

**The understated power of reading contemporary  
Indigenous literature in Canada,  
a White supremacist nation**

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## Abstract

This thesis offers a textual analysis of three contemporary novels by Indigenous writers in Canada – Tracey Lindberg’s (2015) *Birdie*, Katherena Vermette’s (2016a) *The Break*, and Eden Robinson’s (2017a) *Son of a Trickster*. Informed by critical Whiteness studies, scholarship on settler colonialism, and reader response theory, I argue how contemporary Indigenous literature facilitates the social and political transformation decolonization requires. When approached with prior knowledge about past and ongoing colonialism, the stories written by today’s Indigenous authors disrupt the settler national myths that normalizes White supremacy in Canada and demands introspection on how settlers perpetuate colonial violence against First Peoples. Their stories extend possibilities for transformative learning by re-centering Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, and by reframing kindness, reciprocity, and kinship as human obligations. In creating space for us to imagine existing beyond the limitations set by the racial settler state, these stories can instigate shifts in cultural perceptions and power relations in real ways. These stories also hold implications for meaningful and constructive human rights-based social justice practices, by reshaping knowledge on antiracism and decolonization outside dominant frameworks that assume the colonial state’s legitimacy and permanence.

**Keywords:** Indigenous literature; settler colonialism; critical whiteness studies; antiracism; decolonization; reader response theory

For Khadijah McClement. I miss you everyday.

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# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

### 1.1. Preface

“...I’m trying to read the book and understand what the story is about, but you know, in the first couple of pages... I’m trying to remember the quote... it’s something about... the witness of the crime is infuriated by the way White men say goodbye. And I’m like, White guys say goodbye a different way?” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [CBC], 2017a, 43:19)

These were Jody Mitic’s initial thoughts on Métis writer Katherena Vermette’s (2016a) novel, *The Break*, which he shared on live broadcast as a *Canada Reads 2017* panelist. *Canada Reads* is an annual ‘battle of the books’ competition organized and produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). In this competition, five Canadian celebrities select and champion through televised debates, the book they think the country should read (CBC, 2019). Vermette’s book in particular is about Stella, a young Métis mother – who unbeknownst to her at that time – witnesses her second cousin, thirteen-year-old Emily, being sexually assaulted in a barren field outside her house. The novel is woven together by the personal stories of ten characters, most of whom are related or connected to Emily. As their stories unravel, we hear the voices of Emily’s great-grandmother, grandmother, mother and aunt leading up to, and after her rape.

The novel’s plot hinges on violent sexual assault, and showcases how such violence leaves a devastating legacy on families. The Native Women’s Association of

Canada (NWAC) estimates that close to 4,000<sup>1</sup> Indigenous<sup>2</sup> women were murdered or went missing between 1980 and 2012 (Tasker, 2016). The ongoing national inquiry into these missing and murdered women renders Vermette's (2016a) story highly relevant. In her book, *The Colonial Problem: An Indigenous Perspective on Crime and Injustice in Canada*, Lisa Monchalin (2016) states that "Indigenous women are victims of racism and sexism and experience excessive levels of violence when compared to other women in Canada" (p. 175). Yet Mitic is unwilling to move past his discomfort caused by Vermette's description of the white policemen who interview Stella, to acknowledge and understand how sexual violence has impacted and continues to impact Indigenous women in Canada. Specifically, he misses the opportunity to draw a connection between Vermette's subject matter to the alarming events unfolding in this country, where "Indigenous women are almost three times more likely than non-Indigenous women to become a victim of a violent crime in Canada" (Monchalin, 2016, p. 175).

Vermette (2016a) opens her novel with Stella being frustrated by the two police officers who refuse to believe that she had just witnessed a girl being raped. A reader who approaches *The Break* (2016a) with prior knowledge on how Aboriginal people are repeatedly victimized by settler authority may have been more likely to empathize with Stella. As evidenced by her aunt's practiced yelling "at the cops when they started acting like they didn't believe her" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 15), and real-life events including Quebec prosecutors' decision not to charge six police officers in Val-d'Or for sexually assaulting and using excessive force on Indigenous women in 2016, the justice system has repeatedly failed Aboriginal people in Canada. Monchalin (2016) writes that "Indigenous women have become easier targets for abduction and abuse not only because of ingrained notions that they are lesser beings but also because of the deficient reactions the police and other government officials have to these incidents" (p.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a huge discrepancy between the number of Indigenous women and girls who were murdered or went missing between 1980 and 2012, as reported by the NWAC and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). A 2014 study led by the RCMP states that during this period, approximately 1,200 Indigenous women were murdered or went missing – less than half of that reported by the NWAC. Women's rights campaigner Jackie Hansen (2014) notes that the number reported by the RCMP only includes cases where the original investigating police force has concluded that a murder has taken place, and does not include unexplained and suspicious deaths. She argues that the significantly lower number reported by the RCMP misrepresents the reality of Indigenous women's lives and serves as an excuse for continued inaction (Hansen, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> I will be using the terms Indigenous, Aboriginal, and First Peoples interchangeably to refer to the original inhabitants of the land now known as Canada. These terms include First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people in Canada.

184). Stella's anger at the way the policemen and her husband "half laugh politely, the way [W]hite men say goodbye" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 14), therefore points to an exasperation at how settler society, structures and systems devalue Indigenous women's experiences and lives. At the same time, it reveals how settler colonialism continues to retraumatize, marginalize, and oppress Aboriginal people in Canada.

Mitic's refusal to understand Stella's frustration exemplifies how settler colonialism continues to thrive through indifference founded on an unwillingness to recognize the profound power difference between settlers and First Peoples. There is perhaps no one as quintessentially Canadian as Mitic, an Afghan war veteran who lost his legs after stepping on a landmine in 2007. The Ottawa City Councillor has competed in *The Amazing Race Canada*, and is an advocate for wounded veterans and people with disabilities. Mitic fulfills Canada's desired narrative as a benevolent, peacekeeping nation that welcomes difference. However, Mitic's response towards Vermette's (2016a) novel also mirrors how Canadian settlers relate to Indigenous peoples, where the need to see ourselves in a positive light takes precedence over First Peoples' rights to be treated equitably. Canadian settlers prioritize being comfortable in a world that privileges us, over engaging with the reality that our attitudes, policies, and systems continue to abuse and neglect Aboriginal people.

## 1.2. Introduction to Research

Jody Mitic's response to Vermette's (2016a) novel, *The Break*, dismisses the value Indigenous literature in Canada brings to a settler nation committed to renewing its relationship with Aboriginal people based on the recognition of rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership ("New Ministers", 2017). Indigenous literature in Canada has much to offer. It presents settlers with an avenue to understand "the distress of the country's [A]boriginal population", the devastation wrought by residential schools and other policies under the Indian Act, and "the shame of the country's de facto racism that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission [(TRC)] has brought to the fore" (Richler, 2015).

While Indigenous literature has long been acknowledged for its potential to heal Indigenous people, its restorative powers extend beyond Aboriginal communities. Maria Campbell, a prominent Métis cultural leader and author, best known for her memoir *Half-*

*breed* (1973), describes Indigenous writer Beatrice Culleton's novel, *In Search of April Raintree* (1983), as "the kind of writing that will begin the healing of our people, and help a dominant society understand and feel the lives of a people it almost destroyed" (as cited in Episkenew, 2009, p. 14). Indigenous literature provides settler readers with the emotional and cognitive capacity to recognize that "the nation was founded on a practice of psychological terrorism and theft" (Episkenew, 2009, p. 5). It engenders breathing room for settler readers to examine "the myths that their own people hold dear, especially those myths that tell the story of the establishment of the new nation-states that occupy North America and dominate the world (Episkenew, 2009, p. 2).

Jo-Ann Episkenew (2009) – the late Métis scholar on Aboriginal literature and advocate for improving Indigenous health, poverty and homelessness – writes that Aboriginal literature compels settler readers to question the myth of White superiority that has "become entrenched in the psyche of the North American settler population and has resulted in their consistently positioning their darker-skinned neighbours on the bottom of the social strata" (p. 3). Specifically, the narratives from Indigenous literature expose "the structures that sustain White privilege and encourage non-Indigenous readers to examine their position of privilege and their complicity in the continued oppression of Indigenous people" (Episkenew, 2009, p. 17).

Although Episkenew (2009) refers to White settlers, her insights on Aboriginal literature applies to recent non-White settlers like myself, who relocate to this country by choice and are complicit in taking and occupying Indigenous lands as property. People of colour however, are not settlers in the same way that early French and British settlers in Canada are (Chung, 2012). Non-White settlers are often victims of White supremacy – "the operation of forces that saturate the everyday, mundane actions and policies that shape the world in the interests of white people" (Gillborn, 2006, p. 320). Yet acceding to White supremacy promises non-White settlers the ability to reap the benefits of settling on Indigenous lands, making them complicit in settler colonialism (Chung, 2012). While it is important to note that White settlers and non-White settlers hold unequal power and have different political intentions, my work explores how Indigenous literature in Canada can speak to both groups based on their participation in the systemic dispossession of Indigenous peoples. Specifically, my research focuses on how contemporary Indigenous literature encourages Canadian settlers to relate to Aboriginal people in thoughtful and equitable ways.

### 1.3. Research Positionality

I read my first novel by an Indigenous writer in Canada while completing a required course for the Equity Studies in Education Master of Arts (MA) program at SFU. I based my final essay for that course on a novel by the late Ojibway writer Richard Wagamese (2014), titled *Medicine Walk*. Wagamese's story about a dying father's last request to his estranged son, woven around the themes of poverty and racism, struck me as especially poignant. I was compelled to read other literary works by Indigenous writers, and subsequently picked up Sherman Alexie's (2007)<sup>3</sup> young adult novel, *The Absolutely True Dairy of a Part-Time Indian*<sup>4</sup>. Engaging with these two novels sparked a deep interest in contemporary Indigenous literature, and a desire to develop meaningful relationships with the stories written by today's Aboriginal<sup>5</sup> authors.

While Alexie's (2007) book about a Native American teenager who desires better educational opportunities and decides to attend an all-white public high school off the reservation is humorous, it slaps its readers with the gruesome deaths of his grandmother, sister, and friend. The protagonist cites wakes and funerals as one of five reasons he misses a lot of school (Alexie & Forney, 2007). The deaths in Alexie's novel brought me closer to the reality of the disproportionate number of violent deaths suffered

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<sup>3</sup> As of March 7, 2018, three women have gone public with sexual harassment allegations against Sherman Alexie (Flood, 2018). While I am appalled by these allegations, which have coloured how I view Alexie as an individual, they have not compromised the valuable insights I obtained from his novel.

<sup>4</sup> Sherman Alexie is a Spokane-Coeur d'Alene-American novelist. While he is not an Indigenous author in Canada, the *Absolutely True Dairy of a Part-Time Indian* is widely read in North America and is on many Canadian high school curriculums. Though we cannot conflate the experiences of Native Americans and Indigenous peoples in Canada, both groups face similar issues including high rates of mortality, incarceration, poverty, and substance use.

<sup>5</sup> In this thesis, I will be using the terms Indigenous and Aboriginal to refer to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit writers in Canada. The term Aboriginal was legalized – and subsequently popularized – as the collective noun for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in Canada in 1982, when the Constitution Act came into being. The Constitution Act, which enshrined the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, recognizes and affirms existing Aboriginal rights (but did not create them). At the same time, the Government of Canada (2017b) uses the term “Indigenous” to refer to “the original peoples of North America and their descendants,” and employs both terms interchangeably. The term Indigenous is also frequently used in a global context to refer to communities, peoples and nations that have “a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories” (Martinez Cobo, 1987, p. 29). In recent years, the term Indigenous is increasingly being used to refer to First Peoples in Canada as the federal government wants to be seen acknowledging the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

by Aboriginal people in Canada – numbers that I’ve thus far been acquainted with at arms-length, from news reports.

Written works like the *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, which are partly based on the authors’ lived experiences, emphasize that the deaths of First Peoples are more than mere statistics. The sorrow from Tina Fontaine and Colten Boushie’s deaths, both of whom are First Nations, rips through entire communities. Fontaine, a 15-year-old girl from Sagkeeng First Nation, was found in Winnipeg’s Red River, wrapped in a duvet cover and weighted down with rocks in August 2017. Boushie, a 22-year old Cree man, was shot dead on the Saskatchewan farm belonging to Gerald Stanley in 2016. Both the white men – Raymond Cormier, who was charged with killing Fontaine, and Stanley, who was charged with shooting Boushie – were acquitted of murder. Such premature deaths that occur in overwhelming numbers, along with high rates of poverty, substance abuse, and incarceration, indicate that First Peoples are still paying for our ancestors’ mistakes.

At the same time, Stanley and Cormier’s acquittal demonstrates how the Canadian judicial system remains stacked against Indigenous people. Stanley was found not guilty by an all-white jury, following a sloppy and negligent police investigation (Common & Gomez, 2018; Friesen et al., 2018), and Cormier was acquitted despite the recorded statements that indicated his involvement with Fontaine’s death (MacLean, 2018). Contemporary Indigenous literature therefore offers its readers much more than just cultural variety – it outlines why Indigenous people can’t ‘just get over it’. These works depict how Indigenous families are grappling with the intergenerational trauma inflicted by racist, colonial, and genocidal policies like the Indian Residential School System, while existing policies and attitudes continue discriminating against them.

Given the critical insights contemporary Indigenous literature offers, I was surprisingly able to complete an undergraduate degree in English at a reputable Canadian university without having to read anything by an Indigenous author in Canada. I am a recent settler, who came here as an international student from Southeast Asia in 2002<sup>6</sup>. I lived and worked on Indigenous lands for more than a decade before I learned

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<sup>6</sup> I came to Canada, and settled here by choice with relative ease. My experience of immigrating to this country differs vastly from that of the non-White settlers who were drawn to Canada by work opportunities in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These early non-White settlers were

about First Peoples, how their nations were decimated by Canadian settlers, and how this country continues marginalizing and abusing them. The citizenship test I took, and the citizenship ceremony where I was sworn in as a Canadian citizen, hardly acknowledged Indigenous history, truths, or worldviews. Canada's citizenship guide featured information on Aboriginal peoples on only three of its sixty-eight pages.

Today, I am extremely privileged to live freely on the unceded territories of the Squamish, Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, Katzie, Kwikwetlem, Qw'ó:ntl'an, Sto:lo, and Qayqayt peoples. However, the privileges I enjoy as a settler come at the expense of Indigenous lives. The colonial policies and systems that grant me with property buying rights, and low-barrier access to education and job-seeking opportunities continue depriving individuals from these nations and other nations across Canada of the same rights and opportunities. I am here because First Peoples took a chance on us, and helped Canadian settlers survive. We therefore have an obligation to honour their generosity and trust by becoming better citizens and holding ourselves accountable to our commitment in renewing our relationship with Indigenous peoples. This entails valuing Indigenous voices and standing behind First Peoples as they claim their truths and rebuild their communities. I believe that Indigenous literature in Canada provides us with an avenue to achieve this.

## **1.4. Research Focus & Questions**

Stories written by Indigenous authors privilege us with insights on Indigenous lived experiences in contemporary Canada and the opportunity to contextualize their truths within a gruesome history – a history often obscured by formal national narratives concerned with preserving colonial innocence and informal narratives obsessed with the shameful stereotyping of Indigenous people.

We learn about Aboriginal peoples intimately in such stories. We recognize them as grandparents, parents, siblings, aunts, and uncles, with whom we share the same

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not welcomed by the largely Anglo-British society in Canada who responded with racist measures such as the Chinese head tax, denying entry to the Komagata Maru passengers, and the internment of Japanese Canadians. Unlike these early non-White settlers, I do not share with Indigenous peoples, “a violent history of displacement, segregation, dislocation, and internment enacted through racialized and gendered violence” (Lee, 2016, p. 20).

geographical DNA imprinted by a violent colonial history<sup>7</sup>. We get to know them as individuals who deserve our kindness, love and admiration, just as our own families do. Through this new familiarity, Indigenous literature in Canada inspires us to repair and reimagine our relationship with Indigenous people. However, this entails taking responsibility for the problems caused by our ancestors' errors that have created unacceptable social, economic and political disparities between settlers and Indigenous people. Across generations, Aboriginal people experience higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and mental and behavioural disorders due to genocidal and assimilative laws like the Indian Act. Among other things, the Indian Act mandated Indigenous children to attend residential schools, created the reservations system so that White settlers could have access to the most fertile land, confined Indigenous peoples to reserves through the pass system, denied Indigenous women Indian status, forbade Indigenous peoples from speaking their native language and practicing their religions, and declared Indigenous cultural ceremonies illegal. Even though the Indian Act has been amended several times, Indigenous people continue to have their rights violated through underfunded services that see more Indigenous children placed in foster care, and communities on reserves facing severe housing shortages and devastating living conditions. Today, 61 First Nations reserves still live under long-term drinking water advisories (Mercer, 2019). Additionally, Indigenous people continue experiencing brutality and dying at the hands of law enforcement officers and health care professionals who work in institutions that normalize colonial violence.

Establishing a relationship based on respect also requires moving beyond a superficial and tokenistic appreciation for Indigenous culture that increasingly defines attempts to decolonize settler institutions, to recognizing Indigenous land rights, Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination, and the legitimacy of Indigenous systems and cultures. Indigenous education advocate Roberta Jamieson (2017), believes that we are at a unique historical moment that may change the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada forever. In her lecture,

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<sup>7</sup> Canadian settlers and Indigenous peoples share this history, but played different roles within it. Settlers benefited and continue to gain from perpetrating colonial violence on Indigenous peoples. However, this history weighs heavy on both groups in unique ways. While our First Peoples are coping with intergenerational trauma and re-establishing their identities, communities and cultural systems, settlers also need to reckon with their roles as colonizers intent on destroying Indigenous nations on the basis of greed and racism.

*Canada's Original Promise: Still Waiting to Be Realized* on CBC's radio program, *Ideas*, she tells us about a promise that was made in this country at the time of first contact, where Indigenous people consciously decided to share their land and resources to help people survive (Jamieson, 2017, 2:44). That promise was accompanied by a dream that included sustainable Indigenous communities and a sustainable future for settlers (Jamieson, 2017, 5:23).

That dream – which was to be underpinned by a positive working relationship between Indigenous peoples and settlers – was unfortunately squandered by racism and greed, says Jamieson (2017, 6:16). However, she believes that that dream is still available to us “if we can reach true reconciliation between those who have always been here and those... who have come here to find a new future” (Jamieson, 2017, 4:55). To realize this dream, Canada must therefore reconcile itself to be a nation where Indigenous people are a fundamental part of its identity, and are able to thrive as Indigenous peoples (Jamieson, 2017, 10:38).

We are at an important crossroads, says Jamieson (2017), and Canada has never been explicitly asked which way it wants to turn (29:28). The nation can choose to do nothing, which will worsen conditions for First Peoples, or it can choose to travel in a direction where Indigenous peoples have a sustainable future as the original inhabitants of this land (Jamieson, 2017, 29:30). I believe that contemporary Indigenous literature in Canada is well placed to ask Canadian settlers this question. Beyond emphasizing that we are at a crucial point in history, Indigenous literature in Canada also holds the power to steer us in the right direction.

My research investigates how the contemporary works of three Indigenous writers in Canada compel Canadian settlers to reimagine our relationship with First Peoples by disrupting long standing colonial myths about Aboriginal peoples, and impart values that are key to renewing our relationship with them. Consequently, Indigenous writers reawaken Canada's original dream through their work, prompting settlers to respect and value Indigenous peoples as an integral part of the country's identity, and giving us the opportunity to fulfil the promise we made to each other hundred of years ago.

Given Episkenew's (2009) insights on how contemporary Indigenous literature advances "social justice in settler society" (p. 15) and my transformative experience with Aboriginal literature as a graduate student, I argue that the written works by recent Indigenous writers in Canada are well-positioned to disrupt colonial narratives and recast First Peoples and settler relationships in non-oppressive ways. Specifically, my research explores how contemporary Indigenous literature in Canada – as easily accessible material culture that is increasingly promoted within public spheres in recent years – facilitates decolonization in the above ways.

My inquiry on contemporary Indigenous literature's ability to initiate and nurture a positive relationship between Canadian settlers and First Peoples is informed by its comparison to a living and breathing entity that demands meaningful engagement from its readers (Akiwenzie-Damm, 2005). Quoting Sto:lo author Lee Maracle, Renate Eigenbrod (2014) writes that "Aboriginal literature does not try to assist readers with finding the meaning of a story", but "wants them to find the element that is transformative and, with that knowledge, become "the architect of great social transformation" (p. 448). She proposes that the fictional text is a testimony of a certain kind, compelling us to "bear witness to trauma, forcing us to recognize our own complicity and implication in the loss and suffering being narrated" (Eigenbrod, 2014, p. 449). Jeannette Armstrong (2005) too recognizes how Aboriginal literature is inherently dynamic. Indigenous literature in Canada she says, plays a vital role "in the restructuring towards a new order of human thought, beyond racial, ethnic, and cultural attempts to dominate and assimilate" (Armstrong, 2005, p. 185).

However, the path to societal change through reading Indigenous literature in Canada is by no means a direct one. For Indigenous literature in Canada to fulfill its potential as a decolonizing force, it must be contextualized by an understanding of colonialism in Canada and the "socioeconomic forces behind imperialism" (Eigenbrod, 2014, p. 448). Approaching the books above with this background knowledge will deter settler readers from "personaliz[ing] systemic oppression" (Eigenbrod, 2014, p. 448) and perpetuating racist stereotypes about Aboriginal communities. As exemplified by Mitic's response to Vermette's (2016a) novel at the beginning of this chapter, an "intellectual comprehension of systemic forces" (Eigenbrod, 2014, p. 448) is necessary to avoid discrediting Indigenous experiences. Such indifference reinforces colonial attitudes, which continue to destroy Indigenous nations.

Based on the possibilities Indigenous literature in Canada brings and the active engagement it requires from readers to fulfill its potential for effecting change, I developed the following research questions:

- How do the affordances offered by Indigenous literature in Canada disrupt colonial narratives and recast Indigenous and settler relationships in non-oppressive ways, and what are the challenges this literary genre faces when it attempts the above?
- In what ways can critical reader response theory mobilize settler readers of Indigenous literature in Canada to re-examine and discredit colonial narratives, and to recast their relationship with First Peoples in non-oppressive ways?

My research aims to answer these questions by analyzing three Indigenous novels that have enjoyed considerable attention in the Canadian mainstream media: Tracey Lindberg's (2015) *Birdie*, Katherena Vermette's (2016a) *The Break*, and Eden Robinson's (2017a) *Son of a Trickster*. All three books were shortlisted on CBC's *Canada Reads*. Additionally, *Son of a Trickster* was a finalist for the Scotiabank Giller Prize – a prestigious literary award for Canadian authors. The three books are often displayed prominently in major bookstores like Chapters Indigo, Book Warehouse, and Black Bond Books. The books and their authors are also regularly included on recommended reading lists featured in the media. In recent years, the CBC has included them on a list of books to read for Indigenous History Month, a list of books recommended to all Canadians by Indigenous authors, a list of Indigenous authors to read as recommended by the general public, and a list of books generated to commemorate Indigenous Book Club Month in June.

These novels are among the more recent works published at a critical time in this country. *Birdie* was published a few days before the TRC released its ninety-four calls to action, which “represent the first step toward redressing the legacy of Indian Residential Schools and advancing the process of reconciliation” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). Similarly, the novels by Vermette (2016a) and Robinson (2017a) were launched when there was significant public discourse and rhetoric on reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. The books' publication timing lends significance to this research. Exploring the transformative possibilities contemporary Indigenous literature in Canada offers is a worthy undertaking

as this nation realizes a pressing need to reimagine its relationship with Indigenous nations.

## 1.5. Theoretical Framework

In my thesis, I will employ both critical race theory and reader response theory to perform qualitative textual analysis on the written works of three notable Indigenous authors in Canada published in the years between 2015 and 2017. Textual analysis is a way “to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world” (McKee, 2003, p. 2). Specifically, it is “a methodology - a data-gathering process – for... researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and of how they fit into the world in which they live” (McKee, 2003, p. 2). Critical race theory, which begins with the notion that racism “is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order” (Ladson-Billings, 2010, p. 11) that it appears normal, analyzes “the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race and that invariably render blacks and other minorities one-down” (Delgado, 1995, as cited in Ladson-Billings, 2010, p. 11).

A reader response theory, on the other hand, defines reading as a transactional activity that “underlines the essential importance of both elements, reader and text” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 18). Louise Rosenblatt (1978), a pioneer in reading theory, writes that the reader carries on a “dynamic, personal, and unique activity” (p. 15), where their “interest, expectations, anxieties, and other factors based on past experience affect what an individual perceives” (pg. 19) from the text. Any reading act is, therefore, “the result of a complex social nexus” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 20).

A reader response theoretical approach plays a central role in contextualizing the analysis of the three novels and interpreting subsequent findings. I will draw significantly from Aboriginal literature scholars and literary engagement experts including Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, Renate Eigenbrod, Jeannette Armstrong, Jo-Ann Episkenew, Wolfgang Iser, Louise Rosenblatt, and Dennis Sumara to anchor my work. “Words, are sacred”, writes Akiwenzie-Damm (2005), and “can change peoples’ attitudes, their thinking, their construction of reality, [and] their actions” (p. 172). Her reflection on the latent power of words to be mobilized by readers are echoed by the pedagogical scholars mentioned above, and will anchor my research.

## 1.6. Thesis Overview

My research examines the lessons that written works by Lindberg (2015), Vermette (2016a), and Robinson (2017a) hold for settler readers. The three novels feature Indigenous protagonists who refuse to play the “stereotype defined by tragic circumstances or statistics, or accept the involuntary empowerment to which they have been subjected” (Jamieson, 2017, 32:20). In particular, my work aims to demonstrate how each book offers unique entry points for settler readers to learn how to respond to their Indigenous counterparts with mutual respect, humbleness, and appreciation.

In the next chapter, I review recent scholarly work on contemporary Aboriginal literature in Canada, which underlines Indigenous literature’s distinct ability to help cure the colonial contagion (Episkenew, 2009). Some of these works cross over into the reader response realm as they focus on the pedagogical processes involved in teaching Aboriginal literature to non-Indigenous students. It is thus, only fitting to provide an overview on critical reader response theory in this chapter. This delve into reader response theory plays a critical role in arguing how reading Indigenous literature as a transactional activity lends itself well to mobilizing societal transformation. Additionally, I will be reviewing literature on critical race theory and Whiteness studies to ground the decolonizing and anti-colonial praxis of my research and to illustrate how settler colonialism continues to manifest in current policies, systems, and attitudes. In corollary, this section will also examine settler colonial complicity as it applies to both European “re-settlers” and new immigrants.

Chapter Three, Four, and Five focus on the themes that emerge from analyzing the three novels by Lindberg (2015), Vermette (2016a), and Robinson (2017a). I showcase how these themes embody a discourse that disrupts colonial narratives, and reveals lessons on fostering and sustaining healthy relationships between Canadian settlers and Aboriginal people. I also demonstrate how reader response theory generates space for Canadian settler readers to engage critically with these works. Following this, I argue that such critical engagement stimulates receptivity towards the lessons that contemporary Aboriginal literature in Canada imparts, and prompts settler readers to reimagine their relationship with First Peoples. In corollary, I put forth that critically engaging with contemporary Indigenous literature in Canada compels settler

readers to take decisive steps towards repairing their relationship with Indigenous peoples.

The final and concluding chapter summarizes the main arguments made regarding contemporary Indigenous literature's ability to disrupt colonial narratives and to recast Indigenous and settler relationships in non-oppressive ways. I also outline the limitations of contemporary Aboriginal literature in Canada to mobilize societal transformation. At the same time, I discuss the implications this study holds for advancing Indigenous and settler relationships in Canada and for moving us closer to the selves that we project as an inclusive society based on respect and equality. Lastly, to conclude this chapter, I examine the implications for theory, research, and practice on decolonizing processes that involve Indigenous story-telling and truth-telling.

## Chapter 2.

### Literature Review

#### 2.1. Introduction

Jody Mitic's comments on Vermette's novel (2016a), which opens this thesis, reveal the many issues that a meaningful exploration on contemporary Indigenous literature in Canada calls for. I begin this chapter by reviewing recent scholarship on contemporary Indigenous literature in Canada, and how this unique genre responds to settler colonial violence. In particular, critical insights on Aboriginal literature provided by Jo-Ann Episkenew (2009), Allison Hargreaves (2017), Renate Eigenbrod (2014), Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm (2005), and Jeannette Armstrong (2005) solidify the argument that written works by today's Indigenous writers in Canada trouble colonial narratives, and create possibilities for recasting Indigenous and settler relationships in non-oppressive ways.

Additionally, Mitic's unease at the way Vermette (2016a) – a Métis writer – describes her fictional, White, male characters demands that this inquiry on Indigenous literature in Canada be grounded in critical race theory and critical Whiteness theory. Given that the Dominion of Canada was founded on decimating Indigenous nations and seizing their lands, a discussion on colonialism, settler identity, and Indigenous-settler relationships aptly follows. I will also draw on recent news articles and editorials to showcase the ongoing colonial violence inflicted on First Peoples in Canada. At the same time, a discussion on settler identity on Indigenous land that is occupied by different waves of settlers from Europe and Asia warrants a close look at the power dynamics between White settlers and non-White settlers and the relationships between these groups and First Peoples. In corollary, I will explore the tension between settler colonialism and Canadian antiracism. An awareness of how “antiracism theory participates in colonial agendas” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 123) highlights Aboriginal literature's distinctive ability to ignite the reimagining of Indigenous and settler relationships outside colonial constraints.

Finally, I discuss the role reader response theory may play in mobilizing settler readers of Indigenous literature in Canada to re-examine and discredit colonial

narratives and to recast their relationship with First Peoples in non-oppressive ways. In particular, I will draw from prominent reader response theorists Louise M. Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser, as well as literacy education scholar Dennis J. Sumara, to elucidate how Indigenous literature in Canada may play an extraordinary role in igniting societal transformation.

## **2.2. Contemporary Indigenous Literature in Canada: Taking in the Landscape**

Anishinaabe writer Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm (2005) writes that “Aboriginal literatures arise from a tradition unlike that of other literatures in Canada” (p. 169). They come from “the culture, beliefs, values, aesthetics, humour, spirituality and experiences of the various Indigenous peoples of this land” (Akiwenzie-Damm, 2005, p. 170). For generations, Indigenous peoples learned about their culture and history through songs, stories, prayers and other orature passed down by their elders. However, settler colonization disrupted creative and artistic Indigenous traditions by forcing First Peoples to abandon their cultural practices, languages, spirituality and other important parts of their identity<sup>8</sup>. Consequently, Aboriginal communities were forced to stop telling their stories. Akiwenzie-Damm emphasizes that Indigenous peoples “were ‘silent’ not because we had not yet learned how to write ‘literature’ or to use foreign art forms, but because our own artistic traditions had been banned, denigrated, and even outlawed” (2005, p. 170).

Despite having their stories regarded as unacceptable and inferior by the colonizing society, Episkenew (2009) writes that Indigenous peoples have begun to reassert their individual and collective narratives over the last few decades. These narratives serve as resources Indigenous peoples seek within their own communities to heal from colonial trauma (Episkenew 2009). She highlights that First Peoples “have believed in the healing power of language and stories since time immemorial”, and that today’s Indigenous writers continue to apply this belief to their literary works in English (Episkenew, 2009, p. 11). Although English – a language forced on First Peoples

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<sup>8</sup> In addition to cutting Indigenous peoples off from their cultural and social traditions, settler colonization also destroyed economies and governing systems pioneered by First Peoples. Settler colonization in Canada therefore sought to eliminate entire Indigenous nations, not just Aboriginal cultures and traditions.

through colonial policies – is not always their language of choice, today’s Aboriginal writers use it to create literary works that aspire to accomplish many of the same aims as oral stories did (Episknew, 2009). Their work explains the history of the people, buttress cultural practices and norms, and articulate their relationship with the world (Episknew, 2009).

Even more remarkable, Aboriginal writers are using story-telling and the English language to share lived experiences impacted by colonial damage in corollary with their efforts to re-establish Indigenous artistic traditions. Their work challenges the colonial master narrative, laying bare the genocidal intent rooted in colonial actions. At the same time, their stories on experiencing colonial atrocities now constitute a crucial part of First Peoples’ histories and play a significant role in helping them articulate their relationship with the world. Akiwenzie-Damm (2005) notes a definite trend among Indigenous writers to reclaim their authentic voices and decolonize the ways in which they use English since the ground-breaking collection of stories by the celebrated Métis author Maria Campbell (1995), *Stories of the Road Allowance People*, was published. Episknew (2009), too, describes writing in English as both “a political act and an act of healing that provides the foundation for the process of decolonization” (p. 12).

Native American poets and scholars Gloria Bird and Joy Harjo (1997) term this subversive practice as “reinventing the enemy’s language” (as cited in Episknew, 2009). Indigenous writers ‘reinvent’ in the colonizer’s tongue “to mirror an image of the colonized to the colonizers as a process of decolonization” (Episknew, 2009, p. 12). As the colonized Other writes in English, they reveal how colonialism has caused enormous damage to their communities, thereby politicizing and transforming literary expression (Episknew, 2009). Specifically, Bird and Harjo suggest that as Indigenous writers usurp the colonizer’s tongue to tell their stories, they are creating space “where ‘reinventing’ can occur to undo some of the damage that colonization has wrought” (1997, as cited in Episknew, 2009, p. 12).

Episknew (2009) notes that “[c]ontemporary Indigenous literature serves two transformative functions: healing Indigenous people and advancing social justice in settler society” (p. 15). Although both functions are components in the decolonizing process, my thesis focuses on how contemporary Indigenous literature compels Canadian settlers to reimagine their relationship with First Peoples in non-oppressive

ways. Episkenew quotes Charlotte Linde (2000), who describes telling a story as a 'relational act' that implicates the audience, and Willie Ermine (2005), who highlights how stories have the power to enter and transform the listener. For instance, Maria Campbell (1983) describes Indigenous writer Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's (1983) novel, *In Search of April Raintree*<sup>9</sup>, as "the kind of writing that will begin the healing of our people, and help a dominant society understand and feel the lives of a people it almost destroyed" (as cited in Episkenew, 2009, p. 14). Literature therefore has the capacity to "heal Indigenous people from postcolonial traumatic stress response and to cure the settlers from the delusions learned from their mythology" (Episkenew, 2009, p. 15).

The colonial myth, "a story of imagined White superiority", has become "entrenched in the psyche of the North American settler population and has resulted in their consistently positioning their darker-skinned neighbours on the bottom of the social strata" (Episkenew, 2009, p. 3). This colonial master narrative endures despite it being a truly dangerous narrative that has devastating effects on the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples (Episkenew, 2009). Episkenew (2009) writes that "most settlers still choose to believe in the myth of the establishment of the Canadian nation-state because it buttresses their feelings of superiority and confers upon them privileges that have become normalized" (p. 5). For example, the colonial myth "does not acknowledge that the nation was founded on a practice of psychological terrorism and theft" despite a growing body of evidence to the contrary (Episkenew, 2009, p. 5). This willful ignorance in turn, rationalizes the settlers' seizure and occupation of Indigenous lands (Episkenew, 2009).

Yet, the truths presented by Indigenous storytellers trouble "the myth of the new Canadian nation-state, which valorizes the settlers but which sometimes misrepresents and more often excludes Indigenous peoples" (Episkenew, 2009, p. 2). Their stories reveal the nation's hypocrisy, by juxtaposing government policies and practices that systematically discriminate, against the state's formal commitment to democratic equality (Culhane, 1998, as cited in Episkenew, 2009, p. 5). They call the colonial master narrative, which positions Canada as a liberal, inclusive, and diverse nation founded on peaceful negotiation (Episkenew, 2009), into question. In their work, many Indigenous

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<sup>9</sup> The novel *In Search of April Raintree* (1983), is about two Métis sisters who end up in separate foster homes after being taken from their family. Mosionier, who grew up in foster homes, wrote this book after losing two sisters to suicide.

writers in Canada refer to the ongoing colonial holocaust on their lands and its devastating effects across generations. This traumatic recall often arrests contemporary attempts to justify this nation's beginnings (McKenzie, 2001). Episkenew (2009) points out that these stories also alter "the national discourse by and about Indigenous people" (Episkenew, 2009, p. 10). The story of Indigenous people suffering abuse at the hands of colonial officials well into the twentieth century vastly detracts from the colonial master narrative, thereby embarrassing Canadian settlers and their government (Episkenew, 2009).

The settler government, notes Episkenew (2009), began to address the concerns that Indigenous peoples were expressing in their stories because the settlers' collective esteem was threatened (Episkenew, 2009). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada was established because Indian residential school survivors took the Government of Canada to task for the heinous abuse they suffered in the schools developed and administered by the latter. The Government of Canada acted because the narrative they have carefully crafted to portray the nation state as a progressive democracy committed to equality and human rights was being discredited. White people, who have been taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and ideal, are typically horrified to learn about the damage that their governments have caused Indigenous people (Episkenew, 2009).

It is worth noting that the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) is the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history. To begin repairing the harm caused by residential schools, the TRC was mandated by the Agreement, which also sought compensation for residential school survivors. However, current public discourse is largely focused on the TRC rather than the IRSSA, obscuring how the Canadian government had to be taken to court for the crimes they committed against First Peoples. At the same time, focusing on the TRC allows the Canadian government to conveniently refashion itself as a benevolent entity who appears heavily invested in repairing its relationship with Indigenous nations. In deflecting its wrongdoings, there is implicit denial that settler society "is built on a sick foundation" and therefore requires a cure (Episkenew, 2009, p. 11). While the wounded – in this case, Indigenous people traumatized by the Canadian government's genocidal intent – requires healing, Episkenew (2009) maintains that the sick needs a cure. Here, she explains how colonialism is sick; "[U]nder its auspices and supported by its mythology... colonizers

have inflicted heinous wounds on the Indigenous population that they set out to civilize” (Episkenew, 2009, p. 11).

When “historical trauma is not publicly acknowledged and honoured in story, subsequent generations inherit and display the effects of that trauma (Vizenor, 1999, as cited in Episkenew, 2009, p. 9). Similarly, the sickness of colonialism continues to infect future settler generations when it is not publicly acknowledged, documented, and taken full responsibility for. We do not have to look far to see how society continues to be diseased by colonialism. Following Gerard Stanley’s acquittal in February 2018, a private Facebook group by police officers across Canada shows shocking messages supporting the Saskatchewan farmer (Martens & Roache, 2018). “Too bad the kid died but he got what he deserved” (Martens & Roache, 2018), reads a post by a Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officer. Less than a year before this, Conservative Senator Lynn Beyak publicly defended the residential school system for Aboriginal children, lamenting that the “good deeds” accomplished by “well-intentioned” religious teachers have been overshadowed by negative reports documented by the TRC (Tasker, 2017).

The foundational myth of White supremacy, which underlines the colonial master narrative, continues to have a profound effect on Indigenous peoples’ health (Episkenew, 2009, p. 7). Yet subscribing to this myth also has a detrimental effect on settler health. The power that White Canadian settlers currently hold in this country has been acquired by robbing First Peoples of their liberty, land and resources. It is a “criminal power, to be feared but not respected and to be outwitted in any way whatever” (Baldwin, 1962, p. 23). The White settlers’ power therefore hangs in precarious balance, plaguing them with insecurity, and driving them to continually oppress Indigenous peoples. White Canadian settlers are also plagued by psychological incongruence. The genocidal violence experienced by First Peoples at the hands of White colonizers is overwhelming proof that they do not abide by the values they espouse, “of treat[ing] each other with the dignity and the respect that is the birthright of every human being” (Trudeau, 2017). The White man, writes Baldwin (1962), “is himself in sore need of new standards, which will release him from his confusion and place him once again in fruitful communion with the depths of his own being” (p. 97). In negating the mythological narrative that currently defines the Canadian nation-state, Indigenous literature in Canada compels White Canadian settlers to learn about themselves and come to terms

with how this nation was not founded on Christian values but on colonial violence. Indigenous literature in Canada encourages settler introspection, prompting awareness that this nation is premised on dispossessing and disappearing First Peoples despite having arrived on their territories as visitors.

According to Episkenew (2009), Indigenous narratives serve a socio-pedagogical function aimed at changing society by educating settler readers about the Indigenous perspective on Canadian society. Specifically, the testimonies offered by Indigenous writers “implicate settler readers by exposing the structures that sustain White privilege and by compelling them to examine their position of privilege and their complicity in the continued oppression of Indigenous people” (Episkenew, 2009, p. 17). Episkenew describes such narratives as “‘life writing’ that straddles the boundaries of autobiography and fiction and that uses the imagination as a healing implement” (Episkenew, 2009, p. 18). The three contemporary Indigenous novels analyzed in this thesis fits well within this life-writing genre. Lindberg (2015), Vermette (2016a) and Robinson (2017a) have carved their stories from their lived experiences, albeit in different ways and to different extents. Their novels embody their personal myths, “act[s] of imagination that... [are] patterned integration[s] of our remembered past, perceived present, and anticipated future” (Episkenew, 2009, p. 69). By calling attention to the perversion inherent in colonialism, Indigenous life writing challenges settler delusions and fantasies, and compels them to re-examine their collective myth (Episkenew, 2009, p. 70).

Indeed, Indigenous life writing expends political profundity. First Peoples’ continued existence remains problematic “since [they] are a constant reminder of those historical and contemporary events that call into question the settlers’ pride in their nation” (Episkenew, 2009, p. 71). Their stories, in particular, address the pathology of colonialism by supplying truths that illustrates “the structural relationship presently existing between the contingent’s immigrant (settler) society and the peoples indigenous to it” (Churchill, 2001, as cited Episkenew, 2009, p. 72). Episkenew (2009) sharply delineates the toxicity in colonialism: “[t]here is pathology inherent in living in a position of privilege, ignorant of the price that others have paid for those privileges, and believing that those privileges have been earned and are deserved” (p. 73). She warns that settler society will remain sick if it continues to ignore how it is built and sustained on the foundation of unearned privilege (Episkenew, 2009). Consequently, an honest accounting must be made of the flows of impact and benefit involved in the oppressive

relationship between Canadian settlers and First Peoples, “as well as an unequivocal repudiation of the elaborate veils of evasion and denial behind which such unpleasanties are habitually concealed” (Churchill, 2001, as cited in Episkenew, 2009, p. 72). Contemporary Indigenous life-writing in Canada presents truths that reveal colonialism’s cancerous nature and the shameful inequitable relationship between settlers and Aboriginal people.

Settlers learn that the national collective myth of their country – and by extension, its societal foundation – is flawed and that its prosperity is built upon the suffering of others by studying an image of the colonized that the colonized, themselves, have created (Episkenew, 2009, p. 73). Indigenous literature in Canada plays a critical role in healing the wounds of oppression and advancing social justice among settler communities. Episkenew (2009) states that Indigenous people must make public the stories that comprise their truths to cure settler perpetrators of their psychoses (p. 73). Specifically, “[b]y speaking clearly, consistently and, above all, publicly, to the facts of what has been done/is being done to [them], and by whom, native people can force admissions from the perpetrators that they have done what [Indigenous people] contend” (Episkenew, 2009, p. 73).

Contemporary Indigenous literature in Canada, for all it accomplishes, has an expansive definition. Best described as life-writing that straddles the boundaries of autobiography and fiction, Indigenous literature in Canada is undeniably political. The personal truths Indigenous life-writing embraces continually and consistently trouble this country’s national collective myth. At the same time, it possesses a healing imperative – one that soothes the wounds inflicted on First Peoples by colonialism and cures settlers from the pathology inherent in colonialism. But perhaps what is most unique and important about the stories written by today’s Indigenous writers in Canada is how they spring from “an act of imagination that inspires social regeneration by providing eyewitness testimony to historical injustices” (Episkenew, 2009, p. 75). Their stories challenge readers to redress injustices by inspiring empathy and appealing to their morality (Episkenew, 2009). Powerful and effective stories can therefore shape future actions in decisive ways (Episkenew, 2009).

Despite the immense power Indigenous life-writing holds, it is important to note that this genre evolved from Aboriginal writers attempting to mitigate the risks and

shortcomings that autobiography poses. Indigenous life writers often find themselves criticized not only by settlers whose narratives they correct, but also by other First Peoples who witnessed the events being recounted and who may have thus developed different perceptions of the same event (Episkenew, 2009). Disguising one's autobiography is, therefore, often a less risky choice for Indigenous life writers (Episkenew, 2009). Consequently, the lines between factual narratives and fiction are blurred in Indigenous life-writing (Episkenew, 2009). This was a choice Beatrice Culleton Mosionier (1983) made when she wrote *In Search of April Raintree*, a work of Indigenous life-writing that is as influential as Campbell's *Halfbreed* (Episkenew, 2009). Relating her lived experiences under the guise of fiction allowed her to explore the pain from the traumatic dissolution of her family and her subsequent experiences in foster care safely, while at the same time validating those experiences by making them public (Episkenew, 2009). Episkenew (2009) notes that the way Culleton Mosionier understands writing as a healing process marks a turning point in the development of Indigenous literature, and has influenced many other Aboriginal writers to tell their stories in fictional form (2009, p. 113).

Aside from providing Aboriginal writers with a safe avenue for exploring their lived experiences, Indigenous life-writing has the capacity to pervade cultural institutions with truths that challenge the colonial creation myth they fiercely guard. Episkenew (2009) suggests that as an educator, Shirley Sterling (1992) – an author from Nlaka'pamux First Nation who wrote the young adult novel, *My Name is Seepeetza*, based on her residential school experience – would be aware that literary texts are scrutinized less stringently for their factual accuracy than historical ones when they are being evaluated for inclusion in school curriculums. She notes that “although the history taught in Canadian schools no longer contains disparaging comments about the savagery of Indigenous people, Indigenous people are still worthy of note only in relation to their contact with the settlers” (Episkenew, 2009, p. 125). Novels like *My Name is Seepeetza* (1992) are, thus, strategically poised to disrupt colonial institutions and normative colonial ways of thinking by inciting non-Indigenous people to question the dominant narratives these institutions perpetuate and to grasp the brutality of colonization and its continuing effects on First Peoples.

Stories by contemporary Indigenous writers in Canada provide a window into a world not included in dominant knowledge paradigms, and therefore not known by many,

including settlers who rarely question how accurate the colonial creation myth is (Episkenew, 2009). Episkenew (2009) highlights how *In Search of April Raintree* (1983) “debunks the portion of the national collective myth that claims that the child-welfare policies... improved the quality of life of Indigenous children” through the narrators’ descriptions of life in foster care and the destruction of their family (p. 114). The novel, therefore, ensnares readers in the narrators’ world where they can share the pain that generations of Indigenous people who have been subjected to such cruel policies feel (Episkenew, 2009). Such stories by Indigenous life-writers engages settler readers on an emotional level, compelling them to “understand that one of the legacies of colonialism is the position of unearned privilege that they enjoy in contemporary neo-colonial society” (Episkenew, 2009, p. 114).

Indigenous literature can shape history, politics, and public policy by documenting Indigenous peoples’ reality in a way that promotes empathy and understanding (Episkenew, 2009). The stories that are foundational to Indigenous literature have become newsworthy today, undermining the popular mythology of the Canadian settler-state (Episkenew, 2009, p. 186). For example, the murders of Tina Fontaine and Colten Boushie by White men were covered extensively in the news media for many days, sparking a national conversation about the ongoing injustice against First Peoples in Canada. Settlers come to understand Indigenous peoples as fellow human beings, the challenges they face, along with their disappointments, hopes and dreams by reading Indigenous literature (Episkenew, 2009). Settler empathy, in turn, has the potential to create support for social-justice initiatives to improve the way we treat Indigenous peoples, including making positive changes to public policy involving their input (Episkenew, 2009). Indeed, “[p]ublic response to Indigenous literature has resulted in Indigenous writers becoming important advocates for Indigenous people” (Episkenew, 2009, p. 191).

Like Episkenew (2009), Allison Hargreaves (2017), a settler-scholar of Indigenous literatures who authored the book *Violence Against Indigenous Women: Literature, Activism, Resistance*, contends that contemporary Indigenous literature plays a crucial role in analyzing colonialism and in enacting resistance. When understood within Indigenous storytelling epistemologies, she highlights that literature is an especially “powerful means of knowledge transmission and social critique” (Hargreaves, 2017, p. 1). However, beyond its ability to critique colonialism and facilitate resistance,

Indigenous storytelling also envisions “decolonized spaces and transformed realities that we have collectively yet to imagine” (Simpson, 2011, p. 101). Such spaces and realities can only manifest through imaginative modes, precisely because the settler colonial society we participate in today “is built on the violent erasures of alternative modes of mapping and geographic understandings” (Goeman, 2013, as cited in Hargreaves, 2017, p. 20). Additionally, decolonized realities only exist in imaginary realms because settler society is predicated on the continuous eradication of Indigenous peoples, cultures, and systems.

Hargreaves (2017) argues that Indigenous literature<sup>10</sup>, in particular, “unsettles the common-sense appeals to settler legitimacy, benevolence, and permanence” that not only underpins this nation’s collective myth, but that prevail in some dominant anti-violence initiatives (p. 4). Indigenous literature’s role in “the struggle for sovereignty, decolonization, and the reestablishment of Indigenous values” (Justice, 2011, as cited in Hargreaves, 2017, p. 5) is especially crucial given that the ‘decolonization project’ this self-declared liberal and progressive settler nation embarked on has failed to move beyond advocating for inclusion and equity. Where decolonization entails a significant shift in colonial power that is accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futures, current efforts only serve to alleviate settler guilt and complicity and to rescue settler futurity (Hargreaves, 2017). Indigenous literature can “instruct its readers in decolonizing approaches to anti-violence resistance” (Hargreaves, 2017, p. 6). It redresses the underrepresentation of Indigenous voices not only by cultivating wider public recognition, but by specifically articulating “Indigenous solutions to the problems continued colonialism creates” (Hargreaves, 2017; Simpson, 2011, p. 20). Jeannette Armstrong (2005), a scholar from the Syilx Okanagan territory, echoes Hargreaves’ analyses on the role Aboriginal literary voices play to deconstruct colonialism. Such voices, writes Armstrong, “support the reconstruction of a new order of internal culture and a relationship that transcends colonial thought and practice” (2005, p. 183), providing the opportunity to

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<sup>10</sup> Although Hargreaves (2017) focuses on Indigenous women’s literature as a critical site of knowledge-making and critique, I argue that her analyses also apply to contemporary Indigenous life-writing by Aboriginal authors in Canada who are not women. Indigenous authors in Canada like Tomson Highway and Richard Wagamese have written stories featuring characters who attended residential schools and were placed in foster care, showcasing the devastating inter-generational impact of colonial assimilationist policies. While the experiences of Indigenous men, women, and two spirit Indigenous peoples cannot be conflated, their work is also politically disruptive, and can initiate societal and political transformation towards decolonized realities.

“free us all from old world notions of power and its systematic mechanisms” (2005, p. 186). Indigenous literary voices make a profound contribution to Canadian literature by introducing “a new order of human thought, beyond racial, ethnic, and cultural attempts to dominate and assimilate” (Armstrong, 2005, p. 185).

Hargreaves (2017) suggests that Indigenous literature’s strength lies in its ability to “take aim at the structural facets of settler colonialism that empower perpetrators to act with impunity”, offering a “rich and often overlooked contribution to policy analysis and activist debate” (p. 23). First Peoples are often blamed for the violence they experience by politicians, journalists, Canadian settlers, and even some anti-violence advocates (Hargreaves, 2017). For instance, even though there were recordings that implicated Richard Cormier for Tina Fontaine’s murder, and despite the fact that her lifeless body was found wrapped in a duvet belonging to him, she has been blamed for her own demise. Multiple news outlets featured “headlines highlighting Fontaine’s substance use without contextualizing that it was being scrutinized on the request of ... Cormier, the one whose actions are actually on trial” (Balkissoon, 2018). Cormier’s lawyer told the jury that Fontaine “could have overdosed at a drug house or with a john” (Macdonald, 2018).

Fontaine had lost her father to terminal cancer, was estranged from her alcoholic mother, and was failed by welfare workers who were supposed to protect her (Balkissoon, 2018). Her life was “stained by the systemic prejudice and inter-generational trauma that relentlessly chases Indigenous people[s] in Canada” (Balkissoon, 2018). Yet, these details about Fontaine’s life were not highlighted in the mainstream narratives following her violent death. The mainstream news coverage on Fontaine’s murder illustrates that despite the proliferation of local and national campaigns mobilized against violence on women, “some anti-violence initiatives have in fact narrowed rather than opened up a space for politicized, oppositional public engagement by foreclosing understandings of the root causes of gendered colonial violence” (Hargreaves, 2017, p. 22-23). Erasing these significant details from Fontaine’s harrowing childhood – let us not forget that she was just 15 years old when she was murdered – is a colonial attempt at obliterating memory to continuously persecute Indigenous peoples without consequence. Such willed forgetfulness constitutes colonialism’s deliberate strategy of oppression, which includes land theft and sequential policies of child removal (Hargreaves, 2017). These policies, in turn, “fracture the multi-

generational transmission of knowledge” within Aboriginal communities. When examined closely, the strategy of oppression operates on multiple levels, closing off opportunities for resistance by suppressing the ability to remember within Canadian society at large and within Indigenous communities.

But contemporary Indigenous literature, states Hargreaves (2017), “can imagine resistance differently” (p. 22). Indigenous stories re-establish and reinforce pertinent Indigenous practices of remembrance that resist the calculated obliteration of memory initiated by colonial policies (Hargreaves, 2017). By resurrecting such practices, Indigenous literature upholds Indigenous-led ‘re-search’ processes where “colonial histories are named and ongoing resistances are acknowledged – demonstrating the multi-generational connections that exist between Indigenous knowledges and their living, fluid expressions in the present” (Hargreaves, 2017, p. 64). These practices and processes engendered by Indigenous storytelling however, are not about making definitive, quantitative knowledge (Hargreaves, 2017). Rather, they are about making a different kind of knowledge – one that involves “communally held practices of remembrance and resistance” (Hargreaves, 2017, p. 64).

Creating public knowledge from Indigenous storytelling – a process that embraces “reconnection, remembering, learning, recovering, and reclaiming (Smith, 1999, as cited in Hargreaves, 2017, p. 64) – fills a chasm created by Eurocentric epistemologies. Storytelling through an Indigenous paradigm involves a dynamic relationship between teller and listener, where the latter takes responsibility in analysis and understanding (Kovach, 2009, as cited in Hargreaves, 2017). Indigenous life-writing is testimonial, compelling us “to bear witness to trauma, forcing us to recognize our own complicity and implication in the loss and suffering being narrated” and asking us to struggle with the questions of our responsibilities and commitments to the other (McGonegal, 2009, as cited in Eigenbrod, 2014, p. 449). In contrast, mainstream scholarship demands that facts are extracted and the remaining superfluous data set aside once a story is shared and recorded (Stevenson, 1999, as cited in Hargreaves, 2017). Even life narratives collected and retold by human rights advocates turns the speaker into a victim, and are meant to provide credible and reliable data by being codified and contained within a standardized, often chronological, format (Hargreaves, 2017). While turning narratives into positivist evidence holds advantages to making human rights claims, “it also flattens out each story’s nuances and arguably constrains

the kinds of recommendations that can result” (Hargreaves, 2017, p. 75). Here, “the need for justiciable claims and concrete recommendations” takes precedence over “communally held and communicated knowledges” (Hargreaves, 2017, p. 75).

Hargreaves (2017) also takes issue with the reductionistic view that the impetus for social change emerges when settlers, for whom the experience of colonial violence is normatively constructed as distant or unrelatable, learn about the oppression First Peoples experience through Indigenous life-writing:

Literature’s capacity for promoting imaginative empathy and social understanding has long been celebrated (and debated) in Euro-Western intellectual traditions, but its application in the example of contemporary Indigenous literature is further complicated by settler reading practices which may seek (under the guise of identification) to collapse crucial power differences between settler and Indigenous subject positions in the name of reconciliation (p. 19).

The tendency to perform such appropriative and authoritative moves fostered by the desire to identify with Aboriginal peoples is described as the pleasure of becoming or inhabiting the other (Hargreaves, 2017). The teller or the listener’s subject position are left untheorized, and thus “divorced from the power relations that may structure each party’s differential place in the storytelling act” (Hargreaves, 2017, p. 93). Power imbalance in favour of those consuming the other’s narrative, allows settler readers and listeners to avert a more sustained interrogation of one’s own possible complicity in oppressing Indigenous peoples (Hargreaves, 2017). Settlers may come to understand First Peoples as fellow human beings, but decolonizing relations between settlers and Indigenous peoples based on identifying with the other, ultimately entails “abandoning the hope that settlers may one day be commensurable to Native peoples” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 36).

Understanding storytelling as a communal practice imbued with responsibility illuminates Indigenous storytelling practices’ ability to decolonialize by reframing dominant narratives about colonial violence and absolution (Hargreaves, 2017). Listening, however, comes with responsibilities of interpretation and understanding that transcend liberal forms of recognition, toward a witnessing that is deliberate and intentional (Hargreaves, 2017). While the storytelling approach has sometimes been applied as a covert strategy for producing knowledge about racialized others instead of “a culturally intelligible mode for the transmission of knowledge about colonial

oppression”, Indigenous writers have “wielded the resistive capacity of Indigenous storytelling to reframe listeners’ responsibilities” (Hargreaves, 2017, p. 121). As succinctly put forth by Armstrong (2005), “[a]n immense knowledge of the past, and a vision of the present rooted in Aboriginal literatures, are transforming both Aboriginal cultures and Canadian cultures, and are the best of reasons to support Aboriginal writing in all its forms” (p. 186).

### **2.3. Critical Whiteness Studies: This Settler Nation is a Racial... No, a White One**

In the *Canada Reads 2017* broadcast, Jody Mitic expressed discomfort at how Stella, a character in *The Break* (2016a), notes “the way white men say goodbye” (p. 14). Stella’s observation must have put Mitic at such unease, that this was the only thing he mentioned from the novel when asked to share his thoughts on *The Break*. A thirteen-year-old girl is raped in Vermette’s (2016a) story, which features ten main characters who “span the full range of human possibility, from its lowest depths to its most brilliant triumphs” (Celona, 2016). Yet Mitic did not pay heed to any of these significant and meaningful elements at the novel’s heart. Rather, he seemed so embittered by how Stella describes the white policemen’s laughter that he was not able to fully engage with the novel.

Why did these few words in the novel bristle at Mitic? How can his obvious discomfort at how Stella perceives the white police officers be explained? Mitic is a White, male Canadian settler. Previous to being an Ottawa city councillor, he served in the Canadian Army and lost his legs while fighting in the Afghanistan War. He has since been an advocate for wounded veterans and people with disabilities. Mitic embodies the ideal White Canadian settler in many ways. He has risked his life for this nation under the guise of battling terrorism and bringing democracy to Afghanistan civilians. He overcame his war injuries to become an inspirational figure, and continued serving his community by carving a career in local politics. However, Mitic’s response to *The Break* (2016a) exemplifies how calling Whiteness out can cause race-based stress, or racial stress. Specifically, his reaction exemplifies White Fragility, “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57). Such moves include outwardly displaying emotions like “anger, fear and guilt, and behaviours such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the

stress-inducing situation” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57). Whiteness scholar Robin DiAngelo (2011) points out that such behaviours function to reinstate White racial equilibrium.

The racial order in North American society that privileges Whiteness and places value on arbitrary racial markers is an “unstable equilibrium” (Omi & Winant, 1986, as cited in DiAngelo, 2011, p. 58). When the racial order is challenged, the resulting disequilibrium becomes intolerable (DiAngelo, 2011). Mitic’s dismissiveness towards Vermette’s (2016a) novel – particularly, his decision to disengage with it when Whiteness is demarcated – represents an attempt to “restore equilibrium and return the resources ‘lost’ via the challenge” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 58). Though seemingly inconsequential, Mitic’s response to *The Break* (2016a) provides insight to a larger pattern of societal distress that ensues when the racial order is challenged. Beyak’s response to the exhaustive, six-year study by the TRC that found rampant physical, mental and sexual abuse in residential schools is a prime example of such distress. Confronted by evidence that some 6,000 children died while in care because of malnourishment or disease, she stood before the Canadian Senate and insisted that the good deeds by those who taught in residential schools have been overshadowed by the report (Tasker, 2017). Beyak also claimed to have spoken to Indigenous people who told her about their positive experiences at residential schools, adding that many have kept their Christian faith after it was imparted to them by school administrators (Tasker, 2017). Made uncomfortable by the fact that White settlers were, and still are, responsible for the harm inflicted on generations of Indigenous peoples, Beyak’s knee jerk reaction was to preserve White integrity by defending ‘well-intentioned’ residential school teachers and their descendants<sup>11</sup>. Like many other Whites confronted with a challenge to White racial codes, Beyak uses the speech of self-defense to protect her moral character (along with the moral character of other Whites) against what she perceives as accusation and attack while deflecting any recognition of culpability or need of accountability (DiAngelo, 2011). DiAngelo (2011) notes that these self-defense claims work on multiple levels to: “position the speakers as morally superior while obscuring the true power of their social locations; blame others with less social power for their

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<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that Beyak’s utterances followed Senator Kim Pate’s inquiry on the over-representation of Indigenous women in Canadian prisons – a topic that she largely ignored during her speech.

discomfort; falsely position that discomfort as dangerous and; reinscribe racist imagery” (p. 64).

One need not look hard to seek other instances that display the disproportionate anger or irrationality that results from threats to White settler superiority and irreproachability. On July 1, 2017, five white men who claimed to be members of the Proud Boys, a male-only far-right organization, disrupted an Indigenous ceremonial protest against genocide at an Edward Cornwallis statue in Halifax. The five men approached the rally carrying a large Red Ensign flag, which has been adopted as Canada’s equivalent of the Confederate flag by White supremacists who see it as a throwback to a time when Canadians were overwhelmingly White and of European extraction (Hamilton, 2017). They then told the protestors that they were disrespecting General Cornwallis, a British military officer who issued a bounty on the scalps of Mi’kmaq people after he founded Halifax in 1749 (CBC, 2017b).

The ‘Appropriation Prize’ controversy that took place a couple of months before the Cornwallis protest clearly illustrates that White settlers across all demographics – not just the anomalous policy-maker or young, White men who might not know any better – feel threatened when racial order is challenged. In an opinion piece prefacing an issue focused on the work of Indigenous authors in Canada, Hal Niedzviecki, who was then editor of *Write* magazine, stated that he did not believe in cultural appropriation. He then suggested creating an appropriation prize for the “best book by an author who writes about people who aren’t even remotely like her or him” (Niedzviecki, as cited in Kassam, 2017). While Niedzviecki resigned shortly after the piece published<sup>12</sup>, White journalists from Canada’s largest media organizations offered to fund an actual appropriation prize rewarding authors who write about peoples and cultures that are not their own. Just as Beyak was compelled to defend White integrity, these journalists too saw the need to protect White entitlement. When Indigenous artists and leaders in Canada criticized Niedzviecki for dismissing the racist systemic barriers faced by Aboriginal writers and for failing to recognize “how deeply painful acts of cultural appropriation have been to Indigenous people[s]” (Lederman & Medley, 2017), these journalists responded by

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<sup>12</sup> Due to the backlash his statements on cultural appropriation triggered, Niedzviecki’s opinion piece, *Winning the Appropriation Prize*, was taken down shortly after it was published in May 2017.

championing White people's ability to continue appropriating that which does not belong to them.

The appropriation prize controversy calls to mind how Ta-Nehisi Coates referenced White privilege when he explains why White people should never say the N-word. Coates, an American author and journalist who has written extensively on White supremacy and African Americans, says that White privilege – or White people raised in a society whose laws and culture communicate that everything belongs to them – makes some White people feel as though they have a right to do anything (Ruiz-Grossman, 2017). This includes using “a word they have been repeatedly told is inappropriate for them to use” (Ruiz-Grossman, 2017). Although Coates writes specifically about the relations between African Americans and White people in the United States, his observation on White privilege explains the Canadian journalists' thoughtless behaviour and attitudes<sup>13</sup>. In line with his analysis on White entitlement, these journalists believe that they have the right to do anything, including appropriating the stories that belong to oppressed nations whose land and cultures have been and continue to be violently appropriated by White people.

*Toronto Star* race and gender columnist Shree Paradkar (2017) writes: “Instead of being compassionate about the rage they saw stemming from the pain of exclusion, [the journalists] ridiculed the marginalized among their own colleagues and readers they profess to represent”. These very journalists are responsible for driving an unbiased, objective news agenda. Yet their righteous rallying for the freedom of expression for a few, as Paradkar notes, reveals the deep investments White people have in race. White people “need raced others as the backdrop against which they may rise” (Morrison, 1992, as cited in DiAngelo, 2011). White hegemony is at stake when raced others step outside the subordinate positions subscribed to them by dominant White society to reclaim their rights, land, cultures, and identities. More importantly, when raced others refuse to be relegated to the lower ranks in society, the essential dichotomy between the

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<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, Coates suggests that the experience of being a White person not being able to use the N-word provides a little peek into the world of what it means to be black (Ruiz-Grossman, 2017). Coates says that this is because “to be [B]lack is to walk through the world and watch people doing things that you cannot do” (Ruiz-Grossman, 2017). When the White Canadian journalists threw their support behind establishing an appropriation prize, they were also fighting against being placed in a position where they had to watch people do things that they cannot do. The prospect of walking in the other's shoes brings extreme discomfort, and is to be avoided as it may reveal stark inequities that White people perpetuate in society.

former and the unracialized individual – White people – is exposed (DiAngelo, 2011). According to DiAngelo (2011), “inequality must be hidden or justified as resulting from lack of effort” as “[t]he existence of structural inequality undermines the claim that privilege is simply a reflection of hard work and virtue” (p. 60).

Here, it is important to understand the canon that Whiteness takes up within critical race theory. Whiteness “refers to the specific dimensions of racism that serve to elevate [W]hite people over people of colour” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 56). Racism, as defined by Whiteness scholars, constitutes “economic, political, social, and cultural structures, actions and beliefs that systemize and perpetuate an unequal distribution of privileges, resources and power between [W]hite people and people of colour” (Hilliard, 1992, as cited in DiAngelo, 2011, p. 56). Whiteness, as a constellation of processes and practices, “counters the dominant representation of racism in mainstream education as isolated in discrete behaviours that some individuals may or may not demonstrate, and goes beyond naming specific privileges” (McIntosh, 1988, as cited in DiAngelo, 2011, p. 56). Instead, these processes and practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed, include consistently granting basic rights, values, beliefs, perspectives and experiences – purported to be commonly shared by all – to White people (DiAngelo, 2011). Whiteness is also multi-dimensional, dynamic, relational, and constantly operating on multiple levels (DiAngelo, 2011). It is a location of structural advantage, and a standpoint from which White people look at themselves, others and at society (Frankenberg, 1993, as cited in DiAngelo, 2011, p. 56). This stance is evident in the instances I mentioned above. Beyak, the Proud Boys, and the White journalists who championed cultural appropriation were attempting to restore White racial equilibrium, where White superiority is sanctioned and naturalized. Beyak and the Proud Boys’ actions indicate that Indigenous peoples should be grateful and respectful towards White settlers who continue to marginalize them. The journalists, on the other hand, perceive Indigenous experiences as theirs for the taking because the Other is considered inferior and thus incapable of telling their own stories.

Ideological racism constitutes strongly positive images of the White self contrasted with strongly negative images of racial Others (DiAngelo, 2011). These images, in turn, engender “a self-perpetuating sense of entitlement.... [where] many [W]hites believe their financial and professional successes are the result of their own efforts while ignoring the fact of [W]hite privilege” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 61). White people

thus, have a limited understanding of racism as most of them “have not been trained to think complexly about racism in schools or mainstream discourse, and because it benefits White dominance not to do so” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 61). Their racial arrogance causes them to have no qualms about debating the knowledge of people who have thought complexly about race and to dismiss these informed perspectives rather than have the humility to acknowledge that such perspectives are unfamiliar, reflect on them further, or seek more information (DiAngelo, 2011). Although Whites are well-positioned to legitimize people of colour’s assertions of racism because of their social, economic, and political power, they are least likely to see, understand, or be invested in validating these assertions (DiAngelo, 2011). Contemporary Indigenous literature however, can play a pertinent role in mitigating such racial arrogance. The stories told by Indigenous writers engender room for people to take in unfamiliar perspectives that challenge their worldviews. These stories, while not immediate antidotes for racism, open a door for White settlers to reflexively examine their histories, values, and identities – a process that paves the way towards owning the colonial damage that continues to inflict Indigenous peoples.

White settlers like Mitic claim they feel unsafe or under attack when Whiteness is named, profoundly trivializing the “history of brutal, extensive, institutionalized and ongoing violence perpetrated by Whites against people of colour...” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 65). Subsequently, probing forbidden racial issues results in verbal incoherence, which is a consequence of talking about race in a world that insists race does not matter (DiAngelo, 2011). This verbal incoherence, which Mitic exhibits as he offers his take on Vermette’s (2016a) novel, demonstrates “that many [W]hite people are unprepared to engage... in an exploration of their racial perspectives that could lead to a shift in their understanding of racism” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 65). This unwillingness to examine their thoughts on race reveals White people’s ability to determine which narratives are authorized and which are suppressed (DiAngelo, 2011). Regulating narratives plays a large role in cultural domination, and in this case, serves to maintain White power (DiAngelo, 2011). Additionally, “if [W]hites cannot engage with an exploration of alternate racial perspectives, they can only reinscribe [W]hite perspectives as universal (DiAngelo, p.66). However, in liberating narratives that have been suppressed and offering truths that challenge White racial perspectives, contemporary Indigenous literature has the potential to disrupt White power.

DiAngelo (2011) states that it is critical for White people to build the stamina to sustain conscious and explicit engagement with race, as “[a] continual retreat from the discomfort of authentic racial engagement limits the ability to form authentic connections across racial lines...” (2011, p. 66). This inability, in turn, “results in a perpetual cycle that works to hold racism in place” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 66). In 2015, the CBC decided to suspend online comments on its online stories about Aboriginal people because these stories were drawing a disproportionate number of comments that violated their guidelines (Fenlon, 2015). Some of these comments were “clearly hateful and vitriolic, some [were] simply ignorant”, and “some appear[ed] to be hate disguised as ignorance”, wrote Brodie Fenlon, CBC's acting director of digital news (2015). These hurtful comments indicate Canadian settlers’ inability to engage with issues that are directly tied to race. Specifically, Canadian settlers – not having developed the ability to withstand any racial stress – resort to being defensive when confronted with information that underlines how we all live within a White racist society. Although CBC declared that the measure was a temporary one, online comments on Indigenous-related stories on the CBC news site remain suspended several years later. It seems that the racial climate in this nation remains stagnant and that there is little faith that Canadian settlers have developed the stamina to engage with race conscientiously.

Nonetheless, this does not excuse our unwillingness to mindfully engage with race. All individuals who live within a racist system are enmeshed in its relations and are therefore responsible for either maintaining or transforming that system (DiAngelo, 2011). DiAngelo (2011) makes it clear that White racism is ultimately a White problem and the burden for interrupting it lies on White people. However, she notes that while “anti-racist efforts ultimately seek to transform institutionalized racism, anti-racist education may be most effective by starting at the micro-level” (DiAngelo 2011, p. 66). To create a pace that is necessary for White people to approach the challenging study of race, it may be useful to start at a lower level of analysis and move upwards and outwards – that is, moving from the individual out to the interpersonal, societal and institutional (DiAngelo, 2011). Through this gradual approach, “a discourse on Whiteness becomes part of a process rather than an event” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 67). The life-writing that today’s Indigenous writers achieve is well-positioned to facilitate this process as the stories it engenders are oftentimes birthed through autobiographical

experiences. Yet these stories, centered on the personal and interpersonal, invite us to examine the societal and institutional forces that shape these lived experiences.

## **2.4. White Supremacy, Settler Colonialism & Indigenous-Settler Relations: Why Being Anti-Racist Is Not Enough**

Although her scholarly work largely focuses on Whiteness, DiAngelo (2011) notes that “dominant society ‘assigns’ different roles to different groups of colour” (p. 67). A critical consciousness about racism therefore “varies not only between individuals within groups, but also between groups” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 67). This section explores how White supremacy intersects with settler colonialism and how this interconnectedness informs the relationship between White settler colonizers and non-White settlers who participate in and uphold colonial practices, systems and institutions that continue to oppress and marginalize First Peoples. Consequently, I will examine how this relational matrix recruits non-White settlers as participants in Canada’s ongoing colonial project and is instrumental in race theory’s failure to dismantle settler colonialism and address Indigenous sovereignty in meaningful ways.

Scholar-activist Andrea Smith<sup>14</sup> (2010), whose work centres on genocidal and violent acts against non-White women, proposes that “ethnic studies elide Native claims to sovereignty by rendering Native peoples as ethnic groups suffering racial discrimination rather than as nations who are undergoing colonization” (p. 1). Ethnic studies and anti-racism activism assume that communities of colour share overlapping, oppressive experiences that they can compare and organize around (Smith, 2010). As a result, race scholars and activists focus on the uniqueness of particular histories of oppression when they observe that this melting pot approach to understanding racism erases critical differences between groups (Smith, 2010). This focused approach

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<sup>14</sup> Andrea Smith continues to claim Cherokee identity despite not being enrolled in any federally recognized Cherokee tribe, the lack of documentation proving her Indigenous roots, and reported admissions around her own uncertainty about her Cherokee descent. In 2015, a group of Indigenous scholars and activists wrote an open letter, which stated that Smith’s insistence on identifying as a Native woman or a woman of colour have destructive intellectual and political consequences, including adding to “the vulnerability of the communities and constituents she purports to represent” (Indian Country Today, 2015). While I acknowledge that her ancestry claims are troubling as it reproduces colonial practices of appropriating Indigenous identities to centre White voices, her analyses on settler colonialism and White supremacy remain highly relevant to my arguments on how contemporary Indigenous literature can fill the gaps that exist in antiracism studies.

however fails to challenge the models premised on racial solidarity, as those who devote their resources to addressing specific histories of oppression believe that such models work for all groups except theirs (Smith, 2010).

Smith (2010) begins her article *Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy*, by outlining the three pillars of White supremacy: the logic of slavery, the logic of genocide, and the logic of orientalism. The logic of genocide “renders [B]lack people as inherently enslaveable”, and anchors capitalism (Smith, 2010, p. 2). The logic of genocide holds that Indigenous people must always be disappearing to enable settlers’ rightful claim to land (Smith, 2010). Through this logic, settlers then become the rightful inheritors of all that is Indigenous, including land, resources, Indigenous spirituality, and culture (Smith, 2010). The logic of genocide anchors colonialism by allowing “non-Native peoples to feel they can rightfully own [I]ndigenous peoples’ land” (Smith, 2010, p. 2). The logic of orientalism<sup>15</sup>, on the other hand, “marks certain peoples or nations as inferior and deems them to be a constant threat to the wellbeing of empire” (Smith, 2010, p. 2). This logic is evident in anti-immigration movements that target non-White immigrants (Smith, 2010). Smith maintains that these immigrants generally become targeted as foreign threats no matter how long they have resided in the global North (Smith, 2010). Orientalism subsequently anchors warfare as it allows countries in the global North to protect itself from its enemies (Smith, 2010). On the whole, it allows White nations “to defend the logics of slavery and genocide as these practices enable [them] to stay ‘strong enough’ to fight these constant wars” (Smith, 2010, p. 2).

Upon closer examination, a model that organizes non-Whites based on shared victimhood not only renders us as victims of White supremacy, but complicit in it as well (Smith, 2010). Smith (2010) notes that this is primarily because “[o]ur survival strategies and resistance to [W]hite supremacy are set by the system of [W]hite supremacy itself” (p. 2). Specifically, the ability to participate in the other pillars that uphold White supremacy keeps us trapped within the particular pillar that oppresses our own existence (Smith, 2010). In Canada, for example, non-Indigenous peoples – newcomers like myself – are promised opportunities to join the colonial project of settling Indigenous lands. At the same time, First Peoples are promised economic and political

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<sup>15</sup> Edward Said, a scholar who pioneered postcolonial studies, coined the word ‘Orientalism’ to refer to how the West deems itself as a superior civilization by “constructing itself in opposition to an ‘exotic’ but inferior ‘Orient’” (Smith, 2010, p. 2).

advancement if they join wars to spread democracy. Thousands of Aboriginals, most who volunteered, participated in World War I and II as well as the Korean War. Many lost their reserve lands when they returned because their lands had been appropriated by the Soldier Settlement Board to assist non-Indigenous veterans. They also lost their Indian status as the Indian Act ruled that those who were absent from the reserve for four consecutive years would have their status revoked (Peters, 2014). Given how non-Whites simultaneously suffer from and perpetrate White supremacy, coalition work should not only be organized around oppression, “but also around complicity in the oppression of other peoples as well as our own” (Smith, 2010, p. 3).

While the stories written by Lindberg (2015), Vermette (2016a), and Robinson (2017a) address the logic of genocide enacted through the erasure of Indigenous peoples, their ontologies and epistemologies, it is important to understand how the logics underlying White supremacy intersect. This knowledge is crucial in recognizing how non-White settlers remain complicit in the continuing colonization of Indigenous nations. It is an excellent justification for why the stories written by Canada’s Indigenous authors should be widely read by both White and non-White settlers. These stories reveal how White supremacy operates through multiple logics, especially for non-White settlers already conscious to the specific ways they are being oppressed by a White-dominated society. Additionally, these stories may shed light on why we should attempt to organize around the differential impacts brought about by White supremacist logics rather than categories based on presumed cultural similarities (Rodriguez, 2010, as cited in Smith, 2010).

Smith (2010) suggests that the logic of genocide is not fully explored because it is relegated to the past. Like the United States, Canada has shifted from “a racial dictatorship characterised by ‘the mass murder and expulsion of Indigenous people’ to a racial democracy in which ‘the balance of coercion began to change’” (Omi & Winant, 1994, as cited in Smith, 2010, p. 4). As Canada currently defines itself as a democracy characterized by “inclusive and accountable governance, peaceful pluralism and respect for diversity and human rights” (Government of Canada, 2017a), settler colonialism – which entails erasing Indigenous people – consequently disappears as a problem. In Canada, the damage settler colonialism continues to inflict is indeed construed as problems from the past so much so that Senator Murray Sinclair felt the need to explain during a public forum on the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

(MMIWG) national inquiry why Indigenous people who survived residential schools can't just get over their residential school experiences. The Indian Residential School (IRS) system has caused intergenerational trauma amongst Aboriginal communities and families, which accounts for the high rates of addiction, abuse, violence, death and illness amongst Indigenous peoples. The colonial project aimed at eradicating Indigenous people, however, continues to unfold in many other ways. Indigenous people are continuously subjected to a justice system that is set against them<sup>16</sup>, forced sterilization<sup>17</sup>, and underfunded on-reserve child welfare systems<sup>18</sup> among other things.

The colonial project bears deep significance in Canadian society as the nation state can only exist through eradicating First Peoples (Smith, 2010). This makes the nation state a racial one, where race is integral to its conceptual, philosophical and material emergence, and to its ongoing management (Goldberg, 2002). Yet, because “racial theorists often lack an analysis of settler colonialism, they do not imagine other forms of governance that are not founded on the racial state” (Smith, 2010, p. 4). Additionally, collapsing Indigenous peoples into other racialized groups erases their relationship to the land and reifies the settler colonial project (Smith, 2010)<sup>19</sup>. Yet, it is important to recognize that Whites are not simply invested in Whiteness, but are also invested in ‘Nativeness’ (Smith, 2010). While Whiteness operates as a weapon of genocide to eliminate Indigenous peoples, it also ensures that Indigenous peoples “disappear into [W]hiteness so that [W]hite people in turn become the worthy inheritors of all that is [I]ndigenous” (Smith, 2010, p. 6). Assimilatory legislation of the Indian Act clearly demonstrates this White investment in Indigenousness. Indigenous peoples who

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<sup>16</sup> In a submission to the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) (2017), the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres (OFIFC) stated that Indigenous people suffer egregious treatment by law enforcement that takes the form of targeted questioning, harassment, and provocation, and can lead to police brutality, charges, and the act of ‘over-charging’ individuals.

<sup>17</sup> A CBC news article reported that sterilization without informed consent was performed on an Indigenous woman as recently as 2018 in Saskatchewan (Zingel, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> In Ontario, chronic underfunding of on-reserve child welfare systems has resulted in 102 deaths of Indigenous children between 2013 to 2017 (Jackson, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Smith (2010) notes that while there have been calls to go beyond the Black-White binary and include other non-White communities with the growth of multiculturalism, such propositions are flawed (p. 6). Specifically, these calls replace “an analysis of [W]hite supremacy with a politics of multicultural representation; if we just include more peoples, then our practice will be less racist” (Smith, 2010, p. 6). They do not address how White supremacy is structured through the logics of slavery, genocide and orientalism (Smith, 2010). Instead, these calls to embrace multiculturalism “often rely on an immigrant paradigm of ‘exclusion’ from the settler state that does not challenge the conditions of the settler state itself” (Smith, 2010, p. 6).

obtained university degrees, became professionals, served in the Canadian armed forces, voted in federal elections, or married non-Indigenous men had their Indian status revoked. Thus, as Smith emphasizes, we “fail to account for the intersecting logics of [W]hite supremacy and settler colonialism” when we focus solely on White people’s possessive investment in Whiteness (2010, p. 6).

When we fail to critically examine settler colonialism and how the logics of White supremacy intersect, we are prevented from imagining an alternative to the racial state (Smith, 2010). Not only does this failure negate the opportunity for non-White settlers to learn how they are complicit in settler colonialism, but it also shifts Indigenous aspirations from decolonization to gaining recognition from the settler state (Coulthard, 2007, as cited in Smith, 2010). To advance in a racial settler state where White supremacy escapes scrutiny as an intricate system, Indigenous nations express their political goals in terms of “capital and political power from the state through land claims, economic development initiatives, and self-government processes” (Coulthard, 2007, p. 438). Consequently, they unsuspectingly relegate themselves as racial minorities who are competing with other minorities for recognition and lose their ability to build the necessary political power to end colonialism (Smith, 2010). The power that the settler state holds remains uncompromised as it continues to arbitrate claims from competing minority groups (Smith, 2010).

Without centering an analysis of settler colonialism and how settler colonialism is anchored by White supremacy, anti-racism and decolonization efforts fall back on assuming that the White-supremacist, settler state is given and absolute (Smith, 2010). Smith (2010) observes that many racial-justice theorists and activists “unwittingly recapitulate [W]hite supremacy by failing to imagine a struggle against [W]hite supremacy outside the constraints of the settler state, which is by definition [W]hite supremacist” (Smith, 2010, p. 10). She argues succinctly that if we do not define the settler state as fundamentally White supremacist, “then we will not see that it will never have an interest in leaving Native nations alone” (p. 8). Here, it is worth noting the immense value that Aboriginal literature holds. The stories told by Indigenous authors not only offer us lessons on how White supremacy works through multiple logics, but they also introduce us to Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies – other ways of being and knowing, which highlight that the world order hasn’t always been the way it is. These stories encourage us to imagine ways to exist outside the limitations set by the

racial settler state and to work towards transcendent change where systems that distribute power more equitably are possible.

While any decolonization and anti-racism project begins with the political and legal conditions that we currently live under, leaving us with little choice but to use the political and legal instruments before us, we should nevertheless remain alert to how we can be co-opted by using them (Lyons, 2010, as cited in Smith, 2010, p. 9-10). An extensive examination of White supremacy and settler colonialism would hence, provide us with the ability to identify when and how White supremacy logics are thwarting our efforts and encourage racialized groups to find meaningful ways to work with each other. More importantly, such intelligence will empower us to build on our anti-racism and decolonization projects by “rethinking liberation outside the framework of the [W]hite-supremacist, settler state” (Alfred, 2005, as cited in Smith, 2010, p. 9-10). At the same time, all settlers “become morally undifferentiated” when we fail to critique the settler state as a White supremacist one (Smith, 2010, p. 8). Non-White settlers’ participate in settler colonialism because political, economic and social advancement, as determined in White society, is contingent on implementing White supremacy logics despite continually being oppressed by them.

Antiracist scholars Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua (2005) write that:

... there is something deeply wrong with the manner in which, in our own lands, antiracism does not begin with, and reflect, the totality of Native peoples’ lived experiences – that is, with the genocide that established and maintains all of the settler states within the Americas. (p. 121)

Along with Smith (2010), both Lawrence and Dua (2005) maintain that antiracism is premised on an ongoing colonial project. They assert that Canadian antiracism furthers contemporary colonial agendas rather than challenging the ongoing colonization of Aboriginal peoples (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). Specifically, antiracism theory “ignores the ongoing colonization of Aboriginal peoples in the Americas”, and fails to “integrate an understanding of Canada as a colonialist state into antiracist frameworks” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 123). Like Smith, Lawrence and Dua observe that antiracist and postcolonial theorists erroneously assume that colonial genocide has ended, that Indigenous peoples “have been ‘consigned to the dustbin of history’ and no longer need to be taken into account” (Spivak, 1994, as cited in Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 123). These assumptions align with settler nation-building myths, where First Peoples

“become unreal figures, rooted in the nation’s prehistory, who died out and no longer need to be taken seriously” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 123).

Lawrence and Dua (2005) further explore the willed forgetfulness around colonial genocide. They underline that being consigned to ‘the dustbin of history’ means being precluded from existing as real people in the present and being denied the possibility of regenerating nationhood (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). Consequently, Indigenous peoples are reduced to “small groups of racially and culturally defined and marginalized individuals drowning in a sea of settlers – who needn’t be taken seriously” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 123-124). The Canadian government, on the other hand, continues divesting responsibility for how colonialism impacts Aboriginal peoples “while holding onto their land base and resources, redefining without reforming, and further entrenching in law and practice the real basis of its power” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 125). For instance, the Canadian legal system frequently deploys colonial laws to deny possibilities of sovereignty and to criminalize Indigenous protest (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). The Supreme Court’s 2018 decision, which ruled that Canadian lawmakers “do not have a duty to consult with Indigenous people before introducing legislation that might affect constitutionally protected Indigenous and treaty rights” (Tasker, 2018), exemplifies the rule of law at work to pre-empt Indigenous sovereignty<sup>20</sup>.

First Peoples deserve to re-establish control over their nations and communities under a legal framework that brings their existing and returned lands under their own authority (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). This in turn, “requires a total rethinking of Canada; sovereignty and self-determination must be genuinely on the table as fundamental to Indigenous survival, not as lip service” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 125-126). Yet, the question of Indigenous land as contested space is seldom taken up in antiracism theory and practice (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). Above all, this absence in antiracism theory and

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<sup>20</sup> A recent example of this would be how the B.C. Supreme Court granted an injunction in Coastal GasLink’s favour so that the natural gas company could continue building a natural gas pipeline on Wet’suwet’en unceded traditional territory. This injunction was allowed to stand despite the Supreme Court of Canada’s decision on the *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* case in December 1997, which not only states that Aboriginal title could not be extinguished, but “that Aboriginal title rights include not only land, but the right to extract resources from the land” (Hernandez, 2020). Although the Supreme Court’s decision also states that Aboriginal rights could be infringed on for economic development, such infringements can only take place when adequate consultation has taken place and when the benefit reaped is commensurable to any harmful effect on the Aboriginal interest (Hernandez, 2020). The pipeline was approved even though no infringements had been justified in court (Hernandez, 2020).

practice speaks to White and non-White settlers' reluctance "to acknowledge that there is more to this land than being settlers on it, that there are deeper, older stories and knowledge connected to the landscapes around us" (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 126).

Lawrence and Dua (2005) also highlight, how along with critical race theory, postcolonial theory has also failed to make Indigenous presence and colonization foundational. For example, theories on Black, Asian, or Hispanic diasporic identities fail to address that these identities "are situated in multiple projects of colonization and settlement on Indigenous lands" (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 128). Scholarship on the history of slavery for instance, erase the histories of colonization (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). Additionally, claims that modernity began with slavery rather than with the genocide and colonization of Indigenous peoples in the Americas, obliterates Indigenous presence (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). Lawrence and Dua point out that the largest mass hanging in U.S. history involving 38 men who were accused of participating in an uprising in Minnesota was ordered by President Lincoln during the same week he had signed the Emancipation Proclamation (Cook-Lynn, 1996, p. 63, as cited in Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 130). Equally notable was the "resounding silence among anti-slavery activists, women's suffragists, labor leaders, and ex-slaves such as Frederick Douglas concerning land theft and Indigenous genocide" (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 130). Their silence reveals the consensus among diverse activists that the insertion of non-settlers into nation-building projects in the U.S. and Canada was to continue on Indigenous land, regardless of the cost to Indigenous peoples" (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). Critical race and postcolonial scholars have thus "systematically excluded ongoing colonization from the ways in which racism is articulated" (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 130). By doing so, they erase the presence of Indigenous peoples and their ongoing struggles for decolonization (Lawrence & Dua, 2005).

Even when antiracist and postcolonial scholars include Aboriginal peoples and decolonization in their theoretical frameworks, decolonization politics becomes equated with antiracist politics (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). This in turn places decolonization and antiracism within a liberal-pluralist framework, decentering decolonization altogether (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). Such pluralism not only marginalizes decolonization struggles, but also "continues to obscure the complex ways in which people of colour have participated in projects of settlement" (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 131). As Cherokee theologian Jace Weaver (1998) puts forth, postcolonial theory holds little meaning for

Indigenous peoples until it takes the “collective character of Native traditional life and the importance of specific lands to the cultural identities of different Native peoples” seriously (as cited in Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 127).

Lawrence and Dua (2005) further argue that the postcolonial emphasis on deconstructing nationhood facilitates Indigenous denationalization for those who have been targeted for physical and cultural extermination for centuries and face added fragmentation through identity legislation. Existing perspectives on nationalism in postcolonial theory do not “enable Indigenous peoples in the Americas to envision a future separate from continuous engulfment by the most powerful colonial order in the world, or their continuous erasure...” (Venne, 1998, as cited in Lawrence & Dua, p. 132). In other words, postcolonial theory does not recognize Indigenous nations as nations as deconstructing nationalism is premised on the erasure of an ongoing post-contact Indigenous presence (Le Camp, 1995, as cited in Lawrence & Dua, p. 132). Equally problematic is postcolonialism’s failure to understand how Aboriginal peoples actualize nationhood and sovereignty. Not only did Indigenous nationhood exist before Columbus, but it is conceptualized “by moving beyond a linkage of a nation to the state and/or modernity and other European-based ideas and values” (Sunseri, 2005, as cited in Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 132).

Without including Aboriginal peoples and taking decolonization into account, the knowledge constructed on race, racism, racial subjectivities and antiracism leaves much to be desired. Ignoring Indigenous presence within antiracism scholarship fundamentally flaws how we understand Canada and its history, which largely captures White settler racism against immigrants of colour (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). If First Peoples are mentioned in Canadian history at all, they are mostly mentioned in reference to their first contact with European colonizers (or ‘pioneers’, as Canadian history prefers to call them) (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). And when mentioned, they are often referred to as generic ‘First Nations’ even though there are over 600 distinct First Nations groups with governments recognized by the Canadian state. The generic term ‘First Nations’ thus bears “exactly the degree of specificity and historical meaning as ‘people of colour’” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 133). Accordingly, “the ‘vanishing Indian’ is as alive in antiracism scholarship as it is in mainstream Canada” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 133).

The complex relationships people of colour have with settler projects – and, consequently, with Indigeneity – also goes unacknowledged when antiracism scholarship and projects exclude Indigenous presence (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). While non-White settlers are marginalized by a White settler nationalist project, they are invited to take part in ongoing colonialism as citizens (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). Despite broad differences that exist between those brought to North America as slaves, migrant labourers, refugees without legal documentation, and new Canadian citizens – differences that are nevertheless important to acknowledge – “people of colour live on land that is appropriated and contested, where Aboriginal peoples are denied nationhood and access to their own lands” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 134). The history of non-Whites settling in North America is primarily framed by racist exclusion and fails to address the fact that their settlement takes place on Indigenous land (Lawrence & Dua, 2005).

While antiracism scholarship effectively identifies the Canadian nation-state project as a White settlement initiative that marginalizes and restricts non-Whites from entering Canada, it falls short by failing to address how Aboriginal peoples were displaced and targeted for physical and cultural extermination to open land for settlers (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). Non-White settlers are therefore, however unwittingly, placed in colonial relationships with Indigenous peoples (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). Lawrence and Dua (2005) point out that in some cases, Indigenous peoples have been subjugated by the military to make it possible for newcomers to settle in Canada. Not much thought has been given to how such violence against Indigenous peoples “was the precondition for restrictions that ensured that the settler population replacing Native peoples would be [W]hite” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 134). Additionally, choosing not to acknowledge “those who were exterminated to ‘free up’ the land for settlement is to be complicit in erasing genocide” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 134) – that is, to deliberately disremember and therefore expunge the horrific acts committed against Indigenous peoples. To focus just on those whose presence eclipses Indigenous realities despite the levels of discrimination they face while effacing this history of bloody repression is racially divisive and erroneous (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 134).

Ongoing colonization and decolonization struggles must be foundational to how we understand racism, racial subjectivities, and how we construct knowledge on antiracism (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). This involves thinking about how antiracist

campaigns “can pre-empt the ability of Aboriginal communities to establish title to their traditional lands” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 136). Within academia, antiracist theorists “must learn how to write, research, and teach in ways that account for Indigenous realities as foundational” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 137). Lawrence and Dua point out that “to speak of opening borders without addressing Indigenous land loss and ongoing struggles to reclaim territories is to divide communities that are already marginalized from one another” (2005, p. 136). At the same time, we also need to explicitly articulate how settlement policies intersect with policies aimed at eradicating Indigenous peoples when we speak about histories of settlement in Canada (Lawrence & Dua, 2005).

Subsequently, efforts to make colonization foundational to antiracism must be accompanied by dialogue between antiracism theorists and activists, and Indigenous scholars and communities that takes place on Indigenous terms (Lawrence & Dua, 2005). This not only entails listening to Aboriginal people “speak to the realities of contemporary colonization and resistance”, but also having conversations that “take place within Indigenous epistemological frameworks and values – addressing culture, traditional values, and spirituality – as central to any real sharing of concerns” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 137). Lawrence and Dua (2005) contend that “[t]aking colonization seriously changes antiracism in powerful ways (p. 137). Making colonization foundational to antiracism grants antiracism scholars and activists the freedom to work outside constraints that the racial settler state imposes through its institutions, systems and culture. This freedom would render antiracism projects more meaningful and effective as a nation state invested in Whiteness – that is, a White supremacist state – would only set such antiracism initiatives up for failure.

## **2.5. Reader Response Theory: Building a Bridge Between Text & Reader**

Contemporary Indigenous literature in Canada holds immense potential for advancing social justice in settler society. Stories written by Indigenous authors, conceived by lived experiences impacted by colonial damage, challenge the colonial creation myths fiercely guarded by the racial settler state. On a deeper level, these stories reveal how White supremacy operates through multiple logics, and offer meaningfully progressive ways to understand racism, racial subjectivities and how we construct knowledge on antiracism. They help us to envision decolonized spaces and

transformed realities that have yet to be imagined collectively, thus supporting initiatives to reconstruct a societal culture and relationships that transcend colonial thought and practice. Nevertheless, as Episkenew (2009) highlights, sharing stories through an Indigenous paradigm is a relational act that actively involves the audience. While stories have the power to enter the listener or reader, this section on reader response theory explores how the latter is transformed by reading them. Specifically, this section examines how readers interact with literary texts as active agents and the ways they analyze and understand the lessons imbued in the stories they consume.

According to literary scholar Wolfgang Iser (1974), the phenomenological theory of art stresses that “one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text” when considering a literary work (p. 274). There is more to the literary work than just the text as the text only takes on life when it is realized by the reader (Iser, 1974). Similarly, the transactional theory of reading pioneered by Louise Rosenblatt (1978) “underlines the essential importance of both elements, reader and text, in any reading event” (p. 18). The researcher on the teaching of literature states that “[a] person becomes a reader by virtue of his activity in relationship to a text, which he organizes as a set of verbal symbols” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 18). For instance, the set of marks on a page becomes the text of a poem or a scientific formula through its relationship with a reader who can interpret it and access the world of the work (Rosenblatt, 1978).

Iser (1974) also describes the literary work as having an artistic and an esthetic pole. The artistic pole refers to “the text created by the author, and the esthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader” (Iser, 1974, p. 274). This polarity means that the literary work “cannot be completely identical with the text, or with the realization of the text, but in fact must lie halfway between the two” (Iser, 1974, p. 274). While the literary work is brought into existence when the text and reader converge, Iser suggests that this convergence cannot be pinpointed (Iser, 1974). In his book, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communications in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (1974), Iser describes how “reading causes the literary work to unfold its inherently dynamic character” (p. 275). The reader sets the work in motion by using the various perspectives offered to him by the text to connect patterns and ‘schematized views’ to one another (Iser, 1974). This process in turn, elicits responses within the reader (Iser, 1974).

The way that one experiences the text however, is a complex process. To a certain degree, the literary text acts as a mirror and reflects the reader's own disposition (Iser, 1974). But this process also helps to create a reality that is different from the reader's, thus producing a "paradoxical situation in which the reader is forced to reveal aspects of [themselves] in order to experience a reality which is different from [their] own" (Iser, 1974, p. 281-282). Iser further explains that the impact this newly established reality makes on the reader largely depends on the extent that they actively provide the unwritten part of the text, which they can only do by thinking in terms of experiences different from their own (Iser, 1974). Hence, "it is only by leaving behind the familiar world of his own experience that the reader can truly participate in the adventure the literary text offers him" (Iser, 1974, p. 282).

In the same vein, Dennis Sumara (1996), whose research focuses on literary engagement and learning, affirms that including the practice of reading literary fictions in one's life "means being prepared to have the order of one's life rearranged" (p. 9). Reading literary fiction allows the reader to eventually perceive their world differently as it invokes their imagination (Sumara, 1996). In other words, "the reader must 'relinquish the world in order to have the world'" (Grumet 1991, as cited in Sumara, 1996, p. 9). Iser (1978), as well, contends that learning something "always feels at first as if you had lost something" (Shaw, 1964, as cited in Iser, 1978, p. 132). Further exploring this notion of 'leaving' the familiar world, Sumara likens forming relationships with the literary work to playing the game 'Hide and Seek' (1996). He notes that we often speak of getting 'lost' when we talk about engaging with novels, thus suggesting that "it is only by becoming lost will we be found", and that there "is something hidden which is sought" (Sumara, 1996, p. 66). Here, the hidden constitutes the "spaces deliberately left by author between that which is given and that which must be formulated by the reader" (Sumara, 1996, p. 66). While the game of the text is made possible by these gaps, there are no predetermined interpretations for them (Sumara, 1996). These spaces can only be fulfilled by "what has been learned through the playing of 'hide and seek' in the relational space between reader and text" (Sumara, 1996, p. 69).

Nonetheless, it is important to understand that becoming lost or hidden in the literary work is not a disorientation or a loss of direction (Sumara, 1996). Rather, it is a loss of "the 'given path' (the lived world) in order that a 'possible' path (an imagined world that includes the reader's engagement with a literary fiction) may be found"

(Sumara, 1996, p. 67). In particular, "...it is the playing, the hiding, the losing that allows one to be sought and eventually found" (Sumara, 1996, p. 67). The relation between the text and the reader has not been meaningful if the reader is never 'found' as the reader learns something about themselves only in the evocation of meaning between reader and text (Sumara, 1996).

As beautiful as the hide and seek analogy Sumara (1996) provides on reading literary texts is, this process, when performed by settler readers of contemporary Indigenous literature, must be facilitated by consuming additional texts that teach us about settler colonial violence. They must recognize their own complicity and implication in the loss and suffering caused by colonial violence, and struggle with questions of their responsibilities and commitments to the Other (McGonegal, 2009, as cited in Eigenbrod, 2014). Reading these additional texts alongside novels like *Birdie* (2015), *The Break* (2016a), and *Son of a Trickster* (2017a) thus, safeguards against relying on prevalent negative stereotypes and myths of Indigenous peoples to interpret the literary work. Contextualizing the stories written by Aboriginal authors like Lindberg (2015), Vermette (2016a), and Robinson (2017a) through prior knowledge on the historical and ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples is especially crucial so that the reader – while getting lost so that they will be found again – does not find themselves in the same location where they have yet to learn, imagine, or experience anything new.

Reading literary fiction is indeed a process of self-discovery as we "can only know our selves in relation to the other" (Sumara, 1996, p. 70). Rather than being found in our bodies, our sense of self, mind and consciousness is realized through "the ecology of our intertextual relations in the world" (Sumara, 1996, p. 70). Similarly, the meaning of the literary text and reader cannot be considered in isolation (Sumara, 1996). Rosenblatt (1978) suggests that each reader brings a specific past life and literary history, along with a repertory of internalized 'codes' learned from dominant society and an active present to the reading transaction. These elements play a role in "achieving both the work-as-evoked and... [the reader's] interpretation of it" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 144-145). The 'new' experience that the reading transaction brings subsequently challenges the reader's assumptions and understandings (Rosenblatt, 1978). At this point, the reader may be compelled "to clarify [their] own values, [their] own prior sense of the world and its possibilities" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 145). Iser (1978) too, notes how reading has a structure that is similar to experiencing an unfamiliar event, as the

reader's entanglement with the literary text "has the same effect of pushing [their] various criteria of orientation back into the past, thus suspending their validity for the new present" (p. 132).

Yet achieving self discovery or re-discovery through establishing relationships with literary fiction requires "living in between submission to and dominance over the text" (Sumara, 1996, p. 67). Sumara (1996) warns that the game is not effectively played if the reader is overly domineering or overly subservient. There will also be no relation formed between reader and text if the former is not able or willing to engage in the construction of meaning (Sumara, 1996). After all, "[p]lay fulfills its purpose only if the player loses himself in play" (Gadamer, 1976, as cited in Sumara, 1996, p. 66). Someone like Jody Mitic, who doesn't take the game seriously because he is not willing to lose himself while giving over to the text, "is a spoilsport" (Gadamer, 1976, as cited in Sumara, 1996, p. 66). His refusal to further engage with Vermette's (2016a) novel because he was bothered by how a character describes the way White men laugh in the first few pages is synonymous with his refusal to lose himself while giving over to the text.

Mitic was not prepared to – as Sumara (1996) suggests readers do – have his life order rearranged. By refusing to accept that there are realities where Whiteness is not considered normal and neutral but is imbued with power and privilege, Mitic fails miserably at invoking the imagination and thus, also fails at perceiving the world differently. To form a meaningful relationship with the text, one needs to learn to be uncomfortable and to live with ambiguity (Sumara, 1996). Just like any relationship, Sumara puts forth that the one between reader and text demands a tolerance for not knowing (1996). Specifically, reading "requires moving, locating, and relocating one's self in relations to a co-emergent world" (Sumara, 1996, p. 78). It is an act that continually bridges newly opened spaces that materialize in the "ever-emerging intertextual fabric or lived experience" (Sumara, 1996, p. 78). This observation is especially relevant to reading stories written by Indigenous authors like Lindberg (2015), Vermette (2016a), and Robinson (2017a), as such stories introduce us to realities that have been ignored and suppressed by the racial settler state.

Sumara (1996) however distinguishes the experience of engaging with literary texts from other kinds of texts. While we form reading relations with all texts we read,

“the relationship between the reader and the literary fiction often becomes more generative, more transformative than our relations with other texts” (Sumara, 1996, p. 80). Given that the reader must engage their imaginations to make meaning from the literary text, the relationship the reader establishes with the text requires them to journey beyond the confines of the symbolic system (Sumara, 1996). This relationship in turn, opens us a transformational space where the reader’s world becomes re-woven (Sumara, 1996). Consequently, “it is this re-weaving of the reader’s self that alters the reader’s interactions with the world” (Sumara, 1996, p. 80). Here, it is important to note that forming a relationship with a literary fiction is not just an escape from one’s lived world (Sumara, 1996). Rather, it is a relationship that becomes a transformative space conceived by the reader’s imagination (Sumara, 1996).

In exploring reader response theory, I have thus far focused on the esthetic pole of the literary work, which focuses on how the literary work is realized by the reader. To further explore the role that the text itself plays in bringing forth meaning, I would now like to shift the discussion onto the artistic pole of the literary work. The literary text is a system, which shares the basic structure of the dominant thought and social systems. However, Iser (1978) argues that the literary text interferes with this structure as it takes the prevalent systems as its context, “but does not reproduce the frame of reference which stabilizes these systems” (p. 71). Specifically, the literary text does not produce the expectations provided by the dominant systems but sets up a “parallel frame within which meaningful patterns are to form” (Iser, 1978, p. 71). In this parallel frame, the literary text does not reproduce the system to which it refers, but takes the possibilities that have been neutralized or negated by that system as its dominant ‘meaning’ (Iser, 1978). The literary text hence activates “that which the system has left inactive” (Iser, 1978, p. 72).

The stories written by Indigenous authors like Lindberg (2015), Vermette (2016a), and Robinson (2017a), embody these wonderfully disruptive systems that Iser describes literary texts as. While their stories are written in the colonizer’s language, the truths embedded in them defy colonial narratives that constitute dominant systems in Canada. Consequently, even though these stories share the basic structure of prevalent systems through language, they do not reproduce the values or expectations that sustain such systems. Instead, they supply the “possibilities [that] have been excluded by the prevalent system” (Iser, 1978, p. 73). At the same time, is imperative to

understand that the reader's previous point of references and their prior sense of the world are not erased by the new possibilities that reading literary fictions brings. Iser (1978) maintains that the reader does not receive the text by identifying two different experiences – the old and the new – but through the interaction between the two. He explains that the reader's past remains, but “begins to interact with the as yet unfamiliar presence of the text” (Iser, 1978, p. 132).

In particular, their past feelings, views and values are evoked and restructured through merging with the new perspectives and experiences offered by the text (Iser, 1978). This restructuring in turn, gives form to the new experience conceived by the reading transaction (Iser, 1978). The intersection between the new and old that unfolds while the reader forms a relationship with the literary text is therefore not a mere composition of forces. (Iser, 1978). Rather, it is a “re-creation in which the present impulsion gets form and solidity while the old, the ‘stored’, material is literally revived, given new life and soul through having to meet a new situation” (Dewey, 1958, as cited in Iser, 1978, p. 132). As Rosenblatt (1978) succinctly puts forth: the relation between reader and text is “an event at a particular time and place in which each element conditions the other” (p. 16). It is essentially an experience that refuses linearity (Rosenblatt, 1978).

## **2.6. Conclusion: Crossing the Bridge**

Sumara (2002), in his book *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters: Imagination, Interpretation, Insight*, proposes that “reading literature can be a focal practice that creates the possibility for deep insight” (p. xiii). Iser (1978) describes processing literary texts as a “self-sharpening” experience, one that “does not organize materials, but transforms minds” (Fish, 1970, as cited in Iser, 1978, p. 32). In the following chapters, I will illustrate how contemporary Indigenous literature such as the stories written by Lindberg (2015), Vermette (2016a), and Robinson (2017a), are well-poised to recast Indigenous and settler relationships in non-oppressive ways. Engaging meaningfully with such stories – that is, developing relationships with them – exercises one's imagination and creates transformational space, where one's knowledge on racism, antiracism, and decolonization can evolve.

The three novels I have chosen to examine hold truths that document the colonial damage inflicted on Indigenous peoples by the settler state. In presenting narratives that highlight how the Canadian nation-state is founded on psychological terrorism and theft orchestrated by a settler society founded on White supremacy, these literary texts give life to realities that have been silenced by settler institutions and cultures. These texts centre meanings, values, lives, and possibilities that are suppressed by dominant society. In Iser's (1978) words, these texts activate that which dominant systems have left inactive, without reproducing the systems it references by way of language. These literary texts therefore pave the way for self-discovery, where readers learn about themselves and expand how they perceive the world and exist in it, in relation to the Other. Literature, is after all, "a product that is created by people who make it their business to interrupt the familiarity of their own perception and interpretations of the way the world 'really is'" (Sumara, 2002, p. 157).

However, as Mitic demonstrated on live television, "access to information does not guarantee understanding, nor does it necessarily create the conditions for deep insight" (Sumara, 2002, p. xiv). A relationship with the literary work must be established for one to recognize the truths that exist outside their experience, so that these truths might in turn advance their development (Sumara, 2002). As Rosenblatt (1978) explains, the reader who reflects on the world of the literary work and their responses to that world, "can achieve a certain self-awareness, a certain perspective on [their] own preoccupations, [their] own system of values" (p. 146). I believe that this learning process, which engaging meaningfully with a literary text involves, helps us to advance how we understand racism.

Among other things, the stories told by Lindberg (2015), Vermette (2016a), and Robinson (2017a) bring attention to Canada's genocidal practices against Aboriginal people through blatant violence, assimilation, land theft, and the erasure of Indigenous cultures, languages, and laws – all which have been, and continue to be, achieved through institutionalizing and normalizing White superiority and settler privilege. Establishing a relationship with their written stories would instigate us to re-examine our beliefs that have been influenced by the colonial master narrative. This master narrative positions Canada as a benevolent nation founded on peaceful negotiation instead of colonial violence, and excuses the colonial damage that has been and continues to be inflicted on Indigenous peoples. It would hopefully prompt an awareness of how these

colonial practices are unfolding in real time, the damage they continue to cause across communities and generations and consequently, how we participate in such practices.

More importantly, I argue that the transformational space engendered by engaging with such literary works plays a key role in facilitating how we reshape our knowledge on antiracism and decolonization outside the constraints of the dominant settler state, its systems and its inherent values. There are decolonized societies, cultures, and relationships, and other transformed realities that transcend the logics of White supremacy, that are waiting to be envisioned in these spaces. Engaging deeply and meaningfully with the stories written by Indigenous authors like Lindberg (2015), Vermette (2016a), and Robinson (2017a) inspires the realization that “there is more to this land than being settlers on it, that there are deeper, older stories and knowledge connected to the landscapes around us” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005, p. 126). If we are used to seeing the world in greyscale, nurturing a relationship with the stories they write would help us see it in colour.

## Chapter 3.

### Katherena Vermette (2016a)'s *The Break*: A Monumental Lesson on Love & Kindness

#### 3.1. Staring Down the Pitiless White Gaze

Though Vermette (2016a) patiently weaves the stories of ten different characters together in her novel *The Break*, she wastes no time in inverting the White gaze at the beginning of her novel. Specifically, Vermette stares down the White gaze through protagonist Stella, who is frustrated at how the policemen are treating her. Inverting the White gaze, letting White readers see themselves through the eyes of the Other, can be unsettling, as demonstrated by Jody Mitic's response to the novel. Stella, a young Métis mother of two, had called the police after witnessing a rape in a barren field outside her house. Police officer Christie (first name not revealed) is a White male, and his deputy Tommy Scott, is half Métis, (he sees himself as being 'pink'; his mother is Métis and his father is White). The officers do not take Stella's account of the rape seriously, dismissing her claim that it was a girl she saw being assaulted: "You know a lot of these native boys wear their hair long" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 9). The police officers casually ignoring her distress, telling her that what she witnessed was unlikely a sexual assault because they have "been doing this a long time, and it just doesn't look like a sexual assault" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 13).

Stella "can't stand how these officers look at her", and "tries to swallow her anger... tears, [and] her shame" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 11). They ask her the same questions repeatedly, making her think that "they might be trying to trip her up, like she's lying about something" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 11). When Christie dismisses her distress as panic, and presumes the violence as being alcohol fueled, "Stella's tears dry in her eyes and a familiar rage fills her" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 13). As her husband sees the officers to the door, Stella "hears them half laugh politely, the way [W]hite men say goodbye, and it only makes her more furious" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 14). Here, Vermette (2016a) inverts the White gaze, by narrating from Stella's point of view, outlining the humiliation that results from being under the White gaze. The White gaze not only demeans the Other, it presumes the Other to be less than. Stella notices that Christie

“looks around [her] home, her clean kitchen, and out into her dark living room, like he’s trying to find evidence of something” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 7). Vermette makes it a point to mention Stella’s clean kitchen because Stella discerns that Christie is looking to validate a dehumanizing perception of the Other. The White gaze robs the Other of integrity to the extent that the latter, like Stella, accepts “practiced sympathy that... is fake” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 8) and begins to doubt herself. Stella’s being diminishes under the White gaze, and her ensuing anger and shame indicates that this is a familiar occurrence.

Despite Stella’s frustrating encounter with the police officers, we do not fully register the grim repercussions of being under the White gaze until we learn that the person Stella witnessed being raped on the Break was Emily, her cousin’s thirteen-year-old child. We learn that the White gaze, which fervently subscribes to disparaging stereotypes of the Other, is profoundly harmful. Christie dismisses what Stella saw as “just a fucking gang fight” and calls her a “[c]razy dame”, adding that he feels sorry for her White husband (Vermette, 2016a, p. 68). He tells Scott: “I wouldn’t worry about it May-tee. She’s just a crazy bitch is all. Dime a dozen, those kind” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 70). Christie’s presumptions about Stella, and what had unfolded in her neighbourhood where many Aboriginals live, bring to light that such racist beliefs fuel institutional violence that is genocidal in nature. As Hargreaves (2017) notes, Indigenous peoples are often blamed for the violence they experience. Violence, injustice, and crime committed against Indigenous peoples are therefore dismissed, ignored, or treated inconsequentially. The way Christie treats and describes Stella also demonstrates the deep investments that White people have in race. By blaming Stella for her own distress, the power Christie holds as a White person is maintained and justified, and the colonial practices, systems and institutions that continue to silence and oppress Indigenous peoples are upheld. After all, framing violence as deserving for those with character deficiencies is much preferable to the uncomfortable task of examining the colonial damage White settlers are responsible for inflicting on First Peoples.

One of the most horrific examples of how racism translates into institutional violence from the novel is the way that Lorraine, Stella’s mother, was treated in the hours preceding her death. Lorraine had “wandered, half-conscious, to the hospital” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 271) after a White man had beaten her half to death in his truck “without even leaving the parking lot” of the bar they had been at. At the hospital, a

nurse who saw a “drunk and bloody” Lorraine just “rolled her eyes and told [her] to wait” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 271). Stella surmised that “[t]hey thought she was just drunk, had made her own head injury, and could wait” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 272). Tired of waiting, Lorraine lost consciousness and froze to death on her way home. Lorraine was at the hospital “long enough to make a file” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 271), yet the hospital staff did not deem her as being worthy of timely medical attention despite her bloody injuries, and made race-based assumptions that cost Lorraine her life.

While Lorraine’s story is fiction<sup>21</sup>, her story is a familiar one that has unfolded repeatedly in current day Canada. In 2008, Brian Sinclair, a 45-year-old Indigenous man, died while waiting for care in a Winnipeg emergency room (Geary, 2017). Sinclair’s doctor had sent him to the Winnipeg Health Sciences Centre emergency room to have his blocked catheter changed. After checking in at the emergency room triage desk, Sinclair sat in his wheelchair for more than a day without being seen, “occasionally vomiting on himself and eventually succumbing to sepsis” (Malone, 2018). An inquest into his death reveals that health-care workers from the hospital assumed Sinclair “was drunk and “sleeping it off,” had been discharged previously and had nowhere to go, or was homeless and had come to avoid the cold” (Geary, 2017). In August 2016, Maggie Papik took her uncle, Hugh Papik, to the Aklavik Health Centre after staff at the elders’ home found him lying on the ground covered in his own urine. The 68-year-old Inuvialuit man was suffering from a stroke, but the nurses at the Health Centre insisted that her uncle was just drunk (Bird, 2016). It then took the nurses six hours to order a medevac for her uncle to the nearest hospital in Inuvik (Bird, 2016). Papik was brain dead by the time he arrived for his CT scan at another hospital in Yellowknife.

Lorraine, Brian Sinclair, and Hugh Papik were fatally victimized by beliefs that dehumanize the Other. These racist beliefs, which inform our social, economic, and political systems, are normalized and culturally sanctioned by settler society whose privilege and power are contingent on abusing the Other. Additionally, the trauma resulting from such institutional violence inflicted reverberates across families and generations. Brian Sinclair’s cousin, Robert Sinclair, “feels the weight of his family’s history when he has no choice but to go to an emergency room in Winnipeg” (Malone,

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<sup>21</sup> While Vermette’s (2016a) characters and stories in *The Break* are completely fictional, she has, on a few occasions, acknowledge that she bases her writing on realities that she is familiar with.

2018). For Stella, Lorraine's death stripped her of her humanity. Stella felt that Lorraine "wasn't a person anymore", but had become "a story" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 272). More despairingly, she had become a story about someone who had died "because it was all her own fault" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 272). Despite being beaten up by someone she hardly knew and being ignored at the hospital, the narrative surrounding her death insisted that Lorraine "wouldn't have died if she hadn't been drinking... if she would've waited, if she hadn't been so stupid" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 272). She was reduced to "a grainy picture in black and white", of "something covered up on the concrete", looking like "just a blanket [that had]... fallen down, left behind" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 271). That Lorraine was a beautiful mother who loved to dance, who "was smart, really quick witty and mouthy", and who was "very, very funny" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 260-261) was expunged from this narrative.

Sherene Razack's (2000) theory of gendered racial violence and spatialized justice, through which she analyzes Pamela George's murder and the trial that follows, provides critical insight into Lorraine's tragic demise and Emily's rape investigation in *The Break* (2016a). In April 1995, George, "a woman of the Saulteaux (Ojibway) nation and a mother of two young children" (p. 91), was brutally murdered in Regina by two young White middle-class men, Steven Kummerfield and Alex Ternowetsky. Both men were eventually convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to six and a half years in prison. Razack writes that George "was considered to belong to a space in which violence routinely occurs, and to have a body that is routinely violated, while her killers were presumed to be far removed from this zone..." (2000, p. 93). Specifically, Razack outlines that "the men's and the court's capacity to dehumanize Pamela George derived from their understanding of her as the (gendered) racial Other whose degradation confirmed their own identities as [W]hite – that is, as men entitled to the land and the full benefits of citizenship (2000, p. 93). In his book *The Fire Next Time* (1963), James Baldwin writes about how the black man has functioned in the White man's world as a fixed star, an unmoveable pillar. But as the black man moves out of his place, "heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations" (Baldwin, 1963, p. 9). Aboriginal women like George are the fixed stars in Canadian White settler society. The White men who beat George to death, and the Court that tried her murder were making certain that she remained nothing more than a fixed star that marked sordidness, against which White settler identity is reinforced.

Lorraine too, was dehumanized in a similar way that George was. She too, was considered to have a body that deserved to be violated because society understood her as the gendered racial Other. The White guy who had beat her half to death, those who let him get away with only a suspended sentence despite finding blood in his truck, and reduced her to a crazy woman who was dead due to her own fault, did so to reaffirm their identities as White settlers entitled to the land. At the same time, the indifference and ensuing foot-dragging that Emily's rape is subjected to indicates that Emily's body too, is considered to belong to a space in which violence routinely occurs. Christie tells Stella dismissively: "Likely, around here, it's just some gang violence" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 14). Upon leaving Stella's house, he suggests driving to the Tim Hortons across the bridge, to "see how the good people live" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 68). The indifference that Lorraine and George's murders – and to a certain extent, Emily's rape case – are received with, implores that these crimes are manifestations of ongoing colonial genocide against Indigenous peoples in Canada. In her essay *Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy* (2010), Andrea Smith identifies the logic of genocide as the second pillar of White supremacy. This logic holds that Indigenous people must disappear, or always be disappearing, to enable non-Indigenous peoples' rightful claim to the land (Smith, 2010).

Nevertheless, it is important to bring light to the "history of dispossessions, and its accompanying violence" that brought George to 'the Stroll' where she was a sex worker, Lorraine to the alley where she froze to death, and Emily and her perpetrator, Phoenix<sup>22</sup>, to the Break. In particular, we need to examine the violence inflicted on these women through "[W]hite people's historic participation in and benefit from colonial dispossession and violence; and the law's complicity in settler violence, particularly through an insistence on racelessness" (Razack, 2000, p. 94-95). Razack, and numerous anti-colonial advocates and scholars note that "[c]olonization has continued apace" (2000, p. 95). Indigenous people whose ancestors were confined to reserves

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<sup>22</sup> It is later revealed in the novel that Phoenix is Elsie's daughter. Growing up, Elsie was Stella's best friend; together, they became a foursome with Lou and Paul. Elsie was raped at a party she, Stella and her cousins were at one night, and disappeared from Stella's life thereafter. Vermette (2016a) insinuates that Phoenix was conceived from the sexual assault, as Stella had heard that "Elsie had gone to one of those homes for pregnant girls and was going to have a baby" (p. 205). The relationship between Elsie and Phoenix demonstrates how intergenerational or transgenerational trauma persists through families and communities. Phoenix's violent behaviour further illustrates the destructive consequences that such trauma begets.

after their lands were appropriated by White settlers, migrated to cities because of inadequate housing, and limited employment and education opportunities. In addition, the Indian Act – a product of colonialism that defined Aboriginal identities in terms of constructed racial divisions for the state’s convenience – severely circumscribed Indigenous women's autonomy in life from marriage and sexuality, to land ownership and political decision-making (Senese & Wilson, 2013). Up till 1985, Section 12(1)(b) of the Indian Act mandated that upon marrying men who did not have Indian status, Indigenous women and their children would lose theirs. Women who married men without status also lost their Band memberships and thus, their rights to live on reserve (Senese & Wilson, 2013). With diminished political, economic, and social power, Indigenous women in particular, were forced off-reserves, and migrated to urban areas to look for work and housing (Senese & Wilson, 2013).

Like George, Aboriginal peoples in urban areas quickly find themselves limited to places like the Stroll, or “the really bad part of town” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 88) where Stella’s *Kookoo*<sup>23</sup> lives. As Razack notes, White settlers’ encounters with Indigenous peoples who are over-policed and incarcerated at one of the highest rates in the world, mostly involve prostitution, policing and the criminal justice system (2000, p. 95). She points out that “[g]iven the intensity of this ongoing colonization, [W]hite men such as Kummerfield and Ternowetsky had only a very small chance of seeing Pamela George as a human being” (Razack, 2000, p. 95). Two White men who buy the services of an Aboriginal sex worker, and who then beat her to death, a White man who beats an Indigenous woman half to death after having sex with her in his truck, a White police officer who refuses to investigate a possible rape in a predominantly Indigenous neighbourhood; these are all examples of violence perpetrated on Aboriginal bodies throughout Canada's history (Razack, 2000) Such colonial violence “has not only enabled [W]hite settlers to secure the land but to come to know themselves as entitled to it” (Razack, 2000, p. 96-97).

White Canadian settlers claim the lands they colonized as their own through a process of violent eviction, “justified by notions that the land was empty or populated by peoples who had to be saved and civilized” (Razack, 2007, p. 97). These overtly racist

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<sup>23</sup> *Kookoo* or *Kookom* means grandmother in the Cree language. Stella’s grandmother is named Flora.

ideologies and their accompanying spatial practices that include confining Indigenous peoples to reserves, facilitate the nearly absolute geographical separation of the colonizer and the colonized (Razack, 2000). After the pass system that kept Indigenous peoples confined to reserves was eliminated in the mid 1940s, segregation in urban spaces followed these earlier spatial practices (Razack, 2000). The sully of civilized society through the racial Other moving into White urban spaces gave rise to a careful management of boundaries within urban space (Razack, 2000). The inner city – where the Stroll is and where Stella’s grandmother, Flora, lives – “is racialized space, the zone in which all that is not respectable is contained” (Goldberg, 1993, as cited in Razack, 2000, p. 97). Razack highlights that “Canada’s colonial geographies exhibit this same pattern of violent expulsions and the spatial containment of Aboriginal peoples to marginalized areas of the city” – processes consolidated over three hundred years of colonization (2000, p. 97).

George’s homeland, the Sakimay reserve, “is typical of the spatial configurations that emerged in Canadian colonialism and produces the migration from reserves to the city” (2000, p. 101). Stella’s neighbourhood also reflects these colonial spatial configurations. Indigenous peoples started moving into her neighbourhood in the sixties, “once Status Indians could leave reserves” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 4) That was also when “the Europeans slowly started creeping out of the neighbourhood like a man sneaking away from a sleeping woman in the dark” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 4), thus demarcating a space for the undesirable Other. Now “there are so many Indians here, big families, good people, but also gangs, hookers, drug houses”, reflects an unidentified narrator at the beginning of the novel (Vermette, 2016a, p. 4). The Break too, in many ways resembles the country field just two miles outside the city where Kummerfield and Ternowetsky drove George after picking her up on the Stroll. Both spaces are “somehow innately given to illicit and sexual activity”, and both are “degenerate space[s]... juxtaposed to the spaces of respectability” (Razack, 2000, p. 116). The borderland between the country and the city functioned as a sort of no-man’s-land that offered both the young men greater anonymity, and is where “violent acts can be committed without meaningful consequence” (Razack, 2000, p. 114). Similarly, the Break is a desolate place where “the cars that come late at night, park right in the middle of [it]..., far away from any house, and stay only ten minutes or so before driving away again” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 4).

Though Stella lives in the “area around the Break [which] is slightly less poor than the rest” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 4), in a house sold to her by a “perky blonde who looked only a little uncomfortable there” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 89), she sees her painful past “right there on the other side of McPhillips” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 89). She “still had to drive down Selkirk Avenue to get anywhere... [s]till had to see it all, all those things she had always seen” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 89-90). That Jeff, her White husband, feels uneasy about Stella going to the other side of McPhillips further alludes to the geographical separation between the colonized and the colonizer. Jeff “didn’t get it” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 90), notes Stella, and none of the “places [he] didn’t want her going anymore... scared her” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 90). Yet living so closely to her past, one deeply tinged with the colonial legacy of violence against Indigenous women, pains Stella.

The geographical separation between colonizer and the colonized speaks loudly and clearly to the discomfort White settlers feel when they are in the presence of Indigenous people. Razack (2000) explains that when White men like Ternowetsky and Kummerfield “enter racialized urban spaces their skin-privilege clearly marks them as out of place”, and they “experience an unfamiliar racial marking” (p. 114). This visibility in turn, contributes to the White “city-dwellers’ tendency to perceive themselves as likely targets of robbery or violence in racialized urban spaces” (Razack, 2000, p. 114). Experiencing this unfamiliar racial marking produces a discomfort that Jeff projects onto Stella, by not wanting her to visit these racialized spaces. It explains why Stella finds Christie – a White police officer who has been dispatched to investigate a call in a racialized neighbourhood – looking around her well-kempt home “like he’s trying to find evidence of something” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 8). It explains why the White police officers are able to “laugh half-politely” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 14) when they say goodbye to Jeff, their unease from being in a racialized space alleviated by White familiarity and solidarity. And it explains why Mitic feels uncomfortable when Stella observes “the way [W]hite men say goodbye” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 14). Her observation unknowingly marks his skin-privilege, catapulting him into unease. The White settler suddenly finds himself in a strange and isolating territory, when the social construction of Whiteness as the standard against which all other cultures, groups, and individuals are measured and usually found to be inferior, has been disrupted. After all, White settlers have and continue to spend an enormous amount of energy and resources to deny the

significance of race, and the advantages of being White to erase history and hide the ways in which wealth has been distributed and accumulated over generations to benefit them today ((DiAngelo, 2011, p. 59). The link between the material privilege of White settlers in the cities and Aboriginal marginalization is thus, a direct one (Razack, 2000).

In addition to the colonial spatial practices above, Razack highlights that sexual violence towards Aboriginal women was also “an integral part of 19th century settler technologies of domination (2000, p. 98). Aboriginal women were portrayed as licentious and bloodthirsty to justify legally regulating their movements and confining them to reserves (Razack, 2000). Specifically, the “squalid and immoral ‘squaw’” deflected criticism away from the government officials and law enforcers’ cruelty (Carter, 1997, as cited in Razack, 2000, p. 99). These negative stereotypes also legitimized the White settlers’ explanation that reserve land was not used to capacity, and were pockets of poverty because Aboriginal women were dissolute in character and the men, lazy (Carter, 1997, as cited in Razack, 2000, p. 99). Aboriginal women therefore simply got what they deserved when they encountered violence (Razack, 2000). Like George, Lorraine had it coming to her. The former was providing sexual services, while the latter was “just drunk” and “stupid” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 272). The Court saw both women as belonging to spaces of crime, sex and violence, and who therefore represent disorder, filth, and immorality. The violence both women endured remains contained within the moment, without history or context (Razack, 2000). No one questioned or examined the historical conditions that brought George to the Stroll, or Lorraine to the bar. The perpetrators on the other hand, were let off with hardly a slap on their wrists, demonstrating that “[b]odies from respectable spaces may... violate with impunity (Razack, 2000, p. 116).

In 1995, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples released a report examining suicide among Indigenous people in Canada following 172 days of public hearings in 96 communities. In the report titled *Choosing Life: Special Report on Suicide Among Aboriginal Report* (1995), one young Aboriginal woman told the report’s authors about her former life on the street, and as a sex worker. The woman exemplified what the report calls “a mixture of sexual and racial exploitation”, as she described how men from high class communities go downtown to look for Aboriginal kids to rape and assault, knowing that the kids who survived would not talk (Royal Commission on

Aboriginal Peoples, 1995, p. 33). Just as disturbingly, she also shared how she was generally perceived by such men:

One thing that really used to bother me was that men looked at me differently [from the other girls], I always felt dirty all the time. Men used to look at me and undress me with their eyes just anywhere, or try and pick me up thinking I was just easy. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1995, p. 33-34).

Vermette (2016a) alludes to this troubling mixture of sexual and racial exploitation that young Aboriginal women often encounter in *The Break*. Stella recounts a night when she was just thirteen, walking home with her cousins, Lou and Paul, after going to the store to buy some soft drinks. A car driven by a White man had slowly pulled up to them, “its driver looking out” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 165). He stalked the girls as they continued their way home, coming up behind them and “pass[ing] by in that slow, deliberate way” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 165). Just as they reached home, he drove by them for the last time, “slowly looking right at them, leering” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 167). At that time, “Stella didn’t know the word yet, but when she did hear it, years later, she knew exactly what it meant” – the man had “*leered* [emphasis added] at them” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 167).

Law enforcers and other institutional arms of the settler state are complicit in emboldening sexual and racial exploitation directed towards Aboriginal women. Stella’s aunt, Cheryl, called the cops to report the man who was following her daughters, Louisa and Paula, and her niece. When the police finally did come, they told Cheryl that “she probably shouldn’t let the girls go to the store all by themselves, like that was the answer to everything” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 169). The cops not only took a long time to respond to Cheryl’s call, but blamed her for what had happened to the girls. The White man’s lewd behaviour was left unaddressed, excusing and thus normalizing indecent behaviour towards racialized bodies. Cheryl is anguished by how the sexual and racial exploitation of Indigenous women by White men goes ‘unseen’ and unpunished. After the cop leaves, Cheryl “just stood there, staring at the door, her face blotched red with angry tears” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 170).

Attempts to conceal how the stain that is Aboriginality is socially constructed lie at the root of this complicity that cultivates the sexual and racial exploitation of Indigenous women. George was never allowed to leave “the racially bounded space of

prostitution and degeneracy during the trial, a space that marked her as a body to be violated” despite being a good mother to her ten and five-year-old, and a daughter who had helped her father through his crisis with alcohol abuse (Razack, 2000, p. 121). Because no one questioned why she resorted to sex work a few times a month, and why she left the reserve in the first place, her tragic fate was disassociated from settler colonial violence (Razack, 2000). In corollary, that the Sakimay reserve where George was from was created as a way for the settler government to displace, impoverish, and oppressively regulate Indigenous peoples, did not register. Or rather, it did not serve the interests of the courts, or those invested in sustaining White supremacy at the expense of Indigenous peoples’ rights, to uncover how George’s murder is rooted in settler colonial violence.

Examined through a spatial lens, George’s murder trial “helps us to see how race shapes the law by informing notions of what is just and who is entitled to justice” (Razack, 2000, p.129). More specifically, it “enables us to see how [W]hiteness is protected and reproduced through such ideas as contract between autonomous individuals standing outside of history” (Razack, 2000, p. 129). While George was firmly embedded in the racial space of prostitution where violence is innate, Kummerfield and Ternowetsky were far removed from this space (Razack, 2000). Their drunken behaviour and its accompanying racial and sexual violence were described as nothing more than temporary deviance (Razack, 2000). The social meaning of spaces and bodies was therefore considered irrelevant, and “deliberately excluded as evidence that would contaminate the otherwise pure processes of law” (Razack, 2000, p.128). Razack’s spatial analysis of George’s murder trial therefore reveals how “bodies in degenerate spaces lose their entitlement to personhood through a complex process in which the violence that is enacted is naturalized” (2000, p. 129). George’s murder trial also demonstrates how this colonial process of condemning the Indigenous body is a viciously circular one that is almost impossible to break free from. Women like George are criminalized for seeking economic opportunities outside the reserves that their families were historically confined to. Already defined by colonial negative stereotypes, they stand little chance of accessing justice and having their human rights respected.

Like George, Lorraine too hardly registered as a person in Canadian society’s consciousness. She too belonged to a space that marked her as a body to be violated, and had fatal blows inflicted on her by a White man severed from the history of settler

colonial violence in this country. The women in *The Break* (2016a) however, are highly aware of how settler society deems their bodies transgressible and as a site of deserving violence. Consequently, they are cognizant of how their Aboriginality informs what constitutes justice and to whom justice is administered, as well as how Whiteness is protected through these judicial concepts. The anguish that Stella and Cheryl feel when they are being dismissed by the cops who show up hours after they have called the police, stems from being reminded that Indigenous women's lives are undervalued by a settler state that does not perceive them as people. A recognition that their Otherness precludes them from receiving justice underlines the quiet rage Stella feels as she sits across from Christie and Scott, and the anger Cheryl is forced to swallow after the cops told her that she shouldn't let the girls go to the store by themselves.

Emily's sexual assault case eventually gets conscientiously investigated, and her perpetrator gets apprehended in large part due to officer Tommy Scott, whose Métis ancestry sees him as having one foot in the White world and the other in a racialized one. Vermette (2016a) makes an interesting point by establishing Scott as being deeply invested in seeing that Emily's rape investigation receives due process. Scott, who until recently has been passing off as White before receiving his Métis status, is acutely aware of how the racialized Other is perceived by White settlers. "... [Y]our special treatment ends here", Christie tells him on his first day at work, making him feel "suddenly dirty" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 73). Having grown up with a White father who physically abused his Métis mother, a woman who he "got off the reservation for cheap" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 77), Scott is also painfully familiar with the Indigenous woman's body as a site of colonial violence. Vermette highlights how Scott identifies with the women in Emily's life throughout the novel. Entering the hospital room, he recognizes the stern look on Lou's face: "His aunts all have it, his mom too, when she wants to..." (Vermette, 2016a, p. 123). His heart contracts when he sees Paula leaning into Emily to smooth her hair away, and smiling at her with so much love (Vermette, 2016a).

Scott, who discerns the humanizing qualities that these women possess as loving and protective mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, is able to disrupt the pattern of settler indifference that withholds equitable justice from Aboriginal women like Lorraine and George. However, it would be erroneous to think that Scott is able to bring some recourse to the women in the novel because his Métis heritage informs him what it is like to be racialized or because he witnessed colonial violence unleashed on his mother's

body and personhood<sup>24</sup>. Vermette (2016a) makes it clear that it is Scott's ability to see these women beyond their roles prescribed by White settlers, and instead as women who are beautiful because of their fierce capacity to love, which spurs him to negate settler inaction. "...[T]his woman is also so beautiful", thinks Tommy when he registers the stern look on Lou's face – the same look that he recognizes in the women in his family. Herein is a lesson for the settler reader. Empathy itself may not be enough to move the needle on how settler society treats First peoples. A cognitive shift that involves perceiving Indigenous peoples as humans who deserve love and who have the capacity to love is imperative to overcome settler indifference that shields the ongoing injustices against Indigenous peoples. And stories told by Indigenous authors like Vermette – when contextualized by prior knowledge on settler colonialism – play a potentially important role in instigating this much needed shift.

Vermette (2016a) skillfully turn[s] the images in the larger collective narrative around to mirror an image of the colonized to the colonizers (Harjo & Bird, 1997, as cited in Episkew, 2009) in *The Break*. The hurt that the women in Stella's family accrue when Aboriginal women like Lorraine and Phoenix are violated and/or ignored by settler society is made palpable throughout the novel. However, Vermette not only succeeds in presenting images of the colonized to settler readers, but she dexterously fleshes out images of the colonizers to the colonizers themselves. The colonizers are mirrored in her characters' stories, giving settler readers an opportunity to gain insight on how settler society mistreats First Peoples. Consequently, she leaves an opening for settler readers to reflect on how they have been, and still are complicit in the nation's ongoing colonial campaigns to annihilate, define, subordinate and exclude Indigenous peoples. Nonetheless, Mitic's response to Vermette's novel suggests that the image of the colonizers will not always be readily received by settler readers despite published reports that show how Aboriginal people continually suffer from colonial policies and indifference.

In her exploration of George's murder trial, Razack critically asks what it would mean to deliberately introduce history and social context into the trial (2000). She

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<sup>24</sup> By having Scott as a character who is half-White and half-Métis, Vermette (2016a) leaves the possibility of disrupting the pattern of settler indifference open to non-Indigenous settlers. Settler readers may be able to identify with Scott who has been able to pass as White for most of his life, and may therefore see themselves breaking with the colonial legacy of settler inaction.

concludes that such approaches “would be resisted by the deeply entrenched notion that colonization simply happened a long time ago, if at all, and that it has ended, without colonizers enacting it and benefiting from it and, most of all, without their continuing to do so” (Razack, 2000, p. 129). In writing about the murder trial, Razack hopes that “it raises consciousness about how little [George] mattered to her murderers, their friends and families, and how small a chance she had of entering the Court’s and Canadian society’s consciousness as a person” (2000, p. 129-130). In many ways, *The Break* (2016a) also illustrates how Indigenous women in Canada continue to be dismissed and degraded by settler society, its laws and institutions. However, the novel’s brilliance lies in how Vermette (2016a) quietly but powerfully reclaims the narrative surrounding Indigenous women in Canada. Beyond illustrating how the women in *The Break* have been broken by colonial violence, she focuses on their resilience, and how they respond to this violence – a violence with deep historical roots – with profound dignity. Among the many things that this novel is, it offers lessons in developing genuine empathy born from embracing shared truths that require reflexivity and imagination. These are lessons that we desperately need to begin repairing our relationships with Indigenous peoples.

### **3.2. Turning the White Gaze on Its Head (Also Done with Dignity)**

Vermette’s (2016a) novel *The Break* opens with despairing frustration steeped in the inescapable cold of Winnipeg’s frigid winter. Stella, a young Métis mother, has just witnessed a violent crime outside her home, but the two police officers interviewing her undermine her testimony with doubt and disbelief. Anguish and shame overcomes Stella as she tries to convince the policemen that she saw a girl being raped, but she senses that “they might be trying to trip her up, like she’s lying about something” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 11). The familiar rage that fills her suggests that this is not the first time her truths have been discredited or dismissed. Stella’s encounter with the policemen mirrors a familiar trope in Canada, where the truths of the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples are continuously being denied in the nation’s dominant narratives. While Vermette’s novel positions its readers to accept such truths and reckon with the colonial damage inflicted on Indigenous communities, its brilliance lies elsewhere. Vermette

offers her readers a seat at the kitchen tables<sup>25</sup> of the grandmothers, mothers, sisters, and aunts of her novel, to bear witness to the love, kindness, and hope generated by their strength and kinship in the face of heartbreaking violence and victimization. As we take our places next to these women, we learn about the notions of familial relationships, and how to respond, and reciprocate with empathy, kindness, and respect. In turn, these lessons on how to love ready non-Indigenous readers to reimagine their relationships with Indigenous peoples.

In *The Break* (2016a), Stella witnesses her second cousin, thirteen-year-old Emily, being sexually assaulted in a barren field, on an isolated strip of land outside her house. As the personal stories of the ten characters unravel, we get to hear the voices of Emily's great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, and aunt leading up to, and after her rape. Even though the narrative is centred on Emily's rape, *The Break* is not just a story of a violent sexual assault on a young Métis girl. Emily's rape illustrates the intergenerational impact of sexual violence, as it traumatizes, retraumatizes, and pains four generations of her female relations. The far-reaching consequences of sexual violence within families, and communities is also apparent through the peripheral stories that the various characters keep about the sexual and physical violence endured by their own mothers, sisters, aunts, daughters, and cousins.

In an interview on the CBC radio program, *The Next Chapter*, Vermette (2016b) reveals that her novel was conceived from the observation that everyone had similar stories and experiences to the characters from *The Break* (2016a) when she was growing up. There is therefore truth to the heartbreaking stories kept by the characters in the novel. Stella, who has always been "a storyteller, a story keeper, a watcher" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 335) tells us how her mother's body "was found behind a dumpster... with her pants around her ankles" (p. 271). She also relays the story of her childhood friend, Elsie, who was gang raped at a party. Elsie later emerges in the novel as Phoenix's mother, a woman who is so overwhelmed by trauma and pain that she is

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<sup>25</sup> As Native American poet Joy Harjo (1994) (Muscoogee Creek Nation) implies through her poem *Perhaps the World Ends Here*, the kitchen table holds immense significance. It is where "[t]he world begins" and where it would perhaps end, where "children are given instructions on what it means to be human", and where we "have prepared our parents for burial" (Harjo, 1994, p. 68). Here, being offered a seat at the kitchen table not only entails being able to witness one's life events at first hand. We are essentially being offered the opportunity to form empathetic relationships with those who are sitting at the table, by taking a genuine interest in the stories that unfold at the table.

“only thinking about her next fucking hit” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 317). Vermette’s novel illustrates the uniqueness of Indigenous literature, in that the story she tells arise from the experiences of the various Indigenous peoples of this land (Akiwenzie-Damm, 2005, p. 169).

However, Vermette’s (2016a) work goes beyond depicting Indigenous experiences by inviting non-Indigenous readers to honour and value the stories – and essentially, the truths – of Canada’s First Peoples. The novels invite non-Indigenous readers to reflect on the stories of sexual violence as a continuum of colonial violence, which Settler Canadians have benefited from. The truths embedded in the stories of Vermette characters, are therefore also our truths, in that they call into question our national and international claim to moral righteousness. We cannot reconcile our assertion that we treat all individuals with respect, and dignity, or continue selling our nation as a paragon of justice when settler colonial institutions, and systems continue to displace, devalue, abuse, oppress, and murder Indigenous peoples. In many ways, *The Break* (2016a) is an inventory of the extent of colonial damage, and calls forth its non-Indigenous readers to take ownership of the harm wrought by colonialism. As Tracey Lindberg (2017) suggests in her *CBC Ideas* lecture, *Reconciliation Before Reconciliation*, we need to understand the extent of the damage before we can clean it up.

Colonial damage does not constitute the centre piece of Vermette’s (2016a) *The Break*. Beyond the explicit horror of sexual violence depicted through Emily’s rape, and the stories embedded within the narratives of its female characters, Vermette showcases how the Indigenous grandmothers, mothers, sisters, daughters, and aunts in her novel form a resilient network of support when tragedy hits. These women rely on each other for the strength to survive and thrive, despite circling in a vortex of trauma from the continual losses, and abuse inflicted on themselves and their loved ones. When Paulina gets a call telling her that Emily has been hurt and is on her way to the hospital, “she doesn’t think, [and] just starts moving” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 91). She notes that this is what “they all do when Kookoo is really sick, or whenever something happens with the kids” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 91). Louisa responds in the same way when she is told about Emily’s attack: she turns off her brain, doesn’t let herself feel or cry, but just heads towards the hospital (Vermette, 2016a). Once in the hospital room, Cheryl sees that they are “all a part of the same whole”, and that “[i]f something happens to one of them, they

all feel it” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 118). Resting her head on her grandchild’s bed, she “breathes in Emily’s pain and gives her back all the strength she has” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 118).

The strength that these women provide each other with is apparent to even outsiders. Tommy, the Métis police officer who investigates the rape case, sees “[a]ll these women holding each other up” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 291) when he is in Emily’s hospital room. Flora, Stella’s Kookom, recalls rallying around her daughters and granddaughters in the same way when Lorraine’s body was found. She and Cheryl “gathered around Stella and the others, but especially Stella...to protect her” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 325). Flora understands that having family you can rely on for support no matter the circumstances, makes a person stronger. “It means so much to have people”, and having people “is everything” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 336), says the matriarch in her only narrative in the novel. She recognizes that as long as her children and grandchildren “have each other... [a]nd as long as they hold on to each other, they will always be okay” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 337).

Through conceiving Emily’s grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and cousins as “a part of the same whole” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 118), and as part of a strong, familial support system, *The Break* (2016a) is a stellar example of Indigenous fiction which encompasses “relational worldviews that privilege communal over individualistic identity construction and undermine ideologies of dominance” (p. 445). Such relational worldviews also explain the “characterization, plot development, and narrative structure” (Eigenbrod, 2014, p. 445) in Vermette’s (2016a) fiction. The resulting pain and trauma of Emily’s rape reverberates through four generations of her family, and an understanding of the intergenerational impact of sexual violence requires that the voices of her great-grandmother, grandmother, mother, and aunts be heard. Without these multiple narratives, readers will most likely fail to grasp sexual violence against Indigenous women as a continuum of colonial violence. They may also be further removed from appreciating the resilience and strength of Vermette’s female characters, which challenges negative stereotypes of Indigenous women.

Although Vermette’s (2016a) characters are fictional, their stories aren’t. Lorraine’s murder and Emily’s rape exemplify the violent acts frequently committed against Aboriginal women across Canada. The MMIWG report states that homicide rates

for Indigenous women between 2001 and 2015 were nearly six times higher than for non-Indigenous women (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019). The voices of Emily's mother, great-grandmother, grandmother and aunts echo the voices of those whose female relatives have been murdered or gone missing in Canada – women and girls whose absences have largely been ignored by the police, and by a settler nation who otherwise doesn't hesitate to mourn White lives and once appointed a Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, who declared that an MMIWG inquiry was not high on his government's radar (Kappo, 2014). Despite the important lessons that these voices impart on how colonial violence persists and ripples across generations and communities, they remain undervalued by the settler state. In March 2018, the Trudeau government refused the MMIWG inquiry chief commissioner Marion Buller's request for a two-year extension so that more family members of missing and murdered Indigenous women could have their truths heard in a public hearing. The request was an opportunity for the settler government to demonstrate that they were genuinely invested in addressing and ending colonial violence against Indigenous women and children and to learn from the damage wrought by colonial genocidal and assimilative policies. Instead, the government chose to further perpetuate destructive colonial habits by silencing and devaluing Indigenous voices.

Settler indifference and obstinacy however, does little to undermine the support network that hold the women of Vermette's (2016a) novel up. This network is woven together held by love, kindness, and tenderness. Tommy's heart contracts when he sees Paulina leaning down, smoothing Emily's hair and smiling with so much love (Vermette, 2016a). When Stella tells her auntie that she witnessed Emily's rape but could not bring herself to do anything other than call the police, Cheryl responds with love and kindness: "You did the best you could" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 268), she tells Stella and reminds her niece that she will always love her. The detail with which Vermette writes about the grandmothers, mothers, and aunties' compassion in *The Break* (2016a) is indicative of the different heart and spirit that goes into the creative act involving Indigenous literature (Akiwenzie-Damm, 2005).

"Where did they learn that" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 269), Stella wonders when her aunt comforts her, rubbing circles into her back, "just like her Kookoo does, [and] just like her mom did" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 268). A brief telephone conversation between Louisa and her grandmother also encapsulates this intimate familiarity perfectly. An implied

meaning underlines her grandmother's utterances: "[t]his is her way of being nosy" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 43), "[t]his is her trying to make me feel useful, able, occupied" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 44), and "[t]his is her way of telling me she knows more than I am telling her" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 44), notes Louisa throughout the conversation. While not much is being said by her Kookom, she manages to convey care and love to her grandchild. Vermette captures the details of these loving acts with the dexterity of someone who has experienced such kindness herself. While I have mentioned earlier that she writes from personal experience and the experiences of those she knows, Vermette's creative act is also clearly formed by a truth and spirit, which she locates by reaching deep within herself (Akiwenzie-Damm, 2005, p. 172).

Vermette (2016a) also uses the depictions of love, kindness and tenderness in *The Break* to "write back' in the postcolonial sense" (Eigenbrod, 2014, p. 445). Her novel serves as a form of activism, as a positive and giving way to maintain who Indigenous peoples are, to connect themselves with each other, "and to protest against colonization, hatred, and oppression in all its guises and forms" (Akiwenzie-Damm, 2005, p. 171). During her CBC radio interview, Vermette explained that she wanted to capture Winnipeg's North End, as a rich, full place with all sorts of people who had all sorts of strengths and virtue (Vermette, 2016b). Like the people from the North End, the characters of her novel struggle, and fight to fix things that are broken, and succeed (Vermette, 2016b). Vermette 'writes back' by capturing the beauty of love, kindness and gentleness which underlies the strength and resilience of the people living in Winnipeg's North End in her novel.

Narratives like Vermette's (2016a) *The Break*, are essential to the survival of Indigenous peoples (Akiwenzie-Damm, 2005, p. 171). The beauty Vermette draws from the characters in her novel challenges the literary images carried in education and the media, which silences and demeans the story of Indigenous peoples and their worth (Armstrong, 2005, p. 183). Unfortunately, there is no lack of mainstream narratives that silence and devalue Indigenous people in Canada today. A recent example includes a comment made by Canadian Senator Lynn Beyak, which lamented that the "good deeds" accomplished by "well-intentioned" religious teachers have been overshadowed by negative reports documented by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Tasker, 2016). And just a year after ex-Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a formal apology

to former students of Indian residential schools, he declared that Canada has no history of colonialism at a *2009 Group of 20 (G20)* news conference.

While readers of Vermette's (2016a) *The Break* witness the love and kindness generated by the web of support that protects Emily, and provides hope to her female relations, readers are also privy to the damage and despair that takes place in the absence of such a familial network. Phoenix, the ringleader of Emily's rape, does not have that circle of female relations to fall back on. She finds herself homeless after she escapes from a youth detention centre, and does not possess an understanding of familial love. "That's love, thinks Phoenix" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 30), when she notices how her uncle buys his daughter name brand clothing. Having been abused by her stepfather and separated from her family at a young age, she reacts to abuse by abusing others (Vermette, 2016b). She feels worthless, contemplating suicide after her uncle kicks her out of his home. "She'd probably just die" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 236), Phoenix thinks to herself after imagining "how it'd feel to jump off onto the ice and snow" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 236) of the river.

It is challenging to feel empathy for Phoenix, who sticks her chin and chest out, "like she is the toughest bitch in [jail]" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 312). Nevertheless, the reader's encounter with Phoenix is a lesson in being empathetic towards the Other, who has remained unloved and uncared for. By paralleling Phoenix's life with Paula and Louisa's, Vermette (2016a) hints at how familial love, or the lack of it, shapes the life trajectory of those whose lives have been marked by colonial violence. All three women have lost a sister, and have endured physical or sexual abuse as children. Yet, unlike the two sisters who have been sheltered by Cheryl and Flora's love, Phoenix is completely abandoned. She becomes hardened by her circumstances, and her behaviour is regulated by learned violence, whereas Paula and Louisa have learned how to be loving and kind.

The significance of a familial support system is once again highlighted in Vermette's (2016a) novel, through the loss Stella experiences after she alienates herself from her family. As a 'story keeper', Stella is "vicariously traumatized" (Vermette, 2016b) by the "[t]hings she's seen, things her cousins told her, [and] things her mom and Auntie Cher told her and her cousins" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 84). From these stories, she discerns a pattern of victimization that becomes an unavoidable part of her life and the

lives of her mother, aunts, cousins, and friends. Witnessing Emily's rape leaves her shaken, but she is further traumatized by the way in which the police officers discredit her account. Her encounter with the police leaves her tearful, shameful, and raging, as she recognizes that her mother's life was also dismissed in a similar fashion. Longing for a sense of understanding, which she is not able to get from her white husband, she yearns for comfort and support from the women in her family. After the police officers leave, Stella thinks that she should have called Aunty Cher, who "would've come over, made coffee, yelled at the cops when they started acting like they didn't believe her" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 15). She also longs to be in her Kookom's "wrinkled arms and have her whisper that everything is okay, the way she always did" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 14).

The multitude of the women's experiences with colonial violence in *The Break* (2016a) is overwhelming. Nevertheless, the fierce, tireless mothers and grandmothers of these women remain their strongest ally, and continue to be very strong forces of protection (Vermette, 2016b). Without her aunt and grandmother, Stella realizes that she cannot heal on her own. She had left her family and moved in with a man who didn't ask questions, thinking that she could heal in her self-imposed solitude but she turned out to be wrong, realizing that "she was only resting, . . . only standing still waiting for the real work to begin" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 273). Painfully, she recognizes that the emotional wounds inflicted by the stories she keeps can only be healed by returning to the safe and warm circle of familial support and protection, where understanding, kindness and love rendered by her Kookom, aunt, and cousins will give her the strength to survive the stories.

The role of mothers and grandmothers are made even more important, when we realize that there is no one else willing to protect the Indigenous female characters in *The Break* (2016a). The police arrive at Stella's door four hours after she calls them, and undermines her witness account. Stella's mother who wanders into the hospital bleeding and half-conscious, encounters a nurse who rolled her eyes because she thought Lorraine was drunk and had made her own head injury. (Vermette, 2016a, p. 271-272). When Cheryl calls the police after Stella and her cousins were accosted, the cops told Cheryl that "she probably shouldn't let the girls go to the store all by themselves" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 169). The colonial institutions mandated by law to protect all citizens have only served to devalue these women, and the thousands of missing and

murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada is further testament to society's mistreatment of Indigenous women.

Vermette's (2016a) *The Break* requires its readers to embrace the truths of Indigenous women in Canada with empathy and kindness. We are encouraged to connect the stories of the women in the novel to the genocidal consequences of colonial systems and policies like the Indian Act which brought about Indian residential schools, the Sixties Scoops, and the displacement and impoverishment of Indigenous nations. These truths may make us uncomfortable and threatens our privileged existence, but reconciliation at its finest moment – as pointed out by Lindberg (2017) – is reconciling with a truth you never thought you would believe.

Beyond encouraging the acceptance of shared truths, Vermette's (2016a) novel is another chance at settler redemption. We continue to be welcomed at Flora, Cheryl, Louisa, Paula, and Stella's kitchen tables, even though we have been complicit in establishing systems, policies and behaviours that have hurt them. But by being in their homes, we learn about the notions of familial relations, and what it means to be a community from them. We also learn how to be strong and resilient, by being loving, and kind. Consequently, we are able to conceptualize ways of sharing power with Indigenous nations, as these women themselves are sharing their power with us by teaching us how to be strong. With these lessons, we can then move towards a healthier relationship between Indigenous nations and non-Indigenous people, where opportunities to re-imagine our ideas of society, nation, and belonging that do not rely on the elimination but on the resurgence of Indigenous peoples exist (Lowman & Barker, 2015).

Vermette (2016a), like Lindberg (2015), talks about having to revisit her traumatic past when she wrote her novel. According to Lindberg (2017), it takes love, courage and hope for a person deeply impacted by colonialism to share their stories. We, as settler readers, should be honoured to have their stories shared with us. More importantly, we should be honoured that these Indigenous authors are writing to us as an act of love. Despite the ways in which we have participated in eradicating, oppressing and ignoring Indigenous peoples, Vermette and Lindberg want us to know that we are loved enough to still be spoken to (Lindberg, 2017). And like any lover, they hope that their love will be reciprocated. They hold faith in our ability to be empathetic and kind, even though we haven't been in the past, and even if the scars of their wounds remain. Such love and

respect can power our journey to reconciliation and pave the way to equitable nation-to-nation relationships.

Vermette's (2016a) novel is a stunning piece of Indigenous literature that offers a loving approach to reconciliation. It imparts lessons on empathy, a quality that Renate Eigenbrod (2014) hopes will inspire the non-Aboriginal student to work towards redistributing the wealth in our society in which, right now, the original peoples of this land are the poorest (p. 451). The novel also conveys "strength, resilience, resistance, cultural continuance, and innovative creativity", providing "lingering memories for all students, stronger than – but without deleting – stories of oppression and victimization" (Eigenbrod, 2014, p. 451-452). Last but not least, Vermette showcases immense strength and beauty by telling stories that dispel the dominant narratives of Indigenous peoples, thereby preserving images that protect and treasure the splendour of difference" (Armstrong, 2005, p.186).

There is a scene from Vermette's (2016a) novel which encapsulates the beauty and strength of her Indigenous female characters well. Louisa tells Tommy in the hospital room: "We are fighting. This is fighting" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 278). Her arms flail out to take in the whole scene of her mother, sister, and niece, and she sees them as tough women (Vermette, 2016a). The strength demonstrated by Vermette's characters is particularly evident today, as hundreds of those who have had a daughter, mother, sister, relative or friend murdered or go missing, participate in cross-country public hearings and evidence gathering processes for the MMIWG inquiry. Pamela Palmater, a Mi'kmaq lawyer and activist, reminds the audience at a public forum on the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women hosted by the CBC Radio program, *The Current*:

This inquiry is here because of the resilience of Indigenous women... Indigenous women are the ones who have [had to] fill gaps. Colonization has hurt us all, but it has also hurt our men. Our men are languishing in jail. Our men are discriminated against. They are subjects of violence. They are going murdered and missing, so Indigenous women also have to step up as warriors for everybody. ("The Current for April 4", 2017, 2:06:29)

As implied by the stories in Vermette's (2016a) novel, the strength and resilience of Indigenous women has never been more important to the survival of Indigenous nations. Their innate response to the colonial damage inflicted on their communities and

nations is to protect one another by loving fiercely and being kind despite being pained. However, I am not relying on sentimentality by writing about the immense love and kindness that Vermette's characters hold, to provoke settler conscience and inspire social regeneration. In the next chapter, I discuss how Lindberg's (2015) novel, *Birdie* explores love and kindness – and the reciprocity of these feelings – as obligation and responsibility that not only reside between Indigenous people, but also between settlers and First Peoples. Consequently, she reframes our Eurocentric conceptions about familial relationships, and compels us to re-imagine our relationships with Indigenous peoples.

## Chapter 4.

### Tracey Lindberg (2015)'s *Birdie*: Get Ready to Get Uncomfortable Settlers!

#### 4.1. The Continuum of Colonial Violence: Settled Expectations and Settler Fantasies

Cree author and Indigenous law scholar Tracey Lindberg (2015), a citizen of the As'in'i'wa'chi Ni'yaw Nation Rocky Mountain Cree (also known as Kelly Lake Cree Nation), wrote *Birdie*, a novel published in 2015. In her novel, Lindberg writes about a young Cree woman named Bernice Meetos – sometimes called Birdie – who leaves home in northern Alberta and settles in Gibsons Landing, British Columbia (B.C.). Upon leaving a sanatorium she was brought to after she was found sleeping in a dumpster, Birdie progresses into a “sleepwake” state where “her dream life and her waking life had begun to fold over each other” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 66). Later, in the apartment above the bakery where she works in Gibsons, she sinks into a physical dissociative state where she “could fully move and bend” between “[m]emories... [b]ad thoughts... [and] [t]ime” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 5). With her aunt, cousin and employer keeping vigil, Birdie revisits painful memories of sexual abuse and abandonment while she “carves a space where her memory could live peaceably with her body” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 232).

In her novel, Lindberg (2015) addresses sexual violence and intergenerational trauma as a continuum of colonial violence. Bernice, the main protagonist of the novel, is deeply scarred by her uncle who sexually preyed on her. Birdie remembers the year that *The Beachcombers* – a TV show starring her favourite actor, Pat Johnson – was aired a half hour later as the “year that her uncle Larry started pressuring her to do more than sit on his lap and let him feel her up” (p. 12). Even though there is a “space between what she feels and what she thinks” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 161) as “she flows through past and present” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 17), the blinding rage she feels from remembering “her uncle Larry forcing his way into her room, taking all of the life out of her little room under the stairs” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 162) is unmistakable. Equally agonizing to Bernice is how no one seemed to notice what Larry was doing to her: “No one mentioned that her

underwear was bloodied, that there were bruises on her arms and neck... [or] her swollen lip or the cut above her eyebrow” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 165).

The failure to notice what was being done to Birdie however, should not be reduced to “seeming complicity in Larry’s secret-making” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 13). In an interview on the CBC radio program, *The Next Chapter*, Lindberg (2016) says that Bernice’s mother, Maggie, has seen generations of sexual abuse occurring within the family, and that Bernice’s aunt, Valene, knows of the uncles’ predatory behaviour. Freda, Bernice’s cousin, is “related by awful birth to Maggie and Val”, having been “conceived by her uncle’s hideous act” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 197). That Freda is “the spitting image of Maggie” and was a “mini-Maggie doppelgänger” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 60) suggests that Maggie had her after being sexually violated by a male relative. Without truly knowing about Bernice being sexually abused by Larry, Maggie is cognizant of the intergenerational trauma that sexual violence – a violence that she herself has experienced – unleashes. “Don’t you dare let your uncles’ shame come home to you” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 161), Maggie tells Birdie one night after she caught her daughter drunk at a community hall dance. Valene, on the other hand, “[n]otices the rigidity in Bernice’s face and her hands clutching the bedclothes in a ... [d]eathvise” and “[s]tarts to pray” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 165) after Larry rapes Birdie.

Lindberg (2016) emphasizes that Maggie and Valene register Bernice’s trauma based on a historical understanding and expectation that the uncles in the family perpetrate sexual violence, not on what they possibly could have known was happening to Bernice. What they intuit is “their greatest fear coming to life, not that they knew it was happening, [but] that they supposed that it would” (Lindberg, 2016, 9:49). Their male relatives’ destructive behaviour is assumed by the Meetos women because “[they]’ve seen it around [them] for generations, through generations, in generations of people” (Lindberg, 2016, 10:07). Thus, when Valene starts praying, and when Maggie rebukes Birdie about letting her uncles’ shame come home with her, we should not be questioning if and to what degree the women may have been complicit<sup>26</sup>. Instead, we should be asking how violence entered their home. The horror that unfolds on Uncle Larry’s lap and in Bernice’s little room under the stairs, however devastating, are not

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<sup>26</sup> Lindberg (2016) however, makes it clear that Bernice’s guardians neglected their responsibility and obligation to keep her safe.

standalone events to be blamed solely on moral deficit. Rather, Lindberg prompts her readers to read the violence as symptoms manifesting from a broader, settler colonial system that continues to decimate Indigenous nations. Metaphorically speaking, we need to traverse beyond Birdie's little room beneath the stairs, to "the house or the land they were effectively squatting on until the only legal Indian in their family decided he wanted his house back" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 83).

In a lecture Lindberg (2017) gave on reconciliation at Vancouver Island University, she states that she has always understood sexual assault and violence repeated through generations within Indigenous families as a colonial issue. Lindberg explains that she never saw the violence as something that men did to women, or as Indigenous on Indigenous violence, but that she "had thought of it and continue[s] to think of it as a continuum of colonial violence" (2017, 8:29). Lindberg instigates settler readers to make an epistemological shift when reading *Birdie*, a novel in which she "unpacked some truths" (2017, 6:39). Solely relying on a worldview that has been coloured by settler expectations and fantasies does not allow room for settlers to contemplate how colonization has played an integral role in infecting Indigenous nations with violence that has now become "rigorously, vigorously rooted within the family tree, [and is] flourishing in the community garden" (Lindberg, 2017, 7:36). More importantly, such a limited stance prevents us from asking how we as settlers have been complicit in creating the circumstances under which Bernice finds herself on her uncle's lap while he feels her up, and later, entrapped in her own room with her uncle about to lunge on her. Further expounding on intergenerational violence that takes place within Indigenous families, Lindberg upholds that "the reason that we were messed up, is because we were messed with" (2017, 8:40). Says Lindberg: "... [W]e had learned how to be violent from the violence that was done to us" (2017, 8:44).

Settler colonialism in Canada entails removing and erasing Indigenous nations, often violently, so that European and non-Indigenous settlers can acquire and exploit land and resources to which Indigenous peoples have genealogical relationships. In *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Canada*, Emma Battell Lowman and Adam J. Barker (2015) outline the three main pillars underlying settler colonialism. First, invasion did not end the moment Indigenous lands were first occupied or appropriated by EuroAmerican people in the past, but "continues to happen because the social, political, and economic structures built by the invading people endure" (Lowman &

Barker, 2015, p. 25). Similarly, in the article *Settler Colonialism and Cultural Studies: Ongoing Settlement, Cultural Production, and Resistance*, Aimee Carrillo Rowe and Eve Tuck (2017) define settler colonialism not just as an historical event or origin story for a nation-state, but as a persistent societal structure. Eva Mackey (2016) further notes that the 'self-sustaining' states, nations and legal systems built by settlers are organized around their ongoing domination over the Indigenous population.

Settler occupancy is intended to be permanent (Lowman & Barker, 2015). Accordingly, our claims to the land we have chosen to live must remain unquestioned (Lowman & Barker, 2015). The sovereignty settlers assume is therefore justified by insisting that "history begins with our national inception – with explorers, pioneers, soldiers, and traders, not the incredible span of Indigenous histories" (Lowman & Barker, 2015, p. 25). At the same time, settler sovereignty is further rationalized "through narratives of progress and racial or cultural superiority" (Lowman & Barker, 2015, p. 26). Finally, settler colonialism's end goal is to eliminate Indigenous peoples so that settler society "becomes so deeply established that it is naturalized, normalized, unquestioned and unchallenged" (Lowman & Barker, 2015, p. 26). Thus, settler colonialism "has meant genocide of Indigenous peoples, [and] the reconfiguring of Indigenous land into settler property" (Rowe & Tuck, 2017, p. 4). The settler never leaves, "so the possession of territory requires the disappearance of 'the native'" (Wolfe, 1999, 2006, as cited in Mackay, 2016, p. 5). From enforcing enduring colonial structures to replacing Indigenous histories with settler myths, and eliminating Indigenous peoples, each pillar that upholds settler colonialism has violence as a common denominator.

Rooted in settler expectations and settler fantasies of possession and entitlement, the sexual violence endured by the Meetos women constitutes settler colonialism in praxis. The desire to irreversibly naturalize and embolden settler sovereignty to fulfill these expectations and fantasies has time and again, inflicted violence and brutality on Indigenous women. Contact with European settlers fundamentally disrupted Indigenous cultures, including those that revered women and accorded them roles central to family, governance and spiritual ceremonies (Indigenous Corporate Training, 2016). The highly paternalistic Indian Act, which authorizes the Canadian federal government to regulate the lives of registered Indians and reserve communities, disrespected, ignored and undermined Indigenous women in many ways. Indigenous women were and continue to be made vulnerable after their social positions

were devalued, and as colonial institutions like residential schools perpetuated cycles of abuse (“Chapter 5”, 2013).

Lindberg (2015) and Vermette’s (2016a) stories defy the epistemic injustice brought about by settler colonialism in pointed ways. But to learn the lessons they generously and ingeniously offer through their novels so that our intentions to be kinder Canadian settlers (for what else can we be?) carry weight, we must also examine the beliefs underlying our assumed entitlements. Mackey (2016) explains that settler expectations are fostered by “a longstanding, structured collective privilege” that has “been socially legitimized” and seek certainty that is ‘both assumed and defended with philosophy, law, legislation and bureaucratic policy” (p. 9). The Crown and nation-state’s legitimacy is in particular, sustained by the legal assumption that their sovereignty is necessarily superior, stronger and deeper than any claims made by Indigenous peoples (Mackey, 2016). Such legitimacy is enshrined in settler law, even if the above colonial assumptions have not been proven, and Indigenous peoples are themselves not reconciled to how power and authority is being interpreted (Mackey, 2016).

Mackey (2016) identifies “[t]hese so-called ‘logics’ of settler national sovereignty” as elaborate and illogical “‘fantasies of possession’ and ‘fantasies of entitlement’” that have been extensively rationalized (p. 10). These fantasies have built settler certainty, and “have powerful effects in the world, often through their materialization in law” (Mackey, 2016, p. 10). In fact, they have become more than fantasies as they constitute “embedded, ‘unconscious expectation[s]’ of how the world will work to reaffirm the social locations, perceptions and benefits of privilege (Bell, 2008, as cited in Mackey, 2016, p. 10). Settler expectations, and settler fantasies of possession and entitlement exist in a dangerous continuum; such fantasies are beliefs conceived from “long-standing, settled expectations that have been legitimated through repeated experiences across lifetimes and generations of being ‘centered and dominant’” (Bell, 2008, as cited in Mackey, 2016, p. 10). These expectations are in turn, sedimented into settler citizens’ practices and attitudes (Bell, 2008, as cited in Mackey, 2016, p. 10).

Despite the powerful grip that settler expectations and fantasies have over non-Indigenous citizens, Mackey (2016) observes how settler anxiety emerges “because the vibrant presence of Indigenous people is a constant and uneasy reminder that the settler colonial project is incomplete and unsettled” (p. 35). Vibrant Indigeneities and

Indigenous sovereignties are nightmarish for the settler state, as they summon the precarious claims to sovereignty enjoyed by liberal democracies (Simpson, 2011, as cited in Mackey, 2016, p. 35). Settler expectations and fantasies have therefore, unleashed “one of the most extensive colonial processes ever, a legalized grasping for land that has not stopped to this day” (Mackey, 2016, p. 43).

Lindberg (2015) sees her novel *Birdie* as an impetus for crucial ideas and conversations necessary to initiating healthy relationships between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous settlers in Canada. Bernice, says Lindberg (2016), raises the possibilities for difficult conversations about the role settlers play and continue to play in establishing and perpetuating circumstances that have blighted Indigenous nations through colonization. Lindberg (2017) emphasizes that the journey to reconciliation can only begin when settlers recognize the sexual violence Birdie experiences as part of the colonial continuum, and not as something that Indigenous families or communities are predisposed to (11:15). She cautions that “trying to reconcile without full knowledge of where that ideology of male supremacy and dominance came from” – that is, “without looking to the full truth” – would be to do so in vain (Lindberg, 2017, 11:32). The colonial violence that pervaded Bernice’s home never left and was perpetuated because it had become “a normative understanding” (Lindberg, 2017, 12:25). Here, it is important for Canadian settlers to not only accept that the sexual violence Bernice and numerous Indigenous people continue to disproportionately encounter is colonial damage, but to also acknowledge that this damage belongs to us. As Lindberg says: this colonial damage is “mine, and it’s yours” (Lindberg, 2017, 9:58), and we need to understand the extent of this damage before we can eradicate it (Lindberg, 2017, 13:08).

Taking responsibility for colonial damage however, involves embracing difficult truths. Although truth has not always been a shared value between Indigenous and non-Indigenous nations, Lindberg (2017) affirms that we need to know, value and honour our truths before we embark on a reconciliatory journey (5:26). For Canadian settlers, this means reconciling to the reality that we benefit from colonization, including the Indian Act (Lindberg, 2017, 14:10). Lindberg says: “... someone benefits every time one of our men is taken to prison, every time one of our women is snatched, [and] every time intervention is required and our children are taken from the home” (2017, 17:48). Identifying, and respecting our truths also entails recognizing how we feel threatened when equality, fairness, and eliminating violence against Indigenous peoples are brought

up and deliberated (Lindberg, 2017, 14:17). To embrace the truth is to accept how fragile our power base is so that we can normalize discussions about those who benefit from this power imbalance (Lindberg, 2017, 14:30).

For Canadian settlers who like to think they live in an equitable society, who take pride in the nation's reputation as a respectful and inclusive one, and who are deeply invested in their fantasies of entitlement and possession, the truth is hard and uncomfortable (Lindberg, 2017). Nevertheless, establishing a "nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous Peoples, based on recognition, rights, co-operation, and partnership" ("Archived – Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations", 2017) as the Trudeau government claims it is committed to, means examining Canadian history (Lindberg, 2017, 25:58). Revisiting history as a basis for a nation-to-nation relationship does not only involve locating the pieces that are beautiful, but also "identifying the portions... that are actually not" (Lindberg, 2017, 26:01). In particular, it means "[d]oing the hard colonial math, acknowledging and taking responsibility for the mistakes and believing us when we tell those truths" (Lindberg, 2017, 26:07). As Lindberg (2017) points out:

If you think just for a moment about the courage, love and hope that it takes for a person so painfully impacted by colonial violence to tell some of their story, you get a momentary glimpse of profundity and the power of truth (5:34).

A true nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous peoples requires more than a prime ministerial apology tour, a national inquiry, and lukewarm empathy for residential school survivors. Although the idea that we have formulated a new era and a new place to begin the conversation about colonial damage is somewhat laudable (Lindberg, 2017, 24:29), it does little to change how settler institutions continue to dehumanize First Peoples. While some liberal progressive settlers may have graduated from perceiving Aboriginal peoples as savages to seeing them as victims, this shift does not indicate that we have taken responsibility for that colonial damage. It also does not change the way that institutions and laws that benefit us continue to mistreat Indigenous peoples, nor does it make us view them as fellow human beings who deserve the same rights and privileges as us. First Peoples remain unfortunate victims, while we give ourselves congratulatory pats on the back for feeling compassionate.

In her lecture, Lindberg (2017) mentions readers who misinterpret *Birdie* (2015) as a novel that showcases trauma inflicted by the residential school system or from

prostitution even though the book does not feature residential schools or sex workers (24:19). Bernice comes to us deeply scarred by her uncles' sexual predatory behaviour. She is self-destructive, drinking until the "lines between her and other people blurred" (Lindberg 2015, p. 50), and "willing to sleep with Art/Als" (p. 51) who sometimes left her bruised and bloodied. "You look... like you got the worst of it," says Lola to Bernice one morning, as she walked in with blood on her lip and in her eye after a drunken night (Lindberg, 2015, p. 53). She is abandoned by Maggie who was also sexually assaulted by the uncles, and she harbours unbearable guilt thinking that the "shame [she gave her mother] in a dreambundle" had killed her. The novel chronicles the many ways that Bernice is impacted by sexual violence, but to interpret it as merely "the tragic upbringing of so many First Nations women" (McCrae, 2016)<sup>27</sup>, is to adopt a reductionist approach to the story Lindberg (2015) tells. It removes Bernice's trauma from historical context, and absolves us from the colonial damage responsible for her 'tragic upbringing'. *Birdie* (2015) is not about the tragic upbringing of Indigenous women. Rather, it is about the tragic treatment of Indigenous peoples by Canadian settlers.

Bernice herself cautions us about attributing the traumatizing circumstances that plague her life, to the idea that Indigenous peoples are dysfunctional. She makes this clear when she reflects on "the pork incident" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 142), where her foster mother, Ann Ingelson, caught her storing fresh food under her bed. The Ingelsons would tell their guests that Bernice was afraid they would run out of food when recounting 'the pork incident', filling the dining room with the "horror of ... Bernice's supposed past" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 143). Bernice however, "wasn't afraid that they would run out of food, [but]... needed food should she decide to run" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 143). Bernice notes that "[t]here was always food to be had at home", and that "there was always an aunt or uncle or *Kohkom*, to turn to in a pinch" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 143). And while Meetoses "most certainly... had more pinches than the Ingelsons", this "was the result of history and design, [and] not some flaw in her family or her people" (Lindberg 2015, p. 143). By assuming that Bernice must have gone hungry as a child, the Ingelsons – no matter how

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<sup>27</sup> This quote was from a book review on *Birdie* (2015) written by Christine McCrae (2016), a librarian from the Richmond Public Library. The review was published in *Richmond News*, a community newspaper. It is not my intention to call McCrae out for interpreting Lindberg's novel in an overwhelmingly simplistic manner, but to highlight that her reading may suggest how settler society reads the three novels I analyze. Additionally, we look to librarians as reliable knowledge purveyors. McCrae's review, which (unintentionally or otherwise) distances Bernice's experiences from settler responsibility, has significant influence over how others may approach the novel.

kind their intentions – have not advanced much beyond colonial disdain for Indigenous peoples. They fail to recognize that the Meetoses are left wanting, because colonization by European settlers have established systems, policies, and institutions that impoverish First Peoples by socially, politically, and economically marginalizing them. So long as Bernice’s supposed hunger is solely attributed to Indigenous inadequacy, the Ingelsons can remain guiltless settlers motivated by nothing other than pure kindness.

We are reminded again how important it is to historically and politically contextualize the Meetoses’ hardships when Valene talks about her family in the novel. Her grandmother, *Kohkom* Rose, is from Kelly Lake, “where the women hid the men and children when the Treaty Commissioner came through looking for a few more Indians to sign their rights away” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 125). That, reflects Valene, “proved to be prescient and the cause of much modern-day-distress” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 125). While she recognizes that her people “have not been colonized or ‘Indian Acted’ to death..., the Callious and nine other families have no reserve, no treaty rights, no health care... [and] [n]o money” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 125). It “[d]oesn’t matter much that her family is not part of the Indian Act”, Val “is third generation poor” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 125). Here, Lindberg not only roots the poverty Val and her family experiences in colonization, but also underlines the powerful colonial grip that continues to determine Indigenous peoples’ fate across generations. One did not have to attend residential school, be a missing and murdered Indigenous person – these seem to be the typical examples cited when mainstream narratives discuss colonial damage – to have your life impaired by colonization. The grasp colonization has over Indigenous lives is not only profound, but also inconspicuous in many ways.

Lindberg (2016) does not want people to “say bad uncles”, but to ask how we can ensure that families are safe places when they read *Birdie* (2015) (12:43). However, we must have difficult conversations about colonial damage, as well as the continuing oppression of Indigenous peoples before we can get to a place where they “don’t disappear without our expressed and shared concern, search and sorrow” (Lindberg, 2017, 48:23). Taking responsibility for this damage, and fulfilling our obligations as Canadian settlers who live on Indigenous lands, must involve “open[ing] ourselves to the possibility that we don’t know everything... [and that] other people’s truths might be difficult for us to understand, but... are important for us to accept” (Lindberg, 2017,

50:21). As Lindberg (2017) notes, “reconciliation at its finest moment may be when you reconcile yourself to the truth you never thought you’d believe” (22:47).

These conversations about truths, settler obligations and responsibilities are messy, awkward and painful (Lindberg, 2017). The word settler in itself “turns us toward uncomfortable reali[z]ations, difficult subjects, and potential complicity in systems of dispossession and violence” (Lowman & Barker, 2015, p. 2). But Lindberg points out that the endgame here “is to build something magnificent where we all feel safe...” (2017, 51:39) And that, she affirms, would be worth a hundred messy conversations (Lindberg, 2017, 51:45).

## **4.2. Start Exercising Your Imaginations Settlers – We Have Obligations to Fulfill!**

The hard and messy conversations we are to have about uncomfortable truths while on reconciliation road must be accompanied by equally messy conversations about kindness, acceptance and courage if we want to work in a world where Indigenous peoples are safe, valued, and celebrated. While the Ingelsons exhibit settler kindness by fostering a teenage Bernice with patience and generosity, their benevolence is restrained by their failure to do the ‘hard colonial math’ that has privileged them and disenfranchised Bernice. Despite being treated well, Bernice finds herself working “at not begrudging, [and] resenting them” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 144). Bernice’s resentment not only stems from wanting the Ingelsons’ “acreage (on ‘ancient Indian land’, as Tom intones after two Scotches), [and] their refrigerator that makes ice”, but also from “their complete lack of guilt over their fortune” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 144). It takes two Scotches for Tom to admit that they own ‘ancient Indian land’, but perhaps no amount of alcohol can prime him for the uncomfortable task of figuring out how this land became his. To think about how their wealth was accumulated through oppressing Indigenous peoples, would be to contradict their self-perception as exemplary citizens and foster parents. Consequently, their efforts to create a safe and welcoming environment for Bernice cannot be fully realized, leaving their charge to feel “resentment more than peace with the provisioning” (p. 144).

The Ingelsons exhibit a kindness that lack depth, that does little to repair the relationship between Indigenous peoples and Canadian settlers. Kindness – without

embracing uncomfortable truths about our roles in inflicting historical and continuing colonial violence for our own benefit – lacks the currency necessary for a Nation-to-Nation relationship based on recognition, rights, and respect. Lola, who owns the bakery Bernice works at and lives above, demonstrates a kindness which differs greatly from that exhibited by the Ingelsons. Lola is a “little bit racist” (Lindberg, 2017, 33:22), and calls “all people with her own lack of pigmentation, ‘brownies’” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 9). She however, doesn’t know that she is racist, and doesn’t want to be; Lola “just didn’t expand the way that she thought about the world, or didn’t interact enough with people to be able to divest herself of the right not to be racist” (Lindberg, 2017, 33:26). Bernice recognizes this, noting that “Lolas were almost always fascinated because they had never met an Indian before”, and that the “dying savage thing is what floats her boat” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 9). Yet Bernice thinks that “Lola has a really big heart” that is admirable “even if you wouldn’t invite her over for dinner” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 9)

Lola is kind to Bernice “because she suspects no one has been tender to her before” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 111). Bernice describes the kindness Lola extends to her as “one of those kindnesses... that can’t actually be felt or measured – so much so that you don’t actually notice it” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 59). When Bernice chopped her hair off, Lola “marched her right over to Shear Talent to get the ends evened out” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 59). Lola also provides her with free meals, and once, even “coaxed Bernice into her ’74 Malibu and pretended she was not looking for Pat John’s house” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 59). On the nights “when Bernice teetered awkwardly on heels down the stairs, and to godknowswhere, Lola could not sleep until she came home” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 111). Lola’s heart breaks when Bernice comes home “[b]ruised... [b]loodied... [and] [e]mpty”, or when she sees the “scars on [Bernice’s] arms and hands lookin’ like they want to jump out from underneath the skin” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 112). Lola “wonders what and when” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 112), when she sees Bernice’s burn scars, revealing genuine compassion that juxtaposes with colonial notions of innate Indigenous deficiency.

Bernice’s bruises reminds Lola that “she herself used to be with rough men, too... [t]hat she used to have those same black eyes, same torn lips and same bloodied teeth” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 112). Yet Lola doesn’t conflate the violence she experienced with the violence Bernice encounters. She recognizes that the violence Bernice experiences, is “a completely different kettle of fish” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 112). “It is almost like The Kid is *going out to get beat up*” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 112), Lola thinks.

Even though Lola “has a limited idea about who Indigenous peoples are because she hangs out with people who talk about what Indigenous peoples are” (Lindberg, 2017, 34:50), she suspects that there is a backstory to the violence accosting Bernice. She rationalizes “that [it] is impossible” that Bernice is going out to get beat up. Here, Lola starts realizing that there is a larger force underlying the violence that Bernice experiences. she senses that Bernice is looking to get beaten not because there is something wrong with her, but because there is something beyond Bernice’s control that embeds violence into her life. Lola doesn’t know what that something is, but she recognizes that Bernice doesn’t deserve to be abused. Herein lies an important lesson about being kind. The ability to humanize the Other despite the discomfort that unfamiliarity brings, and the understanding that humans are shaped by circumstances, are fundamental to inspiring the genuine kindness necessary for advancing reconciliation in this country.

One of my favourite moments in the novel is when Lola speaks to Bernice in Cree. Bernice had gone out the night before to take damage upon herself, and had returned the next morning with blood on her lip and in her eye. That evening, Lola says to Bernice: “Go to bed, my girl,” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 55). Lola says this to her in “Bernice’s own language, and they had both looked at each other hard because Lola does not speak Cree” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 55). I love this moment, not only because Lola is being tender towards Bernice, but because Lola is indicating to Bernice that she sees her as fully human. Lola sees Bernice as someone who comes from a nation that has its own language, and that she has a culture and identity beyond Lola’s world. On another occasion in the novel, Freda hears Lola singing along to an Honour Song that had come on the radio. Freda “stops cold when she hears Lola singing the song an octave higher and trilling in between the beat” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 131). She thinks there “is no way, no earthly way that this old *moniaskew* has ever heard the song before... [y]et, there she stands pounding and singing like she is at an intertribal” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 132).

Both these moments in the novel require readers to suspend their disbelief, prompting us to loosen our grip on what we think we know about the Other. It also requires us to exercise our imaginations so that we can understand that the Other’s cultures and identities do not just exist in relation to ours, and that these cultures come with their own laws and languages that have been overridden by ours. Social philosopher Frantz Fanon’s (2001) observation about the Black man in his essay *The*

*Fact of Blackness*, comes to mind here. Fanon, who studied the psychopathology of colonization, writes that “not only must the [B]lack man be [B]lack; he must be [B]lack in relation to the [W]hite man” (2001, p. 257). Additionally, the Black man’s “customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him” (Fanon, 2001, p. 258). Fanon’s observations about the Black man’s existence in a White-dominated colonial society also describes how White settlers relate to Indigenous people. In relation to deeply ingrained colonial myths, which equates the White settlers’ presence on Indigenous lands with modern progress and cultural and racial superiority, Aboriginal people and their ways of being can only be inferior, archaic and irrelevant. It is therefore inevitable that Indigenous peoples face erasure, as they stand in the way of progress. We must rely on our imaginative abilities, to realize that First Peoples do not stand in relation to how White settlers have constructed their colonial identities. The ability to imagine is especially crucial, as reconciliation “isn’t about going to a place we’ve been before, but perhaps ...about going someplace we’ve never been” (Lindberg, 2017, 3:42).

Lola, Lindberg (2017) states, also “knows about reciprocity” (35:02). She offers Bernice food, a place to live, and welcomes her family. Bernice in turn offers Lola a daughter, a community and her family (Lindberg, 2017). Lola, who has never had children, “cannot imagine what motherly feelings are like”, but Bernice “touches on a place that she had forgotten existed” (Lindberg, 2015 p. 113). She “has come to love this”, Lola thinks to herself as she is about to have tea with Freda and Val (Lindberg, 2015, p. 185). Lola “likes to sit with these two women (one her younger browner reflection of herself and the other an inverted funhouse version of herself) and take them in” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 185). Bernice and her family also teach Lola about herself. Lola who “has never seen so many Indians up close before... is mostly surprised that they are pretty much like her” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 185). Caring for Bernice has made her realize that she “does not love the Whippets” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 112) – Lola’s friends who are “a peculiarly uniform group of sixty-year-old skinny women from across Canada... [who] found each other because they all suntanned at the same beach back in 1982” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 110). The Whippets do not understand “the softness of Lola’s heart and the feelings of kindness she has for Bernice” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 111), and she “sees their cruelty and deplores the mirror image in herself” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 112). Rather she has taken to the way Bernice looks at her as “[a] different Lola...

[where] [q]uiet kindness and soft intelligence meets harsh observations and boiling wit” (p. 112).

Bernice, who understands that Lola cares for her, reciprocates her kindness. She makes Lola a jean jumper for her birthday, and sews “some sage into the cuffs... to keep Lola well” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 208). She offers Lola “madefamily” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 245) – the Lola who “didn’t know how much she loved having people around until they came” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 250). This reciprocal relationship between Bernice and Lola, is one that was not possible between Bernice and the Ingelsons. While her foster parents provide her with food and shelter, Bernice is not positioned to offer them anything in return. The Ingelsons do not see her as a fellow human, and she is therefore incapable of giving them something they could possibly want. Settler expectations and fantasies also decree that Canadian settlers like the Ingelsons are never seen as desiring anything from Indigenous peoples<sup>28</sup>. To admit that we long for something from First Peoples goes against the narratives that sustains settler sovereignty. It would contradict the terra nullius myth, which erases Indigenous ownership of the land settlers have forcefully seized. Such longing would also negate the racial and cultural superiority Canadian settlers have assumed over Indigenous peoples; we couldn’t possibly want what they have because we are better than them. At the same time, we can no longer rationalize the violence we continue inflicting on Indigenous peoples should we be seen as less superior than them.

To the Ingelsons, Bernice remains an Indigenous stereotype who they rescued from poverty and hunger. Bernice notes that nobody mentions how she “always did the dishes.... [a]nd kept the kitchen and dining room immaculate” when they were recounting the ‘pork incident’ (Lindberg, 2015, p. 142-143). These details were important to Bernice not “because it justified her actions, but because it spoke to her good character” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 143). More importantly, they affirm her humanity. Consequently, she is unable to offer them what she gifts Lola in response to the latter’s kindness. Through Bernice, Lola gains kinship and feels that she belongs to Bernice’s

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<sup>28</sup> However, this does not stop settlers from appropriating Indigenous culture and spirituality (and even dubiously claiming Indigenous ancestry), as they continue positioning themselves as rightful inheritors of all that is Indigenous – specifically, land and resources that belong to First Peoples. That four candidates made undocumented claims to Indigenous ancestry based on far-removed First Nations relatives while running in the 2019 federal election, indicates that such appropriation is openly practiced.

“womenfamily” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 245). She doesn’t quite understand Bernice’s offering to Pimatisewin, “and the feast even less, but Lola sparkles with richness from being a part of it all” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 250). Lindberg (2017) highlights that the reciprocal relationship between Bernice and Lola “is about the way that we hit reconciliation road”, which involves giving “something beautiful of ourselves to somebody else, and ... start[ing] to think of them perhaps as family” (35:53). The reciprocity that Lola and Bernice build their relationship on – the way that they exchange care and tenderness, “back and forth towards each other” (Lindberg, 2017, 36:33), holds important lessons for us. Through Lola’s eyes and heart, we recognize Bernice as someone who is “not just traumatized, but... deserving of love, [and] respect” (Lindberg, 2017, 48:05). And through Bernice, we learn that it is possible for “a Cree family of women [to] adopt a non-Cree person, a non-Indigenous person, and make them a family member” (Lindberg, 2017, 47:50).

When Lindberg (2017) wrote *Birdie* (2015), she was “very clear about including Lola as a relative” (47:24). As Lola appreciates Bernice, Val and Freda as smart, resilient, and hardworking women, and treats them kindly and generously, she becomes part of Bernice’s ‘madefamily’ and ‘womenfamily’. We are not only inclined to learn about genuine kindness and reciprocity through Lola, but to also imagine ourselves as Bernice’s relatives and by extension, relatives to Indigenous peoples. More importantly, we learn that our obligation as relatives requires us to be in a reciprocal relationship with Indigenous Peoples, one that is built on sincere kindness. The idea that Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can be relatives is not a new one. During her lecture, Lindberg mentions the making of Treaty 6 – a treaty signed by the Canadian Crown and 50 First Nations in western Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. She shares with us that on the day the treaty was made, the intention was “[w]hen non-Indigenous peoples came here, they were going to be our relatives” (Lindberg, 2017, 49:47). We therefore “have an obligation to each other to make sure that we are law-abiding and provided for to the degree that that relationship allows us” (Lindberg, 2017, 50:01)<sup>29</sup>. Identifying as relatives plays a crucial role in repairing the relationship between Indigenous Peoples and

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<sup>29</sup> Lindberg (2017) refers to abiding by Indigenous laws, which is different from the common and civil legal traditions in Canada. Indigenous law constitutes “legal orders which are rooted in Indigenous societies themselves”, and includes “relationships to the land, the spirit world, creation stories, customs, processes of deliberation and persuasion, codes of conduct, rules, teachings and axioms for living and governing” (White Charleson, 2016).

Canadian settlers – one that is currently underlined by oppression and violence. A healthier relationship is contingent on our ability as Canadian settlers to re-imagine ourselves as relatives to Indigenous Peoples. For when we “think of somebody as a relative, or who is just like you, then they matter and they don’t disappear without our expressed and shared concern, search and sorrow” (Lindberg, 2017, 48:17).

Bernice’s ‘madefamily’ is a model we should aspire to, yet there is much to learn, unlearn, embrace, and imagine before Canadian settlers can be good relatives. There are uncomfortable truths we must accept and learn from, colonial practices and attitudes to be re-examined so that we can see the Other as fully human, unprecedented kinships to imagine, and new obligations to learn and fulfill. Learning from the Other who we have continuously ignored and abuse isn’t the same as learning about them, and is an exercise that hinges on cultural humility. Jones and Jenkins (2014) emphasize that “the Other cannot be totally learned about, known, or understood...” (p. 12). Instead, the Other brings the experience of difference, which confronts us with the limits of our knowledge and learning – limits that we may not have thought existed (Jones & Jenkins, 2014)<sup>30</sup>.

Lola would probably cackle unforgivingly at you if you tried to tell her about cultural humility and learning from the Other. However, she demonstrates an implicit understanding of these concepts when she is with Bernice and her family. She does not understand why they are collecting boxes of food, which are Bernice’s feast ingredients, and is frustrated that the boxes sit in her kitchen uselessly. At one point in the novel, she throws one of the boxes out on the curb but retrieves it after some thinking. Lola explicitly says that she does not understand the offering to the *Pimatisewin*, or the feast, but this doesn’t hold her back from participating in the ceremony. More importantly, her lack of knowledge about Indigenous practices does not prevent her from being part of Bernice’s family. Lola’s character therefore highlights that knowledge about Indigenous cultures is not imperative to building a reciprocal relationship with Indigenous peoples. Many Canadian institutions, including the one I attend, interpret decolonization and

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<sup>30</sup> Jones and Jenkins (2014) link this entitlement to knowledge, which pedagogy and scholarly research is predicated on, to the fantasy of entitlement that have built settler certainty over their claims to land and other privileges. They observe that when this fantasy of entitlement is disrupted, it threatens “the dominant group at the very point of [its] power” – that is its ability to know (Jones & Jenkins, 2014, p. 14).

reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples as processes that primarily constitutes learning about the 'Other'. Erecting welcome poles or hosting Indigenous ceremonies to increase awareness on Indigenous cultures, does little to address the violent racism inherent in settler expectations and fantasies or to bring about systemic changes needed to keep Indigenous peoples safe and included. To the contrary, learning about the 'Other' through such a contrived manner treads a fine line with eating the 'Other', where the 'Other' is commodified and racial difference is acknowledged and enjoyed for pleasure (hooks, 1992). Liberal multiculturalism with "a 3-D approach – one that celebrates dance, dress, and dining, but fails to take into account the multiple dimensions of racial and social inequality" (Srivastava, 2007, p. 291) then takes the guise of decolonization and reconciliation.

Lola demonstrates the rich possibilities that arise from embracing the 'Other' with cultural humility. She ventures beyond familiarity, is respectful to Bernice, Freda and Val despite her initial myopic view on Indigenous people, and grows comfortable enough to locate herself in relation to Bernice and her family<sup>31</sup>. Her receptivity rewards her, as she is exhilarated from being a part of Bernice's family. Unlike Lola, Jody Mitic lacks the racial stamina and openness that comes with humble curiosity. Mitic, who has engaged in combat on the frontlines as an Afghanistan veteran, is made uncomfortable when a fictional character from Vermette's (2016a) *The Break* marks Whiteness. He therefore misses out on the lessons inherent in Vermette's novel. Despite our assumed superiority over Aboriginal peoples, Lindberg (2015) strongly suggests that they have much to offer us. Canadian settlers have and still stand to benefit from the kindness and reciprocity of Indigenous peoples like Bernice, Val and Freda<sup>32</sup>. They offer us the remarkable opportunity to establish a nation-to-nation relationship that challenges conventional Eurocentric family structures – an opportunity that requires us to exercise our imaginations, and to relinquish the desire to know and what we already know so that more would be returned to us. If those who we have hurt and damaged across

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<sup>31</sup> Lola locates herself in relation to Bernice and her family, as opposed to seeing the 'Other' in relation to her and normalizing her Whiteness. Her existence and selfhood is not displaced, or diminishes by being among Bernice and her family, whose culture and identities exists outside the Whippet world.

<sup>32</sup> In the early days of contact, Europeans settlers relied on Indigenous peoples' knowledge and generosity to survive harsh winters, navigate through unknown terrain, and to accumulate fur trade wealth. Jo-Ann Episkenew (2009) writes that "newcomers valued Indigenous people as military allies and business partners, albeit by necessity than by affection" (p. 21).

generations can see good in us, as Bernice can see Lola's "really big heart and [her] head for numbers" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 9), then we ought to have the capacity to see Indigenous peoples not only as fully human, but as relations who enrich our lives.

Lindberg (2017) sees reciprocity – the "reciprocity of honour, the reciprocity of obligation, the reciprocity of nation-to-nation, going back and forth" – as the place where reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous peoples begins (37:18). A nation-to-nation relationship through reconciliation means that Canadian settlers and governments not only have to collectively understand the values and laws related to reciprocity, but also institutionalize them (Lindberg, 2017). This is a reckoning that Lindberg wants us to arrive at, as we see Lola and Bernice fulfilling their obligations towards each other. That we have an obligation towards Indigenous peoples – one that is based on reciprocity and kindness – must become a normative understanding.

*Birdie* (2015), like *The Break* (2016a), showcases kind, resilient women who create family, and who maintain a deep interconnectedness despite heartbreaking circumstances. Upon listening in on Maggie and Val from her room under the stairs one night, Bernice observes that "[t]hey were so pure in their appreciation of and love for one another that she felt lightheaded" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 20). She hears her mother promise Val that she would pluck the latter's chin when she grows old, and realizes at a young age that she "would have to learn to do anything for one other person in her life" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 21). Bernice fulfills this obligation by protecting Freda from the uncles, "[w]ithout knowing that Freda was doubly in jeopardy, more at risk for an unkind life than even Bernice" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 196). Freda recognizes that her "big little cousin... gave up her lifebody so Freda could have her own" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 197), and loves her dearly for protecting her. Freda too, is "one of those women who is allied with strong women, [and]... will be the first to check out of a relationship if there is something better to do with her friends... [o]r family" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 133). When Lola called Freda to tell her about Bernice, she does what the women in *The Break* would do when something happens to one of them; she dropped her most recent Phil, "hopped a series of hitches and got to her cousin's side within twenty-four hours" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 134).

When Lindberg (2017) wrote about Bernice and her 'womenfamily' in *Birdie* (2015), she "wanted the women to be able to have that language, and that cadence and

that feeling that our kitchens<sup>33</sup> have with our aunties and our moms” (19:10). Bernice and her family represent “the autonomy of self, and self-determination of the community” through their solidarity, the feelings of home and belonging they have enkindled, and their obligations. These women embody “the authority of the nation” that underpins everything, and we can feel their strength (Lindberg, 2017, 19:19). Bernice, Freda, and Val are brought together by “their absolute reliance on only themselves” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 30). They each “understood completely the nature of women’s interconnectedness” after seeing “all of their fathers and husbands walk out the door (with booze or a brunette in hand)”, and “maintained graceful coherence for the sake of the family and the community” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 30). After leaving the San, Bernice feels “the longing for the women in her family so acutely that it gnawed at her like a presence” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 70). She is hungry “[n]ot for food, not for drink, not for foreign skin” but “for family... [f]or the women she loves...[f]or the peace of no introduction, no backstory, no explanation” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 102).

*Birdie* (2015) centers these women’s resilience, and the fundamental roles that they play in keeping families, communities and nations together despite this “over-responsibility... cost[ing] them posture and emotional affluence that could not yet be counted” (Lindberg, 2015, p. 30). Here, Lindberg (2015) reclaims and restores the power and status held by Indigenous women, which European colonizers have systematically displaced through policies that support patriarchal social codes and beliefs. While Indigenous women’s roles differ between nations, and the capacities in which they hold positions of power and leadership in their communities vary (Indigenous Foundations, 2009), Lindberg – like Vermette (2016a) – are institutionalizing the agency held by Aboriginal women through their novels. Acknowledging and re-establishing Indigenous female autonomy and power as a norm, is vital to advancing reconciliation and repairing our relationship with First Peoples. Lindberg (2017) makes this clear by describing what a nation-to-nation relationship entails:

Nation to nation... means entrenching standards of institutional regard for peoples ravaged by Canadian law. Nation to nation means acknowledging the truth of the nations.... It means funding and supporting models of Indigenous governance most damaged by colonization. Nation to nation...

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<sup>33</sup> The kitchen table is after all, as Joy Harjo (1994) notes in her poem *Perhaps the World Ends Here*, where the world begins. One can’t help but think about the power and autonomy held by the women in *Birdie* (2015) and *The Break* (2016a) who spend a lot of time at kitchen tables.

means ensuring those that warrior societies, women's societies, two-spirited societies become an active, elevated, treasured, and funded portion of Indigenous governance again. (26:14).

Both *The Break* (2016a) and *Birdie* (2015) conclude in similar ways. In Vermette's (2016a) novel, Flora knows that Emily will be okay, that "she will go on and be an amazing woman" because "[s]he is strong" (Vermette, 2016a, p. 329). In *Birdie*, Val tells Freda that Bernice will "...be better off no matter what" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 243). Both women who have endured the violence bred by colonialism are able to reinstate their autonomy and dignity because their womenfamilies are fulfilling their obligations. This is a reminder to Lindberg's (2015) readers, that we too, have obligations to fulfill so that Indigenous and non-Indigenous people across generations are safe, protected, cared for, and valued. I can imagine Lindberg saying – in fact, she already has several times in her 2017 *CBC Ideas* lecture – that such obligations are the law, and should be institutionalized in our policies and practices. But we must first grapple with difficult and uncomfortable truths so that we can identify our obligations, and we must be prepared to re-imagine our roles as Canadian settlers. There is not a step to be missed if we are sincere about repairing our relationships with Indigenous peoples.

## Chapter 5.

### Eden Robinson's (2017a) *Son of a Trickster*: Decolonization through Indigenous Wonderworks

#### 5.1. Move Over Settlers: Re-centring Indigenous Epistemologies, Ontologies and Cosmologies

Eden Robinson's (2017a)'s *Son of a Trickster* is the first novel in a trilogy by the Haisla and Heiltsuk author. The protagonist in this coming of age story based in Kitimat, B.C., is sixteen-year-old Jared Martin who is the son of the trickster Wee'git, and a powerful witch. Between his father who relies on him financially, his erratically violent mother who demands his exclusive loyalty, his grandmothers who reject him because of his bloodline, and his girlfriend who self-harms, Jared is unable to rely on anyone for consistent love and support. As the novel progresses, Jared also finds himself increasingly caught up in the spirit world. Despite having to deal with supernatural beings who won't leave and having to navigate challenging familial relationships while struggling with alcohol and drug use, Jared's compassion and kindness remains unflinching. Robinson's novel, like *Birdie* (2015) and *The Break* (2016a), holds remarkable lessons about kindness, obligations, and reciprocity. Yet more profoundly, Robinson brings Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies and cosmologies into focus by ingeniously weaving the spiritual into contemporary human existence in her novel. She dismantles colonial order by presenting a world where non-human forms have presence and agency, thus creating space for – and repatriating – Indigenous ways of being. At its heart, Robinson's novel paves the way for imagined possibilities beyond oppressive structures and conditions through decolonization<sup>34</sup> – a process that is integral to repairing our relationship with Indigenous peoples, and that renders our reconciliatory efforts meaningful and genuine.

Jared's quiet kindness and his intelligent grasp on reciprocity belies his mother's often repeated mantra that “[t]he world is hard... [and therefore] you have to be harder” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 17). We encounter teenage Jared for the first time when he is

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<sup>34</sup> In the second half of Section 5.1. and in section 5.2., I will discuss how Robinson's (2017a) novel decolonizes by centering Indigenous ways of being and knowing.

crying for Baby, his sick dog, who is just about to be put down. Baby who “cried for him every time he left for school and had waited anxiously at the end of her chain for him to come back” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 22), had provided Jared with dependable love and companionship. Even though Jared knew he “wasn’t going to be alone after she died, ... the world was going to be a lonelier place without her” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 17). Jared’s compassion however, persists through his losses and tribulations. More notably, he demonstrates a kindness that extends beyond the yard work he helps his elderly neighbours with. He watches Mr. Jaks while Mrs. Jaks is at the doctor’s but instead of watching TV with him like Mrs. Jaks wanted them to, Jared puts Mr. Jaks in an old jacket, turns on the heater in the garage and spends the afternoon replacing the thread in the weed whacker and sharpening the blades in the lawn mower. Mr. Jaks who has dementia “gave instructions in Czech” while “Jared nodded and frowned” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 44). When Mr. Jaks “threw the flashlight across the room”, Jared took that “as a warning sign that the old man was tired” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 44). Here, the way that Jared takes care in preserving Mr. Jaks dignity, which may have been compromised by illness – despite his own dismal circumstances – demonstrates a perceptive kindness and patience that is beyond his years.

Throughout the novel, we see Jared fulfilling his obligations although those in his life repeatedly disappoint him by not fulfilling theirs. Jared pays his father’s back rent when Phil is unable to work due to an injured back, even though he knows that Maggie is “going to be so pissed if – when – she f[inds] out he [is] helping out his dad” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 60). He gets knocked unconscious and robbed while baking pot cookies to cover his father’s rent, but he continues selling them because he “just didn’t want his dad to be homeless” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 60). When Jared finds out that Phil is using his disability cheques for booze and drugs instead of paying rent, he finds “it hard to leave him in the lurch, knowing that Destiny and Ben<sup>35</sup> needed a place too” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 107). Maggie abandons Jared when she finds out that he has been helping her ex-husband, and he struggles to keep up with the bills. Eating rations from the food bank, Jared thinks that his mother has left him with the bills to punish him for helping Phil with his. His mother “had a Biblical sense of justice”, Jared thinks: “An [e]ye for an eye, [a] bill for a bill” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 162). Maggie is on hard drugs when

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<sup>35</sup> Destiny is Jared’s step-sister from his father’s second marriage, and Ben is Destiny’s newborn baby.

she returns, and Jared feels like he is “running a distant second to whatever she [is] using, so far back it was like they weren’t even running in the same race” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 200). When she tries to make amends, he wants to believe her, but thinks about how “his dad was always sorry and he still kept doing crap he had to say sorry for” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 202).

Although Jared is hurt by his father’s deception and his mother’s neglect, his kindness persists. He finds Mr. Jaks wandering down the street in his pyjamas one morning, and brings him home to give him a quick shave, rinses his dentures, and helps him into a diaper and his clothes. Knowing that the old man is calmer outside, he puts a rain jacket and a pair of boots on Mr. Jaks later that afternoon and brings him into the garden to turn the soil over. He covers Sarah’s self-inflicted cuts with Polysporin even though he isn’t sure “how he [is] supposed to react” when she shows him her wounds (Robinson, 2017a, p. 166). The emotional pain he bears, where “[e]verything ache[s] and all the choices felt wrong” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 202), does not compromise Jared’s capacity for tenderness. Jared therefore, understands kindness as an obligation that should be fulfilled despite the hand that one has been dealt. The way Jared instinctively understands and practices kindness first and foremost as an obligation, differs from the way that Ann and Tom Ingelson from Lindberg’s (2015) novel, *Birdie*, perceive and demonstrate kindness. Unlike the Ingelsons who foster Bernice and other children to position and redeem themselves as good-hearted settlers, Jared practices kindness without expecting anything in return. Kindness for Jared, is a way of being.

Aside from Jared’s exceptional capacity for kindness, he also has an intuitive and profound understanding of reciprocity. He makes himself useful when he stays at George’s house after his mother finds out that he has been helping Phil. He helps Georges’ mother with a heavy tote holding the spring salmon that was delivered to the house when he sees her struggling with it, despite wanting to “stay in the breakfast nook eating cereal” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 179). The golden rule of couch surfing, Jared notes while seeing George’s mother struggle with the tote, is “the more useful you [are], the longer people tolerated you” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 180). He then proceeds to clean and fillet the fish, and chop kindling for her. Above all else, Jared’s relationship with Mrs. Jaks highlights how he interprets and places significance on reciprocity. After Maggie forces him to use the nail gun on her abusive ex-boyfriend David who had broken her son’s ribs, Jared “pop[s] out of his body” and walks to the Jakses’ house (Robinson,

2017a, p. 111). When Jared tells Mrs. Jaks his name and that he was hurt by a bad man, “a glowing shape of her lifted up”, took his hand, walked him back to his house, “lifted him up and put him back in his body” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 112-113). While they walked, Mrs. Jaks had “sang a song he didn’t understand, but ... knew it was a lullaby and his footprints lit up and glowed behind them” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 112). She later takes him in while his mother was in mandatory anger management.

Consequently, Jared feels like he “owed Mrs. Jaks...[s]o much so, he’d even gone to visit her husband in respite” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 102) while she is in Vancouver for chemotherapy. Jared, acknowledging Mrs. Jaks’ kindness, hopes that “she would pull through” as she “deserved a lot better than getting shitcanned by leukemia” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 81). Even though his “mom didn’t like Mrs. Jaks” and “said Mrs. Jaks was slaving him” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 102), he continues helping her without being promised food or pay. Jared does not only appreciate Mrs. Jaks for taking him in, but he loves her because she recognizes the goodness in him despite the violence and neglect he experiences. She knows that “[i]t’s been a hard go” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 300) for Jared, but tells him that he is “a decent boy” (p. 80) and kisses his cheek as he helps her one day. Jared recognizes the faith Mrs. Jaks places in him, and cares for her and her family in return. He is heartbroken when he finds out that Mrs. Jaks is selling her home and moving away because she is dying. He finds himself crying: “It was sudden and he couldn’t stop it and the ache of everything, everything, everything, the sadness of it, the unfairness of it” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 230). Nevertheless, Mrs. Jaks tells Jared she is glad he came to her when he was lost and that she too, “would have been lost without [him]” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 233).

Jared’s relationship with Mrs. Jaks, like the relationship between Lola and Bernice in Lindberg’s (2015) *Birdie*, is a study in reciprocity based on kindness. While Lola offers Bernice food, shelter and room for her family, Bernice offers Lola family and community. Similarly, Mrs. Jaks offers Jared a home when his is in disarray, and Jared offers her and her family thoughtful care. The conversation Jared has with Mrs. Jaks as boxes are being carted out her front door showcases the reciprocal tenderness they share. Jared tells her that he wishes “life was more fair” for her and her husband, and that she “deserve[s] better” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 300). She replies that Jared too, deserves better. Mrs. Jaks tells Jared that he is a “good boy”, that he should “[f]ind love... [and] [h]ave babies” even though “everything hurts right now” (Robinson, 2017a,

p. 301). “I wish only good things for you... I wish this with all my heart”, she says to Jared (Robinson, 2017a, p. 301). The bond between Mrs. Jaks and Jared, and Lola and Bernice, suggest that there is much more to reciprocity than trading resources and services for mutual benefit. Mrs. Jaks and Lola are able to see merit in Jared and Bernice respectively, despite the damage that has been inflicted on them. They both see Bernice and Jared as good individuals and wish good things for them. In turn, Bernice and Jared discern that they are being seen as decent humans and respond by caring for Lola and Mrs. Jaks. Reciprocity thus encompasses recognizing and showing appreciation for the kindness that has been extended. In her *CBC Ideas* lecture, Lindberg (2017) names reciprocity as the starting point for reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Jared, whose character invites love and empathy and who refuses to let hardship compromise his capacity for kindness and reciprocity, therefore holds meaningful lessons on the fundamental ingredients necessary for repairing our relationship with Indigenous peoples.

Although Jared’s compassionate nature is admirable and inspirational, it also makes him vulnerable to destructive spirit beings. The river otters, in seeking revenge on humans who are destroying the world, lure him outside his house by tricking him into believing that there is an emergency at Mrs. Jaks’. Jared is knocked unconscious as he runs to the Jakses’ house, and brought to a cave where “otters that weren’t otters, but had human arms on otter bodies, otter faces on human bodies, human faces on otter bodies” are eager to devour him (Robinson, 2017a, p. 252). The river otters also want Jared to lead them to other witches, who “are so very tasty” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 252). Jared is eventually rescued by his real father – Wee’git, the trickster who often appears as a raven and can morph into any form he desires – and his mother and her boyfriend Richie. While Jared’s kindness – juxtaposed with his grim life – underpins the novel, *Son of a Trickster* (2017a) is also about Jared reckoning with his roots in the spiritual world. Despite his seemingly human existence, Jared has to come to terms with being the son of a trickster and a witch as he encounters various spirit beings throughout the novel.

Through Jared’s story, Robinson (2017a) deftly weaves Pacific Northwestern Indigenous cosmology into the contemporary world where teenagers communicate with their grandmothers through Facebook, and mothers textspeak with ease. Robinson gradually brings the narrative focus onto a spiritual world that intersects with the human one. In particular, Robinson breathes life into Indigenous ways of being by having

Wee'git, who has a specific role in Haisla culture as a trickster figure, appear at a crucial time in Jared's life. In an interview with Vancouver (B.C.) literary magazine *PRISM international*, Robinson (2017b) explains that children are told stories about Wee'git to teach them about Haisla protocol. Wee'git also appears alongside powerful witches, cannibalistic river otters, philosophizing fireflies, and brooding ape-men among others. Robinson recentres Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies not only by featuring culturally significant spiritual beings in her novels, but also by showcasing their capacity to unsettle the human world. More importantly, by having these spiritual beings bring disorder and chaos into the human world, Robinson illuminates the power implicit in Indigenous ways of being, to disrupt the order established by settler colonialism – an anthropocentric order, which constitutes policies, systems and institutions that continuously eradicate, oppress and dehumanize Indigenous peoples.

Ross Hoffman (2013), who provides a descriptive analysis of Aboriginal knowledge in his article *Respecting Aboriginal Knowing in the Academy*, writes that “Aboriginal ontologies and epistemologies are rooted in worldviews that are inclusive of both the sacred and the secular” (p. 190). He notes that the fundamental ontological principle underlying Indigenous knowledge and ways of being, “is that the world exists in one reality composed of an inseparable weave of secular and sacred dimensions” (Hoffman, 2013, p. 190). Consequently, “the epistemological principle that knowledge is gained through interaction with the physical as well as the spiritual aspects of the world” follows this ontological principle (Hoffman, 2013, p. 190). In settler colonialism where “settlers make Indigenous land their new home and source of capital”, land “is remade into property and human relationships to land are restricted to the relationship of the owner to his property” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5). Settler colonialism therefore involves “the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land [that] represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5). As settler colonialism “is a structure and not an event”, this violence “is not temporally contained in the arrival of the settler but is reasserted each day of occupation” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5). The epistemological, ontological, and cosmological relationships to land that are foundational to Indigenous ways of being and knowing are thus “interred, indeed made pre-modern and backward... [and] [m]ade savage” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5).

Indigenous peoples themselves “must be erased, must be made into ghosts” for settlers to make a place their home (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 6). In the article,

*Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor* (2012), Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang elucidate how settler colonialism necessitates the disappearance and destruction of Indigenous peoples:

Indigenous peoples are those who have creation stories, not colonization stories, about how we/they came to be in a particular place – indeed how we/they came to *be a place* [emphasis added]. Our/their relationships to land compromise our/their epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies. For the settlers, Indigenous peoples are in the way and, in the destruction of Indigenous peoples, Indigenous communities, and over time and through law and policy, Indigenous peoples' claims to land under settler regimes, land is recast as property and as a resource (p. 6).

Accordingly, the settler “sees himself as holding dominion over the earth and its flora and fauna, as the anthropocentric normal, and as more developed, more human, more deserving than other groups or species” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 6). His identity as a settler in particular, is based on “making the land produce, and produce excessively, because ‘civilization’ is defined as production in excess of the ‘natural’ world” – that is, “in excess of the sustainable production already present in the Indigenous world” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 6). Indeed, Robinson (2017a) refers to how civilization as defined and carried out by settlers has negated Aboriginal peoples' relationship with the land. The river otters who capture Jared tell him that “[t]he world is burning”, and that “[h]umans take all the fish” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 253). “Can’t stay in the river”, one of them says, because “[t]he rivers burn and taste like shit” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 253).

Similarly, Eva Mackey (2016) writes that “[t]he ideals of improvement, individualism, civilization, and ‘productive elaboration’ became essential to... the ‘civilization identity’ that emerged from Europe, and that has, in turn been generalized and ‘globalized’ in many ways” (p. 49). She highlights how identity based on property ideologies was carefully developed by liberal political philosophers such as John Locke in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, who argued that “God rewards the transformative productive labour of industrious people with property” (Mackey, 2016, p. 50). In particular, transforming nature into property “was a task commanded by God, and such godly labour then resulted in entitlement to property” (Mackey, 2016, p. 50). European identities strongly based on productive labour however, differed from Indigenous notions of personhood and made Indigenous peoples outsiders to the improvement process (Mackey 2016). First Peoples were perceived as savages “because they did not know how to own land in a possessively individualistic way that European colonizers defined as proper” (Mackey,

2016, p. 53). Subsequently, their inability or unwillingness to control land was “interpreted to mean that they needed to be under the control of colonizing, sovereign, settler subjects”, and needed to be civilized into “rational, individualist, and self-reliant, people who would ‘subdue the earth’ and improve it through labour” (Mackey, 2016, p. 52-53).

The way that “[e]verything within a settler colonial society strains to destroy or assimilate the Native in order to disappear them from the land” sends “multiple simultaneous and conflicting messages about Indigenous peoples” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 9). These colonial narratives include ideas “such as all Indians are dead, located in faraway reservations, that contemporary Indigenous peoples are less indigenous than prior generations, and that all [European settlers] are a ‘little bit Indian’” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 9)<sup>36</sup>. Tuck and Yang (2012) further expound that these messages reveal the colonial desires to erase, “to let time do its thing and wait for the older form of living to die out, or to even help speed things along (ethanize) because the death of pre-modern ways of life is thought to be inevitable” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 9). These desires represent yet another way to resolve to the colonial situation where settlers want to control the landscape and be made indigenous to the land they occupy (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Robinson (2017a) not only dispels demeaning narratives about Indigenous peoples that are conceived from colonial desires to destroy and assimilate First Peoples in *Son of a Trickster*, but she also reasserts Indigenous personhood by shaping Jared’s story around Indigenous ontology and epistemology. Through Jared, whose existence is entwined with spiritual beings that traverse the secular world, Robinson signals that Indigenous peoples and Indigenous ways of being are very much alive despite attempts to disappear them from the land. She decolonizes the narratives surrounding Indigenous peoples, and reclaims them by offering truths about who they are through story. Beyond this, her novel dismantles settler colonialism, its ideologies and intentions predicated on subjugating the land and its original inhabitants, by resituating Indigenous peoples as well as other-than-human peoples on the lands that settlers have appropriated and exploited.

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<sup>36</sup> Although Tuck & Yang (2012) refer to Americans in this quote, I find their observations about settler colonialism highly applicable to Canadian settlers as well.

Robinson's (2019) attempts to revive and re-center Indigenous ontology and epistemology stems from observing that the young people in her large family were not laughing or getting the context when stories about the "wild and funny" Wee'git were being told<sup>37</sup>. In reasserting Indigenous identity and existence through storytelling, Robinson's work evokes settler anxiety and insecurity, and discloses the precariousness that defines settler colonial identity. Tuck & Yang (2012) along with numerous scholars note that "Indigeneity prompts multiple forms of settler anxiety, even if only because the presence of Indigenous peoples – who make a priori claims to land and ways of being – is a constant reminder that the settler colonial project is incomplete" (Fanon, 1963; Vine Deloria, 1988; Grande, 2004; Bruyneel, 2007, as cited in Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 9). At the same time, by featuring Indigenous ways of being in the present-time, Robinson defies the racialization by settlers "that portrays contemporary Indigenous generations to be less authentic, less Indigenous than every prior generation in order to ultimately phase out Indigenous claims to land and usher in settler claims to property" (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 12).

By asserting Indigeneity in the present, on land that rightfully belongs to First Peoples, in urban settings, Robinson (2017a) also decentres Whiteness, which settler colonialism has afforded unearned privileges and racial superiority. While Robinson touches on colonial damage in her novel, the interaction between the spiritual and the secular takes centre stage in *Son of a Trickster* (2017a). She fleetingly revisits – but makes clear – the devastation wrought by colonial institutions and policies by bookending the novel with the interactions between Jared and his maternal grandmother Anita Moody, who was sent to a tuberculosis sanatorium while attending residential school. Anita, like the other Indigenous children at the sanatorium, was denied penicillin but subjected to medical experiments where staff would wheel her into "a room in the basement n [sic] [shine] a purple light on her chest" (Robinson, 2017a, p. 203). The intergenerational trauma caused by such genocidal policies is highlighted, when Maggie tells Jared about her abusive upbringing where her mother would bring the bleach out if she sniffled, clean and baked her dishes after she ate, and where she thought that "Dettol was wat [sic] every1 [sic] bathed in" (Robinson, 2017a, p. 203).

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<sup>37</sup> Robinson (2017a) however, mentioned this in an interview about *Trickster Drift* (2018), the sequel following *Son of a Trickster*.

Unlike Vermette (2016a) and Lindberg (2015) who weave their stories around hard truths about colonial violence to restore Indigenous dignity that has been bankrupted by settler colonialism, Robinson (2017a) reinvigorates Indigenous personhood by using Indigenous ontology and epistemology to tell hers. Colonial damage caused by White superiority is not ignored but left at the periphery where it nonetheless, effectively underlines the enduring pain caused by settler colonialism. In *Son of a Trickster* (2017a), Whiteness takes a step back to Indigeneity<sup>38</sup>. In setting “out to change the order of the world” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 2), Robinson’s novel is decolonization in action. More importantly, she suggests that this new order is here to stay, as Jared’s life continues to be intertwined with the spirit world. Jwa’sins, Wee’git’s sister and Jared’s Monster Aunt brings Jared to an Alcoholic Anonymous meeting towards the end of the novel. However, Anita tells Jared that Jwa’sins has a plan “[i]f she is paying attention to you...” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 316). Robinson hints that just as other-than-human beings have established a permanent presence in Jared’s world, Indigenous ways of being— despite being continuously suppressed – will live on in ours.

Despite the ways that stories by Indigenous writers like Robinson (2017a) decentre settler epistemologies, Tuck and Yang (2012) warn us about the settler inclination to usurp the language of decolonization. When superficially adopted into education and other social sciences, the language of decolonization “supplant[s] prior ways of talking about social justice, critical methodologies, or approaches which decenter settler perspectives” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 2). Through challenging dominant paradigms that define our existence, relationships and knowledge, Robinson’s (2017a) work implies that decolonization “is a distinct project from other civil and human rights-based social justice projects” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 2) based on frameworks “that assume the legitimacy and permanence of the colonial state” (Hargreaves, 2017, p. 99). Decolonization, Tuck and Yang points out, “is far too often subsumed into the directives of these projects, with no regard for how decolonization wants something different than those forms of justice” (2012, p. 2).

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<sup>38</sup> Here, I use the term Indigeneity to refer to Indigenous identities that are deeply connected to maintaining Indigenous worldviews, languages, and environments, and preserving Indigenous knowledge systems in the face of cognitive imperialism inherent in Eurocentric ways of knowing (Dei & Jaimungal, 2018, p. 4-5).

Tuck and Yang (2012) note that absorbing decolonization into settler social justice “is one way the settler, disturbed by her own settler status, tries to escape or contain the unbearable searchlight of complicity, of having armed others just by being one’s self” (p. 9). Consequently, they identify reconciliation as a move to innocence, as a way “to find some mercy or relief in the face of the relentlessness of settler guilt...” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 9). At its core, the desire to reconcile “is just as relentless as the desire to disappear the Native; it is a desire to not have to deal with this (Indian) problem anymore” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 9). The stories told by Indigenous authors like Lindberg (2015), Vermette (2016a) and Robinson (2017a) however, hold the power to disrupt such moves to innocence. Their work contests colonial equivocations, which Tuck and Yang describe as a “more nuanced move to innocence” by “homogenizing... various experiences of oppression as colonization” (2012, p. 17). This in turn, creates a “convenient ambiguity between decolonization and social justice work, especially among people of color, queer people, and other groups minoritized by the settler nation-state” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 17). This “vague equating of colonialisms that erases the sweeping scope of land as the basis of wealth, power, law in settler nation-states” includes “remaining silent on settler colonialism while talking about colonialisms,... tacking on a gesture towards Indigenous people without addressing Indigenous sovereignty or rights, or forwarding a thesis on decolonization without regard to unsettling/deoccupying land” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 19). Lindberg, Vermette and Robinson’s work refuses such conflation. Instead the narratives they weave place settler colonialism under harsh scrutiny. Lindberg and Vermette’s novels explicitly address settler colonial violence inflicted across generations, performed on land appropriated from First Peoples. Robinson on the other hand, evokes Indigenous ontology and epistemology – ways of being and knowing that long predate European contact – to affirm Indigenous sovereignty.

In *Unsettling the Settler Within* (2010), Paulette Regan writes that settler Canadians perceive reconciliation as a legalistic matter “primarily concerned with reconciling Aboriginal and Crown land title, recognizing Aboriginal rights under section 35 of the Canadian Constitution, and paying financial compensation to individual [Indian residential school (IRS)]... students who have resolved their abuse claims” (p. 60). When Canadian settlers talk about reconciliation in “other than a strictly legal sense, the tendency is to speak solely of the need for Native people to heal themselves and

reconcile with us, so that the country can put this history behind them and move forward” (Regan, 2010, p. 60). Reconciliation then becomes about “rescuing settler normalcy, about rescuing a settler future” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 35). Indigenous scholars and activists along with other critics of reconciliation note that “the Canadian public’s ignorance and denial of the ongoing detrimental impacts of colonial history upon Indigenous people are significant hindrances to reconciliation” (Regan, 2010, p. 60-61). Reconciling in the way that implores Indigenous peoples to heal – to ‘just get over it’ as we have heard so many say in mainstream discourses<sup>39</sup> – so that Canadian settlers can go on with their lives uninterrupted, does little to substantively change existing economic structures, political institutions, and legal systems that continue to abuse First Peoples. Meaningful reconciliation, as Lindberg (2017) puts forth in her *CBC Ideas* lecture, involves taking responsibility for colonial damage done to Indigenous peoples. Like Lindberg, Regan (2010) states that reconciliation “involves a paradigm shift from a culture of denial to the making of space for Indigenous political philosophies and knowledge systems as they resurge, thereby shifting cultural perceptions and power relations in real ways” (p. 189). True reconciliation then, necessitates decolonization so that the cycles of colonial violence can be broken.

Currently, reconciliation as it stands in Canada is concerned with what decolonization looks like, and what the consequences of decolonization would be for the settler (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 35). However, Tuck and Yang (2012) assert that decolonization is not obliged to answer such questions as it “is not accountable to settlers, or settler futurity” (p. 35). Instead, it is only “accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 35). Robinson’s (2017a) work gestures towards this premise; that she, as the author of *Son of a Trickster*, and the characters in her novel are not responsible for rescuing settler normalcy or even pleading with settlers to reckon with the colonial damage they have caused and continue to cause. Her work is

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<sup>39</sup> Canadian senator and First Nations lawyer Murray Sinclair, gives a thought-provoking response to those who ask why don’t residential school survivors ‘just get over it’ during a public forum on the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) inquiry held at the Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec in 2017. He says:

Why can't you always remember this? Because this is about memorializing those people who have been the victims of a great wrong. Why don't you tell the United States to 'get over' 9/11? Why don't you tell this country to 'get over' all the veterans who died in the Second World War, instead of honouring them once a year? (“How Senator Murray Sinclair”, 2017).

first and foremost focused on restoring Indigenous sovereignty and securing Indigenous futurity through reasserting Indigenous ways of being and ways of knowing. Settlers themselves will have to imagine and shape the role they play in building a “transformative pathway that would lead to a more just and peaceful coexistence” – a pathway that “requires us to think more deeply about what it would mean to *fully* [emphasis added] recognize and respect the *presence and humanity* [emphasis added] of the people whose lands we now share” (Regan, 2010, p. 227).

Jeannette Armstrong (2005) describes Aboriginal literatures as a distinctive genre within Canadian literature (p. 183). She writes:

Aboriginal cultures in their various contemporary forms – whether the experience is urban-modern, pan-Indian, or a clearly tribal, traditional past; whether it is Eastern Woodland, Subarctic, Plains, or West Coast – each have unique cultural sensibilities which shape the voices coming forward out of them (Armstrong, 2005, p. 183).

Armstrong perceives Aboriginal literary voices, as having “symbolic significance and relevance that are integral to the deconstruction of colonialism” (2005, p. 183). Just as importantly, they “also support the reconstruction of a new order of internal culture and a relationship that transcends colonial thought and practice” (Armstrong, 2005, p. 183). By writing from her Haisla and Heiltsuk roots, and back to the young people from her nation, Robinson (2017a) achieves the above ingenuously by reinvigorating Indigenous ontological and epistemological paradigms that rouse our ability to imagine something different. Additionally, Robinson’s work is made especially powerful because she intentionally carves her story through ontological and epistemological frameworks that are specific to the Haisla and Heiltsuk nations. By emphasizing that Indigenous nations are distinct, her work defies the racialized fantasy of generic Indigeneity where First Peoples share the same histories, culture, worldviews and language. This fantasy facilitates ongoing colonization by legitimizing negative stereotypes and makes lighter work of inflicting violence on Indigenous peoples. It also undermines decolonization projects through the assumption that all Indigenous nations have the same needs and desires. However, in revitalizing specific Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, novels like *Son of a Trickster* (2017a) demonstrate how such colonial fantasies and assumptions are morally unsustainable.

## 5.2. Indigenous Wonderworks: Modeling Better Relationships and Better Futures

In Daniel Heath Justice's (2018) book *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (2018), he expounds works by Indigenous authors like Robinson (2017a) "who honour older notions of other-than-human kinship" (p. 91). In their work, Justice notes that "the boundaries between the human and the other-than-human are more permeable, the relationship more complicated, often fraught, and always less certain of human superiority" (p. 91). As Robinson demonstrates through the characters in her novel, these other-than-human beings have "priorities and personalities of their own that remain only partially legible to humans" (Justice, 2018, p. 91). In *Son of a Trickster*, Anita cautions Jared to be careful around Wee'git's sister, Jwa'sins, who appears as a little old woman with "a monster shimmering under her skin" (Robinson, 2017a, p. 307). In a letter to Jared that concludes the novel, Anita writes that "[s]upernatural creatures don't think like us" (Robinson, 2017a, p. 316). She warns Jared that Jwa'sins is paying attention to him because she has a plan. Similarly, Wee'git's intentions behind the appearances he makes – or fails to make – in Jared's life are ambiguous. Wee'git calls Jared his son as he tries to save him from the river otters, but Jared questions his absence during the "shittiest, crappiest, moment of his life" that saw Maggie's ex-boyfriend breaking his ribs (Robinson, 2017a, p. 258). To Jared, Wee'git is "some random asshole" who "instead of helping..., hung back, out of sight, making a smartass commentary track as Jared fell apart and slowly, painfully, glued his life back together" (Robinson, 2017a, p. 258).

Justice (2018) points out that beings like Jwa'sins, Wee'git, and the Animal People in *Son of a Trickster* (2017a) not only "interact with humans as equals, friends or rivals", but that "sometimes, as our old stories and ceremonies remind us, they become human, or humans become beasts, or beasts mate with humans and their progeny stand apart as great heroes or menacing forces in the world" (p. 92-93). Wee'git appears as a tall Native man named Luke when he initially reveals his relationship to Jared on a bus to Terrace, and the cannibalistic river otters in the novel appear as Jared's beloved dog and Sarah to lure him into the woods. On the other hand, Jwa'sins and Sophia – who Jared believed was his paternal grandmother – both appear as humans but harbour monsters under their skin. When Jared first encounters Jwa'sins while trying to hitch a ride home from Prince Rupert, he "saw something in her that was as dark as cedar bark,

with large yellowed fangs and knobby, twisted knuckles” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 148). Jared later sees a pterodactyl-like creature “with a long pointy beak and reptilian eyes” under Sophia’s skin when it is revealed that he is Wee’git’s son, not Phil’s (Robinson, 2017a, p. 268).

These other-than-human beings or humans with supernatural qualities “stand apart in their difference, yet as active co-inhabitants of the world – as neighbours, rivals, allies, prey and predators alike – they disrupt our confidence in our own superiority” (Justice, 2018, p. 91-92). Jwa’sins explains to Jared that Wee’git has 532 children, and that he is “baby boy 361” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 307). However, she maintains that Wee’git is “not actually the giant whose other people would have [Jared] believe”, but that you “tend to accumulate exes and children” when you have been “alive since these mountains were lumps of gravel, bare and treeless” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 307). At the same time, the river otters who abduct Jared reveal just how contrived human superiority is. “You only love the ones that crawl to you and beg for food”, Fake Sarah tells Jared (Robinson, 2017a, p. 238). Above all, the transcendent characters in Robinson’s (2017a) novel illustrate that “[s]implistic homogeneity is far less adaptive or reflective of our diverse realities than heterogeneity” (Justice, 2018, p. 92).

Justice (2018) discerns how trickster figures like Wee’git “disrupt complacency and order”, and often “make a mess of things” (p. 92). Although these shapeshifting entities are usually “driven by excessive appetites for food, sex, and praise, they break down the established social order” (Justice, 2018, p. 92). In corollary, they “also disrupt inequitable power relations, frozen ideologies, and unhealthy traditions” (Justice, 2018, p. 92). Justice specifically refers to Nanabush – the trickster-transformer in Ojibway writer, Drew Hayden Taylor’s (2010) novel, *Motorcycles and Sweetgrass* – when he makes the above observations about tricksters in Indigenous literature. Nanabush “brings truth, love, and chaos in his wake, but in doing so, lays bare festering wounds, unacknowledged losses, and unhealthy secrets that must be dealt with if the community has any hope of a healthy future” (Justice, 2018, p. 93). The racoons from Otter Lake in Hayden’s novel confront Nanabush “with their memory of a darker time when he killed and ate a racoon who had stumbled into his camp during a storm” (Justice, 2018, p. 94). When the People of Otter Lake witness Nanabush, who has taken the form of a good-looking White man, make amends with the racoons, “they disbelieve their own eyes; they try to rationalize it away and find other explanations” (Justice, 2018, p. 95).

Justice (2018) highlights that the People of Otter Lake no longer “remember who they are... [and] they don’t remember their relatives” (p. 95). He makes a salient observation about how colonization has impoverished and continues to diminish Indigenous ways of being and knowing:

Colonization has, through Christianity and residential schools, stripped so much of the community’s deeper understanding that they no longer recognize the language and personhood of the racoons [in Taylor’s (2010) novel], just as they’re initially unable to recognize the presence of one of their greatest teachers and cultural figures (Justice, 2018,p. 96).

The younger humans in *Son of a Trickster* (2017a) too, have forgotten who they are and who their relatives are. The river otters tell Jared that they are dying because humans are killing them (Robinson, 2017a). “You’re killing the world and you have the nerve to wonder why we hate you” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 238), Fake Sarah tells Jared when he denies killing anyone. Like the humans in *Motorcycles and Sweetgrass* (2010), Jared too tries to rationalize his encounters with other-than-human beings. When he first meets Wee’git as a talking raven who tells him not to worry about David stalking him, Jared thinks that the pot he smoked “must have had a good dose of LSD” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 34). Again, Jared thinks that he “must have done acid last night” when he sees something twisting beneath Jwa’sins’ face (Robinson, 2017a, p. 148). Later in the novel, Jared tells himself to “[lay] off the hooch and the weed for a few days” when he hears crows pleading for some of the fish he had just cleaned for George’s mother (Robinson, 2017a, p. 182). Sarah too does not believe Jared when he tells her about the spiritual beings he sees and interacts with. Instead, she accuses him of either “spending too much time bingeing crappy sci-fi with George” or still being mad “about [her] not saying I love you back” and therefore “passive-aggressively making fun of [her] belief system” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 266).

That colonization has debilitated the profound ability to recognize and learn from cultural figures including the shapeshifting trickster extends beyond novels. Robinson’s (2017a) trilogy is partly inspired by the need to address a cultural lapse she observed between generations in her family. In several interviews, she mentions noticing that her nieces and nephews didn’t find the traditional Wee’git stories her father told funny or relevant (Robinson, 2017b; Robinson, 2019). These stories, which she grew up with, impart knowledge about Haisla decorum. Specifically, the transforming raven who is “earthy and funny” teaches “[b]y breaking all the rules” and one lives vicariously through

him to see the consequences of bad behaviour (Robinson, 2017b). As mentioned above, colonization – through the cultural institutions it has established and imposed – has rendered and continues to render Indigenous ontology and epistemology unfamiliar and therefore meaningless to Indigenous youths.

Indigenous writing not only reveals how colonization has uprooted Indigenous ways of being and knowing, but also offers the key insight that “we have so much to learn from the other-than-human world” (Justice, 2018, p. 96). Such learning however, “can only come from humility and relational understandings” (Justice, 2018, p. 96). Without these qualities, Justice (2018) argues that we would be “adrift in the universe, isolated from each other and from the very foundation that gave us form and spirit in the first place” (Justice, 2018, p. 96). And once adrift, “[o]nly imagination and empathy can bring us back to those connections” (Justice, 2018, p. 96). Additionally, this learning process must also be anchored with cultural humility and an intention to explore how we are irrevocably connected to those who do not share our ways of being, so that we do not end up ‘eating the Other’. Here, eating the Other entails venturing into the world of difference to gain “a greater, more intense pleasure than any that exists in the ordinary world of one’s familiar racial group” (hooks, 1992, p. 369).

Nevertheless, “wonderworks” such as Robinson’s (2017a) *Son of a Trickster*, play an important role in reviving the imagination, in invoking empathy and calling for humility that is necessary for us to learn from the other-than-human world, and to locate ourselves within “a community connected beyond the self” (Justice, 2018, p. 111). Wonderworks “offers Indigenous writers and storytellers something different and more in keeping with [their] own epistemologies, politics, and relationships” (Justice, 2018, p. 152). It “gestures, imperfectly, toward other ways of being in the world, and it reminds us that the way things are is not how they have always been, nor is it how they must be” (Justice, 2018, p. 152). As Jwa’sins reminds us, other-than-human beings have “been alive since these mountains were lumps of gravel, bare and treeless” (Robinson, 2017a, p. 307).

Justice (2018) coined the term wonderworks after observing that existing literary genres fail to define the work “marginalized writers are doing to challenge oppressive lived realities through the intentional employment of the fantastic to imagine otherwise” (2018, p. 143). He points to Indigenous writers like Robinson (2017a) “for whom the

fantastic – in fantasy itself, or in its sibling genres, horror and science fiction – offers greater scope for addressing issues of decolonization and self-determination than realist fiction” (Justice, 2018, p. 148). In her novel, Robinson (2017a) employs the fantastic to revive and recentre Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies in ways that highlight our existence in a community connected beyond the self. Jared’s disbelief at the river otters’ accusations that he is killing them (and the world), and from the discovery that Wee’git is his birth father not only emphasize that the human world intersects with various other-than-human ecosystems, but that we are also deeply connected to those we have yet to think about as our relations. At the same time, Robinson’s novel reminds us that these relations who have been around much longer than us, also possess the capacity to unsettle the human world and consequently, the order established by settler colonialism. Through the fantastic, Robinson demands us to deeply reflect on the ways we choose to exist in this complex world, and the values that we choose to define our culture, law, and institutions.

Indigenous and marginalized writers like Robinson (2017a) – as Justice (2018) describes them – often “take on the task of challenging stereotypes and misrepresentations, to offer [their] stories as imaginative and humanizing interventions against the dehumanizing projections of those in power” (Justice, 2018 p. 141). Justice points out that much of what settlers assume about Indigeneity “is self-serving colonial fantasy that justifies and rationalizes the continuing theft of Indigenous lands, violence against Indigenous bodies and relations, marginalization of Indigenous lives, and displacement of Indigenous being...” (Justice, 2018, p. 141). The fantasy literary genre is therefore “too compromised by the oppressive history of the colonial imaginary and its savagist projections” to adequately house works by Indigenous authors like Robinson where other-than-human forms have presence and agency in the anthropocentric world. (Justice, 2018, p. 141). Justice further argues that “[e]ven the category of ‘magic realism’ fails to fully meet this challenge, given its basic assumptions about the ultimate artificiality of the ‘magic’ part of the definition” (Justice, 2018, p. 142). Works like *Son of a Trickster* (2017a) defy categorization determined by “social presumptions that naturalize colonialism and its effects, and that presume the inevitability of Indigenous deficit” (Justice, 2018, p. 148). Instead, they honour Indigenous cosmology, ontology and epistemology as legitimate and dynamic – yet timeless – ways of being and knowing despite settler colonialism’s attempt to eradicate Indigenous peoples and Indigeneity.

These literary works also reframe relationships and ways of existing, which depart from colonial thought and practice. More importantly, “[w]hen ‘realistic’ fiction demands consistency with corrosive lies and half-truths, imagining otherwise is more than an act of useful resistance – it’s a moral imperative” (Justice, 2018, p. 142).

In the settler colonial imaginary, deficit persists as the defining trope for First Peoples (Justice, 2018, p. 147). Lindberg (2015) touches on this imaginary deficiency in *Birdie*, where Bernice makes it clear that the Ingelsons have more than the Meetooses as a “result of history and design, not some flaw in her family or her people” (p.143). In her novel, Vermette (2016a), also highlights this assumed Indigenous inadequacy through Lorraine, whose death was blamed on her drunkenness and stupidity instead of the White man who had beaten her half to death. In assuming this deficit, “‘real’ Indigenous peoples are always Other, always diminished, always the reduced shadow of [their] former greatness” (Justice, 2018, p. 147). Justice (2018) argues that “if the ‘real’ is that which is passed away or gathering dust on a museum shelf, the ‘real’ of Indigenous experience must therefore only be about deficit and loss” (p. 147). This leaves us with “only the most disempowered or disempowering stories”, which serve as a “colonialist fantasy of the deficient Indian who needs to be uplifted through majority beneficence” (Justice, 2018, p. 147).

Settlers, Justice (2018) states, “love their tortured, brutal, and generic Natives, who fade or die away or experience horrific violence as an inevitability of their Indigeneity” (p. 147). Yet they do not “know what to do with the stories of Indigenous people who root their resistance in specific lands, enriching love, and ongoing and defiant *presence*” (Justice, 2018, p. 147); stories like the ones brilliantly written by Lindberg (2015), Vermette (2016a), and Robinson (2017a). One book review of Lindberg’s (2015) *Birdie* written by a librarian fails to recognize that the author is telling a story about Indigenous women who are re-establishing their autonomy and dignity, which have been destroyed by colonial violence. Instead, the review subscribes to colonial tropes of White superiority and imagined Indigenous deficit by describing Bernice as a someone “who doesn’t believe she deserves a stable home,” the men in her life as “serious abusers of both alcohol and women”, and the Ingelsons as a “[W]hite couple who do everything that caring parents should do” (McCrae, 2016). When Stella’s Indigenous presence is asserted in *The Break* (2016a) as she names the police officers’ Whiteness at the beginning of the novel, Jody Mitic – a panelist from *CBC’s Canada*

*Reads 2017* – is flummoxed and tells the nation on live television that he cannot get past this bit to read the rest of Vermette’s (2016a) work. This paralysis, or blindness that overtakes settler readers when they are confronted with narratives that do not align with the colonial imaginary, is a “language of deficiency” (Justice, 2018, p. 147). The language of deficiency is particularly “crippling, for Indigenous peoples, and for everyone else, as they diminish the depth of understanding between individuals, between peoples, and between our time and others.” (Justice, 2018, p. 147).

Justice (2018) puts forth that for Indigenous writers, “the fantastic is an extension of the possible, not the impossible” (p. 149). Speculative fiction “challenges our assumptions and expectations of ‘the real,’ thus complicating and undermining the dominant and often domineering functions of the deficit model” (Justice, 2018, p. 149). The wondrous things that Robinson (2017a) writes about “remind us that other worlds exist”, and that “other realities abide alongside and within our own” (Justice, 2018, p. 153). Her work centres these possible worlds and realities “within Indigenous values and toward Indigenous, decolonial purposes” (Justice, 2018, p. 153). Borrowing from the Haisla and Heiltsuk culture, Robinson’s work is rooted in the specificity of her peoples, their histories, and embodied experiences. Such wonderworks makes “space for meaningful engagements and encounters that are dismissed by colonial authorities but are central to cultural resurgence and the recovery of other ways of knowing, being, and abiding” (Justice, 2018, p. 154). By bringing new life to Indigenous stories through wondrous things, Indigenous writers like Robinson reawaken their lands and peoples to remember the power they have always had, to feed their families and strangers, and to care for the past and future (Kuwada & Yamashiro, as cited in Justice, 2018, p. 154).

Novels like *Son of a Trickster* (2017a) “remind us that there are other ways of being in the world, than those we’ve<sup>40</sup> been trained to accept as normal” (Justice, 2018, p. 155). Specifically, they “remind us that there are other ways of looking at and living in the world, different ways of engaging with one another and our other-than-human relations” (Justice, 2018, p. 155). More pertinently, such works “offer us hopeful alternatives to the oppressive structures and conditions we’re continually told are

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<sup>40</sup> Here, Justice (2018) refers to readers of Indigenous literature, which I assume includes both settlers and Aboriginal people. However, I am using this quote to specifically refer to settler readers of Indigenous literature, to reiterate how stories written by Aboriginal writers have the potential to ignite our imagination and transform the relationship between settlers and First Peoples.

inevitable, material “reality” (Justice, 2018, p. 155). These include the genocidal relationship many Canadian settlers insist on having with Indigenous peoples to date. Indigenous writers like Lindberg (2015), Vermette (2016a), and Robinson (2017a) “continue to produce work that articulates and even anticipates our potential for transformative change, if only we bring to it the best of our imaginative selves” (Justice, 2018, p. 156). Ultimately, the “[f]reedom of love, of desire, of life, culture, and political survival” are things that can only be “realized through the linking of our courage to our imaginations” (Justice, 2018, p. 156). As settlers, we must not be late coming to the party.

## Chapter 6.

### Conclusion: What's Love Got to Do with It?

I usually begin my mornings by tuning in to *CBC Radio One* to catch up on the latest news. On one particular morning – just several weeks after the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) released its final report – I was tuned into *The Current*, CBC's flagship current affairs radio show. It was a bittersweet episode. Anna Maria Tremonti, a veteran journalist known for leading hard-hitting yet insightful interviews, was hosting her last edition with *The Current* after 17 years with the show. That morning, Tremonti, along with Anishinaabe journalist and author Tanya Talaga and humanitarian activist Stephen Lewis, reflected on the issues that defined the last 17 years and would continue defining the future. My ears perked up when Tremonti mentioned the stories that surfaced from the MMIWG public forums she hosted around the country a few months earlier. She asked Talaga how non-Indigenous journalists need to be telling these stories, and this was Talaga's response:

Non-Indigenous journalists need to... open their ears and open their eyes and they need to think in a different way... I was at the press conference at the closing of the National Inquiry and I remember... Justin Brake from APTN<sup>41</sup> was also there and we were I think, the only two Indigenous journalists that were there... And the questions that were coming from the non-indigenous journalists there were really quite astounding... they were just fixated on genocide, fixated on the word and we just couldn't seem to get past that in that press conference. And I remember just thinking, feeling so dejected. You know, is this where we are? These are my colleagues here too, and they just can't see it. They can't see what's been in front of them this entire time. We had this exact same argument four years ago with the release of the TRC when Murray Sinclair's called this cultural genocide. This isn't the first time this word has been used. This has been a reality for Indigenous people in this country. And to hear in the national media just having such a problem with it, it was so disheartening ("Anna Maria Tremonti", 2019).

In October 2019 – just two weeks before the Canadian federal election – the Trudeau government challenged a landmark human rights ruling to compensate apprehended First Nations children harmed by the on-reserve child welfare system and

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<sup>41</sup> Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN). Justin Brake, an APTN journalist has Mi'kmaq ancestry but does not identify as Indigenous.

under-funded child and family services (Stefanovich, 2019)<sup>42</sup>. The Canadian Human Rights Tribunal had ordered the federal government to compensate First Nation children who were taken from their homes on reserve and put in care of the state for reasons other than sexual, physical or psychological abuse (“Wilfully and recklessly”, 2019). The Tribunal ruled that the government discriminated against First Nations children in care by not funding child welfare services to the same level as children living off reserve. In response, the government filed an application that calls for an order to set aside the tribunal’s decision and dismiss the claim for monetary compensation<sup>43</sup>. Yet the Prime Minister openly denies that his government is challenging the Tribunal’s conclusion. In fact, in a press conference following his recent re-election<sup>44</sup>, Trudeau maintains that reconciliation is not just a word that his government uses and points to his government’s record of ending long-term boil water advisories, making investments in Indigenous youth, legislating bills protecting Indigenous languages and child welfare, and extending apologies and exonerations to Indigenous nations and chiefs (Meyer, 2019). Trudeau may be confusing reconciliation with human rights; clean drinking water is a basic human right, and children’s human rights include meeting their basic needs for food, education, health care, and ensuring their freedom from discrimination. But as Talaga’s experience at the MMIWG inquiry press conference suggests, this is where Canada is at when it comes to its relationship with First Peoples. We are at an impasse because we do everything we can to avoid acknowledging and understanding that this nation, its

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<sup>42</sup> Evidently, the incumbent Liberal Party of Canada was confident that launching this challenge just two weeks before the federal election would not hurt their chances of being re-elected. The government’s decision to challenge the Tribunal’s conclusion at this time not only indicates their refusal to take responsibility for the harm their policies and decisions inflicted (and continue to inflict) on Indigenous children, but also reflects on settler indifference when it comes to addressing and making reparations for the colonial damage done to First Peoples. That the government is conscious enough of this apathy reveals a certain level of settler collusion based on the belief that Indigenous peoples’ lives do not matter.

<sup>43</sup> The application also demands that the tribunal review its decision in accordance with directions set by the Federal Court.

<sup>44</sup> It is also worth noting that this was an election where four federal candidates claimed Indigenous identity through far-removed ancestors. In a CBC news article, Darryl Leroux – an associate professor of social justice and communities studies at Saint Mary’s University who authored a book titled *Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity* – says that at least four federal candidates from the Liberal, Conservative and Green parties have made dubious claims of Indigenous identity (Barrera & Deer, 2019). These candidates are making themselves Indigenous to the land they occupy by making such identity claims. Tuck and Yang (2012) put forth – an argument that I highlight in Chapter 5 – that these claims are one way settler colonial society erases First Peoples from the land.

government, laws, institutions, culture – which encompasses its history and narratives – continue to annihilate Indigenous peoples.

‘Stumbling’ on Indigenous literature at the beginning of graduate school led me here. The courses I took introduced me to critical scholarship on settler colonialism and Canada’s (dismal) performative culture of redress, but it wasn’t until I had to complete an assignment on a novel of my own choosing that I paid any heed to Indigenous literature. I am embarrassed to share that before this, I had subscribed to the colonial imaginary that renders Indigenous literature as mostly cultural mythology that has little to offer. Nevertheless, I thought it would be a good way to conclude the semester by applying the course material to a novel by Ojibwe author Richard Wagamese (2014) that came recommended by the course instructor. I also knew I would enjoy the challenge of delving into an unfamiliar literary genre. What I didn’t know was that Indigenous literature had bigger plans for me.

Reading Wagamese’s (2014) work sparked a thirst for more literature written by contemporary Indigenous authors. I read novels by Dawn Dumont (Plains Cree), Lee Maracle (Sto:lo), Eric Gansworth (Haudenosaunee), Thomas King (Cherokee), Sherman Alexie (Spokane-Coeur d’Alene), Louise Erdrich (Chippewa) and of course, Tracey Lindberg (Cree-Métis), Katherena Vermette (Métis), and Eden Robinson (Haisla and Heiltsuk)<sup>45</sup>. Through their stories, I learned to critically examine this country’s national narratives and why these narratives remain unconvincing to me – a settler of colour who has lived in Canada for almost twenty years<sup>46</sup>. I learned that the values, which frame the nation’s narratives, are frequently espoused in public but not necessarily lived by. I learned to see that as Canadian settlers, our humanity is plagued by mediocrity as we fail to engage our capacity for introspection – a quality that underpins our willingness to take responsibility for the colonial damage we inflicted and continue inflicting on First Peoples.

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<sup>45</sup> Again, I chose to focus on these three books as they have enjoyed considerable attention in the Canadian mainstream media, are often included on recommended reading lists, and are displayed prominently in major bookstores.

<sup>46</sup> I recognize that the oppression Indigenous people experience from settler colonialism, which involves land appropriation, and displacing Indigenous ways of being and knowing, differs greatly from the marginalization I experience as a visible minority.

Contemporary Indigenous literature taught me that Indigenous cosmologies, ontologies, and epistemologies persist despite the colonial imaginary that relegates “real” Indigenous peoples as archaic relics because “the death of pre-modern ways is thought to be inevitable” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 9). The stories that bring Indigenous ways of being into the public consciousness challenge the colonial imaginary, which construes the Indigenous experience as one of deficit and loss because the ‘real’ Indigenous peoples are long gone. Reading these stories as a settler of colour, I am more conscious than ever that we live in a racial state, where White supremacy operates in pervasive and complex ways that warrant compliance from non-White citizens. From these stories, which must be read with prior knowledge on settler colonialism and with a reflexivity that allows us to recognize our own complicity in the trauma and loss caused by colonial violence, we gain the courage and astuteness to name White supremacy. These stories create space for us to imagine existing beyond the limitations set by the racial settler state. They tell us that the world order wasn’t always how it is now and can therefore change.

I am witness to how today’s Indigenous authors – as many others before them have done so – are reclaiming control over the narrative surrounding Indigeneity, and asserting that Indigenous cosmologies, ontologies and epistemologies are not mythologies but established ways of existing and knowing. Indigenous nations have their own laws, languages, ways of preserving and sharing knowledge, trading systems, and cultures – all which deserve to thrive instead of being devastated and supplanted by Western hegemony and ideology. Their stories remind me of my obligations as a settler on Indigenous lands. It is my duty to respect Indigenous cosmologies, ontologies and epistemologies by disrupting settler colonial practices that entail deriding and destroying Indigenous peoples, nations and ways of being. However, respecting Indigenous ways of being also necessitates knowing one’s place as a settler and understanding that one can never embody Indigenous ways of being as a non-Indigenous person<sup>47</sup>.

Accepting our inability to personify Indigenous ways of existing and knowing as settlers however, does not preclude us from taking in the lessons on kindness,

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<sup>47</sup> Mackey (2016) identifies ontological expansiveness as one of the predominant unconscious habits of White privilege, where White people “... tend to think and act as if all spaces – whether geographical, psychical, linguistic, economic, spiritual, bodily or otherwise – are or should be available for them to move in and out as they wish” (Sullivan, as cited in Mackey, 2016, p. 183).

reciprocity and imagination grounded in the stories told by Indigenous authors like Lindberg (2015), Vermette (2016a), and and Robinson (2017a). These are qualities we should instil as stronghold values when we go about decolonizing our institutions. Tokenistic activities like commissioning totem poles, installing Indigenous artwork or artefacts, having Indigenous Elders perform welcoming ceremonies for events do little in dismantling institutions, policies and attitudes that harm Indigenous peoples. Instead, these acts uphold the status quo by reinforcing the colonial narrative that ‘real’ Indigenous people belong to the distant past when decolonization should be concerned with preserving Indigenous sovereignty and futurity.

Above all, I did not expect these stories to fill a gap I did not know existed before I started reading contemporary Indigenous literature. The stories written by Lindberg (2015), Vermette (2016a), Robinson (2017a) along with those written by the Indigenous authors mentioned above emanate love. When Stella’s aunty rubs circles in her back “just like her Kookoo does, just like her mom did” (Vermette, 2016a, p. 268) after she reveals that she witnessed Emily being attacked, when Bernice tells Freda to get out of the house so that Uncle Larry assaults her instead, and when Jared takes Mr. Jaks into the garage to repair his weed whacker and lawn mower instead of plonking him in front of the television; these are moments that showcase love and compassion. That these take place amidst loss and trauma emphasize that the Indigenous protagonists in Lindberg, Vermette, and Robinson’s novels are not just individuals who are surviving colonial violence, but ones who are resilient enough to fulfill their obligations to love. Their capacity for kindness despite being damaged by colonial settler genocide that continues evolving in Canada right before our eyes, is moving and deeply powerful. It implies dignified resistance towards colonial erasure and thereby, the ability to disrupt settler colonialism. The understated discernment that kindness is not a concession but a weapon, distinguishes contemporary Indigenous literature from other literary genres.

It does not escape me that Lindberg (2015), Vermette (2016a) and Robinson (2017a) themselves understand love as a human obligation to be able to write intimately and profoundly about familial love and reciprocal love. Lindberg had the language, cadence and the feeling that kitchens have with aunts and mothers in mind when she wrote about the women in *Birdie*. Robinson wrote *Son of A Trickster* as an act of love because she wanted her nieces and nephews to enjoy and learn from the stories she grew up with around the kitchen table. And Vermette – no one could have written about

those comforting circles aunts and mothers rub on one's back unless they themselves have received this loving gesture. The stories by these three Indigenous authors are exceptionally compelling because they are written from the heart. In her *CBC Ideas* lecture, Lindberg (2017) states that love fuels the difficult conversation about reconciliation between Canadian settlers and non-Indigenous peoples. She says, "...we have this conversation because we love you, and we want to be loved by you" (Lindberg, 2017)<sup>48</sup>. In much the same way, this desire for reciprocal regard is inherent in the stories written by Lindberg, Vermette and Robinson – stories that encourage us to face grim truths about participating in settler colonialism, and to imagine and unlearn our way into a decolonized future where Indigenous voices, perspectives and experiences are valued.

However, this is not to say that contemporary Indigenous literature is intuitively transformative upon consumption. To learn from the lessons stories written by today's Indigenous writers hold, settler readers must approach them with prior knowledge about past and ongoing settler colonialism, be willing to engage in active reflexivity, and welcome the uncertainty of not knowing. These preconditions are necessary for us to work towards "fully recogniz[ing] and respect[ing] the presence and humanity of the people whose lands we now share" (Regan, 2010, p, 227). Lindberg (2015) – a sexual assault survivor who said that writing some of the scenes in *Birdie* was like walking towards a landmine (Lindberg, 2016) – reminds us that it takes courage for those impacted by colonial violence to tell some of their story (Lindberg, 2017)<sup>49</sup>. We too, should respond in kind by bravely embracing the discomfort that accepting their truths elicits. Accepting the truths etched in the stories told by Indigenous authors like Lindberg, Vermette (2016a), and Robinson (2017a) opens the door to re-evaluating our

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<sup>48</sup> In the lecture, Lindberg (2017) makes it clear she is echoing the words spoken by Indigenous rights activist and lawyer Tanya Kappo from the Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation. At an *Idle No More* protest teach-in, Kappo had said: "We do this because we love you".

<sup>49</sup> *Birdie* (2015), *The Break* (2016a), and *Son of a Trickster* (2017a) are novels written by Indigenous women who have been touched by colonial violence in different ways and to different extents. Although her novel is completely fiction, Vermette (2016a) says that she wrote *The Break* for Indigenous women and people she knows who have been through similar circumstances as the characters in her novel, including herself (Medley, 2018). Robinson, on the other hand, was inspired to write *Son of a Trickster* partly because she saw the traditional trickster stories she enjoyed and learned from as a child gradually lose their relevance with the younger generation. As Tuck and Yang (2012) point out, settler sovereignty necessitates the erasure of Indigenous peoples and their creation stories. The way we relate to land and use it for capitalist ventures in particular, compromises Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies and cosmologies (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

national myths and examining the role we play in perpetuating colonial violence against First Peoples. Respecting these truths will ready us for “a paradigm shift from a culture of denial to the making of Indigenous political philosophies and knowledge systems as they resurge, thereby shifting cultural perceptions and power relations in real ways” (Regan, 2010, p. 189).

I am fortunate that my initial exploration into contemporary Indigenous literature took place while I was immersed in reading scholarship on settler colonialism and critical race theory, in an academic environment that demanded us to think critically. At the same time, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was about to release its final report and there were repeated calls from Indigenous activists and non-governmental organizations to launch a national inquiry into the thousands of Indigenous women and girls who disappeared or were murdered since 1980. These events and the readings I took on during my courses positioned me well for recognizing the immense value that contemporary Indigenous literature holds. I am aware that not all readers of the stories written by Indigenous authors like Lindberg (2015), Vermette (2016a), and Robinson (2017a) have had similar opportunities to access knowledgeable sources that avoid these stories from being read in a reductionistic way. As one professor reminded us students at the beginning of our program, attending graduate school is a privilege. Yet, I do not want the lack of access and opportunity to be an excuse for underappreciating, undervaluing, or dismissing contemporary Indigenous literature, just as Jody Mitic did on national television. Learning about settler colonialism, developing critical thinking skills that compel us to examine our narratives, and holding ourselves accountable to the values we espouse, should be a responsibility that settler laws, institutions, policies and culture encourage. Practicing such reflexivity will turn us into more self-assured settlers, as the anxiety we feel around losing our entitlement and certainty in land, property and settler futures stem from the myths we build to preserve these very things. So long as we continue clenching on to these narratives unquestioningly, the vibrant presence of Indigenous peoples – and their claims to land, sovereignty, and ways of being – will not only continue revealing “settler certainties as fantasies of entitlement”, but also “shows how the precarious and illogical claims to settler sovereignty must be constantly reinvented and defended” (Mackey, 2016, p. 36).

Paulette Regan (2010) argues that to effectively transform divisive histories and identities and shift negative perceptions of marginalized groups, we must focus on

pedagogical reform in addition to curricula reform (p. 11). She writes “that how people learn about historical injustices is as important as learning truths about what happened” (p. 11). Regan is not alone in making this assertion. Sara Ahmed (2005) who authored the article *The Politics of Bad Feeling*, suggests that “recognition of injury is not simply about others becoming visible” but also about “saying that injustices did happen” (p. 83). She explains that “this re-telling of history offers new insights into the present and how lives in the present have been shaped not only by past injustices, but by the forgetting of those injustices” (Ahmed, 2005, p. 83). While reflexivity is essential to the task of confronting unsettling stories, Regan also cautions that “individual self-reflection merely encourages passive empathy or a neutral distancing from the Other that is insufficient to effect social and political change” (2010, p. 51). Without acknowledging that we have a mutual responsibility to one another, self-reflection – like passive empathy – “runs the risk of reducing historical complexities to an overly tidy package” (Boler, as cited in Regan, 2010, p. 51).

In corollary, unsettling truths – told through story or testimonies like the ones gathered by the TRC and MMIWG inquiry commissioners – must be met with a “posture of alert vulnerability... or recognition of difference, rather than a pose of empathic understanding that tends to reduce difference to the same” (Jones & Jenkins, 2014, p. 12-13). It is imperative to acknowledge difference, as “the Other cannot be totally learned about, known, or understood by me” (Jones & Jenkins, 2008, p. 12). Alison Jones and Kuni Jenkins (2008) who authored the book chapter *Rethinking Collaboration: Working the Indigene-Colonizer Hyphen* in the *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* clarify that this demand for vulnerability and recognizing difference “is not a moral injunction, but one in the interests of knowledge” (p. 13). Such openness to difference “can provoke meanings beyond our own culture’s prescriptions... and lead to new thought” (Garrison, 2004, as cited in Jones & Jenkins, 2008, p. 13), which in turn is vital for social and political transformation that decolonization requires.

Aboriginal Elders and scholars, along with some Western scholars suggest “that we do not learn solely or even primarily through reason but through our emotions, body, spiritual presence, and imagination” (Regan, 2010, p. 52). Following this, transformative learning “involves experiencing a deep structural shift in the basic premises of thoughts, feelings, and actions”; a shift in “consciousness that dramatically alters our way of being in the world” (Regan, 2010, p. 52). Engaging in critical inquiry often means radically

altering one's worldviews (Boler & Zembylas, as cited in Regan, 2010, p. 52). While it is a process that can incur anger, grief, disappointment and resistance, it offers new windows on the world (Boler & Zembylas, as cited in Regan, 2010, p. 52). This pedagogy of discomfort requires not only cognitive but emotional labour, and emphasizes the need to move beyond inscribed cultural and emotional terrains that we occupy less by choice and more by virtue of hegemony (Boler & Zembylas, as cited in Regan, 2010, p. 52). Stories written by Indigenous authors like Lindberg (2015), Vermette (2016a) and Robinson (2017a) – stories that are written from the heart, featuring trauma and loss, but fuelled by love – are thus remarkably well-positioned to facilitate such transformative learning that involves both cognitive and emotional capacities.

Nonetheless, facing our fears and “turning aside our post-modern cynicism to undertake acts of critical hope can seem futile in the face of seemingly overwhelming challenges” (Regan, 2010, p. 217). Here, Regan (2010) urges us to understand the link between personal change and political action. Confronting huge forces like colonialism is a personal process not only because it involves emotional labour, but because “all the world's big problems are in reality very small and local problems” (Alfred, as cited in Regan, 2010, p. 217). These problems are “brought into force as realities only in the choices made every day and in many ways by people who are enticed by certain incentives and disciplined by their fears” (Alfred, as cited in Regan, 2010, p. 217). Consequently, embracing uncertainty on the part of settlers is necessary for decolonization. It allows us to “find ways to develop new kinds of relationships based on actually trying to see the '[O]ther' and not enfold them within our own project of relieving anxiety...” (Mackey, 2016, p. 191). Mackey reminds us that settler colonialism “is not settled, and never has been, because it is untenable, will be consistently resisted, and would only continue to produce more anxiety...” (2016, p. 191). We cannot form respectful relationships with Indigenous people – who, engaged in “an act of sharing almost unimaginable in its generosity” (Tully, as cited in Mackey, 2016, p. 191) are still willing to treaty with us – if we are trapped in our obsessive-compulsive search for certainty (Mackey, 2016, p. 191).

Cherokee writer and Indigenous literature scholar, Daniel Health Justice (2018), puts forth that “we must return our attention to Indigenous voices, perspectives, and experiences” if we are “serious about establishing better relations than those we've had

in the past – and if we're serious as a country and as a broader, multinational, and multivocal community" (p. 159). We must also work towards decolonial transformation instead of extending a "redemptive offer of reconciliation" (Hargreaves, 2017, p. 182), if we as Canadian settlers are serious about forging a healthier relationship with First Peoples. This transformation requires us to "share, and sometimes give over, power and authority to those who have been historically constructed as shadow citizens and outsiders to Western frameworks of property, personhood, and 'civilization'" (Hargreaves, 2017, p. 182). After all, "[t]he projects of reconciliation and reparation are not about the 'nation' recovering" (Ahmed, 2005, p. 83). Instead, they are about finding ways for those affected by injustice to live in a nation "that feels better through the process of speaking about the past, or through exposing the wounds that get concealed by the 'truths' of a certain history" (Ahmed, 2005, p. 83).

Mackey (2016) concludes that decolonization will take shape in ways "which we cannot know" (Jo Smith, as cited in Mackey, 2016, p. 191), but "must entail creating a world in which we all want to live" (p. 191). I see contemporary Indigenous literature as an excellent pedagogical guide for this journey. Taking in today's Indigenous literary landscape, Justice (2018) notes that there are:

So many stories, poems, songs – so much work dedicated to possibilities beyond the impoverished imaginations of those who would long ago have seen Indigenous peoples disappear. So many visions of love made manifest in words, reminding us that we're worthy of being loved, and called to love in turn" (p. 180).

A hand has been extended to us through these stories, poems, and songs. How we receive it, and more importantly, whether we extend ours in return without the certainty of knowing where this conjoining will lead us, remains to be seen.

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