occupant of a large aquarium in the lobby. The turtle serves as a reminder of his sister who once gifted him a picture of a turtle in hopes that he would be able to make his home wherever he travelled, just like the reptile. Moreover, the turtle who has an “indentation in its shell, as though it had spent its life bearing a heavy load” also serves as a reminder of the creation story (22), in which beings work together to help make a home for Sky Woman on the turtle’s back. Although Gabriel wants to recover meaningful relationships with family, culture, and land the question remains how he might do so, especially after years of alienation and after his role in *The Ruin*.

Crisp’s plan to restore the creation story to its foundational role in the organization of life provides a guide to relation building for Mara, Gabriel, and others in the bay. He invites those Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who are left in Samaritan Bay to join him at the hot springs to celebrate his birthday and to retell the story, which he does “each year as a reminder” (222). While together in this ceremonial “[site] of perpetual conciliation” (Garneau 24), Crisp shares the creation story in which mutually sustaining relationships and responsibilities to one another and to the land are depicted. The ethics that are encouraged by the plot are reinforced by the storytelling context in which Crisp and the others work together to tell the story. Through the content and the context, the Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants are reminded of or learn an alternative to the ways of being that are normalized through colonialism and neoliberalism. As Carol Miller states of the novel, “indigenous value systems are offered as a means of co-operative survivance not just for Native people but for everyone” (83). King’s emphasis on how

Indigenous ethics, which are embedded in “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky,” are beneficial to Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters provides an important intervention into Domidion’s profit-driven approach to land, and by extension to Canada’s profit-driven reconciliation process.

By emphasizing how the world becomes more harmonious when characters use their individual skills to solve problems cooperatively and exist in responsible relation to one another, the creation story helps Mara, Gabriel, and the others who have been harmed by neoliberalism and colonialism to imagine alternative modes of existence than those dictated by corporations. In *The Truth About Stories*, King explains the ethics embedded in “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky.” He states,

the acts of creation and the decisions that affect the world are shared with other characters in the drama In our Native story, we begin with water and mud, and, through the good offices of Charm, her twins, and the animals, move by degrees and adjustments from a formless, featureless world to a world that is rich in its diversity, a world that is complex and complete In our Native story, the world is at peace, and the pivotal concern is not with the ascendancy of good over evil but with the issue of balance. (24)

As King explains, the story involves characters with realistic abilities who work together in an ongoing effort to generate a diverse and balanced world. For Rick Monture, the story is important for Haudenosaunee peoples because it helps them forge a “connection to a collective past [that] reinforces identity” while also helping them adapt to constantly changing existence by “translat[ing] cultural beliefs into proper behaviour and action” (5). While the story is especially valuable to Haudenosaunee peoples as a means of strengthening their identity and helping to guide their actions in an ever changing world, the story’s emphasis on building relationships with

others including non-human beings and the land is of value to non-Indigenous peoples and intercultural relation building as well. Kimmerer, who shares the creation story with her non-Indigenous students, believes the experience is beneficial to her listeners. She explains: “Most of my students [who cannot imagine mutually sustaining relationships across species] have never heard the origin story of this land where they were born, but when I tell them, something begins to kindle behind their eyes” (9). Consequently, the story’s emphasis on characters who use their strengths and skills to work together toward creating a more balanced world is a timely story for the Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters in Samaritan Bay who are struggling in their attempts to develop relationships and restore balance.

Although the story’s contents are helpful so too is the context and the way in which the story is shared. In her discussion of King’s telling of the creation story in his Massey Lectures, Martha Nandorfy argues that critical attention only to the story’s content “divests it of its performative power” (334). King brings performative qualities to his written representation of the story by stressing how the story is shared. The performative qualities of the story are worthy of critical attention because the performance of storytelling and story listening depicted by King models ethical interactions between non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples. The participants model appropriate behaviours by first deciding who should tell the story. As a non-Indigenous person—albeit one whose origins and identity are mysterious—Crisp asks Mara if she would like to tell the story because, as he states, “it’s not my story to tell” (222). Crisp reveals that although he likes to tell stories, “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky” should be told by an Indigenous teller like Mara, if she desires. Although Mara convinces Crisp to take the lead, the interaction between the two underscores that Indigenous voices should be centred and Indigenous protocol

should be followed in “sites of perpetual conciliation” (Garneau 24).⁷³ Doing so is not only an act of relation building responsibility to the Indigenous participants and to the story, but it helps restore balance to a world in which Indigenous stories have either been devalued or appropriated by non-Indigenous peoples.⁷⁴

In addition to modeling appropriate non-colonial intercultural behavior, the performance also mimics the story’s content thereby modeling a form of intercultural relation building in which each person has the agency to contribute to community in their own way. Before starting the story, Crisp explains that the story is told every year “as a reminder” (222) His cryptic statement encourages attendees to actively engage with the story by considering what it might help them remember. Although Crisp starts telling the story, the story soon becomes a communal performance that is shaped by the participants and the context. Crisp describes Sky Woman digging for tubers and then gestures to Mara and Gabriel to explain what happens next. Mara and Gabriel who are familiar with the story from their youth exude “She falls in!” (224). Even the water participates in the telling as Crisp mimics Sky Woman’s fall when he rose out of the springs and “fell back into the water and disappeared” (224). The story moves forward with Gabriel, Mara, and the water’s help, until they briefly pause so Gabriel can share his talents as a singer. As the story continues, the three are joined by other guests who are too shy to enter the

⁷³ Following protocols regarding stories is important in an intercultural context, but as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson emphasizes in her decision not to share a certain creation story, protocols are also followed by Indigenous peoples in Indigenous contexts: “There are several different Creation Stories within Nishnaabeg cosmology and these stories are epics in and of themselves, often taking several hours or even days to tell. It is not ethically appropriate for me to tell these stories here, since these stories are traditionally told by Elders who carry these responsibilities during ceremony or under certain circumstances. They are not widely shared” (*Dancing* 35).

⁷⁴ Margery Fee provides a summary of the appropriation of Indigenous stories by Canadian authors in “The Trickster Moment, Cultural Appropriation, and the Liberal Imagination in Canada.”

pool. Crisp's nephew Sonny, the remaining townsfolk, and a mysterious group of people whom Gabriel rescued from the ocean at the start of the novel join the celebration and listen each in their own way. Just like the characters in "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky" who co-operate and contribute each in their own unique way toward the creation of a world that is trending toward harmony, Crisp and the others also co-operate, each in their own way, in order to tell the story and create a harmonious party.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson states that embodied storytelling events provide an opportunity for Indigenous peoples to imagine new modes of existence. She states that sharing Indigenous stories with community members is "an individual and collective experience, with the goal of lifting the burden of colonialism by visioning new realities" (*Dancing* 34). Simpson argues that storytelling creates new realities "because the physical act of gathering a group of people together within our territories reinforces the web of relationships that stitch our communities together" (34). For Simpson, when the storyteller's approach shifts according to the audience's individual and collective needs, the audience's reaction and participation feed back into the story thus generating a "collective event," in which "new realities" are envisioned (34). Although Simpson is discussing storytelling events that occur in "irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality" (Garneau 27), a similar visioning of alternative modes of existences occurs during the novel's intercultural storytelling event. In the novel, the embodied interaction among characters while they engage in the telling of the creation story creates a moment in which new realities are envisioned and even momentarily realized. By performing an alternative mode of existence during the party, the characters who have been distanced from meaningful relationships begin to realize that relationships other than those dictated by colonialism and capitalism are possible. Consequently, Crisp's party marks a turning point in the novel after

which characters act with renewed belief in and understanding of their ability and responsibility to use their unique skills to rebuild relationships and work toward balance.

After participating in the storytelling event, Mara and Gabriel are encouraged to restore balance. Mara intends to return home to live on the reserve and continue her portraiture project. Gabriel is encouraged to support Mara because of the story, which prompts him to think “about the woman who fell from the sky, how it would have been to have seen her streaking through the heavens like a falling star, plunging towards earth. And how different the outcome might have been if the birds hadn’t caught her” (252). With a reminder of the harm that occurs when cooperation is abandoned, Gabriel decides to assist Mara, just like the birds who support Sky Woman. Gabriel has an important role to play in restoring the balance that he has upset. Critic Robin Ridington explains Gabriel’s new supportive role: “it is up to Gabriel, a new left-handed twin, to become a fixer-upper who wants to become right-handed, to realize his mistakes and try to make things right again.” Mara also acknowledges Gabriel’s ability to restore balance when she remembers Gabriel’s mother using his name for one of the twins when she told “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky” years ago. However, Mara cannot remember if Gabriel was the right-handed or the left-handed twin. She reflects, “Gabriel had been the left-handed twin, the one who had brought chaos to the perfect world that his twin had created. So that there would be balance. What was the right-handed twin’s name? Or was Gabriel the right-handed twin?” (49). Mara’s confusion suggests that Gabriel is not innately good or evil; rather, he has the ability to cause chaos and restore balance.

Gabriel and Mara’s work to restore balance occurs alongside non-Indigenous characters who listened to the story and desire to live well together. Before hearing the story, Crisp’s nephew Sonny spends his time on the beach collecting salvage and trying to live according to his

father's rules, which are heavily influenced by the Christian creation story. However, after hearing "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky," Sonny decides to build a tower out of the materials that have washed onto the beach as a "beacon" for the turtles who had not been seen since the disaster:

What could a tower accomplish that a wall or a garden or a boat could not? And now Sonny finds his thoughts running into one another. Not just any tower. Sonny stops dancing and concentrates on thinking. A beacon. A tower beacon. A lighthouse. More or less. A symbol of hope. A guiding light. A monument to perseverance. That's what Sonny will build. Right here on the beach. A tower. A bright tower that will stand against the dark sky and bring the turtles home. (268)

Through his sculpture, Sonny gives new life to the materials that have been rejected and deemed no longer useful by a capitalist, materialist society. He transforms these objects at the end of their lifecycle as products into "A symbol of hope" (268). By giving the damaged and useless products a new purpose, his sculpture implies that other beings and places that have been damaged and deemed worthless may also find a new purpose in Samaritan Bay. Accordingly, the turtles return. Understood by way of "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky," the return of the turtles to the bay equates to the symbolic return of the land on which Sky Woman and the other beings make their home. As such, Sonny's efforts suggest that with each purported ending is the opportunity for a new beginning and while such a statement may be deemed cliché to some, for those living in the wake of the disaster, the possibility that the land remains, thereby allowing beings to begin again and begin differently, is welcomed.

The two families that had been rescued by Gabriel, who was standing on the rocks preparing to drown himself in the rising tide, also want to begin again and begin differently. The

crew members moved in the background until after hearing Crisp's story. But afterward the Chin and Huang families explain their precarious situation. They share that they left Taiwan to work on a ship that Domidion contracted to dispose of its toxic waste. However, they became trapped on the *Anguis* after it had broken down in a storm until they boarded a lifeboat when they saw the shores of Samaritan Bay. Their survival is unbeknownst to Dorian who believes that "The only thing that had really mattered was that, when the barge broke apart and sank with her load of biologicals, she be as far away from Canada and the U.S. as possible" (20). And yet, the crew survived, despite Dorian's lack of concern for the unwanted cargo and expendable crew due to his corporate-driven interest in having the problem of the missing ship solve itself. They lived thanks in part to Gabriel's decision to help them—an act that also saved himself from his initial decision to die by suicide. Finding themselves in a new land with its own creation stories, the former crew members want to participate in the emerging socially- and environmentally-just relationships occurring in Samaritan Bay, which function differently than neoliberal corporate-worker / trash disposer-ecosystem relations. The Chins who have experience as cooks plan to work for a nearby hotel that is hopeful tourists will visit now that the turtles have returned, while the Huangs who have experience farming "will be supplying the town with fresh produce" (495). Like the characters in "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky," who use their own skills and agency to help construct the world, so too do the Chins and Huangs.

The intercultural and interspecies world the Chins and Huangs are making with Mara, Gabriel, Sonny and the other people and beings in the bay is one that is not organized around neoliberalism, Eurocentrism, or settler-colonialism. Rather, the former crewmembers' relationships are informed by Indigenous story and in relation to Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. In doing so, the former crew members are enacting what Rita Wong sees as the

possible non-colonial relationships that can emerge “between those racialized as ‘Asian’ and ‘indigenous’ on that part of Turtle Island also known as Canada” when whiteness is not centred (“Decolonizasian” 161). And, by welcoming the Chin and the Huang families, Mara and Gabriel are demonstrating the sentiment that newcomers to Turtle Island are welcome if their existence is not framed by exploitative colonial and capitalist practices. As Dylan Miner (Métis) states, “Migrants & refugees are welcome / it’s the settlers who think they own the world.” Together the characters interact in a “[site] of perpetual conciliation” (Garneau 24) to negotiate the types of relationships and modes of existence they desire as alternatives to settler colonialism and neoliberalism, which has through a logic of control and exclusion caused ongoing social and environmental harm. Together, the group is not only able to develop non-colonial relations, but they are also able to fend off future threats. Just as the characters are celebrating the arrival of the turtles and their emergent non-colonial relationships, they are confronted with potential disaster that could undo their work. Domidion’s biological waste-carrying ship breaks through the fog and crashes onto the beach. However, unlike when Domidion last arrived with GreenSweep, the community stops the impending disaster that the ship threatens. Crisp encourages everyone to push the ship off the beach and while Gabriel momentarily reverts to his earlier fatalism and states “You’re never going to move it” Mara explains “it’s not about moving it’s about community” (498). Mei-ling encourages Gabriel to sing and together the community pushes the ship back to sea. In a miraculous moment of cooperation, the characters push the ship back into the water and avoid a second disaster. Together the community successfully opposes the threat, which is symbolic of the ongoing danger of capitalist land relations as well as the strength of community that occurs when members cooperate to defend the land and their collective future.

When Stories Return Home

Set adrift, the Anguis is eventually spotted headed toward the St. Lawrence prompting Dorian to state “So, it’s coming home” (515). While the trajectory of the Anguis from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean is seemingly impossible it serves as a reminder to those who have caused material harm to other people and places: regardless of how distanced the harm one causes appears to be, it can eventually affect the perpetrator. For King, people who tell harmful stories about others will eventually be affected by these stories as well. Dorian’s wounding stories the importance of profit at the expense of foreign, racialized, and working-class people and the places they call home will eventually turn against him. When Dorian buys a mattress that makes him feel sick he briefly experiences what life is like for those people and places deemed worthless by corporations. On opening the mattress with his wife, the narrator states that the “bedroom immediately filled up with a violent odour that irritated their eyes and set the both of them coughing” (39). Months later, the mattress still gave them “headaches and sore throats” (40). The mattress’ effect on Dorian’s body suggests despite the fact that impoverished and racialized peoples face higher levels of toxicity than wealthy white communities ultimately no one can escape toxicity.

Despite the narrative of impermeability and self-worth that Dorian tells himself, the mattress company’s attitude toward Dorian is one that is informed by the very narratives of worthlessness and purported corporate responsibility that he has told to others. When Dorian enquires about the mattress “the sales associate told him, off-gassing was quite common. Yes, all the emissions were within government regulations and did not pose a health hazard. Yes, in rare cases, the fumes might irritate eyes and cause some minor coughing. No, the guarantee only covered manufacturer’s defects” (39-40). Speaking with a detached tone, the sales associate tries

to distance the mattress company from the harm the mattress has caused by claiming that the emissions do not cause health issues. Even if Dorian could prove that the mattress caused his sickness, the sales associate is able to deny responsibility for the harm by standing behind a legal framework that supports the manufacturer's product. Dorian's struggle to receive compensation from the company continues when Dorian speaks to the store manager months later. He was given a small discount on a mattress cover "for people with heightened sensitivities." (40). Here, not only does the manager offer inadequate compensation for the harm the mattress caused, but also offloads responsibility for causing harm onto the client who is deemed an abnormal person who has "heightened sensitivities" (40). For the mattress company, bodies that are negatively affected by the bed are deemed abnormal. In this sleight of hand that denies the possibility that supposedly normal bodies can be harmed, only clients with deficient, worthless bodies are capable of being harmed. In Dorian's fight with the mattress company he has a momentary feeling of what it is like to be deemed deficient or expendable, by those in power who claim to be acting responsibly. And yet, Dorian's feeling of powerlessness is part illusion. Unlike those without resources and formal education, Dorian who "in his office speed-read[s] a Japanese study that measured toxicity in furniture" has the ability to understand scientific research and the money to buy a different mattress (39). Consequently, Dorian's fight with the mattress company is less about receiving a new mattress from the company and is more about him succeeding against the company in order to stave off his anxiety that he may be less important than he had previously believed, and that the stories he holds may be more reprehensible than he previously believed.

In addition to being affected by the mattress company that uses the same strategies that Dorian uses at Domidon, Dorian is also under the control of familiar corporate decisions when he

is prescribed a drug to treat his headaches. The drug causes “side effects” that are deemed “unacceptable” according to the scientist who ran the clinical trials (172). Nevertheless, the pharmaceutical company that created the drug had no issue with the side effects and thus pushed the drug Lucror—Latin for profit—into the market.⁷⁵ A similar situation occurred at Domidion when GreenSweep was in development: Gabriel, who was familiar with the Lucror case due to his work at university in which he argued in favour of Dr. Kousoulas’s decision to stop testing Lucror, similarly attempted to stop developing GreenSweep. While Gabriel believed that they needed to further shorten “the bacterium’s life cycle” before it was safe to use as a defoliant, Domidion deemed Gabriel’s concern “excessive” and instead suggested that GreenSweep might be a lucrative product (409). In generating this ethical argument, Gabriel displays that he has the ability to act like the balancing right-handed twin rather than only being cast as the disruptive left-handed twin. Although corporate actors in high-level positions place profit over potential ecological and health issues without concern for balance, Dorian’s Lucror prescription suggests that regardless of one’s presumed distance from potential corporate harm, the neoliberal tolerance toward creating public risks can impact even the wealthier members of society. For Dorian the stories that circulate within corporate culture in order to help corporate actors succeed in business and bolster their self-worth cause far more harm to him than he expects. As such, the

⁷⁵ As is typical of King’s writing, the fictional case of Dr. Kousoulas’s opposition to Lucror is inspired by actual events. The case echoes a series of events related to Canadian scientist Dr. Nancy Olivieri’s clinical trials of deferiprone. Olivieri who, was running the trial with support from Apotex and the Toronto Hospital for Sick Children, ignored a confidentiality agreement and informed her patients and the public once she learned that the drug might be unsafe for use. As a result, Apotex threatened to launch a lawsuit and the hospital forced Olivieri from her position. Despite the attack on her academic freedom, she received little institutional support for her actions (Spurgeon). By echoing the Olivieri scandal, King indicates the types of challenges Gabriel might face if he were to mount opposition to Domidion’s projects.

novel demonstrates that telling harmful stories also hurt the teller. Similarly, telling stories that heal benefits both the listener and the teller.

By focusing the novel on the stories told before and after the disaster, King rejects sensational depictions of environmental violence. Instead, King makes legible for his readers the storied neoliberal and colonial logics of control and worthlessness that are applied to Indigenous and other marginalized peoples and their homes. While these stories are indeed harmful, King also makes clear that alternatives to colonial and neoliberal relations are possible. King, who through the tool of fiction is able to imagine beyond present-day relations and public relations spin, implies that turning to Indigenous stories is a productive way for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to begin generating relationships other than those informed by neoliberalism and settler colonialism. In doing so, *The Back of the Turtle* provides a timely literary counter-discourse to corporate narratives that rationalize corporate control over Indigenous lands and obscure the uneven distribution of corporate caused environmental impacts.

However, during the time of reconciliation, King's literary counter-discourse is not simply about making environmental injustices and their alternatives legible to his readers; rather, King's literary counter-discourse encourages readers to live in better relation to each other and to the land. As he states in his first Massey Lecture after sharing "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky" with his readers: "Do with it what you will. Tell it to friends. Turn it into a television movie. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now" (*Truth About Stories* 29). According to McCall et al.'s reading of King's directive, "King reminds his readers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, of the responsibility that readers hold once they have listened to a story King is suggesting that once you have read a story it becomes a part of you, and it

continues to shape the way you move forward in the world” (5). Although King is not as forthright in *The Back of the Turtle* as he is in this lecture, King models his argument that stories make possible alternative modes of existence. He does so through characters whose lives and actions are affected by the Indigenous creation story. After reading the novel’s depictions of harmful stories and the alternative mode of existence brought forth by the Indigenous story, King’s readers cannot claim they were unaware that neoliberal and colonial-settler stories cause social and environmental harm, nor can they claim they were unaware that alternative intercultural relationships are possible. Consequently, King places the responsibility for meaningful intercultural relation building squarely on his reconciliation-era readers. In doing so, he challenges readers, who have ignored the relation-building process or who have offloaded their responsibilities for generating intercultural relationships onto governments and corporations that co-opt the task of reconciliation to suit their goals, to participate in imagining and enacting socially- and environmentally-just acts of reconciliation.

Chapter Two: Indigenous Cultural Continuance in Mushkegowuk: Traditional Foods, Community, and Joseph Boyden's Celebrity Writer-Activism

The Canadian media's regular coverage of food crises affecting Northern Indigenous peoples often reduces the cause of these emergencies to remote communities' struggles to access consumer goods and services on their reserves. One telling example is Mark Gollom's 2016 CBC News photo essay titled "Attawapiskat Reserve Life: \$22 for a 12-pack of Pop." Gollom devotes most of his article to identifying this western James Bay community's struggle to access industrial goods. He explains that merchandise is transported into town on a single road during "a few cold months" and by plane when the ice-road melts; according to Gollom, these obstacles have resulted in limited access to goods and inflated prices. In a brief gesture beyond this reductive approach to the origins of and responses to the food crisis, he includes a photograph of an "activity wish list" generated by some of the community's youth that includes a breakfast club, harvesting programs, and fishing among other programs and activities. And yet, Gollom fails to explain to readers why these items are included on the wish list. Instead of considering how community efforts that foster connections with culture and land may lead Attawapiskat out of perpetual crisis by contributing to self-determination and healing from colonial trauma, Gollom's essay returns to a near voyeuristic documentation of the community's struggle to access the very goods and services that the youth did not wish for, namely fast food. He notes that Northern Store, the community's main shop, houses a KFC, "the only fast-food franchise on the reserve," and sells twelve cans of Diet Coke for the inflated price of \$22. These details do

little but shock the CBC's non-Indigenous readership, many of whom have convenient access to a variety of reasonably priced industrial foods.⁷⁶

The implicit assumption that arise from Gollom's observations is that remote Indigenous communities could stave off crises if only they had the same access to industrial foods and other goods and services enjoyed by the rest of Canada. In contrast to Indigenous peoples, including the youth of Attawapiskat, who are advocating for increased community-led social and cultural initiatives as a means of combating ongoing crises, settler logic that deems industrial goods and services necessary yet infeasible in remote locations, leaves people living in places like Attawapiskat with little choice but to relocate. Journalist and entrepreneur Scott Gilmore has articulated this opinion most forcefully in his *Maclean's* article "La Loche Shows Us It's Time to Help People Escape the North," where he argues that Indigenous communities in remote areas of Canada struggle because "They are disconnected from the economy, from the government and from society." Gilmore argues that "The only way we can ever truly help the people of La Loche and hundreds of other remote communities like it, is to give those who want it a viable option to leave, to build lives in southern Canada, integrated into one of the world's healthiest, safest, most rewarding societies." Notwithstanding the discourse of reconciliation that encourages better relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, Gilmore's and Gollom's articles are representative of a still too common line of assimilationist thinking that was once used to justify the forced relocation and residential schooling of Indigenous peoples and now contributes to ongoing colonization of Indigenous communities. From an assimilationist perspective, the

⁷⁶ Over the last century-and-a-half, processed foods have become increasingly common across the globe (Winson 20, 35). While the industrialization of food offers conveniences, Michael Pollan highlights some of the problems with the industrial food chain: it requires monoculture, commodifies food, encourages fast-food restaurants, and obfuscates people's relationship with their food sources (8, 10).

possibility that Indigenous communities could live well on their homelands by relying on traditions, rather than as communities that struggle to survive due to their distance from the amenities of cities, is unfathomable, or on “the other side of the abyssal line,” to borrow Boaventura De Sousa Santos’s phrase (52).⁷⁷

Like Gilmore and Gollom, writer-activist Joseph Boyden addresses how Northern Indigenous communities could overcome the ongoing food crises. Gilmore argues that these communities should relocate and Gollom implies that these communities need better access to industrial goods and services and in doing so both advocate for the outside interventions into Indigenous peoples’ land-relations. In contrast, Boyden proposes that rather than assimilation Northern Indigenous communities should centre Indigenous knowledge. In a tireless and public effort to raise awareness about the effects of colonialism on Northern Indigenous peoples, Boyden has written articles for national news outlets as well as several novels. In his critically acclaimed *Three Day Road* (2005) and *Through Black Spruce* (2008), Boyden depicts three generations of an Indigenous family living on the traditional territory of the Mushkegowuk, or “The Cree First Nations on western Hudson Bay and James Bay” (Bird, *Telling Our Stories* 24).⁷⁸ When the characters in Boyden’s Mushkegowuk novels enact traditional knowledge they

⁷⁷ De Sousa Santos explains that Western thought cannot see beyond itself. Instead of viewing non-Western knowledges, it sees “only nonexistence, invisibility, non-dialectical absence” (45-46).

⁷⁸ Louis Bird explains that the Cree First Nations on the west side of Hudson and James Bays are referred to as either Omushkegowuk or Mushkegowuk (*Telling Our Stories* 24). Likewise, there are multiple ways to spell other Algonquian language words such as Anishinaabe or windigo. Rather than standardizing Indigenous language words, I adopt the same spelling conventions and terminology of the author I am engaging with at a given moment. For example, instead of referring to Boyden’s Cree characters through the more specific terms Mushkegowuk or Omushkego—which differentiates the Omushkegowuk from other Cree peoples—I use the term that Boyden’s characters use to name themselves, which is usually the more generic term Cree.

develop responsible relationships to land and community, which stands in contrast to the exploitative relationships that institutions encourage through their control over Indigenous peoples' movement and food systems.⁷⁹ His multi-genre writing that circulates alongside the work of mainstream non-Indigenous journalists presents an alternative to assimilationist and neoliberal approaches to Indigenous issues by encouraging readers to understand how the outside interventions affect Indigenous communities and how reviving traditional cultural practices could potentially solve the food crisis. And yet, Boyden's writer-activism has been controversial: the mainstream media and non-Indigenous readers have granted Boyden a central and authoritative role on Indigenous issues. This omnipresent role that occurs at the expense of other Indigenous commentators is troubling, especially since reconciliation discourse suggests that relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples ought to extend beyond non-Indigenous peoples forging connections to a select few Indigenous celebrities.

Attentive to Boyden's precarious relationship to the Indigenous communities that he writes about and his role as a celebrity writer-activist, I read Boyden's Mushkegowuk novels not as complete descriptions of Omushkego cultural practices, but for the way that food functions in the novels as an accessible means of introducing non-Indigenous readers to the valuable role Indigenous culture plays in social and environmental justice. Although Boyden's focus on eating, hunting, starvation, and the threat of cannibalism offers a limited view into Omushkego life, they are concepts that are palatable to those non-Indigenous readers who are excited by unfamiliar cuisine and accustomed to stories of starvation in the North. Engaging scholarship on Indigenous

⁷⁹ In this chapter, I continue to use the adjective *traditional* to signify the types of knowledges, practices, and relationships that emerge from Indigenous peoples' historic yet ever-developing intellectual heritage. Many Indigenous scholars argue that the recovery of traditional ways of thinking and being are necessary for the resurgence of Indigenous communities (Monture 22).

environmental justice and the decolonization of Indigenous diets, I propose that when Boyden's characters reconnect to traditional foods they begin to care for their community and the land, and thus begin to heal from colonial traumas and oppose contemporary industrial food systems. As such, food, as a cultural practice that is accessible to non-Indigenous peoples, encourages non-Indigenous readers to recognize that traditional knowledges are inseparable from the continuation of Indigenous communities; and yet, Boyden's turn to food is limited because it does not explicitly engage with the challenging but necessary return of land and recognition of treaty rights that would allow Indigenous communities to enact their traditional land relations without interference. While Boyden should not be, and should never have been, the central voice for Indigenous issues in *Mushkegowuk*, his novels nevertheless have promise for their celebration of Indigenous knowledge. This is especially so when they are situated within mainstream accounts of *Mushkegowuk* that deny the central role that Indigenous knowledge plays in communities who are seeking self-determination, environmental justice, and healing from colonial trauma.

Cultural Heritage, Community, and Boyden's Celebrity Writer-Activism

As a widely-read author who claims Indigenous and European heritage and advocates for Indigenous peoples, Boyden has filled a central but often precarious role as an intercultural educator in the reconciliation process. In his short yet essential biography of Boyden, Eric Andrew-Gee explains that "In an age of reconciliation" Boyden's "mixed background was an asset: Boyden came to be seen as a 'shining bridge,' as one Indigenous scholar called him, able to mediate between white and Indigenous, at a time when that task seemed more urgent than ever." Acknowledging Boyden's capacity to work across cultures, the renowned Anishinaabe scholar Basil Johnston named him *Waase Aazhgan*, which means, "Shining Bridge, or, in

Boyden's preferred translation, 'He who must enlighten'" (Andrew-Gee). This is a role Boyden has taken seriously: "For a long time now," states Boyden, "I've written about environmental and social and personal issues that impact Indigenous peoples and communities, many of them communities in which I lived and taught in the mid-1990s on the west coast of James Bay, ... I consider this country my adopted home" ("My Name"). Indeed, Boyden has long worked on behalf of his "adopted home" in an effort to raise awareness about colonial trauma, environmental injustices, and the value of Omushkego cultural practices. But Boyden's often impactful advocacy has nevertheless resulted in legitimate questions about his approach to activism and Indigeneity. Many of these questions were asked in private until 2016 when a number of Indigenous commentators publicly questioned whether or not Boyden is Indigenous, whether or not he has legitimate connections to Indigenous communities, and whether or not he should be the primary voice on Indigenous issues in Canada.

Boyden's impact on Canadian culture and the reconciliation process prior to 2016 is hard to understate; he quickly became a Canadian literary celebrity who received regular accolades for his writing that brought Indigenous peoples' struggles and triumphs to a non-Indigenous readership. Andrew-Gee explains that although Boyden's debut—a collection of short stories titled *Born with a Tooth* (2001)—received little attention, his first novel, *Three Day Road* (2005), was a sensation: the novel "vaulted him not just into the CanLit aristocracy, but into the national conversation on Indigenous issues." *Three Day Road* won the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, Books in Canada/Amazon.ca First Novel Award, and the Scotiabank Giller Prize and was lauded for its ability to reconcile Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous peoples. Ellen Bielawski, Dean of Native studies at the University of Alberta, champions the novel for its reconciliatory efforts: the novel is a "milestone in North American fiction" for its "brilliant

raveling of the essential threads of our great story, the meeting of the people of the ‘Old World’ with the people of Turtle Island” (3). Through works that highlighted colonial violence as well as the roles that Indigenous people played in foundational moments in Canada’s history, such as World War One, Boyden’s imaginative investigations into “our great story” (Bielawski) engrossed audiences and award committees alike. With early accolades and a cultural milieu in which government policies and initiatives increasingly encouraged non-Indigenous readers to reassess their relationships with Indigenous peoples, Boyden’s celebrity and writer-activism developed at an outstanding pace.

In the decade following the publication of *Three Day Road*, Boyden has produced a lengthy and once acclaimed catalogue of writing and extra-literary pursuits that advocate for Indigenous peoples and intercultural relation building. His oeuvre includes two novels, *Black Spruce* (2008) and *The Orenda* (2013); a novella, *Wenjack* (2016); a biography, *Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont* (2010); a ballet, *Going Home Star - Truth and Reconciliation* (2014); a public university lecture, *From Mushkegowuk to New Orleans: A Mixed Blood Highway* (2008); an edited collection in support of Indigenous women, *Kwe: Standing with our Sisters* (2014); and numerous articles for national magazines and newspapers, including *Maclean’s*, *The Globe and Mail*, and the *National Post*. In addition to various speaking engagements, his most important role as an advocate of Indigenous issues is his induction as an honorary witness for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (*Honouring*) in 2014—a role that underscores Boyden’s position as an esteemed cultural commentator in the early 2010s. Through multi-genre writing for mainstream publishers and advocacy tied to reconciliation initiatives, Boyden’s celebrity writer-activism has helped raise Canada’s awareness about the violence generated by colonial structures and institutions that persist in the still colonial present.

Boyden's writer-activism, which was informed by his complicated biography, was regularly praised prior to coming under immense critique. On the one hand, he was providing a needed Indigenous-centred approach to Indigenous issues, which were often marginalized by mainstream media that regularly published pundits whose beliefs aligned more closely to assimilation than to reconciliation. His efforts to highlight how settler colonial institutions and practices have severed Indigenous peoples' relationships with the land and their culture has helped draw attention to the causes of the people of Mushkegowuk and made legible Indigenous issues to non-Indigenous readers. On the other hand, Boyden's writer-activism was propped up by tenuous connections to Indigenous communities, knowledges, and protocols and his popularity dwarfed the voices of other Indigenous writer-activists who deserved to be heard.

In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* Rob Nixon proposes that writer-activists are valuable yet controversial figures. According to Nixon, writer-activists "have deployed their imaginative agility and worldly ardor to help amplify the media-marginalized causes of the environmentally dispossessed" (5); however, as part of the "publishing classes" they are "inevitabl[y] distance[d] from the bulk of the impoverished people about whom they write" (26). Through their successes as writers, or through their parents' good fortunes, Nixon's writer-activists are removed from the impoverished context that they or their parents experienced firsthand. This newfound distance from communal exposure to environmental injustices has engendered writer-activists who advocate on behalf of their communities and who attempt to forge personal connection to community members in order to overcome feelings of alienation that have arisen through their, or their families', recently-changed social status (26). For Nixon, these troubled yet necessary figures "are at the very least intimate, highly motivated translators" whose work involves the "challenges of translating across chasms of class, race, gender, and

nation [and] is thus viscerally connected to memories of self-translation across dauntingly wide divides” (27).⁸⁰

Boyden’s writer-activism was influenced by several moments in which he learned about his Indigenous heritage and developed early relationships with Indigenous communities. As Andrew-Gee outlines, Boyden was born in 1966 and raised in Toronto by his mother Blanche Gossling. His father, Raymond Boyden, who was a doctor, an Irish Catholic, and a veteran of the Second World War, died when Boyden was eight. In many respects, Boyden’s early years resembled that of a settler child. However, Boyden developed connections to Indigenous communities through regular family vacations to Georgian Bay where he befriended children from the Wasauksing and Beausoleil First Nations. He also had a sense that he was Indigenous through relatives who revealed that his family had a hidden Indigenous heritage (Andrew-Gee). Like many Indigenous people in Canada who have been distanced from their Indigenous heritage through colonial processes, Boyden had only a vague notion of his Indigeneity as a youth. In his teens, he played football and travelled the United States as a roadie for a band. In his early twenties, Boyden enrolled in the University of New Orleans’ MFA program and married a fellow writer. Still, “the idea of Indigenous blood,” Andrew-Gee suggests, “seemed to tug at him” during these years. These yearnings manifested in his early writing that included Indigenous characters, in his inclusion of an “Ojibway healer” at his wedding, and in his decision to teach for Northern College in Ojibwe communities along the west coast of Hudson and James Bay.

⁸⁰ Boyden and his family are further distanced from impoverished contexts than are many writer-activists and therefore Boyden has only a narrow chasm to cross when connecting to his non-Indigenous readership and a wider divide to cross when attempting to connect with the Indigenous communities that are represented in his writing.

While the 1990s were a formative decade for Boyden's career as a writer and for his connection to his Indigenous heritage and communities, Boyden did not regularly announce his Indigeneity during this period. His MFA thesis advisor, Fredrick Barton, explains that "If he was aware that he had these traces of Indian blood, it was not something that he shared with anyone to my knowledge" (qtd. in Andrew-Gee). Similarly, Boyden's Indigenous heritage was not widely known by the people of Mushkegowuk. Although he expressed his identity to his friends, the Tozer family, other community members including former student Lynn McCauley assert that he did not share these intimate details widely: "he never mentioned anything about having any native heritage when he was our teacher, ... I guess everybody just assumed he wasn't" (qtd. in Andrew-Gee). During this decades-long process, Boyden underwent a complicated journey to better comprehend his Indigenous heritage and relationship with Indigenous communities. His search was aided by conversations with family members, friendships with people in Mushkegowuk and in Georgian Bay, work experiences, and not least through his writing.

If Boyden's first forty years indicate that he was turning to art and experience in an effort to understand his identity and heal from a painful "family secret" (Andrew-Gee), then his emergence as a successful writer in the early 2000s marks a timely transition from self-discovery to self-fashioning that aligned with reconciliation. Since the publication of *Three Day Road* in 2005, which underscores the residential school experience that is at the centre of the reconciliation process, Boyden regularly and publicly identified as an Indigenous person. Journalist Jorge Barrera catalogues Boyden's public claims to Indigeneity: in 2005, Boyden stated that he had Métis and Mi'kmaq heritage; in 2008, he declared Ojibway and Métis heritage; in 2009, he stopped referring to his Mi'kmaq heritage and began referring to himself as Anishinabe; and in 2014, he claimed Nipmuc heritage ("Author"). In addition to announcing

these vague connections to several Indigenous Nations, Boyden positioned himself as part of Omushkego communities. In his public lecture *From Mushkegowuk to New Orleans* (2008), Boyden describes his connection to Mushkegowuk where he hunts and fishes at his “friend William’s camp” and “bring[s] back gifts of thick fillets to Elders in Moosonee and Moose Factory” (17). In a number of *Maclean’s* articles Boyden further stresses his deep and important ties to this community: not only do he and William bring food to elders, but also they build a camp that “gets James Bay youth back on the land.” Boyden explains that he even “financially support[s] the camp, as well as a number of young people from the communities when they need help” (“True Tragedy”). Describing his close connection to Mushkegowuk, Boyden proclaimed to an audience in Fort Albany that he had become “part of your land” (“Joseph Boyden’s Keynote Address”). Central to Boyden’s rise as a celebrity writer-activist in Canada has been his use of highly visible and accessible media platforms to self-fashion himself as an Indigenous person who is affiliated with many nations and is closely connected with Omushkego communities.

However, there are many parts of his Indigenous identity that Boyden chose not to reveal in interviews, lectures, articles, or elsewhere. For example, while Boyden has proclaimed that he is a member of the Ontario Métis Aboriginal Association, he has not mentioned the fact that the organization does not require applicants to provide genealogical records nor has he mentioned that the group is held in low esteem by the Métis Nation of Ontario and by the Ontario government. Boyden also fails to mention that there are people in Mushkegowuk that believe his ties to the community are superficial. Most notably, past chief of Fort Albany First Nation Edmund Metatawabin states that “I don’t think he comes around the community much. He’s built himself a safe place. And that’s the camp ... If you want to be a member of us, live with us,

act like us, and work with us. And stay for a while! He’s hopping around all over the place” (qtd. in Andrew-Gee).⁸¹ Boyden’s identity and community ties are more complicated than Boyden would have readers believe, but through a series of public claims Boyden has largely controlled the narrative about his Indigenous heritage and role in Indigenous communities. His self-proclaimed ties to Indigenous Nations and to Omushkego communities have proved satisfactory for many readers, award committees, publishers, and news outlets that accorded Boyden an authoritative voice.

Boyden’s position as an authority on Indigenous issues was made possible not only through his persona as an Indigenous person but also through his celebrity—a status he helped cultivate. In one of his early efforts to emphasize his celebrity status, Boyden begins *From Mushkegowuk to New Orleans* with memories of adventures with famous Canadian artists. He has “run with the bulls” with Michael Winter, “paddled Lake Kipawa” with Margaret Atwood, and “hung out with Gord Downie in New Orleans” (6). Through these anecdotes Boyden highlights his place within Canada’s literati. By articulating these credentials at the start of his lecture, the arguments about Indigenous issues that Boyden voices later in the talk are made more credible and authoritative. Critic Lorraine York explains that “Those who are given special, elevated status as literary celebrities are given extra latitude to speak and to be listened to” (15). This “extra latitude to speak and to be listened to” is certainly the case with Boyden who became one of the main voices on Indigenous issues in Canada through his own self-fashioning and accruing of various awards and accolades.

⁸¹ Metatawabin’s remarks are significant because, although he is a former chief and a residential school survivor who shared his story in the memoir *Up Ghost River: A Chief’s Journey Through the Turbulent Waters of Native History*, his writing received far less media attention than Boyden’s.

Although occasional questions about Boyden's Indigeneity have been raised throughout his career, these queries did not alter his status as a highly celebrated writer-activist, until the waning days of 2016.⁸² On December 23, 2016 Jorge Barrera published an article in *APTN* that investigated Boyden's ever-changing claims about his Indigenous heritage. Barrera turned to the genealogical records to reveal that Boyden's Indigenous roots are "difficult to pin-point" ("Author"). Raising similar questions, journalist Robert Jago (Kwantlen and Nooksack) published an article for *Canadaland* on December 24 that built on his December 22 tweets about Boyden's misleading claims to Indigeneity (@IngenousXca). Jago explains that he was prompted to question Boyden's Indigenous ancestry, after being "enrage[d]" by Boyden who "seeme[d] to have given himself the right" to bestow Indigenous identity on Steven Galloway as part of his highly-public and controversial effort to support the University of British Columbia professor, who was under investigated for assaulting a student ("Why I Question").⁸³ After Barrera's and Jago's publications, countless articles and social media posts about Boyden resulted in what Andrew-Gee deems a "swift" fall that "for those who had wondered about Boyden ... came as no surprise." On December 30, Anishinaabe comedian and writer Ryan McMahon provided a lucid and clarifying summary of the issues that critics had with Boyden. His article demonstrates that critics' concerns were not unfair, as some commentators suggested; rather, he explains that the issue with Boyden is

⁸² Anishinaabe author and publisher Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm explains that "There have been questions raised about Joseph and who he claimed to be for quite a while. ... But it was really nothing that any of us individually could put their finger on" (qtd. in Andrew-Gee).

⁸³ For more on the UBCAccountable letter signed in support of Galloway and Boyden's prominent role in the affair, see the introduction to *Refuse: CanLit in Ruing* by McGregor et al.

about his role in the Indigenous community. It's about how he got that role. It's about his responsibility in assuming the role he's playing in contemporary Indigenous issues. It's about his unwillingness to be responsible back to the community he claims as his own. Somehow, Boyden has gotten by without answering to the Indigenous community he so often speaks for/over. Claiming a community and then refusing to answer back to community concerns (of which there are many) is the real conflict here.

A pertinent example of Boyden's failure to answer to the community that he claims to be a part of is uncovered by Barrera's conversation with Omushkego elder and story teller Louis Bird. Bird explains that in 2010 Boyden asked Bird what he thought about his decision to use Bird's deceased brother's name, Xavier, as the name of a character in *Three Day Road*. Bird explains that "it's not right to do that ... without asking him [Xavier]" (qtd in. "Similarities Between Joseph Boyden Story"). Boyden's decision to use first and ask later is an instance where Boyden claims a community while "refusing to answer back to community concerns" (McMahon). Thanks to journalists and critics who raised concern about Boyden's celebrity writer-activism, a brief yet widely-read conversation regarding appropriation, Indigenous identity, and the importance of centring a variety of Indigenous voices productively unsettled Canadian literary culture.

Boyden's swift fall is not surprising given the way he operated at a distance from Mushkegowuk. Nixon explains that writer-activists are often distanced from the communities that are centred in their writing. He proposes that they regularly "stand above the immediate environmental struggles of the poor" (27). For Boyden, this occurred through decades of self-fashioning an Indigenous identity for Canadian literary culture. As Boyden's literary superstardom grew, he became more of a spokesperson for Mushkegowuk than a community

member. But Boyden's distance from Mushkegowuk is not solely a result of his public personas; it is also a result of Canadian literary culture. Critic Karina Vernon explains that the Canadian literature industry is organized to separate writers from communities. She writes, "Prize culture is rooted in the western political philosophy of individualism: prizes serve to exalt an individual writer and their achievement rather than acknowledging the ways words and stories are always tied to larger contexts. This is, after all, how the phenomenon of Joseph Boyden was created" ("Decolonizing CanLit Prize Culture"). For Vernon, prizes champion individuals rather than the communities that individual writers are tied to and concerned about. Boyden's fall is a complicated moment in Canadian literary history that occurred in part because of Canadian literary culture, Boyden's self-fashioning, and centuries of colonialism that has deemed Indigenous peoples incapable of being authorities on their own communities.

Canadian literary celebrity is particularly troubling in the reconciliation process because celebrity culture restricts who is provided with an opportunity to speak and who is heard. The Truth and Reconciliation's *Calls to Action* emphasizes that the media must make spaces for a diversity of Indigenous speakers and perspectives. The report calls for increased funding to the CBC/Radio-Canada so that publicly funded media can "be properly reflective of the diverse cultures, languages, and perspectives of Aboriginal peoples" This call to action contrasts Canada's celebrity culture, in which only a few Indigenous authors, including Boyden, are made central at the expense of other Indigenous voices. Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) emphasizes how the mainstream media and Canadian literary culture's centring of Boyden harms Indigenous expression. In a twitter post, he states:

Joseph Boyden is not & should not be the dominant voice of Indigenous experience in Canada. Other voices deserve platform, esp. Indig women. Boyden is a talented writer,

but his work fetishizes violence & he tells [a] story white Canada wants to hear about itself & and Indig ppl. Many Indigenous writers have been doing this work longer, have more substantial ties, & honour protocols of representation. Centre them.

(@justicedanielh).

While Justice is concerned that Boyden’s presence overshadows the work of Indigenous women, he is also concerned with the content of Boyden’s writing, which he believes tells a “story white Canada wants to hear.”

Haudenosaunee writer Alicia Elliott provides insights into what type of story Justice may be referencing. She states,

For non-Native Canada, Joseph Boyden is another “good Indian.” When asked about reconciliation by *The Edmonton Journal* this past November, Boyden did not talk about giving land back, honouring treaties, upholding the United Nations’ Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, eradicating discriminatory gaps in on-reserve versus off-reserve funding or letting sovereign Indigenous nations decide their own fates. Instead he cited “recognizing the treaty territory.”⁸⁴

For Elliott, Boyden tells the stories that white settlers want to hear because his stories fail to explicitly address the systemic changes to land ownership necessary to increase Indigenous peoples’ wellbeing and to build meaningful acts of reconciliation. Consequently, in contrast to those activists who Elliott calls “bad Indians” who are explicitly challenging settler colonialism,

⁸⁴ For critic Daniel Francis, Canada has a long history of supporting Indigenous celebrities who reflected settler attitudes. He states, “celebrity Indians were hailed as spokespeople for their race, but they delivered a message that mainstream Canadian society was prepared to hear. If they had not, if they had tried to convey an overtly political message for instance, they would not have received a platform at all. The dominant society set the agenda and the terms of the discussion” (142-43).

Boyden's non-fiction reveals a politics that allows white settler readers to engage with Indigenous issues without being challenged to participate in systemic change. In doing so, Boyden tells a story that not only appeases readers who are unwilling to commit to systemic changes for reconciliatory purposes but also works to increase his authority and celebrity among this readership.⁸⁵

Making Legible Indigenous Land Relations in Boyden's Mushkegowuk Novels

Boyden should not have been considered a central authority on Indigenous issues due to his distance from Indigenous communities and the content of his commentary, nor should critics ignore that explicit challenges to settler colonialism's legal control over land is often absent from his writing. However, Boyden's politics, which extend through his novels, are not entirely egregious. For non-Indigenous readers whose perspectives are informed by Eurocentric thinking, Boyden's writing serves the pedagogical function of making legible the harm caused by settler colonialism and making legitimate Indigenous land relations that work to challenge Eurocentrism. While failing to explicitly envision systemic changes at legal and institutional levels is a limit to Boyden's writing, his ability to construct stories that challenge Eurocentrism and make valid Indigenous practices participates is an important early step in the reconciliation process. Boyden generates a literary counter-discourse to Eurocentric thinking that normalizes the management of Indigenous land relations in *Three Day Road* and *Through Black Spruce* by representing Indigenous alternatives to colonial and industrial food systems.

⁸⁵ Elliott draws attention to Boyden's readership when she questions why so many white men in the media industry were invested in supporting Boyden and quieting critics during his fall from stardom.

In *Three Day Road*, Boyden considers how residential schools controlled Indigenous peoples' relationships with animals and the land, and how the military incorporated traditional hunting techniques to serve their assimilationist and imperialist goals. Set against the backdrop of the First World War, Boyden depicts characters who resist assimilationist colonial institutions by retaining or returning to traditional foods and the accompanying land relations. Similarly, the characters in *Through Black Spruce* turn to traditional foods as an alternative to the ever-present capitalist commodification of food that erodes traditional cultural practices in contemporary Mushkegowuk. In the novels, Boyden's characters heal from colonial and neoliberal forms of management and take responsibility for each other and the land when they hunt, trap, and eat traditional foods. By writing about food, Boyden turns to a topic that is accessible to an intercultural audience to help non-Indigenous readers better understand colonial and neoliberal control over Indigenous land relations and how traditional practices can contribute to decolonial alternatives.

Food is particularly accessible to Boyden's non-Indigenous readership because, as philosopher Lisa Heldke explains, the middle-class has long enjoyed the widespread practice of eating meals that are associated with other cultures (xxii-xxiii). Heldke proposes that for "food adventurers" eating foods that are associated with other cultures is at best an attempt "to learn about other cultures" (xvi). Boyden provides readers with a literary version of food adventuring that can help non-Indigenous peoples gain a glimpse into Omushkego culture when he depicts characters who eat bear, moose, and geese. Similarly, he deploys familiar food-related tropes when he lingers on characters' struggles to find food and the ensuing threat of becoming a

cannibal, or what many Algonquian cultures refer to as a windigo (Smallman 22).⁸⁶ Although turning to food is an accessible means of engaging his non-Indigenous readers, forging connections through food can result in a facile understanding of other cultures or reinforce colonial relationships. Heldke argues that food adventuring regularly results in culinary explorers' "desire to have contact with, and to somehow own an experience of, an Exotic Other" (xvi). Even if non-Indigenous peoples avoid this colonial relationship, they may still hold a superficial appreciation for other cultures. They may enjoy another culture's food, while disliking traditions, such as religion, which that culture feels stronger about than their own cuisine. Critic Stanley Fish describes this process, which can occur when eating at "ethnic restaurant[s]," as boutique multiculturalism:

Boutique Multiculturalism is characterized by its superficial or cosmetic relationship to the objects of its affection. Boutique multiculturalists admire or appreciate or enjoy or sympathize with or (at the very least) "recognize the legitimacy of" the traditions of cultures other than their own; but boutique multiculturalists will always stop short of

⁸⁶ International Studies scholar Shawn Smallman explains that "During the 1950s and 1960s the windigo became a staple in Canadian fiction ..." and through repeated depictions in settler and Indigenous art it "has become a truly global symbol" (73). Given the windigo's pervasiveness in art, and especially within Canadian literature, it is not surprising that Canadian literary critics regularly focus on Boyden's windigo. While the windigo is used for different arguments in Sophie McCall's "Intimate Enemies: Weetigo, Weesageechak, and the Politics of Reconciliation in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*," Herb Wyile's "Windigo Killing: Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*," and Vikki Visvis's "Culturally Conceptualizing Trauma: The Windigo in Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*" the centrality of this familiar trope in analysis of Boyden's work is telling. Critics, like readers, who are not experts in Omushkego culture turn to the familiar figure of the windigo in order to better understand Boyden's writing, which often depicts unfamiliar Indigenous traditions that help characters heal from colonialism. Through eating, hunting, and food-related tropes like the windigo, Indigenous culture and its importance to contemporary Omushkego peoples is made accessible to a non-Indigenous readership.

approving other cultures at a point where some value at their center generates an act that offends against the canons of civilized decency as they have been either declared or assumed. (378)

Both food adventurers and boutique multiculturalists regularly eat foods from cultures that are not their own in ways that fail to disrupt relationships in which middle-class settler culture is normalized and dominant.

In contrast to the food adventurers and boutique multiculturalists' problematic approach to food, Boyden's novels use food to disrupt settler attitudes and assumptions. By intertwining food with other traditions that help characters care for themselves, their community, and the land, Boyden prompts readers to acknowledge that healing and justice for Indigenous peoples lay not with colonial control over Indigenous land relations that is perpetuated through assimilationist policy and colonial institutions, but with traditional forms of food collection, cultivation, and processing. In *Three Day Road*, Niska tells her nephew, Xavier, who has returned from the First World War, a series of stories about her life. While these stories revolve around eating, hunting, and starving, they are also about the responsible relationships that Indigenous peoples have with the land and their community. They stand in contrast to Xavier's morphine-induced flashbacks of his and Elijah's experience at residential school and in the military where food is divorced from land and community. Likewise, in *Through Black Spruce*, characters begin to heal from assimilation when they return to traditional foods. Will Bird, Xavier's son, escapes to the bush where he must hunt to survive after fighting with a local drug dealer, Marius; there he begins to care for himself and the land. After Marius's attack on Will, which places Will in a coma, Will's niece, Annie, shares stories about the cultural and physical harms caused by the local grocery store. For Annie, spending time on the land and with urban

Indigenous peoples who find ways to eat traditional foods helps her enact responsible relationships with the environment and her community. For Will and Annie, like Niska, eating and hunting are inseparable from Indigenous worldviews that hold them responsible to the land and community. For Boyden, food becomes an accessible way to prompt non-Indigenous readers to understand that Indigenous peoples do not want to be controlled by settler institutions and corporations and instead desire to return to traditional practices that sustain Indigenous communities and the land.

Potawatomi philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte illuminates how traditional practices and knowledges, through their emphasis on responsible relationships, strengthen Indigenous peoples' connection to the land and each other. Whyte describes settler colonialism as a process through which settlers move to another peoples' home and "erase indigenous peoples' social institutions, ecologies and ways of experiencing the world ..." in an effort to lay claim to this "new" land as their home (171). This affront to Indigenous peoples and the land allows settlers to claim that their worldview is legitimate. Despite purported legitimacy, Whyte explains that the settler worldview is unsustainable because it celebrates extraction industries and land development (171-72). In other words, environmental violence is inseparable from settler colonialism. Whyte proposes that environmental injustices occur not only when industry impacts the land on which Indigenous peoples live but also when settlers destroy Indigenous peoples' social and environmental relationships, or "socioecological contexts." With the destruction of these relationships, the mutually beneficial responsibilities, or "systems of responsibilities," that exist among Indigenous peoples and the land are also destroyed, and thus Indigenous peoples are no longer encouraged to act in the interest of their future (163), or in Whyte's words to participate in

“the upkeep, or continuance, of their societies” (165). Whyte summarizes this argument when he writes that an environmental injustice occurs

when the social institutions of one society systematically erase certain socioecological contexts, or horizons, that are vital for members of another society to experience themselves in the world as having responsibilities to other humans, nonhumans and the environment. Injustice, here, involves one society robbing another society of its capacities to experience the world as a place of collective life that its members feel responsible for maintaining into the future. (158)

Rather than searching for justice by prompting colonial institutions to be more equitable, Whyte explains that “indigenous scholars, activists and allies often call for the resurgence of operating indigenous systems of responsibilities” (172).⁸⁷ Such a resurgence of Indigenous systems of responsibilities necessarily requires the revival of Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and cultural practices that stress people’s relationships with and responsibilities to land and community.

⁸⁷ Whyte recasts environmental justice so that in addition to holding industry and institutions responsible for their disproportional placement of environmental harms within marginalized communities, it also attends to settler colonialism’s disruption of Indigenous worldviews. From Whyte’s perspective it is equally important to attend to institutions and businesses such as the residential schools, military, and grocery stores that disrupt systems of responsibilities as well as the destruction of Indigenous lands that is caused by dams and resource extraction. Whyte’s focus on the destruction of Indigenous worldviews differs from the environmental justice movement, which emerged in 1982 when community members protested a proposed hazardous-waste landfill in Warren County, North Carolina. This act of state-sponsored environmental racism that sought to dispose of waste in an African American county resulted in studies that confirmed that hazardous waste was regularly placed in areas inhabited by people of colour. In 1991, the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit widened the scope of environmental justice concerns beyond hazardous waste and the United States (Bullard, “Environmental Justice” 19, 20), thereby growing the foundations for many-sided approaches to environmental justice of which Whyte’s is only one.

By focusing on food, Boyden joins a rising chorus of scholars, artists, and activists that is demonstrating the link between colonialism and the destruction of traditional relationships with food. These cultural workers are encouraging Indigenous people to reconnect with traditional foods as a means of generating an alternative to colonial land relations and improving physical and cultural wellbeing (Bodirsky and Johnson, par. 9; Mihesuah 827-28; Reinhardt 88; Waziyatawin 78). These advocates are turning to the notion of “decolonizing diets” (Mihesuah 807), as a strategic effort to inspire Indigenous peoples to alter everyday routines in ways that reconnect people to their cultures, communities, and the land.⁸⁸ For Devon A. Mihesuah (Choctaw and Chickasaw), decolonizing diets provides an important alternative to “adhering to a typical American diet, even while it is killing us” (827). In addition to health benefits of traditional foods, Waziyatawin (Dakota) explains that when Indigenous peoples regain control over what they eat through decolonizing their diets they also find renewed connection to community, traditions, and the land. Waziyatawin writes that the

restoration of food practices will also restore a sense of well-being and

interconnectedness with the rest of creation For example, in my own family I was

⁸⁸ Food sovereignty and decolonizing Indigenous diets are related, as demonstrated by Luz Calvo and Rueda Esquibel who make little distinction between the terms (35); however, there are some differences between the concepts. Decolonizing Indigenous diets is oriented toward a community’s or individual’s agency to reconnect with traditional foods, whereas food sovereignty emerged out of La Via Campesina, a “transnational agrarian movement,” and often works at the level of activist organizations, NGOs, forums, policy change, international organizations like the UN, and governments (Wittman et al. 2-3, 6-8). While there is some Indigenous involvement in the food sovereignty movement, there have also been challenges from Indigenous critics who are concerned that food sovereignty is too “agriculture- and state-centric” (Desmarais and Wittman 1154-55) and may not adequately address “indigenous self-determination and the relationship between autonomy and respectful inter-dependency between communities” (1165). Because of this concern and because Boyden’s efforts lay primarily with individual and community responses to food crises, rather than food crises as they relate to loftier forms of organizing and advocacy, I choose to rely on scholarship regarding the decolonizing of Indigenous diets.

taught that the planting of corn is an important part of Dakota life. Every time I plant my grandmother's corn, I feel a sense of connection to her and the long line of grandmothers who planted the same strain of corn before me. Every cycle of planting and harvesting renews a commitment to and love for the corn plants and the land and soil on which they grow. It reaffirms that connection to *mitakuyapi owas'in* (all my relations). (78)

For Waziyatawin, eating corn for sustenance is only a small part of what the food means to her nation. Through corn, Waziyatawin cares for the plant, the land, and her community, past and present. In other words, Waziyatawin's responsible relationship with corn extends outward to *mitakuyapi owas'in*. Chicana studies scholars Luz Calvo and Catriona Rueda Esquibel emphasize the empowering nature of decolonizing diets when they write that "Cooking a pot of beans from scratch is a revolutionary act that honors both our ancestors and future generations" (17, 23). From this simple meal, traditional land relationships can be renewed. And yet, decolonizing diets is not always easy. Waziyatawin explains that some traditional foods no longer exist while others contain high levels of toxins (76). Consequently, decolonizing diets is "always tied to broader indigenous struggles such as land rights, environmental protection and ecological restoration" (76).

By prompting non-Indigenous readers to understand that traditional food is more than sustenance for Indigenous peoples, and more than an easy way for boutique multiculturalists and food adventurers to experience a different culture—that it is actually intertwined with Indigenous ways of relating to community and the land—literature like *Three Day Road* and *Through Black Spruce* can support Indigenous peoples who desire to practice their cultures without interference. Ecocritic Joni Adamson explains that Indigenous literature that attends to the politics of food can support Indigenous causes by "enhanc[ing] public understanding of why indigenous peoples

around the world are advocating a rights- and culturally based approach to food” (230-31). Indeed, Boyden’s Mushkegowuk novels “enhance public understanding” by representing characters who turn toward a “culturally based approach to food” (Adamson 230), which allows them to forge responsible relationships to their communities and the land as an alternative to colonialism. In doing so, Boyden’s novels work alongside other Indigenous writing that also engages with food, including texts by Maria Campbell (Métis), Marilyn Dumont (Cree and Métis), Marvin Francis (Cree), Diane Glancy (Cherokee), Louise Halfe (Cree), Winona LaDuke (Anishinabe), Eden Robinson (Haisla and Heiltsuk), and Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo).⁸⁹ Food is important to Indigenous writers because it is connected to other aspects of Indigenous life; as Waziyatawin explains, Indigenous peoples’

well-being is connected to the well-being of the land and all of its inhabitants. When we devote our time and energy to understanding those rhythms and cycles, we are closer to truly understanding who we are as indigenous peoples. The decolonization of our diets is thus linked to other forms of decolonization that will help us physically, culturally, psychologically, and spiritually. (85)

Consequently, Boyden’s vivid depictions of eating, hunting, and starving windigos are accessible to non-Indigenous readers and these depictions destabilize colonial attitudes toward Indigenous issues that regularly call for intervention or assimilation and instead encourage non-Indigenous readers to let Indigenous peoples re-organize their relationships with land and community according to their traditional knowledges. Although Boyden’s Mushkegowuk novels do not

⁸⁹ Thanks to Jenny Kerber for drawing my attention to some of these authors. See Ella Soper-Jones’s “The Fate of the Oolichan: Prospects of Eco-Cultural Restoration in Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*” for one of the few pieces of Canadian literary criticism that focuses on food in Indigenous literature.

explicitly advocate for the systemic changes necessary for a meaningful form of reconciliation, the novels could nevertheless encourage support for systemic change through their attention to accessible themes and tropes that help make legible the importance of Indigenous foods and self-determination.

Indigenous Responses to Residential Schools and The Military in *Three Day Road*

In *Three Day Road*, the Anishnabe character Niska enacts her culture in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries as her way of life and community are attacked by the assimilationist policies that sought to separate Indigenous peoples from their land and knowledge. She illuminates the value of traditional foods through a series of stories told to her morphine-addicted and war-wounded nephew, Xavier, who has returned to Mushkegowuk after serving in the First World War. In one story, Niska implies that animals should be respected because they are living beings and because some sustain human life (35). This message proves helpful to Xavier who has just participated in gratuitous killing in a war, where hunting for people and hunting for animals are conflated and there is no regard for human or animal life. Niska recalls that the community unearthed a hibernating bear just as starvation was setting in during a harsh winter. This winter was abnormally hard because two men were taken by the North-West Mounted Police and one had died from alcohol, thereby leaving the hunters less capable of providing for the hungry group. Nevertheless, the men locate a bear by following its footprints through the snow to its den.

But the bear is more than meat, especially to those who are members of the Bear Clan. They struggle with the decision to eat the bear: if they are to eat their “brother” they must do so with increased care (37). Niska recounts that they “laid the animal on his back on freshly cut spruce boughs, talking to him, whispering prayers for what seemed like hours” (38). With this

process complete, “all thirty of us crowded in and ate until every part of the animal was gone My father warned all of us that not a scrap should be wasted We were always careful not to waste for fear of insulting an animal, but this time stood out to me” (38-39). Here, Niska reveals how Anishnabe hunting and spirituality are transferred intergenerationally. In other words, Niska describes systems of responsibilities that require that the Anishnabek respect animals, like the bear, whether or not the animal becomes a source of food for the community. The scene also illuminates how the introduction of colonial practices like drinking alcohol and being managed by settler law disrupted their system of responsibilities by pushing them to unearth their “brother” (37), which they would not have done under normal circumstances. Nevertheless, Niska continues to enact her traditional land relations despite the residential school’s and military’s efforts to sever Elijah and Xavier’s connection to their culture and land.

Through Niska, Boyden provides an example of how the Indigenous peoples of Mushkegowuk were attentive to the responsibilities humans had with animals, even in times of trouble. For Boyden’s Cree, Oji-Cree, and Anishnabe characters who reside in Mushkegowuk living responsibly involves combining technical, spiritual, and cultural knowledge. Technical skills related to hunting, trapping, and fishing are used to procure a variety of foods that alter seasonally (McDonald et al. 22-23). But as Louis Bird explains, these skills count for little without intertwined human-land relationship that involves respect for animals and the Creator:

According [to] our ancestors, everything works in order, systematically. Nothing was overused, there was nothing that overextended its usefulness or its benefit to humans. We found a systematic way to survive in the area where we live, the Omushkego country. All these things were extended to us by the Great Spirit and were applied by us in our lifetime through the teaching system that was passed on to us by our elders. Everything

worked well, from the beginning of time—until the time of the other nation’s appearance There were rules about respecting nature and the environment—the animals and the birds. If one of these were broken by a member of the family, a kid maybe, the punishment was a retraction of the benefits from nature. (*Spirit Lives in the Mind* 76)⁹⁰

Here, spiritual, cultural, and technical knowledge are brought together through education in order to maintain systems of responsibilities that make possible the continuation of people and land unique to Omushkego country.

For Bird, Omushkego culture is transmitted through a “total education” that combines physical and spiritual education (*Telling Our Stories* 40). Learning how to make tools or move through an environment are valuable skills, but expertise must be connected to spiritual beliefs in order to “will yourself beyond your physical strength” (38-9). Bird explains that “the physical . . . is limited, and this spiritual process adds to the total being of the individual to survive, at least in the northern area” (39). Learning about one’s physical and spiritual existence in Omushkego-Aski occurs “by observation, by hearing, by feeling, [and] by imagining” (35).⁹¹ More specifically, Bird highlights how their education system involves engaging with dreams, stories, daily activities, animals and the land (42). After many years of learning, an elder becomes a mi-tew, or “the totally educated person” (23), who shares ideas and enforces customs through stories (44). Elders transmit various culturally significant teachings, such as the idea that “Everything is

⁹⁰ While Bird provides sustained and compelling writings on Omushkego culture and is therefore a useful resource for this brief summary of Omushkego foodways, I do not presuppose that he offers the only valid understanding of Omushkego cultural practices, that his writing is unmediated gospel, or that my interpretation of his writing offers anything more than a limited introduction to Omushkego life.

⁹¹ Omushkego-Aski refers to the “Omushkego land, the area around the west coast of James Bay and Southwest coast of Hudson Bay” (*Telling Our Stories* 24), “which is approximately 200 miles wide and about 700 miles in length . . .” (*Spirit Lives in the Mind* 3-4).

living” (40), that “the human body needs ... kindness, love, protection, and food and clothing” (42). Elders also enforce ethical stances: people should not kill without a reason, commit sexual taboos, or steal, and they should respect animals, the environment, and elders (46-48). For Bird and other Indigenous peoples living in Mushkegowuk, traditional knowledge and practices are tied closely to their existence as Indigenous peoples and have, therefore, been targeted and controlled by colonial institutions such as the residential school.

Xavier’s brief flashbacks to residential school echo historical accounts of school life that reveal an institutionalized effort to manage and ultimately erase Indigenous cultural practices by severing the intergenerational transmission of Indigenous knowledge between adults and children (*Honouring* 3). This government-supported, church-run program that spanned from the 1870s to the 1990s aimed to assimilate its 150,000 students in a process rightfully described by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada as “cultural genocide” (3). The genocidal aims were carried out through various, often horrific, processes involving attacks on Indigenous culture including managing their relationships to traditional food and land relations. Instead of serving fare similar to those culturally-specific foods that students ate at home, the schools served European style meals, of the lowest quality and nutritional value (Chrisjohn et al. 50; Milloy 121). Despite ongoing official acknowledgement that residential school meals were nutritionally inadequate, food quality was not increased. Instead of alleviating this crisis, medical professionals and government officials in the 1940s conducted studies on residential school students, “apparently without the subjects’ informed consent or knowledge,” in efforts that served the observers’ careers more than the malnourished students (Mosby, “Administering Colonial Science” 148-49). In addition to providing the setting for these appalling experiments, residential school meals worked to confuse students at school (*Honouring* 88), as well as at

home. By the time children returned home many had become disoriented from their traditions; as Gabriel Fireman of Attawapiskat explains, “when our children went to school they lost the importance of hunting which is why we have lost the old traditional way of our culture. Education, itself, has slowly destroyed our culture” (qtd. in McDonald et al. 51). As Fireman indicates, traditional foods are not only connected to the meals they provide, but also are connected to Indigenous cultural practices rooted in a relationship with the land. Because traditional foods are vital to Indigenous socioecological contexts, they were a crucial site of colonial control through which the schools attempted to assimilate their students into the Canadian body politic and clear the land for settler use.

Boyden’s attention to how schools attempted to assimilate students exists only so far as it allows him to explore the new worldview that emerges in students whose cultures were vilified. After spending most of his childhood at the residential school, Elijah leaves school with an altered worldview in contrast to Xavier who only had brief encounters with the school system because he lived with Niska. While critics agree that Elijah’s attitude is altered as a result of the school, they stress different reasons for Elijah’s new behaviours. For example, Herb Wyile emphasizes Elijah’s sexual abuse (89), Vikki Visvis argues that he is harmed by “internalized racism” (233), and Sophie McCall underscores his removal from traditional foods (65). Together, these assessments highlight how the residential school layered multiple routes of attack on Elijah’s personhood and culture; surely all affected him, but McCall’s attention to food is compelling given Boyden’s ongoing depictions of food in *Mushkegowuk*. In *Three Day Road*, Sister Magdalene—the same nun who sexually abuses Elijah—aims to instill a belief in her students that separates them from the land and community by claiming that it is “barren” and that their culture is “backwards” (56). Claiming that the land is devoid of life works in support of the

school's goal, which Bird argues is to stop children from loving the land (*Telling Our Stories* 236).

Leaving the school without "love of land," Elijah no longer carries Cree systems of responsibilities that guide his relationship with other beings. His new worldview manifests in the novel's opening vignette where Elijah's beliefs about hunting are juxtaposed with Xavier's. In this passage that holds significant rhetorical weight due to its placement at the beginning of the novel, Elijah finds an ensnared marten and "bends down to touch the marten's naked body" and says, "Our first night out alone and we have already taken an animal. Your Auntie will be impressed We are great hunters, aren't we, Xavier?" In response Xavier thinks, "I make sure to be careful, to not damage the fur, to keep the body intact. I want Auntie to see that I do not waste" (2). Elijah expects praise for exerting their will over the marten. In contrast, Xavier who was raised by Niska knows that his aunt will be proud not because they killed, but because they did not waste thereby killing only as much as is necessary for their survival. Because of the residential school's attack on Indigenous cultures that promote systems of responsibilities, Elijah's relationship with animals is altered so that animals are no longer respected and his own self-worth is based on domination and control. This scene foreshadows the growing rift between the two friends that began because of their different upbringings and is exacerbated by their wartime experiences.

Although the residential school and military manage Elijah's land-relations so that he is forced toward assimilation, the novel emphasizes that resistance and Indigenous resurgence are possible alternatives to assimilation. Resurgent cultural practices are highlighted through the easily accessible relationships that characters have with food, but also through the way Boyden's narrators story the novel's events. For example, early in Elijah's and Xavier's military service,

Xavier recalls how they followed the experienced Corporal Thompson who led them to raid enemy dugouts. Xavier explains that they were both “scared” and that they “are all equally guilty” for killing the enemy soldiers. In contrast, Elijah tells his fellow soldiers about the same event and “brags that he has now killed men” and suggests that he played an important role in the successful raid. While Xavier finds collective guilt in their failure to be responsible to other humans, Elijah finds individual success in his failure to be responsible to other humans. So powerful is Elijah’s story that Xavier believes it “keeps their spirits up, and that is worth nearly as much as good food and a warm, dry bed” (77). Here, Boyden highlights the power of stories. Although the violent story that the soldiers crave sustains them for the time being, it does so in spite of their responsibilities to others. Events later in the novel highlight that Elijah’s belief in stories that discourage systems of responsibilities do indeed cause harm. Just as eating different foods affects the body in different ways so do different stories.

Readers of *Three Day Road*, like the novel’s characters, have the opportunity to decide what version of the soldiers’ raid they want to believe. Boyden presents his readers with a crossroads: they can choose Elijah’s story or Xavier’s. Thomas King explains that some stories can cause harm while others can save. To choose Xavier’s story, is to choose a “saving stor[y],” to borrow King’s phrase (*Truth About Stories* 118-19). Boyden pushes his readers to align themselves with Xavier’s story by drawing on and then subverting conventions of the Canadian World War One novel. Neta Gordon explains that the “central paradox” of Canadian literature about the First World War is that while the war was “cataclysmic for Canadians” the Canadian soldier’s story is one of “productive, progressive ‘initiation’ and, as such, is reimagined within a complicated framework of nostalgia for a time and set of events that might reify a set of constructive values (about, for example, community or duty or justice)” (12). *Three Day Road*

deploys these conventions through Xavier's story rather than through settler soldiers. In doing so, Boyden shifts what Gordon calls "constructive values" from the settler soldiers' mentality that has dominated this body of literature to Xavier's Cree worldview (12). Readers familiar with the genre are comforted that the novel utilizes familiar conventions, but are productively unsettled because they must rely on a Cree character, and Cree epistemology, as the source of "constructive values" (Gordon 12).

In war, Elijah and Xavier use their knowledge of the land to help the military achieve its goals at great expense to their cultural existence and to the deterioration of systems of responsibilities. McCall notes that Elijah's success as a sniper, and Xavier's accompanying achievements as Elijah's spotter, is made possible through a combination of military training and repurposed Cree hunting techniques (65). Together Elijah and Xavier build their first sniper's nest from which they can easily see German soldiers. Xavier explains, "Elijah and I spend long hours at nighttime building our nest, paying attention to every little detail, the colour of earth, the surrounding stumps and pieces of twisted, rusted metal This is just like building goose blinds at home" (86). But if Xavier originally thinks "It is just like hunting I am made for this ..." (86), his opinion changes after their first kill, which causes him to throw up. Xavier's disgust is compounded because he utilized his knowledge of goose blinds in order to kill a person. The hunting technique that was used to help sustain human lives is now used to extinguish human lives. Unlike Xavier, Elijah smiles after shooting the soldier. He is empowered by killing the soldier just as he was when he killed the marten; in both cases, killing is less about Elijah's survival and more about his ability to exert his will on other beings.

The continuing divide between Elijah and Xavier raises questions regarding assimilation and agency. On the one hand, Elijah and Xavier are resourceful and put their knowledge to work

in order to succeed at war. According to historian Timothy C. Winegard, serving successfully for Canada in the First World War was a common goal for Indigenous soldiers who hoped “to prove their worth as Indians both individually and collectively” and “participate on equal terms and win the respect of the dominant non-Indian society in order to gain rights for their own peoples” (8). Here, Xavier and Elijah carve out an existence within a colonial system. On the other hand, modifying hunting in support of the military’s aims, in order to achieve individual self-preservation or to earn admiration for their culture, comes at a cost. When hunting for humans is conflated with hunting for animals, it is reduced to a technical skill without spiritual and ethical responsibilities. According to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, such assimilation of Indigenous knowledge within settler colonialism often requires that “the spiritual foundations” of traditional knowledge are jettisoned (“Anticolonial Strategies” 374). The agency that Elijah and Xavier exhibit through traditional hunting techniques is coopted in support of the military’s goals and thus loses its ethical component.

Through the school and military that manage Indigenous land relations by devaluing or appropriating Cree culture, Elijah loses sight of the lessons that traditional foods provide and becomes integrated in settler society. This transition is made clear when Xavier describes Elijah as a windigo. Basil Johnston describes the windigo as a Manitou, or a spirit, with an unending appetite for humans that disregards the pain of others and cares only for itself (*Manitous* 221-22).⁹² By framing Elijah as a windigo, Xavier emphasizes the ethical and spiritual responsibilities that are lost during the war in a way that is recognizable to non-Indigenous

⁹² The windigo is spelled in many different ways, depending on the writer’s language, dialect, and alphabet usage. For example, Bird uses the word wihitiko, which is a transliteration of an Omushkego word into roman orthography, whereas Johnston uses an Anishinaabemowin spelling, weendigo.

readers. As Johnston explains, the weendigo occurs when people overconsume, but can be kept away through traditions that involve care for family, community, animals, and offerings to “Mother Earth and Kitchi-Manitou” (223). Indeed, Bird explains that the wihtiko “comes from a strong teaching of conservation—that you didn’t kill any animal just for the sake of killing, you kill the animal for use, and you use it all” (*Spirit Lives in the Mind* 115). The windigo also signifies Elijah’s transition into a member of settler society. Here, Boyden participates in a trend in contemporary writing where the windigo is used to describe settler-colonial attitudes (Smallman 171), which for Powhatan-Renape and Delaware-Lenape scholar and activist Jack Forbes involves the wétiko using others “in a manner which is decidedly one-sided and disadvantageous to the victim,” often in order to generate excess wealth (47, 49). Rather than believing colonial institutions that view Elijah’s transition from Indigenous to settler ways as his successful assimilation into settler society, Xavier draws on his Cree stories to reframe Elijah as a windigo and in doing so suggests that assimilation into settler society is not a success, but a violent transition that requires the management of Indigenous land relations and the denial of one’s responsibility to care for others.

As settler colonialism takes hold, or as “*windigos* spring from the earth” as Niska phrases it, industrial foods emerge and disrupt Indigenous peoples’ relationship with each other and their surroundings (49). Niska discloses that although settlers once relied on Cree peoples, the Cree of Mushkegowuk now rely on settlers, especially for “flour and sugar ... [and] rum” (46). As Cree cultural practices were managed by institutions like the residential school, many Indigenous people in Mushkegowuk moved to Moose Factory and “learned to stomach the *wemistikoshiw* food and ways” (89). However, Niska and others “went back to the old ways as little families ... hunting with bows and vine snares,” but the novel makes clear that Niska’s decision is an

exception to the rule (89, 90). That most transitioned to settler customs over the course of Niska's life is both unique to the novel's depiction of Mushkegowuk and representative of larger changes that involved the industrialization of food that emerged in the late nineteenth century and intensified through the twentieth century (Winson 20). Although the Second World War is responsible for many changes to food in Canada (Mosby, *Food Will Win the War* 203), the Canadian response to the First World War involves actions that were taken up in earnest during the Second World War, such as patriotic campaigns to consume less and produce more, as well as large-scale farming, processing, and exportation of foods to Europe (Granatstein and Morton 53). The novel gestures to the war-driven developments of industrialized foods through its mention of tins of beef, stew, bread, and crates of food that sit alongside boxes of ammunition and clothes—"Everything we will need over there," according to Elijah (127). The assumption for Elijah, and those who now live in town, is that industrial foods are "Everything we will need" to sustain life (127). Industrial foods do sustain life, but at the cost of situated and sustainable knowledges that contribute to physical health and a rich cultural life.

These changes amount to an environmental injustice. But unlike typical environmental injustices that occur when disrupted land harms people, this environmental injustice occurs when traditional ecological knowledges are disrupted by colonial knowledges. For example, the residential school and military disrupted traditions, thereby turning Indigenous peoples toward industrial foods. Industrial foods that include alcohol and processed products harm both Indigenous bodies and the environment. When Boyden's characters, like Elijah, turn to industrial foods, they lose their systems of responsibilities that prompt them to care for animals, land, and community. This loss of responsibility, in turn, allows for further destruction of the environment by settler-colonial practices that then results in additional harm to Indigenous peoples who

become further alienated from the land and entrenched in unhealthy industrial foods—a cycle of intertwined human and environmental harm spurred on by settler-colonial management of Indigenous peoples' land relations.

Boyden suggests that this intensification of human and environmental destruction can be mitigated by adherence to traditional land relations that tie hunting and eating to responsible relationships to community and the land. In *Three Day Road*, Niska provides an alternative to the destruction of Indigenous peoples and environments through her commitment to traditions. The power of these traditions is exemplified most fiercely when Niska heals Xavier, who becomes a windigo after killing Elijah. Niska heals Xavier by reclaiming control over traditional land relations that have been managed by the regime. Literary critic Cynthia Sugars argues that Xavier also becomes a windigo, but is saved by Niska (243-44); if this is so, both Xavier's harm and his healing is tied to food. At war, Xavier slips between industrialized foods and industrialized warfare. As the soldiers move in and out of the craters of no man's land, Xavier looks at a pool of water and thinks it "is more a stew" with human "limbs" and "rotted faces" (70). By blending together two normalized but separate events—the staple diet of stew and the regular sight of dead bodies—this passage works to defamiliarize both. The stew contains humans, thereby connecting industrial foods to human harm, and horrific military violence to the mundane act of eating. Here, Xavier foreshadows his transition into an all-consuming and self-destructive windigo.

That Xavier returns home addicted to morphine and unable to eat is not surprising given his experiences. But Niska knows that "If he doesn't eat soon, he will die," so she feeds him moose meat and tells a story of how his first successful moose hunt generated community and instilled a sense of pride in the boy (356, 362). Here, food is wrapped in traditional hunting

techniques and spirituality that support community, individual wellbeing, and a sustainable existence in Mushkegowuk. Reconnecting to these relationships, through a combination of moose meat and story, helps Xavier heal and reestablish systems of responsibilities. For Niska and Xavier, the relationship between a people and their culture is a matter of life or death. In order to stop Xavier from dying, Niska combines traditional foods with spiritual aspects of their culture. In Bird's words, she realizes "our bodies can only stand so much hardship the will is limited. That's where the spirituality comes in" (*Telling Our Stories* 38). Through her story, she imbues the moose meat with cultural significance. It becomes more than material sustenance. Because of Niska's story, it is also spiritual sustenance. The act of storytelling also helps reinforce the way of life that the story encourages Xavier to participate in: by telling a story with the goal of helping Xavier, Niska is enacting her responsibility to care for her nephew. In doing so, her actions help revive the systems of responsibilities that are represented within the story and are necessary to Xavier's survival. What becomes apparent, when reading Niska, Xavier, and Elijah's engagement with Indigenous traditions and the colonial actors and institutions that devalue or appropriate Indigenous foods and the stories through which knowledge is shared and enacted, is that a critique of colonial institutions cannot be limited to the social harm they cause. In social harm is environmental harm and in environmental harm is social harm. To see Xavier's existence as one that is culturally and environmentally intertwined and enriched by traditional cultural practices that are often tied to food provides non-Indigenous readers with an accessible means of understanding that justice is impossible unless Indigenous peoples are able to enact their traditional knowledge without outside interference by those actors and institutions whose efforts are grounded in Eurocentrism. The significance of traditional land relations is

underscored in *Through Black Spruce*, especially when characters are inspired in their own fights for Indigenous continuance by Xavier's efforts to enact traditional systems of responsibilities.

Industrial Foods Systems and Indigenous Food Practices in *Through Black Spruce*

In *Through Black Spruce*, the school and military give way to the reserve and city life, but the control over Indigenous land relations continues. Fast-food restaurants and grocery stores have commodified food and sell harmful processed products on the reserve and access to healthy food in the city is just as unlikely. Grocery stores and fast-food restaurants are only two recent manifestations of colonialism that have altered Omushkego peoples' relationships with the land. Bird summarizes the various steps in colonial practices that have led to contemporary Omushkego peoples' distance from the land: "One is the fur trade, the loss of First Nation conservation rules. Then Christianization, to prepare for treaty; and the treaty to take the land; and then the residential school to detach the young people from the love of land" (*Telling Our Stories* 236). Just like the fur trade, Christianity, treaties, and residential schools that controlled Indigenous peoples' relationships with the land industrial food systems harm Annie and her uncle Will. And yet, they try to counteract the various attacks on their family and community: Will is fighting against the drug-dealing Marius, and Annie is searching for her missing sister. Through their responses to colonialism's fragmentation of their family and community, they eventually realize that regaining control over their traditional land relations by reconnecting with traditional foods can provide an alternative to colonial oppression. Will's and Annie's attempts to decolonize their diets allow the novel to interrogate the individual's ability and struggle to dismantle an oppressive food system and to consider how limited access to land complicates this decolonial process. Before addressing Will's and Annie's efforts to reconnect with traditional foods, it is first helpful to pause on Annie's understanding of the differences between industrial

and Indigenous food, as they reveal why the turn to traditional food is necessary for cultural and environmental resurgence.

Annie's impetus to recover Indigenous ways of hunting and eating stem from her experiences with how the industrialization of food involves a violent re-organization of space and social relations. Annie illuminates how industrial foods harm the people of Mushkegowuk when she spends a morning in town with her friend Eva. They enter a Kentucky Fried Chicken because Eva wants to sit and nurse her baby. On this occasion, neither Annie nor Eva wants to eat processed food. Annie is overcoming food poisoning caused by rotten canned pasta that she was forced to eat on a failed hunting trip and Eva, who enjoys fast food, is in this instance more interested in finding a place to sit and nurse her child. Nevertheless, they buy a meal to counter Annie's expectation that the employees will force them to purchase food if they use the restaurant's seats. Annie's self-policing becomes a striking example of how the industrial food systems manage how Indigenous peoples relate to food. Industrial foods attract potential consumers through their physical presence in the town, or what sociologist Anthony Winson calls the corporate "spatial colonization" of food (185). After eating at KFC, Annie and Eva go to the Northern Store because it is the only thing to do on a "weekday morning" despite "neither of us really wanting to buy anything" (41). In the store they find grandparents who once hunted but now shop for "overpriced and unhealthy food" that help "Diabetes and obesity and cancer plague our community ..." (42). Annie highlights how these stores generate business not because of the value of their products, but because of the social expectations they command and their physical presence in a place where living in responsible relation to the land has been devalued. In other words, the industrial food system is a self-perpetuating system that harms the people of Mushkegowuk through unhealthy and culturally irrelevant foods.

However, Annie and Eva generate alternatives to industrial food systems. While in the restaurant Annie nurses her baby, thereby continuing traditional feeding practices between mother and child, whereas Annie generates an alternative to industrial foods outside of the restaurant by returning to Indigenous foods that recover communal space and activate systems of responsibilities. Annie emphasizes these values when she tells her uncle about her favorite childhood memory, her first hunt with her family in “irreconcilable space of Aboriginality” where Indigenous peoples “express and celebrate their continuity and figure themselves to, for, and with one another without the sense that that they are being witnessed by people who are not equal participants” (Garneau 27). In her story that parallels Xavier’s spiritually and communally enriching first hunt with Niska, Annie shoots and injures a goose that Xavier then kills. After killing the goose he “strokes the bird as if it’s a pet ... whispers words to it and takes some tobacco from his pocket and places it in the bird’s beak” (395). He then calls Annie by her nickname “little Niska,” which means little goose (392). Annie’s “stomach sinks” because Xavier killed the goose, but the seriousness of his action is compounded for Annie who shares the same name as the goose (395). Her reaction is similar to the young Xavier’s reaction to the conflation between humans and geese that occurred when he used goose blinds to kill enemy soldiers, and yet these moments convey different ethics. In war, conflating animals and humans helps some soldiers devalue the enemy; whereas, in Mushkegowuk conflating animals and humans places value on the animal. That is, Xavier’s care for the bird that shares Annie’s name illustrates that if one is to survive by killing something so close to oneself then this must be done sparingly and with care. Killing fewer geese means that more geese continue to live, thereby making life possible for Annie now and in the future. That Xavier cares for both the human and feathered niskas indicates that their traditions prioritize systems of responsibilities that sustain

human and animal life. Their traditions also value communal space and unprocessed foods, both of which are antithetical to industrial foods according to Annie's experiences.

Creating similarities between these two novels not only through the setting and focus on the Bird family but also through minute details is a testament to Boyden's ability to generate an in-depth rendering of Omushkegowuk. It is also tied to Boyden's place at the centre of the Canadian literary marketplace. By connecting both novels, Boyden is responding to the success of *Three Day Road* and offering readers an additional opportunity to get to know the Bird family. Readers who identify the similarities between these two moments—where Xavier's and Annie's stomachs sink after they kill other beings—may be simply satisfied that they are attentive enough to identify a connection between novels. However, such attentive reading can be political if readers extend their observations to connect Xavier with his granddaughter, place Annie's life into context, and alter their own beliefs about Annie's world. King explains after he tells a creation story to his audience: "It's yours. Do with it what you will But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now" (*Truth About Stories* 29). Ultimately, listeners, or readers, have some degree of agency in whether they let stories change them. If non-Indigenous readers are attentive to the implications of Annie's story, not just its connection to a moment in *Three Day Road*, then they may change their ways by supporting Indigenous peoples who are turning to traditional knowledge in an effort to care for the land and their communities. Acknowledging the legitimacy of Indigenous practices is not the ultimate goal of reconciliation according to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's *Calls to Action*, but it is a worthwhile step in the process.

Annie's portrayal of industrial and Indigenous foods suggests that they operate on different scales. Industrial foods are consumed in Mushkegowuk by way of large-scale networks

of colonial institutions, neoliberal policies, and corporate interests, whereas traditional foods are consumed by way of people whose everyday practices are tied to responsible relation to unique environments. In other words, Indigenous foods involve specific manifestations of Indigenous relationality that is not found in the industrial networks that are involved in the transportation, sale, and consumption of industrial foods. While the recovery of Indigenous diets sometimes relies on institutional support (Whyte 167), Boyden's novels suggest that it also requires sustained efforts from inclined individuals, like Niska who taught Xavier, or Xavier who taught Will and Annie. Indeed, advocates of the decolonization of Indigenous diets often emphasize the individual's role in this process. Devon Mihesuah, for example, argues that "it is up to us to make ourselves physically and mentally strong again We can only do so much to combat racism and prejudice, but we can control what we put in our mouths" (828). Stressing that the individual has agency to combat the cultural, physical, and environmental violence that is caused by industrial foods is empowering, but it also downplays the systemic issues that hamper individual attempts to recover traditions that have been altered by corporations and settler colonialism.⁹³

Through Black Spruce explores the tension between individual agency and systemic oppression in relation to food through Will who is impacted by external pressures including a childhood in residential school and alcoholism. Despite these harms, he begins to take control of his lifestyle only after being assaulted by Marius; the injuries that Will receives cause him to

⁹³ Here, I am drawing on an argument made by @Kam'ayaam/Chachim'multhnii (Clifford G. Atleo Kam'ayaam / Chachim'multhnii) who considers the value of decolonizing Indigenous diets as a response to the high rate of diabetes among Indigenous peoples, but worries that this may place too much onus on the individual to combat a systemic problem: "one of the ways neoliberalism manifests itself is through the pathologizing [of] our problems as personal/individual problems."

realize that his existence is fragile. He begins to change his lifestyle by jogging, but he learns that if he is to truly alter his way of life, he must do so through actions that are connected to the land and his community and culture. This realization occurs when he flees from town to Akimiski Island after shooting Marius. On the island, Will remembers what Xavier taught him about bush life, but this counts for little without the company of people: “My father told me that fire and food and good shelter were the three things I needed to concentrate on out here. But he didn’t mention a fourth. Company” (210). Fortunately, Will encounters a couple and their grandchildren who are hunting geese in preparation for winter. With likeminded people, who are living in a traditional manner that Bird explains involves “liv[ing] on the surface of the land and practic[ing] the migrating life” (*Telling Our Stories* 235), Will’s attitude continues to change. He drinks less, especially in front of the children, and he helps Francis achieve a successful fall hunt. Will’s lifelong struggle to care for himself is a result of colonial oppression, but self-care becomes more successful when Will shifts from individual activities to culturally and communally significant activities like hunting for food.

Will’s attempt to decolonize his diet is aided by access to land, but Annie’s encounter with an Indigenous community in Toronto reveals that traditional foods can be enjoyed by those who do not have access to unharmed land. To Annie’s surprise, her newfound Indigenous friends show her that the recovery of traditional diets is possible, even in the city. When she arrives at one of their weekly feasts under the garbage-filled overpass, she is shocked to smell cooking goose. The goose, although cooked using traditional techniques, tastes different because, as Old Man explains, “they eat different here. Candy floss, popcorn, hot dogs” (85). Despite the birds’ questionable diets, eating geese helps this largely homeless group sustain their physical selves and their community; the birds even allow this community to remake a hostile urban space from

one officially purposed to move people to other locations into a place that supports Indigenous gatherings. Here, responsibilities to each other are activated through preparing and eating traditional foods. Care is even extended to the underpass. However, these emerging responsibilities cannot stop the goose from eating industrial foods. This passage is evidence of the resilience of Indigenous peoples and power of traditional foods, and yet it also poses a challenge to the decolonization of Indigenous diets if the concept is separated from the fight for environmental justice and legal title to the land. Here, Boyden's novel implies that Indigenous peoples can benefit from traditional foods even if the food and land is poisoned, but the benefits of traditional foods are limited unless Indigenous peoples have access to land that is not under the control of the settler state or neoliberal corporate interests.

The small-scale everyday acts in support of the decolonization of Indigenous diets that Niska, Xavier, Will, and Annie partake in radiate outward to other decolonial processes. Here, Boyden's novel substantiates Waziyatawin's argument that "the decolonization of our diets is thus linked to other forms of decolonization" (85). This notion is emphasized most forcefully in the final passages of *Through Black Spruce* when Will gathers with friends and family at Xavier's hunting camp. In this moment where Annie's and Will's interests in traditional foods converge, it seems that Will and Annie have resolved the issues that they faced at the beginning of the novel. Will's fight against drugs began with an attack on the drug dealer Marius, and yet Will continues to abuse alcohol. His consumption of alcohol is only reduced when he reconnects with traditional foods that remind him to care for himself and others. Annie finds her missing sister not in the city as she had hoped, but at their camp as if this traditional-food centred communal space urged Suzanne to return home. Indeed, Annie and Will work hard to reconnect with traditional approaches to hunting, preparation, and eating and in doing so they inevitably

combat other colonial issues that at first seemed unrelated, namely drug use and missing Indigenous women.

The camp also signifies a physical space, where responsibilities to the land and community can be practiced without outside interference. That the novel ends as Will arrives at camp prompts the reader to return to the events of both novels to imagine what may occur at the gathering. Will and Annie may follow Niska and or Xavier, who hunt with care and respect and tell stories about the way that hunting and eating involves being responsible to the land and community so that this knowledge can be passed on to the next generation in support of the intertwined continuance of Indigenous culture and the land. According to Cherokee Indigenous studies scholar Jace Weaver, using a specific piece of land over a long period of time, as these characters do at Xavier's camp, is an important way of maintaining environmental justice for it allows for "a longer-term view toward the environment" (20-21). Although the end of Boyden's *Mushkegowuk* diptych stresses a forward looking environmental view that affirms Calvo and Esquibel's claim that reconnecting with traditional foods is a "revolutionary act" (17), it does so with a caveat: for all of Will and Annie's achievements, there lingers the memory of characters like Elijah, Eva, and Old Man whose connection to the benefits of traditional food have been disrupted by various settler-colonial practices and colonial institutions including residential schools, the military, grocery stores, and fast-food restaurants. In other words, *Through Black Spruce* and *Three Day Road* support Indigenous peoples whose everyday food choices contribute to other decolonial processes and help counteract harm to people and environment by strengthening systems of responsibilities, but the novels also acknowledge that reconnecting to Omushkego culture is difficult because of ongoing settler-colonial practices.

Adamson suggests that changing public perceptions is one of the primary functions of Indigenous food narratives (230-31). Altering public perception in this manner can combat what Santos calls “abyssal thinking” (45), which is willfully ignorant of the value of Indigenous knowledge. For Marie Battiste (Mi’kmaw) and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Indigenous knowledge is valuable and necessary for a just future. Battiste explains that Indigenous knowledge has “a legitimate pride of place at the transfer table of contemporary knowledge production and exchange” (“Animating Sites” 8). For Simpson, “settler society must also choose to change their ways, to decolonize their relationship with the land and Indigenous Nations, and to join with us in building a sustainable future based upon mutual recognition, justice, and respect” (“Oshkimaadiziig”14). Literature like Boyden’s novels that stresses the relationship between Indigenous knowledge and healing can contribute to this larger scholarly, legal, activist, and artistic effort to illuminate the value of Indigenous knowledge and practices. While the novel is attentive to the importance of access to land and the challenges associated with recovering traditional land relations, the novel fails to address the fact that without government, corporate, and settler commitment to honouring treaties and returning land, there is no guarantee that Will, Annie, and future generations will have access to the land. As such, Boyden’s works champion a form of intercultural relation building that while useful is limited to helping non-Indigenous readers better understand the importance of Indigenous knowledge and practices to Indigenous communities.

Boyden, Community, and Rhetorical Sovereignty

Three Day Road and *Through Black Spruce*’s exploration of the social and environmental benefits of Indigenous knowledge and practices prompts non-Indigenous readers and the mainstream media to reconsider commonly held beliefs about Indigenous food crises and to

support Indigenous peoples who are calling for Indigenous-centred and self-determined alternatives to environmental injustices. Boyden's companion novels urge non-Indigenous readers to understand that Indigenous food crises are not caused by unaffordable industrial foods and are not solved by moving Indigenous peoples from reserves to cities. Rather, these crises are instead a result of ongoing colonial institutions and practices that manage Indigenous peoples' land relations by divorcing Indigenous peoples from locally-derived traditions that sustain culture, community, and land. In these novels, Boyden not only outlines the settler colonial and corporate disruption of Indigenous life, culture, and environments, but also provides a necessary literary counter-discourse to these intertwined injustices through characters who practice their traditional forms of food collection, cultivation, and processing. Boyden's writer-activism, especially as it manifests in his Mushkegowuk novels, offers a limited but potentially useful contribution to reconciliation by working to alter non-Indigenous perceptions and practices related to Indigenous peoples' fight for justice. Boyden's writing works to alter colonial perceptions about Indigenous issues and to encourage non-Indigenous peoples to support the recovery of Indigenous knowledge; however, the potential of Boyden's writing is dependent not only on the strategies he uses to engage his non-Indigenous readership, such as eating, hunting, and the windigo, but also on the ways that his readers view his relationships with Indigenous communities.

When vocal critics persuasively exposed the fragility of Boyden's Indigeneity in 2016, they made clear that the success of a writer-activist is also dependent on what community members have to say about a writer-activist who represents their lives, cultures, and issues. After being publicly critiqued, Boyden wrote a lengthy response for *Maclean's* titled "My Name is Joseph Boyden," in which he simultaneously acknowledges critics' arguments that activists

succeed only if the community responds positively to their work while also dismissing critics' concerns. He states:

If I am accepted by people in Indigenous communities, if I have been traditionally adopted by a number of people in Indigenous communities, if my DNA test shows I have Indigenous blood, if I have engaged my whole career in publicly defending Indigenous rights as well as using my public recognition as an author to shine light on Indigenous issues, am I not, in some way, Indigenous?

By explaining that he is both Indigenous and accepted by community members he acknowledges criticism related to his shifting heritage and limited relationship with Indigenous communities but does so in a way that works to dispel such critiques. Having attempted to quiet criticism and retain his status as a lauded Indigenous writer, Boyden concludes the article by gesturing toward his future efforts as a writer-activist. He explains, "I have been gifted the ability to speak and write stories. I am part of a bigger fabric. I don't often know where these voices come from. But I'm meant to tell these stories. And I will not stop telling them. You don't throw away something gifted to you I will never assume to speak for all, but I must speak my own voice There is more to come from me. A lot more." Here, Boyden suggests that he is a part of something larger than himself and that he has little choice but to write about Indigenous issues, regardless of the charges mounted against him such as Jorge Barrera's argument that Boyden was not gifted but rather stole parts of Ojibway healer Ron Geyschick's story "Inside My Heart" (Similarities Between Joseph Boyden Story"). In doing so, Boyden attempts to reclaim control over the narratives about him that circulated in the past year and to retain his role as an author who will continue to advocate for Indigenous peoples.

Notwithstanding the revelations that much of Boyden's public claims to Indigeneity and Indigenous communities were an attempt to self-fashion a persona that contributed to his success, and notwithstanding Boyden's evasive response to his critics, there are less public moments in Boyden's career where he displayed ostensibly sincere attempts to use his skills as a writer to participate in Cree communities. Specifically, Boyden is undertaking a community-engaged effort to translate *Three Day Road* into Cree (Baldassi). His project is part of a recent effort to recover Indigenous languages that critic Warren Cariou (Métis) describes as "a larger movement among Indigenous scholars and writers to bring Indigenous languages back into the center of cultural and aesthetic production" ("Indigenous Literature" 581). It is up to Cree community members to decide whether they will participate in this translation project, and whether they will read the novel if it is translated. The community members will enact what Ojibwe literary critic Scott Richard Lyons calls rhetorical sovereignty: "the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse" (449-50). Just as it is the role of community members to decide whether or not Boyden is a part of their community, or whether or not Boyden's novels are written in a way that fits their "communicative needs" (Lyons 449), so too do community members have a vital role in sharing with the public those books they deem most compelling. While Boyden's novels have much to offer non-Indigenous readers who have yet to understand the legitimacy of Indigenous land relations, to read Boyden ethically requires that non-Indigenous readers first understand the valid arguments that Indigenous peoples have made about Boyden's precarious relationships to Indigeneity. Non-Indigenous readers may also find that their time is better spent reading and engaging with a wide variety of Indigenous authors and informed critics. For those who are

interested in reading beyond Boyden, critic Daniel Heath Justice provides a good place to start: Justice encourages people to read and “centre” Indigenous women who have close connections to their communities and follow Indigenous protocols (@justicedanielh).

Chapter Three: “The girl who ate rice almost every day” Walks “the path of peace”:

Water and Knowledge in Rita Wong’s Environmental Justice Poetry

On May 11, 2015, Chief Roland Willson arrived at the British Columbia Legislature with two coolers full of frozen bull trout that were originally intended to be shared with West Moberly First Nations community members (Hunter, “B.C. First Nation”). Willson pulled a trout from the cooler and proclaimed, “Typically, you’d be proud of this fish ... but we can’t eat this” (qtd. in Meissner). He had scientific evidence to support his claim. According to an independent study commissioned by Willson, the frozen trout, like countless others that had been harvested at his family’s camp, contained high levels of mercury, which was released into the water when the W.A.C. Bennett Dam flooded the Peace River (Meissner).⁹⁴ Willson travelled to the legislature with contaminated fish to ask the province to stop the proposed Site C dam—a project he has opposed since it was put forth by the Liberal government in 2010. Explaining his concern about the dam that was originally proposed in 1976 and sidelined twice in the 1980s due to environmental impact, cost, and low energy demands (Thomson), Willson stated, “What we are trying to do is not make the problem worse Only 30 per cent of the Peace River is left that we have access to, and they are going to flood half of that to build Site C. We want them to leave it alone” (qtd in Hunter, “BC Hydro”). For Willson, who was informed by scientific research, the Site C dam threatens to cause the same type of irreparable damage that the W.A.C. Bennett Dam has caused to the Peace River ecosystem and to Indigenous peoples whose lives are inseparable from the watershed.

⁹⁴ After the completion of the dam in 1968, mercury was released into the reservoir by recently submerged plants that began to decompose. In 1992 the Ministry of Environment warned against eating large quantities of fish harvested from the dam’s reservoir. However, the last time the province tested fish in the dam’s tributaries was in 1990 (Hunter, “BC Hydro”).

Willson moves effortlessly and strategically across knowledges when discussing the dam. His environmental justice work relies on an egalitarian interaction among knowledges in which Western science works alongside Indigenous ways of knowing in an effort to protect the water and Indigenous peoples' relationship with the life-giving substance. Willson has regularly used the trout study to demonstrate the relationships between Indigenous peoples and the Peace River watershed that will be disrupted if the dam is completed. Responding to the NDP government's decision in December 2017 to continue construction on the partially-built dam, Willson delivered an address in which he recounted how the Indigenous peoples living on the Peace River are connected to the region through their long-term occupation of the land. He described how their existence that depends on subsistence farming, hunting, and ranching as well as spiritual sites has been disrupted by the W.A.C. Bennett Dam and is threatened by the building of the Site C dam. In order to make his arguments, Willson draws upon poetry, personal stories, oral histories, and scientific studies, including the report that identified an unsafe amount of mercury in bull trout caught near the dam ("Panel"). Although Western scientific knowledge is regularly deployed by government and corporate employees who build dams and attempt to greenwash megaprojects by pointing to how harm will be mitigated, Willson demonstrates that Western knowledge can interact with Indigenous knowledge in ways that support Indigenous peoples' efforts to navigate damaged environments and advocate against future harm.

A self-described "poet-scholar who works with and for water as she lives on unceded Coast Salish lands," Rita Wong is a vocal critic of the Site C dam and an advocate for decolonial approaches to water in which caring for water becomes a means of relation building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Wong and Goto). For Wong, the Site C dam is an unnecessary and destructive project that "kills ... any hope of meaningful reconciliation that the

provincial and federal governments supposedly espouse.” It is also a flashpoint that highlights how different approaches to water make possible radically different futures. For Wong, the dam also damages the possibility of “A community-strengthening, democratic economy of the future, one based in solar, wind, geothermal and small hydro” (“Book”). While the pervasive Western understanding of water as a resource has contributed to the creation of the W.A.C. Bennett Dam and contributes to the logic used to justify the Site C dam, the Indigenous understandings of water as a relative who is worthy of respect encourages a future without largescale hydroelectric dams. The Site C dam controversy even provides an opportunity for people to place different knowledges into conversation in an attempt to live well together in relation to the water. Through academic scholarship and poetry that often begins with self-reflection, Wong has long interrogated the relationship between knowledge and justice. By reflecting on her location as a middle-class, Asian North American woman and consumer born into the oil-reliant province of Alberta, Wong parses the benefits and harms that Western thought has bestowed on her and others.

Aware that Western knowledge often simultaneously suppresses other knowledges, harms marginalized peoples, and destroys environments, Wong wants “to build better relationships than what colonization would consign us to” (“4/4”). She works toward building “better relationships” through poetry and academic work that considers how knowledges may be placed in respectful conversation and how marginalized knowledges may be recovered and deployed in an effort to create a more equitable and less destructive world. Tania Aguila-Way acknowledges this ethical impetus in Wong’s second book of poetry, *forage*, which she describes as a collection that “stage[s] a productive encounter between diasporic, Indigenous, and scientific ways of knowing” (49). While Wong takes seriously Indigenous knowledge by placing it in

conversation with other knowledges, the manner in which these ways of knowing ought to interact in order to produce a “productive encounter,” rather than to replicate contemporary colonial hierarchies, requires ongoing investigation. Wong explores these concerns in an academic context as an Associate Professor at Emily Carr University, particularly in her Downstream Project, supported by a SSHRC Research/Creation grant, that considers “how cultural perspectives shape the ways people view and interact with water” (“Home”). In addition to ongoing academic and poetic inquiry into knowledge systems, water, and justice, Wong supports the water and other beings who are affected by destructive Western approaches to water at Site C, by participating in protests, co-organizing poetry readings, and raising awareness on social media.

Wong’s compelling praxis manifests powerfully in her fourth collection of poetry *undercurrent*. The collection contemplates the inseparable social and environmental harm that occurs at Site C, and elsewhere, when Western knowledge is used to discourages people from working with and caring for water; and yet, the poems are also hopeful expressions of an environmentally just and equitable future. They articulate how a shared reliance on water serves as a link between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island (North America). Wong’s poems imagine how variously located people can work together to build better relationships with water and each other by rejecting a Eurocentric focus on Western knowledge at the expense of Indigenous knowledge and by considering cautious interactions among different ways of knowing. This chapter first considers Wong’s critique of Western approaches to food in *forage* and her effort to encourage readers to sever the harmful relationship between science and corporate profit by highlighting the epistemological shifts that are tied to cultivating organic produce. It then addresses how Wong’s attention to knowledge systems, environmental

justice, and relationship building becomes intensified in *undercurrent* through water's ability to connect all beings. The chapter considers the many ways that Wong arranges knowledges in support of water, from the mutually enriching interaction between Indigenous knowledge and science to setting science in a purely supportive role, and from drawing on the knowledge embedded in one's own cultural heritage to scavenging whatever knowledges are close at hand. I argue that by taking a tentative and flexible approach to the deployment of and interaction among different ways of knowing, *undercurrent* contributes to a non-colonial vision of environmental justice that leaves little space for celebrity, or even activism as a specialized vocation, and instead encourages Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples to develop mutually sustaining relationships with each other through water. In doing so, Wong creates a timely statement in support of egalitarian, intercultural relation building.

Knowledge, Activism, and Everyday Life

Rita Wong has long been interested in understanding her relationship to people, places, knowledge, and justice. Born in 1968 to parents who immigrated from Guangdong province in south east China to Alberta ("Seeds" 24), Wong spent her early childhood living in Calgary where her family owned a convenience store (Khoo 319). Reflecting on her youth in an interview with the *Capilano Review* in 2012, Wong states that "As someone born in Calgary, I know that I have benefitted from the oil industry, while others have unfairly suffered from it; I feel that I have a responsibility to learn about the devastating price that has been paid, and to find ways to give back" ("4/4"). Her awareness about how she has gained from the extraction industry while others have been harmed emerged many years prior to the 2012 interview. She points to the 1988 Calgary Winter Olympics as a defining moment in her awareness about environmental injustices: "I became aware of the vast theft and destruction of Indigenous lands in 1988, with the Winter

Olympics in Calgary, when the Lubicon Cree First Nations protested the effects of oil extraction on their traditional territories” (“Elemental”). With the help of First Nations activists, Wong began to reflect on her entanglement with the history of settler colonialism and the contemporary harm and inequality caused by resources extraction projects.

In the 1990s Wong wrote, studied, and worked in ways that were tied to her emerging activism. According to critic Gaik Cheng Khoo, Wong held a number of positions throughout the 1990s. She taught in Japan and China; studied for Masters Degrees in English and Archival studies, at the University of Alberta and the University of British Columbia, respectively; worked in a book store, at the U’mista Cultural Centre’s archives, and at the Alberta Network of Immigrant Women; and wrote her PhD in English at Simon Fraser University, titled “Provisional Mobilities: Rethinking Labour Through Asian Racialization in Literature” (319). She was also involved with writers’ groups such as the Asian Canadian Writers’ Workshop (“12 or 20 Questions”), and organized as an activist to support Chinese refugees by cofounding the Direct Action Against Refugee Exploitation group (Khoo 320). Although not all of Wong’s efforts were as explicitly activist as her work with DAARE, her studies and occupations often connected to issues relating to race, diaspora, Indigeneity, and feminism. At the same time, Wong was publishing her poetry in literary journals. Some of these early poems were collected in her debut collection *monkeypuzzle* (Khoo 319), which critic Christine Kim describes as poetry that is “interest[ed] in decolonizing representation” and “foregrounds the issues of international justice” (59-60). For Wong, poetry and life were inseparable from activism, or as Khoo explains: Wong’s writing in this era was “fueled by her strong belief that activism is part and process of daily living” (320).

The activism that is central to Wong's daily life is also central to her career as a poet. After *monkeypuzzle*, which won the Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop Emerging Writer Award, Wong published *forage* (2007). *forage* is a celebrated collection that propelled Wong to prominence as a notable writer-activist. The collection won the 2008 Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize, the 2011 Canada Reads Poetry competition, and was a 2008 Asian American Literary Award finalist. Ever focused on responding to new manifestations of social and ecological injustices, Wong wrote *sybil unrest* with Larissa Lai (2008), *undercurrent* (2015), *perpetual* illustrated by Cindy Mochizuki (2015), and *beholden: a poem as long as the river* with Fred Wah (2018). In addition to poetry, Wong has written important academic articles such as "Decolonizasian: Reading Asian and First Nations Relations in Literature," penned news articles on the Site C dam for the *National Observer* and on the state of Canadian literature for *Rabble*, and has edited a collection of essays with Dorothy Christian titled *downstream: reimagining water*. Her multi-genre efforts to interrogate injustice set her within a distinct group of writers that Rob Nixon calls writer-activists—"a tiny minority of writers [who] assume an overtly activist public role" (285). In Canada, writer-activism is often inseparable from Canadian literary culture's obsession with celebrity. Gillian Roberts explains that prizes are one of the main ways that literary celebrity manifests in Canada (*Prizing* 16). As such, Wong is drawn into celebrity culture primarily through the awards she has received for her poetry. Consequently, Wong's celebrity-writer activism is located within the larger category of what Joel Deshayé calls "the star poet" (9).

Setting Wong in relation to the category of "the star poet" in Canada can help clarify her politics. For Deshayé, "the star poet," whose heyday occurred between 1955 and 1975 (6), was "someone whose private life has become interesting to the public and has begun to serve as an

advertisement” for their writing (5). Despite the public’s role in producing the poet’s status, “the star poet[s]” who Deshayé describes—Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen, Michael Ondaatje, and Gwendolyn MacEwen—regularly “demonized” the public in their writing (9). Their dislike for the public is understandable, at least in part, because of how demanding audiences can be on those in the spotlight. For example, E. Pauline Johnson/Tekahionwake (Mohawk and British), who is a prototype of “the star poet” was pushed by her audience to emphasize her British heritage during her performances. As Lorraine York writes, “there seems little doubt that when she [Johnson] was performing the identity of stage star, it was her non-Native heritage that came to the fore and was served up for presentation to her non-Native audiences” (38). In contrast to Johnson/Tekahionwake, Wong centres her cultural heritage and in contrast to more recent “star poet[s],” Wong turns the public’s interest in her life into lessons about how to enact justice. In doing so, Wong recasts the category of “the star poet” to activist ends.

Moreover, Wong has taken whatever attention her celebrity has afforded her and used it to deflect the spotlight onto other cultural workers. Her effort to demonstrate that her poems exist only in relation to other writers, thinkers, and activists is emphasized in the quotations and lengthy bibliographies that are found within the pages of *forage* and *undercurrent*. By shining the light on others, Wong underscores the relationship between writing and communities rather than writing and individuality, or solitary genius. For example, in a 2008 interview conducted just after the publication of *forage*, Wong unlike some novelists and “star poets” does not engage in acts of self-promotion. Rather, Wong discusses “how writing is both fed by and gives back to many different communities” and explains that she is “grateful for the work of feminists, socialists, environmentalists, and anti-racist activists (and more) who came before me and make my work possible [sic]” (“12 or 20 Questions”). Wong regularly names the thinkers who have

influenced her. In “seeds, streams, see/pages” she states that her body “learn[s] and benefit[s] from the poems of shirley bear, jeannette armstrong, lee maracle, marie annharte baker, kateri akiwenzie-damm, marilyn dumont, connie fife, joanne arnott, janet marie rogers, sharron proulx-turner, and more” (21). By emphasizing her intellectual and physical connection to other writers Wong enacts an alternative to a Canadian literary celebrity prize culture, that critic Karina Vernon explains reinforces the Western notion that “writing is an individual—not a collective—achievement” (“Decolonizing CanLit Prize Culture”). Wong not only disrupts Canadian literary celebrity through what Daniel Coleman calls a “politics of citation,” or a “refus[al] to recite the same authorities endlessly while maintaining motivated ignorance and silence around alternative authorities” (“Different” 141), but also by emphasizing that her writing, and even her corporal existence, is inseparable from the thinkers whom she regularly acknowledges.

Wong even disrupts the far less contentious category of writer-activist. For Wong, writing and activism are not unique occupations that give her the privilege, or require her, to speak for communities facing harm. Although Wong’s praxis is aligned with writer-activists, whom Nixon describes as “giv[ing] imaginative definition to the issues at stake,” her efforts are unlike writer-activists who “help amplify the media-marginalized causes of the environmentally dispossessed” (5). Instead of speaking for other communities, Wong speaks for herself in relation. In their co-created collection of poems and drawings *perpetual* (2015), Wong and Cindy Mochizuki outline tactics that can be used to fight injustices, which parallel the implicit approach to activism that Wong takes throughout her oeuvre. They state:

(held hostage by injustice)
how do you respond to ...
... devastation?

alone & small, you look & listen for others

you hear a call for healing from

Indigenous peoples and friends. (45-49, ellipsis in original)

For Wong and Mochizuki, activism is not a solitary act; instead, it must occur in relation to others. At the same time, they suggest that people must act from their own self-locations:

what can you do?

educate yourself,

educate others

everything you can do

talk, write, organize

ready for the battle

get out there on the land, with respect

walk barefoot on the earth, do it

stay connected to your own histories, cultures

& peoples

get ready for the next world (62-3)

Wong and Mochizuki normalize activism as a process that involves situating the self in relation to others as well as in relation to one's own culture and physical location. They also normalize writing as a tactic that is essential to challenging injustice, and healing. For Wong, writing and activism are not specialized categories that result in a person becoming famous or an expert on every environmental justice issue. Writing and activism are far more humble, everyday preoccupations. They are inseparable from daily life lived in humble relation to peoples, beings, and land. After two decades as a professional poet, Wong has retained her writer-activist

conviction that Khoo summarizes as a “strong belief that activism is part and process of daily living” (320). Such a conviction makes possible an alternative to the harmful type of writer-activism that is sometimes practiced in Canada, in which justice-oriented authors relish celebrity and take up too much space. In doing so, Wong’s writer-activism encourages others to act in ways that support justice on Turtle Island, such as turning to Indigenous thinkers.

Wong emphasizes the centrality of Indigenous thinkers and knowledge to generating meaningful acts of activism during a moment in which reconciliation is encouraged. On August 5, 2018, Wong along with three others was arrested during the Drums Not Drills event that opposed the construction of a Kinder Morgan oil tanker terminal for the harm extraction industry causes to Indigenous Women (“Poet”). She was subsequently imprisoned 28 days for her non-violent act of civil disobedience (Alcuitas). Prior to her sentencing she made a statement, in which she explained that her actions were informed by Indigenous law in conjunction with international law and with “respect for our [Canadian] justice system” (qtd. in Alcuitas). She states:

I respect the court’s concern for the rule of law. I do appreciate that obeying court orders is part of the rule of law. There are more aspects of the rule of law that I would ask you to consider before sentencing me.

Natural law and Indigenous law rely on mutual aid and cooperation, qualities that require maturity and a deep love for one’s community, recognizing that we are all equal. It is a rule of law that works primarily from a place of love and respect, not from fear of authority and punishment.

This is the aspect of rule of law that has moved the hearts and spirits of the thousands of people who’ve shown up to care for the land and waters of this place. Such

an understanding of rule of law, as coming from a place of love and courage more than fear, could strengthen our sense of democracy. It could make our commitment to reconciliation a sincere one. (qtd. in Alcuítas).

For Wong, Indigenous law can coincide with settler laws. However, the centrality of “mutual aid and cooperation” that inform Indigenous law are necessary to generating meaningful acts of intercultural relation building (qtd. in Alcuítas).

While serving in Alouette Correctional Centre for Women, Wong continued to practice her writer-activism through her Twitter account, which was run by her friend and fellow writer Hiromi Goto. In an August 26, 2019 Twitter post Wong shared a poem, “prison candy” written from prison:

what poverty confinement and ingenuity produce—
a tasty brown taffy stretched from packets of creamer, sugar, peanut butter
saved from dining hall meals
mixed and microwaved
set and shared by inmates
after count in Birch

Camp CupCake isnt [sic] as sweet as it sounds
lock down is still lock down
but sisterhood survives in it somehow
bright as a pink volleyball
bouncing off the sand
steady as a bear beyond the pines

chomping down on blackberries
in the prickly late summer bramble
quick as a dragonfly
riding the unseen breeze
that brushes across our cheeks⁹⁵

In this short poem, Wong demonstrates how the prisoners participate in subversive acts of “sisterhood” through their effort to create an off-menu dessert by microwaving “packets of creamer, sugar, [and] peanut butter” saved from their meals. For Wong, acts of relation building are not a luxury but rather are a means of enacting alternative modes of existence to oppressive circumstances. In the poem, Wong works to naturalize these sisterly acts by comparing “sisterhood” to the more-than-human world in lines that read “sisterhood survives... / steady as a bear beyond the pines / chomping down on blackberries.” In contrast to Wong who turns to the more-than-human world to emphasize empowering relationships, the correctional centre turns to nature by naming a section of the prison “Birch,” like the tree species, in an attempt to naturalize imprisonment. These contrasting uses of nature, demonstrate the power of language, which writer-activists seek to reveal and to harness for justice. As such, Wong’s ongoing writer-activism and relation building that is informed by Indigenous knowledge, the more-than-human world, and sisterhood contrasts the court’s decision to imprison water defenders and support the extraction industry, which exemplifies the state’s lack of commitment to reconciliation and mitigating environmental harm.

⁹⁵ The poem was later published in an article by Wong in *The Tyee* titled “Lessons from Prison: A Shackled Pipeline Protester Reflects.”

As Wong suggests in her poem “prison candy,” statement to the courts, *undercurrent*, and elsewhere, newcomers to Turtle Island who are trying to build relationships with water and Indigenous peoples would do well to begin by listening to Indigenous thinkers who generously share their knowledge. Deborah McGregor (Anishnaabe) explains that Indigenous knowledge has developed over millennia with the purpose of guiding people to live in a manner that allows life to flourish. She writes that

the relationship with Creation and its beings was meant to be maintained and enhanced, and the knowledge that would ensure this was passed on for generations over thousands of years. The responsibilities assumed by individuals, communities, and nations as a result of having this knowledge ensured the continuation of Creation (what academics now refer to as ‘sustainability’). This knowledge I call Indigenous, or Aboriginal, knowledge. (“Honouring” 33)

For McGregor, Indigenous knowledge is spiritual. Indigenous knowledge also teaches that water and life are inseparable; consequently, people have a responsibility to build mutually beneficial relationships with water. McGregor explains that “Water is not just closely associated with life, or merely part of life, but rather water is life itself”—it is “alive,” and thus requires that people “respect and treat water as a relative, not a resource” (37). The notion that water is alive and should be treated as such is shared by the Whanganui whose understanding of the Whanganui River was recognized after 140 years by Aotearoa/New Zealand’s settler government as having “the same legal rights as a human being” (Roy). People certainly have a responsibility to water, whether recognized or not by the settler state; however, McGregor explains that this living relative also “has a role and a responsibility to fulfil, just as people do. We do not have the right to interfere with water’s duties to the rest of Creation” (37-8). From the Indigenous perspective,

water is so interwoven with life that it provides a common bond among beings who can work across their differences in order to support Creation. For non-Indigenous people, learning Indigenous approaches to water is an important part of becoming a better guest on Turtle Island.

Despite the benefits of Indigenous approaches to water, Indigenous thought is often devalued on Turtle Island. Settler colonialism has long involved discrediting Indigenous knowledge and championing Western knowledge in an effort to further settler aims (HaluzadeLay et al. 4). Stó:lō writer Lee Maracle’s story about how her Salish approach to water is regularly ignored by non-Indigenous activists exemplifies how Western thinking invades environmental justice work. Maracle explains that from a Salish perspective people must build a caring relationship with water. She asserts, “*We do not own the water, the water owns itself. We are responsible for ensuring that we do not damage the water. We do not have an absolute right to use and abuse the water; we must take care of the water and ensure that we have a good relationship with it. This relationship is based on mutual respect*” (37). Maracle is frustrated that despite sharing this idea with non-Indigenous peoples for nearly half a century it is often ignored, even by environmentalists. Discouraged, Maracle states, “It feels like so few people listen and accept what I say. My lips are weary of repeating themselves. We can never move the conversation to any new place, so long as the first line that comes out of my mouth is unacceptable: The water belongs to itself” (37). Maracle’s comments are significant. By emphasizing that non-Indigenous attitudes towards Indigenous knowledge and water have changed little since the 1970s, Maracle suggests that although government policy has shifted from assimilation to reconciliation during this time, such a shift has not adequately centred Indigenous knowledge and speakers. Nevertheless, Maracle is arguing that Indigenous knowledge has, what Marie Battiste (Mi’kmaq) calls, “a legitimate pride of place at the transfer

table of contemporary knowledge production and exchange” (“Animating Sites” 8). The non-Indigenous activists’ “abyssal thinking” is disappointing (Santos 45), since a Salish approach to water can lead to environmentally just ways of being. Taking a Salish approach to water could very well mean the difference between cancelling or completing the Site C dam. If activists listen to Maracle’s approach, like Wong does, they may oppose the dam that would be an affront to water’s autonomy and its ability to support life. In contrast, if activists take a Western approach to water they may support the dam, if they become convinced that harm against Indigenous peoples could be mitigated, since the dam is a manifestation of the idea that water is a shared resource.

In part, Maracle is advocating for an Indigenous approach to environmental justice, in which people support water and water supports people. Although there are similarities between Indigenous and Western approaches to environmental justices, there are some important differences. McGregor explains that an Indigenous approach to environmental justice

is most certainly about power relationships among people and between people and various institutions of colonization. It concerns issues of cultural dominance, of environmental destruction, and of inequity in terms of how certain groups of people are impacted differently by environmental destruction from others, sometimes by design. But environmental justice from an Aboriginal perspective is more than all of these. It is about justice for all beings of Creation, not only because threats to their existence threaten ours but because from an Aboriginal perspective justice among beings of Creation is life-affirming. (“Honouring” 27)

McGregor also maintains that while people have a role to play in justice, so too do other beings: “In the Anishnaabe world view, all beings of Creation have spirit, with duties and responsibilities

to each other to ensure the continuation of Creation” (27-8). Taking seriously an Indigenous approach to environmental justice can help shift the conversation toward decolonization by decentring the human and Western knowledge and by encouraging people to build relationships across cultures and beings. It is a self-defined and culturally appropriate understanding of environmental justice, the likes of which is enshrined in the Principles of Environmental Justice that were adopted at the People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in 1991. The Principles aim “to respect and celebrate each of our cultures, languages and beliefs about the natural world and our roles in healing ourselves” as part of “political, economic and cultural liberation that has been denied for over 500 years of colonization and oppression, resulting in the poisoning of our communities and land and the genocide of our peoples” (“Principles” 299). Since its formative moments, the environmental justice movement has acknowledged how the recovery and deployment of Indigenous and other marginalized knowledges is central to justice.

If environmental justice is to benefit beings who have been harmed by settler colonialism, it must avoid turning to Western knowledge as its starting point. Environmental justice must be led by the communities who are burdened with injustices and allies would do well to listen to community members’ visions for justice. And although they would do well to find appropriate ways to centre the community’s way of knowing, allies must also find appropriate ways to work across knowledges and maintain complementary practices. For example, there are a number of scholarly fields of study within the Western intellectual tradition that could be mobilized to generate complimentary practices, such as scientific work on sustainability or critical theory including Donna Haraway’s call “to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present” (1). Allies, as Wong demonstrates, can be committed to helping Indigenous communities’ efforts to “support the

continuation of Creation,” while also practicing sustainability or working toward what Haraway calls “ongoingness” and the making of “oddkin” (1, 2). However, retaining Western ways of knowing while supporting and centring Indigenous ways of knowing presents challenges: Daniel Coleman, Marie Battiste, Sákéj Henderson, Isobel Findlay, and Len Findlay have gathered to consider the feasibility and benefits of placing knowledges into conversation (Coleman, “Different” 142); similarly Aman Sium, Chandni Desai, and Eric Ritskes remain skeptical that Western knowledge can work together with Indigenous knowledge without reinforcing colonial hierarchies (iv). Challenges notwithstanding, epistemological and environmental justice requires ongoing conversations regarding the ethical deployment of knowledges in intercultural settings, especially since colonial practices have long marginalized Indigenous knowledge.

As a poet, Wong creates an uncertain yet valuable space in which knowledges are placed in dialogue. Through her attempt to generate ethical interactions among knowledges, Wong considers how non-Indigenous peoples can work across knowledges in support of the water and Indigenous peoples who have been harmed by settler colonialism. Gillian Roberts reads *undercurrent* for the way Wong imagines allyship, but while Roberts focuses on how allies emerge in the wake of Idle No More (“Writing Settlement” 78), this chapter considers the connection between knowledge and allyship in Wong’s collection. It proposes that relationships emerge when variously located non-Indigenous peoples centre Indigenous approaches to water and when they find ethical ways to place different approaches to water into conversation. To do so is to participate in what David Garneau (Métis) calls “sites of perpetual conciliation” (24), which allow for the emergence of an intercultural non-colonial environmental justice activism.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Garneau prefers the term non-colonial to describe the relationships that emerge in “sites of perpetual conciliation” (24). For Garneau, the term non-colonial refers to “new ways of being

Neoliberalism and Corporate Science in *forage*

The antecedents to Wong's poetic efforts to think across knowledges as a way of encouraging relationships with water and Indigenous peoples are apparent in the food poems in *forage*. Her poems "nervous organism" and "the girl who ate rice everyday" consider the harm caused by corporate science that dominates the intellectual landscape and how people can challenge this destructive monoculture by turning to different ways of knowing. In "nervous organism" Wong considers the unexpected consequences of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The speaker explains that when agribusiness splices jellyfish genes with potatoes the result is a new being, and a new word, "jellypo fishtato." This uncanny new word is at once familiar and unfamiliar and so is the modified potato. The "jellypo fishtato" may be edible; however, eating this being may cause "slugfish arteries," or some other unintended affliction. The speaker explains that unchecked agribusiness generates "science lab in my esophagus" with "hothoused / experiments." In the poem, hothouse refers to the heated greenhouses where experiments occur, but also to its second meaning: an oppressive environment. By using the homonym hothouse, Wong demonstrates that these harmful experiments are spreading beyond the greenhouse and creating an oppressive environment that harms the speaker's "esophagus" (20). Matthew Zantingh explains that "nervous organism" highlights how "In attempting to genetically alter foods to boost the profit line, humans have unwittingly granted it a form of toxic agency: an agency that is felt, first and foremost, in the body" (635). Indeed, the spliced genes are material agents that affect bodies in unexpected and potentially harmful ways. Here, Wong draws attention to what Stacy Alaimo calls trans-corporeality—the material interactions between

that are cognizant that a return to pre-contact conditions is impossible and that total assimilation into the dominant ideology is unacceptable (cultural genocide)" (24).

bodies (*Bodily Natures 2*). In doing so, Wong challenges the dominance and hubris of western thinking, which Alaimo argues tries to separate people from their material surroundings. When trans-corporeality is acknowledged, the harm caused by corporate science begins to be understood and questions such as who benefits from splicing emerge.

Wong is not solely concerned with the human cost of corporate science experiments that downplay the material interactions between GMOs and bodies. In “the girl who ate rice everyday” Wong emphasizes the harm that is caused to non-human beings who are involved in corporate science experiments. The speaker of this prose poem states, “corporate magic, crossing / goats and spiders who had no / desire to become one creature ...” (17). Here, Wong makes clear that goats and spiders have desires beyond being the sum of agribusiness experiments. In doing so, Wong reminds readers that these animals are beings with agency who should not be reduced to raw material for profit-driven experiments. Together, both poems propose that when science is tied to neoliberalism, corporate science obscures any connections and desires that negatively affect the bottom line. Corporate science becomes a threat to people and other beings by harming ecosystems and bodies far beyond those sites that are directly implicated in experiments. The slow moving, long lasting, and often hard to identify harm caused by GMOs’ unruly behaviours requires that corporate science be held accountable and that alternatives to this monoculture be enacted.

“the girl who ate rice almost every day” considers how activists must turn to a haphazard and partial engagement with various knowledges in order to challenge unchecked corporate science. The right column of the poem includes descriptions of Monsanto’s patented GMO rice, as well as the speaker’s instruction that the reader should search the patent database to bear witness to the ever-multiplying patents for genetically modified rice. Tania Aguila-Way argues

that this column functions by “demonstrating that keeping abreast of the global GMO debate demands an engagement with legal and scientific discourses that will vary according to the specific crop under discussion and the specific cultural and ecological contexts in which the crop is typically grown” (210). Consequently, Aguila-Way argues the poem “evokes some of the epistemological shifts that contemporary environmentalists need to enact” (211). Embedded in her analysis is an emphasis that the necessary “epistemological shifts” require accepting that one cannot learn everything about GMOs (211). She highlights the near impossible task of learning continually changing “legal and scientific discourses,” as well as the complex “cultural and ecological contexts in which that crop is typically grown” (210). Still, the intended consumers of corporate experiments must try to learn something about science, law, and other ways of knowing GMOs if they are to protect themselves and the environment from corporate science. Indeed, the speaker’s encouraging directive that the reader should “*go to the US patent database*” website and the somber warning that “*there is a high / probability that the numbers / [of GMO patents] will be greater by the time you / access the database yourself*” suggests that although one can never completely understand GMOs (16), people should nevertheless learn what they can about these “hothouse” creations (20).

In the left column of the poem, the speaker recounts a story in which a woman named ‘slow’ attempts to disrupt agribusiness’ control over food by planting organic rice. slow goes to “riceworld,” but when she cannot find the grain she is tempted by the grocery store manager to try genetically modified beets (16). Although slow is too late to reverse the harm that the beets cause to her body, she plants organic rice in an attempt to build relationships with the land and other non-human beings. Unfortunately, the poisoned beets’ genes spread into the once organic rice. slow’s struggle to make sense of and respond to the spreading monoculture created by

GMOs provides an opportunity to understand how people can work from a site of partial knowledge to effect change. Although slow knows little about rice, she applies what she knows with hopes that she will contribute to a world where GMOs no longer destroy diversity and deliver unexpected consequences. By attempting to grow an organic variety of rice, slow builds relationships with rice, land, animals, and Indigenous peoples. The speaker recounts the moment when slow realizes these responsibilities:

slow realized that she had been
eating imported rice from china
(white) and the united states
of amnesia (brown) for most
of her life. now that she had
eaten the beets of no return,
and did not have long to live on
this earth, she wanted to know
what a grain of rice grown on
the land where she lived, the
land of the salish, musqueam,
halkomelem speakers, would
taste like? How could it grow?
she determined to try to grow a
small crop hydroponically. (18)

With a partial knowledge of rice's movement as a commodity and a vague understanding about how it may grow where she lives, slow begins to act. She grows the rice in the sewers and

enlists the sewer rats to help
her guard and cultivate this
crop, by promising them half
the yield, if it grew. (19)

Through this process, slow is developing and proliferating responsibilities: she is becoming responsible to the organic rice as an entity that does not “desire” to be genetically engineered; she is becoming responsible to the rats and other beings who will co-create the garden and share the food; and she is becoming responsible to the land and Indigenous peoples who knew only organic foods.

And yet, slow’s story also warns of the issues that can occur when activists fueled by partial knowledge act with hubris rather than humility. The final paragraphs of slow’s parable end with a mistake. Unexpected and undesired effects occur when slow becomes too confident in her approach to growing rice. The speaker relays slow’s mistake:

the beets had infused her
excrement with a permanent
red glow, but she still used it
as fertilizer. the rice that grew
from this experiment was
rouged by the fertilizer, and
became a sweet, rosy coloured
grain that spread like a weed
through the urban catacombs.

long after the last beet eaters
disappeared from this spinning
planet, the slow-cooking rice
continued to make its way
through the sewers and alleys
of many a struggling city. (19)

slow's desire to grow organic rice began with questions and tentative answers, but eventually she becomes too confident in her methods and in the value of her activism. She uses the fertilizer even though she knew that it was irregular. slow's decision to act rather than to question the fertilizer's quality results in destruction that outlasts her corporal existence. slow's story is a warning for activists who are negotiating the relationship between knowledge and action to stay humble: engaging with multiple knowledges and working from a site of partial knowledge not only makes activism possible, but the humility that this approach encourages may also help ensure that activists do not replicate the hegemonic approaches to knowledge that their activism seeks to disrupt. As Alaimo explains, "epistemological humility can function as a mode of environmental ethics that refuses utilitarian modes of mastery" (*Exposed* 5-6). If slow had worked with humility, her activism might have been more successful, or at least less harmful.

Setting Science and Indigenous Knowledge in Conversation in *undercurrent*

Like *forage*, *undercurrent* stresses the value of working from a site of epistemological humility. The collection gathers and reconfigures knowledges by turning to many differently located writers, thinkers, and teachers—even some who are not human. Wong's thoughtful and detailed engagement with knowledges in *undercurrent* encourages readers to think beyond dominant forms of Western thought such as what Maria Bargh (Te Arawa and Ngati Awa)

describes as the neoliberal notion that “economic growth equals human improvement” (10). In doing so, the collection generates a poetic counter-discourse to capitalist/industrial ideology that champions a long colonial tradition of resource extraction as both viable and beneficial. Both collections consider corporate driven environmental injustice; however, they each attend to different forms of injustices. While food is an important concern in *forage*, water permeates *undercurrent*. Wong’s shift from food to water is more than her response to the most relevant manifestation of environmental injustice—though her collections are always timely. Rather, for Wong, water encourages new modes of existence in ways that food does not. Wong, who is heavily influenced by Indigenous thinking, proposes that water connects all peoples and beings. Although plants, animals, and foods are still incredibly important to her poetry and vision of justice, in *undercurrent* they exist only through their relationship to water. Wong’s shifting understanding of food is apparent in the final poem of *undercurrent*, “epilogue: letter sent back in time from 2115.” In this poem, Wong articulates a vision of the future in which the relationships that people develop with water reshape the world. The speaker highlights the connection between water and food in the lines “city dwellers cultivate gentle water, in the / shape of sturdy kale, crisp apples ...” (87). Rather than imagining a future in which people living in the city cultivate kale and apples, or other edible plants, they “cultivate gentle water” (87). This subtle shift from *edible plants* to *edible plants as manifestations of water* emphasizes that water is inseparable from life and that social and environmental change must start with changing the way people think about and act toward water.

In “declaration of intent,” Wong celebrates the conciliatory potential that can occur when people pay attention to water’s flow. The poem proposes that settler colonialism severs relationships, whereas water encourages relationships across peoples, beings, and knowledges.

The speaker states “let the colonial borders be seen for the pretensions that they are / i hereby honour what the flow of water teaches us / the beauty of enough, the path of peace to be savoured ...” (14). Here, colonial borders are “pretensions” that assert an unconvincing albeit powerful authority to control movement and sever connections. In contrast, water’s flow, or its watersheds, provide a “path of peace.” According to the speaker, water can encourage peace because it is “a sacred bond” that “connects us.” Because all beings rely on water for their shared survival, the speaker concludes with the line “let our societies be revived as watersheds” (14). Part of cultivating the relationships that water encourages involves interrogating how colonialism has worked to control Indigenous peoples’ land relations and limit emerging relations. It also involves turning to Indigenous peoples whose knowledge provides important insights into water. In her essay “Waters as Potential Paths to Peace,” Wong explains that “If we are thinking about specific waters, we also need to recognize specific First Nations with a long history of coexistence with those waters. In speculating on water as a lens for peacemaking, it is necessary to address this country’s [Canada’s] history of violence and colonialism against Indigenous peoples” (212). For Wong, water encourages relationships among beings and may even allow all beings to flourish together; however, water’s work is assisted by people who take seriously the value of Indigenous knowledge and the violence caused by contemporary colonial injustices.

If the relationships that water inspires are to be mutually sustaining they will require ongoing dialogue among the many knowledges that circulate on Turtle Island. As a newcomer, Wong regularly listens to and respects Indigenous thinkers: Wong and Dorothy Christian (Splatsin, Syilx, and Anishinabe) have argued that doing so is “not only a matter of justice and principle, though it is certainly that, but it is also a practical matter of developing the cultural fluencies, actions, and philosophies needed to navigate together in a spirit of peace, friendship,

and respect” (8-9). For Wong and Christian, turning to Indigenous thinkers is a practical act of intercultural relation building. At the same time, Wong also finds value in arranging Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges in different ways, in order to disrupt the colonial hierarchization of knowledge and to engender new ways of knowing. Bringing together different knowledges is integral to Wong’s poetics. For example, in “declaration of intent” she brings together Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges in ways that enrich both perspectives. The speaker states,

water is a sacred bond, embedded in our plump, moist cells
in our breaths that transpire to return to the clouds that gave us
life through rain
in the rivers & aquifers that we & our neighbours drink
in the oceans that our foremothers came from (*undercurrent* 14)

Embedded in this stanza is the scientific concept of the hydrological cycle that describes the circulation of water from rain, to runoff, to evaporation, to condensation, and then back to rain (“Water Basics”). Also embedded in this stanza is Indigenous knowledge that, for Christian and Wong, involves understanding that “everything within Creation is sacred and interrelated” (“Untapping” 238). In Wong’s poem, Indigenous knowledge locates people within this sacred cycle and thus enriches a scientific approach to water that excludes people from the hydrological cycle and ignores its spiritual dimension. Meanwhile, the scientific approach that delineates the precise movement of water through cells and breath, as well as through the hydrological cycle, enriches an Indigenous approach to the world that celebrates water’s movement and its inseparability from life. By embedding two knowledges within the same passage in a way that

allows each perspective to complement the other, Wong generates a non-colonial interaction between knowledges that is facilitated by water.

Wong also proposes that the value of science may reside in its modest ability to support an Indigenous approach to water. The speaker of “for Gregoire Lake *which way does the wind blow?*” tries to build a relationship with water that is informed by Indigenous knowledge and encouraged by Western science. The speaker states,

i dip my hands into you tentatively
thankful to camp on your shores
amidst mosquitoes, mud & grass
knowing you hold airborne toxins
from the tar sands
.....
i wish i had met you in better times
but i am grateful to meet you at all (68)

Here, the speaker talks to the North Albertan lake and approaches it tentatively with thanks, thereby indicating that the water is a being who has agency and deserves respect, just as McGregor and Maracle have argued. The speaker’s interactions with the lake represent an effort to build what Maracle calls a “good relationship” with water (37). While building a mutually supportive relationship with water is always a good practice, it is made even more urgent and necessary by scientific studies that reveal the lake has been harmed by the tar sand’s “airborne toxins” (Wong, *undercurrent* 68).

In contrast, the poem also demonstrates the risks associated with using science to support an Indigenous approach to water. The same science that helps the speaker realize that building a

“good relationship” (Maracle 37) with water is an urgent task also threatens to disrupt the speaker’s ability to articulate this newly emerging relationship. The interruption occurs when the right-hand column of the poem that is comprised of italicized scientific terms for pollutants found at the tar sands is read alongside the left-hand column of the poem that holds the speaker’s narrative. When each line of the poem is read in full from left to right, rather than column by column, the scientific terms for organic elements and compounds disrupt the narrative:

in the fresh morning
 i dip my hands into you tentatively
 thankful to camp on your shores
 amidst mosquitoes, mud & grass

becomes,

in the fresh morning	<i>hexavalent chromium</i>
i dip my hands into you tentatively	<i>arsenic</i>
thankful to camp on your shores	<i>aluminum</i>
amidst mosquitoes, mud & grass	<i>zinc (68)</i>

The elemental compounds rendered toxic by industrial science and technology that Wong has extracted from a study on the tar sands interrupt the speaker who is building a relationship with water. While the right-hand column offers important information—like the fact that when the speaker touches the water the speaker is also touching arsenic—it does so in a way that interferes with the speaker’s story and thus relationship. That the introduction of scientific terms disrupts the narrative is troubling because the speaker’s emergent, caring relationship with water, which is informed by Indigenous knowledge, could exist even without coding environmental harm through scientific terms.

However, the interruption caused by the scientific terms that disruptively warn the speaker that tar sands extractions causes harm is perhaps preferable to the industry-supporting scientific report from which Wong sourced the poem's terms. The chemical elements and compounds in the right column of the poem are extracted from a report by Peter Dillon et al. titled *Evaluation of Four Reports on Contamination of the Athabasca River System by Oil Sands Operations*. Their report reviews previously published scientific studies that generated controversy by concluding that the oil sands industry caused pollutants (Dillon et al. i). While the authors agree with the studies under review, Dillon et al. recommend using these investigations as reference points for a Government of Alberta led monitoring effort that will "address the issues of whether the releases from oil sands production are causing adverse effects on aquatic and terrestrial organisms" (v). The report's call for additional research suggests that proof, and therefore justice, can be continually deferred. Bunyan Bryant's early environmental justice scholarship highlights how the search for certainty can contribute to inaction. Bryant explains that variables such as diet, for example, complicate scientist's ability to demonstrate a causal relationship between a specific polluter and a being's declining health. For Bryant, "our inability to show causal relationships takes us down the slippery slope into a quagmire of confusion and entanglements and outright disagreements about levels of proof needed" (9). Confusion is exacerbated by nefarious attempts by industry to generate uncertainty, or to use Nixon's succinct phrasing "The forces of inaction have deep pockets": whether deferred action is a result of genuinely inconclusive studies or a result of the "production of doubt," debates over certainty can delay action (39). Wong's poem challenges the type of science that is so centred on certainty that it delays justice and instead puts science to work to support the relationships that Indigenous

knowledge encourages. At the same time, Wong acknowledges that even when science is used to support Indigenous approaches to water, it can be disruptive.

And yet, in “a magical dictionary from bitumen to sunlight,” Wong turns the disruptive nature of science used for capitalism against itself in an attempt to encourage ethical and spiritual engagement with the tar sands. Wong’s dictionary includes some of the same scientific terms that are included in Dillon’s et al. glossary; however, her definitions are radically different than their definitions. For example, they define bitumen as “a naturally occurring, viscous mixture of hydrocarbons that contains high levels of sulphur and nitrogen compounds ... [that] makes up about 10% of the oil sands” (37), whereas Wong defines bitumen as “buried ancestors, unearthed & burned to expand the ocean” and “pitched sacrifice zone wherever it bubbles up, hellishly excavated.” Dillon’s et al. scientific definition provides practical information for those involved in industrial tar sands extraction. The notion that people must engage with bitumen responsibly is not imbedded within this definition. In contrast, through her depiction of bitumen as “buried ancestors” (29), Wong’s definition implies that people should have a good relationship with this substance that consists of deceased relatives. To acknowledge that bitumen is comprised of beings who were once alive encourages people to maintain relationships with bitumen, just as they would with human ancestors. By embedding the sacred within the oily material, Wong’s poem disrupts science with spirituality.

Métis writer and visual artist Warren Cariou’s developing relationship with the tar sands exemplifies the type of responsible relationship with bitumen that Wong’s definition gestures toward. Cariou has been using bitumen to produce images of the tar sands industry. Discussing his artistic process, he explains that “These petrographs use bitumen itself as a medium of representation, creating a particular perspective on the world: extractive industry viewed through

a film of oil” (Cariou and Gordon 2). While Jon Gordon comments that Cariou’s petrographs emphasize “that our culture is an oil culture” (7), Cariou’s process also reveals that if bitumen is extracted responsibly it need not create global destruction. Cariou recounts how gathering bitumen for his project has transformed his relationship with the substance into one that is responsible and mutually enriching. Traveling by boat past industrial tar sands extraction, he is surprised to happen upon a “lush valley ... where we decided to stop and look for our samples ... one of the most verdant places I had ever seen in the boreal region” (8). That the bitumen is intermingled with life is unexpected, since tar sands are regularly associated with the destructive tar sands extraction industry. Considering this point, Cariou states:

I remembered that bitumen was composed of organisms that had once been alive and had been transformed into petroleum long after they died, and I thought of William Blake’s line in *The Book of Urizen*: “for he saw that life lived upon death.” That had always seemed a grim sentiment to me, but now in this context it seemed almost comforting, a reminder of the necessity of natural cycles, the flow of energy through different beings and different forms of matter. It made me realize that the toxic and the beautiful, the dead and the living, are intimately connected. Perhaps we need to remind ourselves of that if we are to live in a respectful way on this planet. (10-11)

Like Wong, Cariou remembers that the substance that is now bitumen was once “alive.” Through this oily rereading of Blake, Cariou realizes that the living rely on the dead, and thus if the living are supported by the dead then the living ought to enter into a relationship that encourages the ancestors to continue to support life.

In his reflection, Cariou makes a distinction between industrial tar sands extraction and the ways that Indigenous peoples extracted bitumen from the tar sands. Cariou speculates on an Indigenous approach to bitumen extraction:

I knew that the Cree, Dene, and Métis peoples of the Athabasca had their own important use for the tar: they used it to seal their canoes. They understood that there was something valuable in this material, that it had a kind of power or unique properties that could help humans if they knew how to use it. They would have known where to find the best sources, what the best time of year was, how to process the sandy tar to get the particles out of it. All of this would require intimate knowledge of the land. Perhaps there was a ceremony involved in its gathering. There may still be one today, but if so, I don't know it. I hope there are Elders somewhere along the river who have kept that knowledge. (10-11)

Cariou's meditation reveals that Indigenous peoples had a responsible and respectful relationship with bitumen. For Cariou, the tar sands represent a relationship between the living and the dead that is not antagonistic or exploitative. Similarly, for Wong who defines the word ancestor as "holding my body up through cellular memory, anonymous" (28), there is an intimate and supportive relationship between the living and dead. In contrast, the industrial extraction of tar sands "ancestors" that is regularly supported by science is an affront to interdependent relationships that Wong, Cariou, and the "lush valley" articulate (Cariou and Gordon 8), in which the dead support the living and the living respect the dead. Wong's "magical dictionary" inserts Indigenous approaches to ancestors into Dillion's et al. glossary in an attempt to encourage relationships between people and the tar sands, whereas the glossary terms function in "Gregoire Lake *which way does the wind blow?*" as a means of disrupting the speaker's

relationship with the lake. Through these interventions, Wong considers the risks associated with placing Western science and Indigenous knowledge in ethical relation: science may overshadow other knowledges and generate a new way of knowing that erases difference and diminishes both scientific and Indigenous knowledge.

For Wong this risky approach is worth trying because science cannot be left in its current entanglement with corporate and settler-state driven resource extraction projects. By attempting to sever science from corporate goals via placing it into conversation with Indigenous knowledge, Wong joins a growing group of writers who are encouraged by the new ways of being that may emerge when traditional knowledge interacts with Western science.⁹⁷ Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer explains that she works cautiously to create “a new species of knowledge, a new way of being in the world ... [in which] the beauty of one [knowledge] is illuminated by the radiance of the other” (47). Although she is “deeply privileged to carry the powerful tools of science as a way of engaging the world” (43), she opposes the pervasive colonial attitudes of educators who belittle important questions and perspectives that fall outside of the scope of science (41-2). Unlike her narrow-minded teachers, Kimmerer understands that science has limits. She explains that science only knows with the mind, but from an Indigenous

⁹⁷ Biologist Fulvio Mazzocchi describes the important distinctions between traditional knowledge and Western Science. He writes, “Western science favours analytical and reductionist methods as opposed to the more intuitive and holistic view often found in traditional knowledge. Western science is positivist and materialist in contrast to traditional knowledge, which is spiritual and does not make distinctions between empirical and sacred (Nakashima & Roué, 2002). Western science is objective and quantitative as opposed to traditional knowledge, which is mainly subjective and qualitative. Western science is based on an academic and literate transmission, while traditional knowledge is often passed on orally from one generation to the next by the elders. Western science isolates its objects of study from their vital context by putting them in simplified and controllable experimental environments—which also means that scientists separate themselves from nature, the object of their studies;-by contrast [sic], traditional knowledge always depends on its context and particular local conditions (Nakashima & Roué, 2002)” (464).

perspective “we understand a thing only when we understand it with all four aspects of our being: mind, body, emotion, and spirit” (47). Rather than dismissing science entirely because it has been used to contribute “abyssal thinking” (Santos 45), Kimmerer, like Wong, tries to disentangle science from colonialism and place it into productive conversation with Indigenous knowledge.

Self-Locating, Foraging, and Relation Building in *undercurrent*

While science certainly needs to be unsettled, Wong places this responsibility on the people who have benefited from the type of science that is used to manage Indigenous peoples’ relationship with the land and causes environments injustices. Indeed, the people who live in good relation with water should not have to bear the brunt of the work needed to heal the world. The final half of “declaration of intent” encourages those people, who Maracle calls the “ordinary people” who “did the work of destruction” (36), to create an alternative to the unjust present. The speaker proposes,

because i am part of the problem i can also become part of

the solution

although i am part of the problem i can also become part of

the solution

where i am part of the problem i need to be part of the solution

while i am part of the problem i can also be part of the solution (15)

The repetitive phrasing and the “i” pronoun creates a bond between speaker and reader, through which readers are encouraged to think of themselves as “part of the problem.” Although not everyone is “part of the problem,” the poem’s abstract words like “problem” and “solution,” allow many people to locate themselves within these broad categories so that they can work

toward an alternative (15). For some readers, the solution is to disentangle science from its use in corporate, state-supported extraction projects, but for other readers the problem and the solution will be different.

Wong encourages readers to partake in solitary acts of self-reflection; however, she also encourages those who are working to “become part of the solution” to learn from Indigenous thinkers and from the plants and other beings who already know how to be good relatives (15). “medicines in the city” reveals what people can learn from horsetail and wind who enact their responsibilities to water. Wong’s poem describes how horsetail resides in urban locations and cleans the poisoned water, with wind’s help. She writes:

horsetail hints
at abundant water beneath
transformed into fine green nodes

sprouting up from cracks in pavement
near Main & Broadway
atop what was once Brewery Creek
horsetail hails the sturdy spore, the perpetual wind
its ally in propagation

scrub brush, toothbrush, remover of toxins
horsetail ever-so-slowly heals inflictions
a living fossil who quietly outlasts our cities
soaking up the acid soil we leave behind. (36)

Within this damaged cityscape, wind helps horsetail propagate, thereby contributing to the plant's effort to clean the wet soil. That horsetail, aided by wind, cleans the mess made by settlers is an act of decolonial responsibility to land and water. Wong's depiction of the relationships between horsetail, wind, water, and soil exemplifies McGregor's belief that all beings have "a responsibility for justice" ("Honouring" 27). Not only are these beings responsible for working toward justice but they can also teach people how to act. Kimmerer asserts that from a Potawatomi perspective many entities are animate and can teach people how to live. She writes that elders

remind us of the capacity of others as our teachers, as holders of knowledge, as guides. Imagine walking through a richly inhabited world of Birch people, Bear people, Rock people, beings we think of and therefore speak of as persons worthy of our respect, of inclusion in a peopled world Imagine the access we would have to different perspectives, the things we might see through other eyes, the wisdom that surrounds us. We don't have to figure out everything by ourselves: there are intelligences other than our own, teachers all around us. (58)

The beings in Wong's poem who each rely on their own unique skills to work together in support of a mutually sustainable existence teach that non-Indigenous peoples who have different perspectives, skills, and responsibilities can cooperate to achieve the common goal of caring for water.

In "holders" Wong demonstrates how women live like the horsetails that grow in the cracks of the pavement as a means of living well in spite of colonial control over the land. For Wong, women who protect water have learned from horsetails how to take up space in ways that disrupt settler colonialism. The speaker states:

the women stand in
front of army trucks & policemen, uniforms & riot gear with
only their soft skin & clear eyes to protect their beating hearts.
the mothers, the sisters, the aunties, the grannies, the daughters
crack open the ugly pavement of unjust laws & find old rivers
underneath. quietly, firmly, they pray & burn offerings for the
four directions to come together in sacred commitment to all of
creation: the frogs, the slugs, the hummingbirds, the whales, the
mountains, the creeks, the laughing ones & the crying ones (80)

Wong generates a parallel between the horsetail and the women who forge connections with water. For Wong, as well as for Alannah Young Leon (Nishnabe Midekway and Nehiy/naw Cree), women inhabit a position that encourages their water responsibilities. Leon writes, “My understanding of the relationship with water is that it is my responsibility to take care of the water because to take care of the water is to take care of and enhance life. Water is the embodiment of the spirit of life. Women take care of this responsibility through song, ceremony, and conscious intention” (Leon and Nadeau 119). Consequently, “holder” celebrates the many women who build responsible relationships to water in order to “enhance life.”

In a series of italicized prose vignettes that are scattered throughout *undercurrent*, Wong encourages “ordinary people” to join horsetail, women, and other beings who are building good relationships with water—and by extension each other. The vignettes are spoken from the perspective of a group of beings, whose desire to live well together is predicated on access to unpolluted water. The collective proclaims, “*We are the beings who need clean water in order to live a life of dignity, joy and good relation. Maybe you are a part of ‘us’ without even knowing*

that you are” (16). This water-loving multitude is comprised of many different beings, from “coyotes” and “grandmothers” to “thunderstorms,” and is always growing as forgetful people begin to remember that they also rely on unpolluted water (16). Even as the collective grows, some people selfishly resist participation. The multitude appeals to these selfish people by arguing that they have obligations to their relatives who make existence possible: “*We are your relatives We call upon you to remember your ancient oaths, your debts to all realms that enable your existence, your obligations as earth-dwellers*” (35). By foregrounding the relationships among relatives, Wong challenges a Western perspective that, according to Christian, “imagine[s] the individual as primary, as being more important than community” (Christian and Wong, “Untapping” 238). Through these vignettes Wong underscores the mutually reciprocal relationships that all beings have with one another and especially with water. As such, recovering and enacting forgotten relationships with and responsibilities to water is a communal effort.

At the same time that the multitude celebrates community, and proposes that “*We need kinship that builds peaceful relations,*” they also oppose uniformity (47). Rather, they advise that “*We need to respect our differences without letting them kill, destroy, displace, incarcerate and oppress us*” (47). Wong follows their directive in three of the italicized prose vignettes, in which she uses the first person singular, instead of a collective voice, to discuss her relationship with water. In these autobiographical passages, Wong recounts participating in the tar sands Healing Walk, Salish Seas Festival, and Keepers of the Waters conference. At the conference she listens to elders and learns “*an excellent lesson in patience and community love,*” as well as “*the importance of working together to respect and protect the water*” (72). At the Healing Walk, Wong is pained by the sight of tar sands extraction, but through the walk that is “*led by*

indomitable Cree and Dene elders and everyday people,” she understands that only together can “*we reassert human responsibilities to land, water, life*” (18). By listening to and working with Indigenous peoples in support of water, Wong follows their longstanding “requests that non-Aboriginal peoples walk beside or behind—but not in front of—Aboriginal peoples” (HaluzadeLay et al. 5). Wong approaches water by way of Indigenous peoples’ environmental justice activism because she realizes she cannot have a good relationship with water unless she has a good relationship with Indigenous peoples. She declares, “*There is still a long way to go in my journey with water, which is also a journey of becoming worthy to live as a guest on these sacred lands of the Coast Salish peoples ...*” (22). In these vignettes, Wong reveals how she works from her location as a non-Indigenous person on Turtle Island to build relationships with water and Indigenous communities in an effort to help support environmental justice.

Wong works from this entangled site of settler privilege and racialized marginalization to recover aspects of her cultural heritage that have been disregarded by white settler ways of knowing, in order to develop relationships with water and Indigenous peoples. In one of the vignettes she describes being invited to participate in a canoe ceremony by the Tsleil-Waututh, but she is worried that she may fail, until she states her Cantonese and English names. She writes, “*What if I tipped the canoe by accident? What if I didn’t pull my weight? As I entered the canoe, I said my name out loud in Cantonese and English, then put my fears aside ...*” (22). She is concerned that she may not be able to pull her weight physically, but perhaps also intellectually, spiritually and emotionally in this gathering within a “[site] of perpetual conciliation” (Garneau 24). However, by saying her Cantonese name Wong reminds herself that she is supported by her cultural heritage that offers rich approaches to water. Christian and Wong explain that names provide a powerful source of pride that can connect people with their water-

loving ancestors. They state that “When we acknowledge our ancestral and gifted names, we are asserting the continuance of cultural heritages that predate and survive through the imposition of colonial paradigms and naming practices. When we go back far enough in our familial lines, we find ancestors who lived in relationship with the lands and waters” (2). By remembering her Cantonese name, Wong gestures to her ancestors and the knowledge that allowed them to build good relationships with water. Together, Wong’s autobiographical and collectively voiced vignettes articulate that non-Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island should listen to Indigenous peoples and also recover the aspects of their specific cultural heritage that encourage people to relate to water.

In the collection’s epigraph and bibliography that highlight martial artist Bruce Lee’s approach to water, Wong recovers a part of her cultural heritage that is trivialized by white settler “abyssal thinking” (Santos 45). While an extended quotation of Lee’s famous saying “be water my friend” serves as an epigraph for *undercurrent* (5), Wong also cites an interview between Canadian historian Pierre Berton and Bruce Lee that underscores how white settlers often reduce Lee’s knowledge to a meaningless catchphrase. In the interview, Berton’s reductive interest in Lee’s stardom, martial arts maneuvers, and catch phrase evacuates the philosophical underpinnings from his famous statement “be water my friend” (“Bruce Lee Interview”). Berton is not interested that water is foundational to Lee’s gung fu, which is informed by Taoist and Zen philosophy and advocates for self-preservation by acting like water (Lee, *Artist* 13). Writer Maria Popova contends that the genesis of Lee’s famous phrase is revealed in his essay “A Moment of Understanding,” in which he recounts his early attempts to learn gung fu. As a student, he struggles to grasp his instructor’s message, “preserve yourself by following the natural bends of things and don’t interfere. Remember never to assert yourself against nature;

never be in frontal opposition to any problems” (16). Frustrated, Lee strikes the water and it moves to make space for his fist then returns to its initial state, unharmed. In this moment, he realizes, “was not this water the very essence of gung fu? Hadn’t this water just now illustrated to me the principle of gung fu?” and thus he decides to “be like the nature of water” (17). His journey to preserve himself is tied to his journey to understand and emulate water. By centring Lee’s words and by drawing attention to how Berton was only interested in hearing Lee speak about the flashy film portrayal of gung fu, Wong works from her self-location as a member of the Chinese diaspora to recover a small part of her cultural heritage.

Lee helps Wong with her relationship with water that exists independent of, but alongside, Indigenous peoples who also have culturally specific relationships with water. Lee’s knowledge is embedded in a section of “declaration of intent” that reads, “i will learn through immersion, flotation & transformation / as water expands & contracts, i will fit myself to its ever-changing / dimensions” (14). In these lines, the speaker intends to learn like Lee by immersing the self in water. The speaker also desires to match water’s movements, just as gung fu artists match their opponents’ movements. If the water expands the speaker contracts and if the water contracts the speaker expands, but in either case the speaker’s and the water’s movements are inseparable and if each being moves in accordance with the other neither will be harmed. By using Lee to help the speaker develop a humble relationship with water, Wong demonstrates how variously located non-Indigenous peoples can draw on their cultural heritage in a manner that works in solidarity with Indigenous peoples’ fight to protect water. Here, Wong follows critic Larissa Lai’s notion that “It does absolutely no good for settler folk to appropriate Indigenous practices, but if we can have our own practices that work in solidarity with Indigenous ones, then that strikes me as hugely relation-building” (266). Indeed, Wong’s efforts

to build relationships with water and with Indigenous peoples are enhanced when she turns to her cultural heritage for support.

Lee's resistance to fame is also instructive. While Berton is interested in Lee's growing celebrity status, Lee moves away from this topic of conversation. For Lee, gung fu is a spiritual practice that encourages a disinterest in fame and status. He writes about the humility and self-worth embedded in gung fu:

A gung fu man devotes himself to being self-sufficient and never depends upon the external rating by others for his happiness. A gung fu master, unlike the beginner, holds himself in reserve, is quiet and unassuming, without the least desire to show off. Under the influence of gung fu training his proficiency becomes spiritual, and he himself, grown ever freer through spiritual struggle, is transformed. To him, fame, and status mean nothing. (*Artist 11*)

By the time Lee is interviewed on Berton's talk show, he has been incorporated into North America's celebrity culture and yet he moves away from fame because it stands in contrast to gung fu, which teaches adherents not to show off and to find worth in the self rather than the opinions of others. Her decision to include his interview in *undercurrent's* bibliography generates a point of connection between Wong and Lee through their shared disinterest in fame.

Wong's notion that cultural heritages can be a valuable tool for non-Indigenous peoples who want to work in solidarity with Indigenous peoples and perhaps even for writer-activists who are pulled into celebrity culture is shared among other non-Indigenous writer-activists who desire to enact non-colonial relations. Writer Heather Menzies recounts working alongside Rita Wong and Valeen Jules for Poets for the Peace and participating in Paddle for the Peace with

Treaty 8 First Nations and settler farmers, all of whom are working to stop the Site C dam.

Menzies explains:

this is a struggle between two realities: the local, lived one so rich in inter-dependencies and shared history, and the more remote, abstract one in corporate budgets and government policy positions. One is small scale and slow, the other large and fast. The larger-scale one is centred in the powerful, populated south while the other is distributed in a host of small centres across the north, which has historically been treated as a colony, a handy resource hinterland for the south. (“Honouring the Peace”)

Like Wong, Menzies’s understanding of the conflict is informed by several perspectives, including her own cultural heritage. She explains the importance of turning to one’s cultural heritage in her memoir *Reclaiming the Commons for The Common Good*, in which she explores how turning to her Scottish heritage helped her develop better relationships with the land in a way that works alongside Indigenous peoples’ cultural resurgence. She states, “As I watch them [Menzies’s “First Nations neighbours”] recover their lost traditions, renew their old practices and relearn their mother tongues, as I watch individuals I know struggle on their journeys or recovery, I sense parallels in the journey that so-called settlers in North America like me can undertake, personally and collectively, and perhaps need to as well” (2). While there is danger in conflating the loss of Indigenous peoples’ traditional land relations that occurred through a colonial regime of forced movement and erasure of Indigenous knowledge with white settlers who lost their traditional knowledges by participating in the settler colonial project, Menzies nevertheless suggests that settlers may find an alternative to colonial relations by recovering the ecological aspects of their cultural heritages.

However valuable turning to one's cultural heritage to inform one's understanding of water and ecological relationships, Wong follows the water-loving community's reminders that although differences are valuable to the multitude culture heritage should not "oppress us" (47). Accordingly, Wong finds freedom from any undesirable limits that her cultural heritage would impose on her—such as Lee's gendered description of the "gung fu man"—by engaging with a wide variety of approaches to water, beyond what are embedded in her heritage. For example, Wong's poem "flush" uses a quotation by Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who also views water as a teacher: "Think of it: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody Nobody started it, nobody is going to stop it. It will talk as long as it wants, the rain. As long as it talks I am going to listen" (42). Drawing on Merton, the poem considers how daily encounters with water in settler society, such as showering, obscure water's lessons. The shower quiets water's voice; nevertheless, the speaker makes the best of a bad situation by reframing the shower as rain water and turning "face / and shoulders toward post-chlorinated rain" (42). Evoking rain in the shower serves as a reminder that water is inseparable from the speaker's body; it "slid[es] into sink and teacup, throat and bladder, tub and toilet" (42). It is also a "bountiful abundant carrier of what everyone emits into the / clouds ..." (42). In other words, the speaker learns what people do to the rain they do to themselves. By placing quotations from differently located thinkers throughout her collection and by including a lengthy list of "References & Influences," Wong demonstrates how a great many ways of knowing encourage people to build good relationships with water. In *undercurrent*, Wong continues a practice she develops in her collection, *forage*, that Catherine Bates calls a "foraging poetics." Bates explains that Wong "explicitly situates her own writing within the creative and critical works she has found rummaging through the writing of others" (199). Foraging for knowledge is certainly an

important part of *undercurrent*, but it is only one of several tactics that Wong uses to encourage people to develop good relationships with water.

Six years prior to the publication of *undercurrent*, Wong described her poetics as a process in which she sifts through, and rearranges, the poisoned language of English in an attempt to understand the harm it causes. She writes, “immersed in the muddy, polluted stream that we call the english language, i still need the stream to live, even as i filter the pollutants, rearrange them in funny shapes in order to try to understand what they are doing to my body this dirty water is what i have to drink, what i have to give back, you can call it ink ...” (“seeds” 22). Although some of the poems in *undercurrent* address the violence caused by the English language, the collection also sees Wong immersed within a stream polluted not only by English, but with other violent ways of knowing, “abyssal thinking” to science that supports corporate goals (Santos 45). And yet, the stream holds a diversity of knowledges, many of which provide insights that can make possible an alternative to the unjust present. Wong filters out the pollutant knowledges and returns the insightful ways of knowing. She gives these knowledges back to the stream in different configurations—she places Indigenous and scientific knowledge into dialogue that enriches both ways of knowing, uses science to support Indigenous perspectives, draws on her own cultural heritage to work alongside Indigenous approaches, and forages around for any knowledge that may be useful. In doing so, she encourages non-Indigenous peoples to interrogate how knowledge systems and knowledge synthesis can be both part of, what Wong calls, “the problem” and “part of / the solution” (*undercurrent* 15). There is hope in Wong’s poems that certain arrangements of knowledges will allow non-Indigenous peoples to work toward the common goal of supporting water and generating intercultural relations, in moments

of crises like the planned construction of the Site C dam, and during everyday actions like showering, because to support water is to support life.

Interrogating harmful ways of knowing and humbly arranging knowledges in different ethical configurations is a necessary task that non-Indigenous peoples must take up; however, Wong's poems also remind non-Indigenous peoples who want to support water and Indigenous peoples that listening is a task that must also be prioritized—as Lai states, “there are still moments when settler folk just need to stand aside and exercise their listening skills” (266). Indeed, Wong's poems direct non-Indigenous peoples to listen to Indigenous peoples and to water; to drink the knowledge that has been so generously shared, for this knowledge is life sustaining and can encourage good relationships on Turtle Island that support epistemological and environmental justice. Listening to Indigenous peoples and to water are necessary tasks if non-Indigenous peoples are to develop meaningful intercultural relationships.

By focusing on her own efforts to build relationships with water and Indigenous peoples through listening and placing knowledges in various configurations, as well as encouraging her non-Indigenous readers to do the same, Wong rejects celebrity writer-activism. She takes whatever fame Canadian literary culture has afforded her and uses it to direct admirers to other lesser-known thinkers, writers, and activists. More radical than her rejection of celebrity—an obviously problematic cultural phenomenon—is how Wong's praxis encourages a shift away from writer-activism to the emergence of ordinary people who join the water-loving multitude and act in ways that develop and strengthen relationships across cultures, knowledges, and beings. Rather than reside in the uncomfortable, albeit sometimes useful, category of writer-activist that Nixon argues involves raising awareness about underrepresented issues while being distanced from the people who are facing harm (26), Wong proposes a different way of writing

about and relating to injustices. She humbly situates herself among other ordinary people who must all work together from their self-locations in order to develop an alternative to settler colonialism and neoliberalism. From this perspective, there is little room for writer-activists who reside a safe distance from injustices. Indeed, water does not permit such separation; it makes clear our interconnectedness without erasing difference. As such, water necessitates that people work together and Wong's collection provides insights on how we may support water's directive, or as Wong states, "*One water body flows together with other water bodies, a whole greater than its parts: 'what you cannot do alone, you will do together'*" (21).

**Conclusion: From the “Literary Right to Represent” to Responsible Relationships:
Canadian Literary Culture and Reconciliation**

In this dissertation I have considered how Boyden, King, and Wong have contributed to a literary counter-discourse to colonial management policies, practices, and narratives that have resulted in the control over and damage to environments and Indigenous communities. By centring Indigenous authors and allies, utilizing Indigenous research methods, and focusing on environmental injustices this dissertation contributes to the study of environmental literature in Canada, which has primarily engaged with non-Indigenous writing understood by way of Western modes of literary criticism. Despite a number of illuminating studies on Indigenous authors and contexts, the lack of sustained engagement with Indigenous writing, knowledge, and scholars within the study of environmental literature inadvertently bolsters settler colonial land relations and limits the possibility of generating just intercultural relations that are necessary for reconciliation. Consequently, the methods used and topics addressed in this dissertation work to encourage intercultural relation building and epistemological justice within the academy and beyond. To these aims, I have demonstrated how each writer-activist has worked to make legible and legitimate traditional land relations as viable alternatives to various environmental injustices. I have also considered how Boyden, King, and Wong have negotiated the complicated relationship between writing, activism, and community. While King, Wong and even Boyden have found moments of joy and kinship through their writer-activism, in this dissertation I have also paused on moments when writer-activists—Boyden in particular—have failed to act and write in ways acceptable to the standards set by Indigenous communities, especially those who are represented in their works. Despite the challenges associated with writer-activism, Boyden, King, and Wong have played an important role in reconciliation through their efforts to express

modes of existence other than those informed by notions of Eurocentrism, assimilation, and neoliberalism. In doing so, they have emphasized that non-colonial relation building is central to the reconciliation process, which since its emergence in the late 1990s has become increasingly incorporated into the goals of corporations and the neoliberal state.

In 2020, after two decades of reconciliation initiatives, there exists some malaise among readers, writers, critics, and environmentally marginalized communities who had hoped that writer-activists working within the Canadian literary context would help engender new forms of non-colonial existence. Their discontent is justified. At the same time, state and corporate actors are using the rhetoric of reconciliation while continuing to exert control over Indigenous peoples' land relations and causing environmental injustices, despite Indigenous peoples' calls to stop the extraction. For example, in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's findings that the state-sponsored residential school system "pursued this policy of cultural genocide because it wished to divest itself of its legal and financial obligations to Aboriginal people and gain control over their land and resources" (*Honouring 3*), Prime Minister Justin Trudeau claimed that Canada would partake in "nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous Peoples, based on a recognition of rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership" ("Prime Minister"). Despite his rhetoric of reconciliation, the federal government's decision in spring of 2018 to buy Kinder Morgan's Trans-Mountain pipeline exemplifies the state's commitment to oil, industry, and neoliberal philosophy, rather than to Indigenous peoples, the land, and the reconciliation process. Secwepemc activist Kanahus Manuel states in response to the government's new pipeline that "All this word play about reconciliation is thrown out the door and spit on and stepped on" (qtd. in Barrera, "Buying"). Although the frameworks that could contribute to reconciliation and renewable energy are in place, assimilationist and

neoliberal desires to maintain cultural and physical control over Indigenous peoples and the land have resulted in ongoing social and environmental harm.

At the same time that government, corporate, and settler interests and actions generate environmental injustices, writers, critics, and literary institutions who have the opportunity to use their cultural capital to model and engender decolonial relationships have instead often reinforced exploitative colonial practices. For example, at the same time that Joseph Boyden's writing advocates for the recovery of traditional land relations, his career within Canadian literary culture as a celebrated and authoritative spokesperson for Indigenous peoples is a result of his efforts to obfuscate his fractional Indigenous heritage and limited relationships with Indigenous communities. Consequently, his self-fashioning has replicated the colonial relationships that his writing sought to dismantle. Boyden was critiqued for his practice of speaking for, rather than with, others and although many mainstream media pundits supported his practice, Boyden's fall from stardom was swift. Boyden's controversy produced a highly visible debate regarding what Rob Nixon calls the "literary right to represent" (26). The actions of individuals like Boyden are normalized by the structures embedded in Canada's literary industry, such as its obsession with awards. Critic Karina Vernon rightfully argues that literary awards regularly function in "deeply colonial" ways that contribute to a literary culture in which celebrated individuals occupy rather than make space, and appropriate rather than share knowledge ("Decolonizing CanLit Prize Culture"). While there are alternatives to Canada's problematic award culture—such as the Indigenous Voices Awards (IVAs), discussed below—settler writers, critics, and members of the media have often been involved in and supported the commodification of Indigenous stories, knowledge, and trauma at the expense of Indigenous writers who desire the space to share their own stories and knowledge with Indigenous and non-

Indigenous readers in ways that support relation building, follow Indigenous protocols, and are responsible to the communities who are represented in their writing. Although some Indigenous and non-Indigenous writer-activists who are celebrated in Canadian literary culture have built responsible and respectful relationships with the communities who are depicted in their writing and have found responsible ways to engage with Indigenous knowledge, the figure of the celebrated writer-activist must be approached with caution given the ways that some replicate and profit from embedded and exploitative colonial approaches to Indigenous peoples and Indigenous knowledge.

Boyden's speaking for and over others is not an isolated incident; rather it is one of many incidents in which settlers, especially white men, have gifted themselves authority over knowledge, cultural production, and marginalized communities. Throughout Canadian literary history, settler cultural workers have for the most part argued that they have the right to represent other peoples' lives and stories. In fact, Margery Fee argues that "This belief that it is legitimate, even virtuous, to represent others is ingrained in Canadian culture" (67). This normalized practice is made visible for all to see in moments when Indigenous writers challenge Canadian literary practices, such as during the "appropriation of voice" debate of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The debate arose when writers Lee Maracle (Stó:lō) and Lenore Keeshig-Tobias (Anishinaabe) challenged settler authors' right to use Indigenous stories without regard for the people or communities that originally produced the stories (61-2). Maracle and Keeshig-Tobias wanted to make space in literary culture for Indigenous writers to write about Indigenous peoples, rather than simply being the object of settler stories; and, when settlers used Indigenous stories Maracle and Keeshig-Tobias wanted them to follow Indigenous protocol regarding those stories (61). The debate garnered attention from mainstream media and, as Fee explains,

“Despite many attempts to turn the discussion to the issue of access to media attention, publication, and grants, it became caricatured as a shootout between racial minority writers who were depicted as would-be censors and mainstream writers who argued the claims of the minority writers were a threat to freedom of speech” (64). Despite the nuanced and important arguments made by Indigenous writers, settler cultural workers largely dismissed the concerns of Indigenous writers in an effort to shore up their places at the centre of Canadian literary culture.

Indigenous writers who challenged cultural appropriation and sought space for Indigenous voices have contributed to the increasingly prominent role that Indigenous writers are playing in Canadian literary culture, and yet a number of influential critics and media members are still championing cultural appropriation over a quarter of a century after the “appropriation of voice” debates—the emergence of reconciliation initiatives notwithstanding. In the May 2017 issue of the Writers’ Union of Canada’s magazine *Write* that was devoted to Indigenous works, editor Hal Niedzviecki’s introduction echoes earlier arguments in support of cultural appropriation. Niedzviecki’s now redacted introduction states, “I don’t believe in cultural appropriation. In my opinion, anyone, anywhere, should be encouraged to imagine other peoples, other cultures, other identities. I’d go so far as to say that there should even be an award for doing so—the Appropriation Prize for best book by an author who writes about people who aren’t even remotely like her or him” (qtd. in Nathoo). Niedzviecki argues in favour of cultural appropriation, despite not “believe[ing]” in it, because he believes it is the best way for Canadian literary production which is predominantly white and middle-class to move beyond the fact that “CanLit subject matter remains exhaustingly white and middle-class” (qtd. in Nathoo). As such, Niedzviecki believes that cultural appropriation is an important writing strategy for white middle-class authors to deploy in order to make Canadian literature’s subject matter more

diverse. His argument is especially confusing given its placement at the start of a special issue on Indigenous writing that aims to extend Canadian literary production and its subject matter beyond its white middle-class bounds. Nevertheless, his call to generate an appropriation prize was taken up by a number of high ranking members of the mainstream media who believed it would promote freedom of speech (Nathoo). Embedded in these white settler cultural workers' attempt to challenge what they perceive to be Indigenous peoples' monopoly over Indigenous stories is their desire to maintain authority over Indigenous peoples' cultural production and literary production in Canada.

Unlike settler cultural workers who retained popularity after supporting appropriation during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Boyden's fall from stardom and Niedzviecki's resignation as editor of *Write* suggest that settler control over the right to represent and literary production in Canada more generally is diminishing; however, justice for writers who have been marginalized from literary culture and for communities whose stories have been appropriated is more than retributive. Indigenous and settler cultural workers are attempting to alter Canadian literary production so that it no longer operates according to capitalist, colonial, and opportunistic logics. In his response to Niedzviecki's editorial, Anishinabe cultural critic Jesse Wenté echoes Maracle's argument that settlers should move aside and let Indigenous peoples tell stories. He states, "My issue ultimately with the original column was that it called for the 'overclass,' for white writers, to imagine It didn't actually call for the elevation of actual Indigenous voices. That is actual inclusion. The other is appropriation" (qtd. in Nathoo). While Wenté emphasizes that an inclusive literary culture would include Indigenous authors rather than white writers who represent Indigenous peoples, Haudenosaunee author Alicia Elliott whose writing was included in the special issue of *Write*, responded to Niedzviecki's editorial by arguing that writers should

develop relationships with communities who are represented in their writing. She explains, “You always have to be asking yourself, ‘Why? Why is this the story that I need to tell?’ ... If you’re building relationships with the groups or with the people that you’re writing about, then there’s not going to be any outrage” (qtd. in Nathoo). Here, Wente and Elliott are encouraging others to make space for Indigenous writers, especially emerging Indigenous writers, and to acknowledge that relation building is an indispensable part of non-colonial writing practices.

Elliott’s and Wente’s notion, like Keeshig-Tobias’s, that authors should think about and improve the ethics of their writing practices is supported by Thomas King and Rita Wong. In a co-authored response to the Niedzwiecki’s controversy, Rita Wong and Hiromi Goto state:

We don't want to speak for others, but we do want to speak with or near them In this time of accelerating climate destabilization, we believe we need, more than ever, to learn to work together to become better relations. What we cannot achieve alone, we might find a way to accomplish together. It starts with listening and acting from a place of love and respect for Indigenous people and their perspectives.

Here, Wong and Goto imply that they have no interest in telling Indigenous stories, or “speak[ing] for others.” Instead, they want to tell stories, or speak, in ways that acknowledge, respect, and align with Indigenous communities and their knowledges. King provides a slightly different approach to the ethics of storytelling that places responsibility on the teller. After sharing an Indigenous creation story in *The Truth About Stories*, King proposes that his readers must decide how to engage with the story. He states “Do with it what you will. Tell it to friends. Turn it into a television movie. Forget it. But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (29). In doing so, King relinquishes control over the story, but with a caveat: let the story affect your actions.

Given the story's emphasis on cooperation, relation building, and balance, King implies that readers and potential tellers of the story ought to consider if their tellings align with the story's ethics. By setting the responsibility to engage ethically with the story on the would-be teller, King encourages non-Indigenous peoples to actively reflect on their relationship with Indigenous stories, knowledge, and communities. While King, Wong and Goto, as well as the other commentators each generate somewhat different approaches to the issue of cultural appropriation, all agree that cultural appropriation must give way to more ethical intercultural relationships between non-Indigenous authors and Indigenous peoples.

While individual authors have the responsibility and agency to alter literary culture, structural changes must also occur if Canadian literature is to develop beyond its settler colonial visions. One significant structural change must occur at the level of literary awards because they play a central role in Canadian literary culture. The Indigenous Voice Award (IVA) that was created in response to Niedzwiecki's call for an "appropriation prize" exemplifies how institutions that bestow literary awards can do so in ways that avoid replicating settler beliefs that are foundational to many Canadian literary awards. While awards are often tied to corporate or government sponsorship, thereby setting potentially radical writing to work for capitalist goals and settler nation building projects, the IVA emphasizes that literature's value is to a diverse community of readers. From its inception, the IVA stressed that readers and critics rather than corporations or governments can provide monetary and emotional support to writers. Settler lawyer Robin Parker initiated the award through a crowd funding initiative that generated over \$100,000 from over 1,500 donors. After receiving such extensive backing, Parker's initiative was turned over to the Indigenous Literary Studies Association (ILSA) ("Our History"). This intercultural academic organization that is comprised of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars

emphasizes the significance of the award's crowd funded origins. They write, "Not only is the dollar amount that you have helped us raise important, but so is the number of you who have donated. You have given each of our writers the knowledge that, in addition to our judges, there are 1,573 people who believe in them and are willing to back their writing. This contribution of faith is invaluable" ("Donors"). For ILSA's IVA Board, the donation process not only helped generate money for authors but also highlighted that there is a large community of readers interested in reading Indigenous writing and supporting Indigenous writers. Moreover, the award's founder and the organization that distributes the award demonstrate that Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous can work together to generate spaces that centre Indigenous writing for the benefit of all readers, rather than for the benefit of corporate and government interests.

The IVA also makes a modest intervention into award culture's problematic promotion of literary celebrities. Literary awards often generate highly visible festivities and public discussions that centre on a select few award nominees and inevitably celebrate an individual author who is selected as winner of that year's prize. This veneration process contributes to the creation of literary celebrities who become perceived as authorities on the issues and communities that are depicted in their writing. Even those authors who write from knowledgeable positions can become increasingly distanced from the communities they write about if they identify too closely with their role as celebrated members of the publishing class. Shining the spotlight on a select few writers works at the expense of a great many writers who are also creating important literary works, many of whom also have close relationships to the communities that are depicted in their writing. Like King who begins each chapter of *The Truth About Stories* by featuring the words of an Indigenous author and Wong who quotes and acknowledges Indigenous authors throughout *undercurrent*, the IVA Board challenges the notion

that literary culture must inherently support individual authors and the figure of the literary celebrity. They explain that their “awards are intended to support Indigenous artistic communities and to resist the individualism of prize culture. As such, the IVA Board will endeavour to create opportunities for mentorship, professionalization, and creative collaboration among applicants, jurors, and other members of the Indigenous artistic community when possible” (“IVAs”). Even when they highlight individual authors they do so in a way that draws attention toward a large number of authors. In 2018 they celebrated over twenty Indigenous authors who were shortlisted across seven categories. In doing so, they simultaneously retain some familiar aspects of literary awards while also attempting to challenge “the individualism of prize culture” (“IVAs”).

While the 2018 IVA awards “celebrate the very best in literary art by emerging Indigenous writers” (“2018 IVA Finalists”), the award also implicitly takes into consideration the relationship that authors have with Indigenous knowledge and communities who are represented in their writing. Unlike Canadian literary awards in which authors’ appropriation of knowledge and distance from communities are often tolerated and sometimes even praised, Indigenous writers, critics, and allies understand that it is necessary for writers to develop good relationships with the communities they write about and the knowledge deployed in their writing. The 2018 IVA highlights this stance by shortlisting authors such as Joanne Robertson, an Anishinabe writer who has a close relationship to the communities and knowledges that are represented in her nominated children’s book; *The Water Walker* depicts Anishnaabe water protector Josephine Mandamin who walked with others around the Great Lakes in order to draw attention to our collective responsibility to water. Robertson is an artist-activist who works across mediums to advocate for redress from water issues affecting Indigenous communities.

Robertson decided to write *The Water Walker* after Mandamin finished her final walk because she “thought it would be good to continue Josephine’s message.” Mandamin who states that the book’s “pictures really tell a lot” about her journey, has worked with Robertson to present the book to schoolchildren (Garrick). In addition to the close personal relationships Robertson has with the people, places, and communities that are represented in her story, she has a close relationship with the Anishinabe knowledge that informs her story and emerges through the inclusion of Anishinaabemowin words and the depiction of the traditional responsibilities that Anishinabe women have to water (Brown). While there are many ways that writers can develop relationships with community and knowledge, Robertson models one way that writer-activists can write from their unique self-locations and avoid appropriating other peoples’ knowledge and stories.

The IVA is representative of infrastructural changes that can contribute to a literary culture in which a form of writer-activism that is community centred and justice driven can thrive. Emerging literary cultures notwithstanding, many writer-activists are through choice or circumstance working within the Canadian literary cultural context, which at worst normalizes Eurocentrism, cultural appropriation, and literary celebrity. While Canadian literary culture has made permissible questionable tactics such as Boyden’s self-centring and self-identification, writer-activists including King and Wong have been able to work within this context in ways that support their environmental and reconciliatory aims. Indignant towards neoliberal and settler colonial discourse, policies, and practices that have resulted in extensive environmental injustices, Boyden, King, and Wong have generated writing that exposes harm and turns to Indigenous knowledge as the foundation for generating ecological and intercultural relations. As such, they participate in a broad and complicated cultural project of replacing what Rita Wong

and Dorothy Christian call “The dominant stories given to us by colonization [that] have been violent, painful, hateful, anchored more often in fear and attempted control of Indigenous peoples and their homelands than in respect for others” (7). Rejecting these harmful stories and cultivating stories that celebrate mutually sustaining relationships with each other and with the land are necessary if Turtle Island is to move beyond the unsustainable, unjust, and crises-ridden contemporary moment.

I have often approached literature for what it could reveal about destructive environmental relationships and alternative modes of existence. Readers living in what is currently called Canada might broaden their perspectives and imagine beyond the present through critical engagement with stories, especially those that draw on non-Western knowledges to envision different social and environmental relationships than those normalized under settler colonialism and neoliberalism. I remember taking such an approach a few years ago when I had the opportunity to teach Thomas King’s *The Back of the Turtle*. In the class, we discussed how the novel critiqued the extraction industry and corporate attempts to control narratives. Perhaps more importantly, we also considered how the Indigenous creation story told within the novel provides characters with a model for environmentally-just, intercultural relation building. It seemed to me that the agency, reciprocity, respect, and community demonstrated by the characters in the novel could resonate with us beyond the classroom, especially as the truth and reconciliation process was encouraging relation building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

By engaging with King’s work for the ways in which it encourages environmental sentiments and imagines ways to overcome environmental injustices, I was enacting what Nicole Seymour calls an “instrumentalist approach” to literature. Seymour explains that such an

approach is common among ecocritics. She writes, that ecocritics “have regularly evaluated cultural texts on their capacity to inculcate ‘proper’ environmentalist feelings—often, reverence, love, and wonder—educate the public, incite quantifiable environmental activism, or even solve environmental problems” (26). Although I was familiar with these ecocritical methods, my interest in taking an “instrumentalist approach” to King’s novel in this class was instead prompted by the anthology *Read, Listen, Tell: Indigenous Stories from Turtle Island*, which we read alongside *The Back of the Turtle*. In the anthology, critics such as Grace L. Dillon, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Thomas King, as well as the collection editors, emphasize the central role that Indigenous stories play in the transfer of knowledge and culture.

In this dissertation, I continue to read King’s novels, and other texts, for what they might offer to readers in a time in which environmental destruction and lackluster visions of intercultural relation building are normalized. However, Boyden’s, King’s, and Wong’s regular appearances in the spotlight at public events and on national media through which they raise concerns about environmental injustices and reflect on their activism prompt me to consider the connections between text and activist. I adapt Rob Nixon’s notion of the writer-activist to the Canadian context and in doing so reveal a complicated network of interactions between an author’s writing, activist actions, celebrity status, and relationships with communities facing environmental harm. Each node in the network impacts the other, sometimes in unexpected ways. By reading their environmental activism alongside their literary works, I examine emerging decolonial practices and pedagogies that are co-constructed by literary text, activism, and responses to the activists’ actions. Sentiments such as privileging the community’s role and community’s knowledge in the environmental justice process becomes central, as does the importance of allyship and intercultural relation building. Moreover, notions of agency,

sovereignty, relationships, and reciprocity are extended to non-human actors that participate with people toward the shared goal of ecological balance. These environmental sentiments not only challenge colonial and capitalist approaches to the land but they also contrast mainstream environmental attitudes, many of which serve as the foundation for ecocritical analysis.

Consequently, this dissertation participates in recent calls for ecocritics to reflect on the field's methods and colonial underpinning. For example, Seymour critiques the field for relying on an "instrumentalist approach" that judges literature on a limited and Western set of environmental attitudes (26). While I agree with Seymour's assessment, by drawing on Indigenous approaches to literature in this dissertation, I demonstrate that taking an "instrumentalist approach" is not inherently colonial and need not be limited to mainstream Western environmental sentiments. The range of environmental attitudes that emerge through my study of Boyden, King, and Wong are promising for the ways in which they empower readers and critics to participate in decolonial and environmentally-just relationships. However, my attention to the challenges and controversies faced by writer-activists who have spent years imagining and attempting to enact ethical relationships suggests that cultivating these connections is not an easy task. I hope that my focus on the many challenges associated with building equitable environmental relationships across knowledges and cultures provides insights into how ecocritics might work to ethically engage with decolonial research methods and with texts that examine environmental injustices affecting Indigenous peoples.

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