

“Significant Otherness” versus Othering in Marian Engel’s *Bear*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Marian Engel’s portrayal of what Animal Studies scholar Donna J. Haraway terms “significant otherness” (the simultaneous interconnection and mysterious difference between animal and human life/connections) and othering as a form of dismissal and a perpetuation of colonial hierarchies of gendered and racial power. I explore the overlaps of Engel’s othering of Indigenous characters in the novel and the racism present in speciesism, exposing why the character of the bear is more knowable to the protagonist than Lucy Leroy (Cree). I offer a decolonial reading of this seminal Canadian text, drawing on Engel’s desire to disrupt literary utilization of animals as images of nationalism and emblems of patriotic virtue, while simultaneously exposing the prevalence of entrenched gendered and racial hierarchical perceptions of Indigenous women and relationships to nature. In offering this reading, I hope to suggest that decolonial readings offer us the tools to integrate the ideals expressed in Haraway’s “significant otherness” reading of companion-animal relationships with decoloniality and the deconstruction of hierarchies of power as pioneered by Indigenous authors, artists, and activists. This generates hope.

Keywords

Othering; Significant Otherness; Marian Engel; *Bear*

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She was trying to decide to regard the black flies as a good symptom of the liveliness of the North, a sign that nature will never capitulate, that man is red in the tooth and claw but there is something that cannot be controlled by him.

—Marian Engel, *Bear*

Janice Fiamengo writes that animals are so fundamental to Canadian literature that Canadian writing “is founded on the bodies of animals—alive or dead; anthropomorphized or ‘realistic;’ indigenous or exotic; sentimental, tragic, magical, and mythical” (5-6). In Marian Engel’s *Bear* (1976), human and beyond-human otherness intersects and clashes in ways that raise important questions about the Anthropocene and settler colonial incursion in the Canadian wilderness. *Bear* follows Lou, an archivist from Toronto, as she undertakes the task of travelling to a small island in northern Ontario to catalogue the library of Colonel Cary, a colonialist who built a house in the wilderness. Upon her arrival she learns that the role will involve taking care of a bear. As Lou catalogues the library, she discovers that the Carys had always owned bears at the property, and she learns how to connect with the bear through the advice of Lucy, a Cree Elder. Lou begins to project meaning onto her relationship with the bear, finding that she can “paint any face on him” (80) that she wishes and uses him as a vehicle for indigenisation (Aguila-Way 8), while she is also repeatedly confronted with the fact that the bear is a bear. When she consummates the relationship sexually, the bear announces his presence in the novel (Barrett 140) by striking her across the back with his paw. The wound serves as a spell-breaker that prevents Lou from instrumentalising and anthropomorphising the bear further, but it doesn’t resolve Lou’s subalternisation of Indigenous characters in the novel and much is left unresolved and unsettlingly ambiguous at the novel’s conclusion.

1. Situating a Decolonial Reading of *Bear*

Published in 1976, *Bear* is part of a context of literature that challenged the use of animals as symbols of national belonging, and that attempted to justify settler-colonialism while demarcating Canada from the U.S. during the 1970s. The encroachment of U.S. cultural imperialism was especially feared by Canadians post-Vietnam War, and growing anti-Americanism and the 1967 Centennial celebrations reaffirmed the urgent need to clearly define the Canadian national character (Mackey 46; Aguila-Way 6). As Fiamengo writes, critical attention to literary animals was piecemeal and did not result in any broader literary

criticism on the intersection of nationalism, postcolonialism, and ecocriticism through the portrayal of animals, and one-off pieces often focused on historical approaches to animal writing (9-10). However, literary portrayals of animals as patriotic images of Canadian national identity jarred with writers like Marian Engel and Margaret Atwood, the latter penning *Survival* (1972) as a politically motivated response to the milestone *Literary History of Canada* (1965) and Northrop Frye's reprinted collection *The Bush Garden* (1971) in which he discusses the symbolic import of animals in Canadian literature (Fiamengo 5-7). Atwood's approach revealed an alternative depiction of the Canadian psyche, one that distinguishes Canadian writing from triumphant American hunting tales (Fiamengo 7-8). Canadian animal narratives have also explored the national fear of "victimization by American power" which Fiamengo argues "is not because they empathize with animals themselves but because, as a colonial people who feel politically and culturally vulnerable, they recognize their own situation in the plight of suffering and endangered creatures" (7-8). Alternatively, Engel and Atwood attempt to expose these tensions by depicting animals free from symbolic and anthropomorphic, human-centred knowing, by accepting their otherness. Gwendolyn Guth argues that Engel's novel expands upon Atwood's work and builds on Tim Lilburn's and Dom McKay's "practical anthropomorphism" as a form of "enacting [anthropomorphism and translating wilderness] thoughtfully" (43). Here, the curious national fear of victimisation, a response to enacting the gendered and exploitative violence of settler colonialism, is a tension present in Canadian writing that suggests a national imaginary more able to relate to animals than to apply logics of empathy to Indigenous peoples. In this article I explore how Engel, like her contemporaries, attempted to divorce herself from human-centred nationalistic portrayals of animals, while her work more ambiguously grapples with indigeneity and the subalternisation of Indigenous peoples.

While discourses surrounding settler colonialism, indigenisation and animal studies reflect more modern shifts in Canadian literary scholarship and Engel wrote *Bear* within the context of the 1970s, these discourses do offer significant new frameworks with which to further contemplate and examine Engel's canonical text. *Bear* was published before third wave feminism and greater mainstream intersectionality, and well before more mainstream conceptions of settler-Indigenous allyship forged by Indigenous Women Water Protectors' #IdleNoMore grassroots activism against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock in North Dakota in 2016 (Roberts 65-66). The 1970s saw Indigenous grassroots activism garner more mainstream attention with the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the U.S. and the Indian Rights for Indian Women (IRIW) protesting gender discrimination in the Indian Act in Canada from 1967. The White Paper of 1969 proposed that the Indian Act be abolished and removed

“the federal government’s moral and material responsibility for Indigenous peoples... and undermined Indigenous people’s special legislated status” under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau’s government, demonstrating poor settler understandings of the legacies of racism and settler colonialism, and enabled continued socio-economic oppression and political marginalisation of Indigenous peoples under the guise of “equality” (Nickel 224-225).

Bear has often been analysed within the context of the second wave feminism movement and Engel’s feminism is an important component of her often women-centred narratives. As Joan Sangster notes, local and historical specificity demonstrate significant variations in the claim that second wave feminism in Canada was entirely “essentialist and universalist,” with solidarity demonstrated most clearly between Black, Indigenous, and other minority activist groups (399). However, definite gaps in many second wave feminists’ understandings of oppression have been identified, such as unpredictable or racist language, flawed or incomplete understandings of the legacies of slavery and colonialism, and a focus on class and not race (399). Indeed, media coverage of Indigenous women’s struggles “was sometimes superficial and often assumed parallel women’s movements, but did not theorize the connections between race, gender, and class” that developed more broadly in the 1980s and 90s (399). Biographies of women in journals and papers sought to emphasise the “unordinary ordinary” woman in Canadian society and in Northern Canadian papers, profiles on “Pioneer Women” featured regularly in ways that failed to acknowledge white female settlers’ complicity in settler colonialism and Indigenous dispossession, while “*other*” articles covered Native women’s grievances, land issues, and organizations like Indian Rights for Indian Women: the two themes were often compartmentalized” (Sangster 393-394). In this way, while Engel’s novel is important as a feminist work, her interactions with colonialism and her refutations of nationalism and its use of anthropomorphic symbols of nationhood do intersect with this feminism in ways that cannot be neatly compartmentalised, and complicate and problematise her portrayal of Lucy Leroy in the novel.

That the 1970s saw an increased literary focus on feminism, postcolonialism, and nationalism is apparent in *Bear* as a form of canonical revision which attempts to legitimise “forms of literary expression that lie beyond the more familiar genre categories such as the novel or poetry” and “the importance of work by numerous women writers who chose alternative literary practices or forms of expression” as a result of second wave feminism and postmodernism (Verduyn 22). Christl Verduyn cites the language of feminist writer Adrienne Rich when she argues that Engel attempted to create the impression of “seeing again with fresh eyes” in her literature (4-5). However, I would argue that while Lou’s experience as a woman is centred alongside Engel’s deconstruction of

Lou's relationship with the natural world, *Bear* raises important questions about the extent to which Lou's freshly acquired vision at the end of the novel is one that positively encompasses intersectionality. In earlier feminist scholarship, the bear's identity as a bear seems outweighed by the bear's symbolic identity of "what they [the reader] want it to be," to use Engel's own description of the multitude of interpretations the text's ambiguity has evoked (Klein). As Paul Barrett notes, Patricia Monk's Jungian interpretation of Engel's novel determines that the bear is "a feminine divinity in theriomorphic form—the bear-goddess Artio" (qtd. in Monk 35) and is therefore "specifically a mother image" (Monk 37; Barrett 125). In this way, earlier feminist readings of the novel haven't always acknowledged or fully contested the novel's examination of postcolonialism and its intersections with Lou's treatment of indigeneity and the natural world.

Engel's use of narrative irony is also widely debated in discourse about the novel, with most scholars acknowledging its effectiveness in exposing and problematising the unsettling power binaries often reinforced through anthropomorphising animals in literature. Barrett argues that Engel deliberately uses "a narrative mode in which speaking subjects are ambiguous to the extent that Lou's perspective, the narrator's perspective, and possibly even Bear's perspective can never be wholly isolated... Literality is, therefore, always evasive: simultaneously desirable and impossible" (143). While Engel's novel utilises narrative irony as its primary aesthetic mode, Tania Aguila-Way underlines the "necessity of moving beyond this stance of ironic awareness to construct an aesthetic that mobilizes the affective power of literature" (24) and that enables us to articulate the imaginary interior landscape of a bear's mind, but which might also highlight the inequities in representation of, to use Carol Adams' term, other absent referents "whose fate[s] [are] transmuted into a metaphor for someone else's existence or fate" (Aguila-Way 24; Barrett 123; Adams 53). Even if Lucy Leroy is a deliberately ironic depiction of Lou's own prejudices, one that is intentionally complicated by Lou's inability to apply the same logics of significant otherness and respect to both Lucy and the Bear, Lucy still exists on the periphery of the novel and remains subalternised and vanishing (Aguila-Way 27). If Engel is ironising this conclusion, Lucy's portrayal in the novel doesn't revise nor fully problematise depictions of the "vanishing" indigene that are so pervasive in U.S. and Canadian literature.

Awarded the Governor General's Award for best English-language Canadian fiction in 1976, *Bear* has been critically analysed as a pastoral, a mythic, and a gothic narrative, as pornography, as a critique of colonialism, and more and generated much public controversy because of its explicit content (Verduyn 118). Engel's research for the novel consisted of educating herself on the history of Ontario pioneers (119), and is especially evident when her protagonist, Lou, finds notes of paper, recorded by one of the Colonel Carys, that document collected

pieces of anthropological wisdom regarding bears, archived in between the pages of the books in the library at Pennarth. The name Pennarth itself means “bear’s head” or “head of the bear” in Welsh, with the architectural design of the house based on that of Orson Squire Fowler, a phrenologist and vegetarian who transmuted domestic space into the shape of the brain. Lou scoffs at the house and views the structure as “colonial pretentious” and suggests that Fowler was “the sort of American we were all warned about” (Engel, *Bear* 36), emulating national attitudes of the time.

2. Indigenous and Settler Narrative Interaction

Engel also spoke to Haida sculptor Bill Reid when she was struggling with *Bear’s* narrative. Reid told her about the Traditional Haida Story of *The Bear Mother*, also known as *The Bear Princess*, which Engel cites as an influence in a CBC interview in 1978 but never formally references or acknowledges this in the novel. The story exists in many different forms and is shared by Haida, Gitksan, Coast Tsimshian, and Nisga’a nations based in the Pacific Northwest. Essentially, a woman who disrespects bears is kidnapped and forced to marry the son of a grizzly bear chief who impregnates her with twin bear cubs who possess both human and bear features (The Bill Reid Centre). Engel used French-Canadian folklorist and ethnographer Marius Barbeau’s translation of the Haida story (Ore) and writes in the novel that Lou wishes “to offer him [the bear] her two breasts and womb, almost believing that he could impregnate her with the twin heroes that would save her tribe” (Engel, *Bear* 143), a direct mention of the Haida narrative. Here, Engel’s protagonist fully envisions herself as an Indigenous member of a nation; specifically, she envisions herself in the Haida story and yet the novel is set in Ontario. As Aguila-Way explains, Engel’s usage of this Traditional Haida Story has been adapted and appropriated into *Bear* in such a way that ambiguously “perpetuat[es] a story that appropriates Indigenous lore or lampoons it” (qtd. in Ore), emblematised by the novel’s conclusion when Lou returns to the city feeling innocent and free from guilt, which Engel appears to problematise through narrative irony (Ore). While the text itself appears ambiguous in the questions raised and absence of answers offered given Engel’s death in 1985, the extent to which narrative irony sufficiently or believably explains some of the novel’s content still permeates through the novel and its reception. How aware and in control is Engel of her treatment of Indigenous peoples and how much authorial distance is placed between her own beliefs and Lou?

When Reid advised Engel to read Barbeau’s *Haida Myths* (1953) he told her, “You’ve probably left Mouse Woman out” (Engel, “A Conversation with,” 28).

The Haida character of Mouse Woman (*kuugan jaad*) is known for her ability to shape shift between animal and human form, often intervening in human affairs in order to restore respect for the natural world, animals, and cultural traditions (Evans 53-54). Haida artist Robert Davidson describes Mouse Woman as "helping the storyline along and sometimes lending a hand to the human characters" (n.p.). Engel read *The Bear Princess* and returned to her manuscript to write "an extra half page" and describes finding that she "had Mouse Woman in there. I didn't have her doing anything. And that's the section that most people object to very much. A little old woman comes out and says, shoot the bear. And that's all the content that was needed to make the whole thing fall together... it's just a question of the instincts being lined up the right way, I guess" ("A Conversation" 27-28; Verduyn 129). Engel's reference to "a collective unconscious" ("A Conversation" 27-28; Verduyn 130) when she realises Lucy Leroy can be read as Mouse Woman highlights the tensions present in white retellings of Traditional Indigenous Stories. While Engel conceptualised Lucy before knowledge of Mouse Woman, her utilisation of *The Bear Princess* and Mouse Woman in the final novel demonstrate the unsettling legacies of implying a "collective conscious" between settler narratives and Traditional Indigenous Stories, especially where settler indebtedness to Indigenous writers and artists isn't formally acknowledged or referenced. Does our perception of Lucy Leroy change when we think of her as Engel's recreation of the Haida character Mouse Woman? And in light of this information, how far can our perception of a white retelling of a Traditional Haida Story set in the wilderness of Northern Ontario, a retelling in which Traditional Haida Knowledge is never formally referenced, be altered by this understanding of Lucy Leroy (Cree)?

Indeed, Reid similarly advised and illustrated Christie Harris' novel *Raven's Cry* (1966) and then in the late 1970s he illustrated several adaptations of Haida stories of Mouse Woman, often combined with European fairy tales and folklore, as well as Tsimshian Traditional Stories (Evans 53). As Gwyneth Evans notes, at the time some felt that "the adaptation of these stories by white people, to conform to white tastes in narrative, [was] a desecration" (53), unlike Reid, who argues that Indigenous storytelling and settlers have become interdependent on one another and that collaboration "increases general knowledge of the wealth of Native culture" (Evans 53). Certainly, there have been shifts in contemporary attitudes regarding the ethics of citation, appropriation, and the appropriateness of Indigenous stories being utilised or narrated by settler authors, although the work of pervasive decolonisation is still much needed. However, I argue that it is valuable to analyse canonical texts through the lens of settler colonialism and speciesism so that we can more clearly comprehend the complexities and ethics of literature through the interplay of indigeneity, the natural world, and colonialism within the context of a broader Canadian literary canon. This does not

negate the significance of Engel's novel as a feminist text that powerfully rejects human-centric depictions of animals in Canadian literature. Rather, I argue that Engel's *Bear* continues to raise pertinent questions about settler and Indigenous narrative interactions, as well as the ways in which indigeneity and connectivity with the natural world implicitly correspond with settler colonialism in ways that do limit Engel's deconstruction of male and human-centric power hierarchies.

3. Othering versus "Significant Otherness"

I will use Donna Haraway's definition of "significant otherness," among other terms, in order to examine the tension between celebration or acceptance of otherness versus the dynamics of othering present in *Bear*. Haraway defines her term as the subtle and overt intersections of human and beyond-human life, and the historical and environmental ways that our lives overlap, demonstrating that nature and culture are interconnected and not in the isolated spheres that settler colonialism and capitalism have marked out: "naturecultures" (100-101). Otherness is acknowledged as not being completely understood, and from this acceptance grows a more symbiotic kinship. Connectivity can be as microscopic as genetics, or as broad as sharing the same environment. By contrast, othering is to dismiss and minimise the importance of intersection and interconnection, rendering the human or beyond-human an unknowable other, often stemming from assumptions based on racism, class formations, gender or sexual identity, and speciesism, which I will continue to elaborate can operate as a form of racism. Othering draws upon human-supremacist models of "racial and ethnic inferiorisation... assimilating racially subordinated groups to women, or to animals and children" in overlapping layers of oppression (Plumwood, *Environmental Culture* 106). Another term that guides my discussion of otherness is ecofeminist Val Plumwood's concept of "hyper-separation" which is defined as "the structure of dominance that drives western binaries... [and] accords value to one side of the binary, and relegates the other side to a position of oppositional subordination" (Rose 94). Here, there is a clear distinction between Haraway's term which celebrates otherness, and otherness in this sense implies connectivity, as opposed to the othering utilised through hyper-separation, which implies difference that cannot be bridged.

Engel's treatment of the bear in the novel finally embraces the bear's "significant otherness" at the end of the novel when Lou understands that the images and desires she has projected onto him have failed to respect this difference. By co-opting the bear into her vision of indigenisation to escape victimisation, "the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous" facilitated through the recognition of "an Other having greater roots in that place" (Goldie 13-14), Lou has

actively perpetuated racism and speciesism by reinforcing the exploitative power hierarchies of settler colonialism in order to realise her identity. Lou's realisation of the bear's "significant otherness," however, has no bearing on her treatment of Lucy Leroy, who remains othered in such a way that dismisses their shared humanity, and the many interconnections, genetic, environmental, or otherwise, that link them as humans. Instead, Lou sustains "the forcible imposition of the dominator and his discursive system within the dominated space... and *appropriation*... the consumption enforced by the dominator of what belongs to the dominated" (Goldie 15; emphasis in original). Lucy is racially othered by Engel's protagonist who seeks to become indigenised through the bear as a form of validation. While this cognitive dissonance is more obvious to a contemporary reader, Lou's treatment of Lucy Leroy in the novel has been unsatisfactorily explained away as part of the deliberate ambiguity of narrative irony as an aesthetic mode.

I argue that Lucy Leroy's existence as a white image of the indigene in Engel's novel can be interpreted as a literary form of racial othering, even if Engel's narrative irony is intended to ambiguously challenge such depictions. Terry Goldie builds on Abdul R. Jan-Mohammed's "The Economy of Manichean Allegory" (1985) by arguing that in contemporary literature "the opposition is frequently between the 'putative superiority' of the indigene and the 'supposed inferiority' of the white" but "the positive and negative sides of the image are but swings of one and the same pendulum," a model that fundamentally reduces the indigene to a set of prescribed symbols, "a semiotic pawn on a chess board under the control of the white signmaker" (10). Engel seeks to disrupt the anthropocentric and human-centred models that utilise and construct white images of beyond-human animals like the bear at the beginning of the novel. The extent to which narrative irony explains why Engel also continues in the style of her literary forebears to convey a white image of the indigene so as to facilitate settler indigenisation narratives of the white settler gaining rootedness in the natural world remains ambiguous and unanswered. I argue the possibility that Engel's usage of narrative irony does not fully explain why Engel offers no transformation at the end of the novel that fully connects the commonalities between racism and speciesism, and that Lou's eventual acknowledgement of the "significant otherness" of the bear as a beyond-human animal only starkens the absence of acknowledged interconnections with human Lucy Leroy. If this is intended to be interpreted in ironic terms, it raises questions about how effective white settler narratives can be at critiquing colonialism without disambiguating the purpose of such replications of harmful literary tropes. This depiction of an Indigenous woman is also significant when placed within the context of Engel's usage of a Traditional Haida Story without any formal citation or credit given and removed from its place-based logics of conception. Therefore, the plausibility that Lucy is intentionally peripheral and

subalternised given Engel's discovery of the Haida Mouse Woman after Lucy's character had already been conceptualised is limited.

4. Instrumentalisation, Indigenisation and the "Vanishing Indigene" in *Bear*

Huggan and Tiffin argue that by interrogating "the category of the human itself and... the ways in which the construction of ourselves *against* nature—with the hierarchisation of life forms that construction implies—has been and remains complicit in colonialist and racist exploitation from the time of imperial conquest to the present day" (6). Indigenous peoples have been viewed as "part of nature—and thus treated instrumentally as animals" (6), as a part of environmental imperialism and colonialism. Engel depicts Lucy Leroy as part of a vanishing people whose knowledge of nature (the bear) is extracted by Lou and is presented in crude terms through their discussion about how Lou should defecate near the bear so it learns her scent. Lou assigns to Lucy this colonial construction of Indigenous peoples as more like animals than western human colonisers, recalling the "ecological Indian." The notion of Indigenous peoples as closer to the natural world is the resultant construction of settler colonialism and demarcating a Canadian national identity free from U.S. cultural imperialism, and as a way of creating a dichotomy between Westerners as "civilised" and Indigenous peoples as "primitive" (Mackey 45). Unlike the bear who announces his presence in the narrative by refusing Lou's advances, Lucy is not afforded the same opportunity to contest her own instrumentalisation. Therefore, Engel's depiction of Lucy can be interpreted as a white image of indigeneity, one that perpetuates the tropes and hierarchies of settler colonialism, and not one that can authentically, accurately, and ethically represent the diversity and uniqueness of Indigenous people's relationships with nature.

Aguila-Way argues that *Bear* attempts to uncover "the instrumentalizing and indigenizing logics that often lie beneath the nation's environmental ethos" while also producing more ethical portrayals of animals in keeping with Haraway and Cary Wolfe's posthumanist theories that "construct common worlds" between humans and animals "while maintaining their irreducible differences" (6). However, such instrumentalising and indigenising logics are still deployed in ways that serve to bolster settler-colonialism through Engel's portrayal of Indigenous characters in her novel. While Engel's protagonist seems to learn by the end of the novel that she has harmfully fetishised and anthropomorphised the bear to the extreme of bestiality, Engel does not resolve Lou's attempts to indigenise herself to the landscape. Questions can still be raised over whether Lou's conclusive return to Toronto resolves Engel's prejudiced depictions of Indigenous peoples in the novel who only appear at the periphery of the

narrative and appear to fit tropes assigned to U.S. literature of the vanished or ghostly Indian (Bergland), nor is Lou's hyper-fascination with indigeneity and colonialism resolved. Indigeneity in the novel is depicted as akin to animalism, with Lucy Leroy's eyes described as "alive as oysters" (Engel, *Bear* 51). Such depictions simplify the many diverse epistemologies and material connections that Indigenous peoples have with animals, and that assigns these knowledge sets to the past. Material connections with animals are portrayed as vehicles of indigenisation (Aguila-Way 27) in such a way that is harmful to both animals and Indigenous peoples. Even if Lucy's connection with the natural world is intended as a depiction of the Haida Mouse Woman who shape-shifts between human and animal form and reminds Lou of how she must respect the natural world, Lucy is condemned to vanish at the end of the novel having served the narrative purpose of educating the white settler, raising questions about the ambiguities of how far narrative irony extends in this portrayal.

The depiction of Indigenous peoples as vanishing is intrinsically related to Eurocentric colonisation, as Val Plumwood notes, with human and beyond-humans in nature invoking anthropocentrism to justify and portray incursions on ideal "unused, underused or empty" landscapes where Indigenous cultures are judged to be "primitive" and more akin to animals (Plumwood, "Decolonizing Relationships" 53). Huggan and Tiffin build on Cary Wolfe and Jacques Derrida's work to delineate how this clearly demonstrates the intersection of racism and speciesism which "relies on the tacit acceptance that full transcendence to the human requires the sacrifice of the animal and animalistic" (Wolfe 39, Huggan and Tiffin 5), therefore marking both animals and humans as "primitive" and unable to assimilate into this model. The perpetuation of racism through ecological imperialism is explored by Engel as she attempts to disentangle these notions through Lou's relationship with the bear, but through the novel's gaze, Lucy Leroy remains subalternised and unknowable. Therefore Engel does not fully dismantle these notions in her novel, and instead perpetuates their assignation to human-others.

Lou compares Lucy to a woman she saw as a child "who used to peddle bitter-sweet on the street... a toothless old Indian crone in many cardigans and running shoes, ten cents a bunch" that her mother condemned derogatively as "a waste of money, a form of begging" (Engel, *Bear* 51). Lou attempts to assign her mother's prejudice to generational difference and to suggest that her own attitudes may be more progressive when Lou notes that she bought a bunch of bittersweet berries. However, Lou's internalised colonial prejudices pervade the novel and are only partially transformed by her encounters with the bear. Lucy Leroy is repetitively described as old and withering, as practically vanishing before Lou's eyes, in language that recalls Renée L. Bergland's theory that Indigenous peoples as ghostly and vanishing "function both as representations of national guilt and as triumphant agents of Americanization," reinforcers of national identity but also reminders

of the origins of this national identity (4). I argue that though Canadian writers attempted to divorce themselves from U.S. cultural imperialism, their shared enactment of settler colonialism binds them to the necessity of demarcating a national identity that is patriotic and assimilative but is necessarily haunted. In this way, Lou's reference to another Indigenous woman who was similarly toothless and old and described as a beggar further echoes the colonial mindset of assimilation and suggests Lou's lack of exposure to Indigenous peoples and different cultures. Lucy Leroy and the woman selling bittersweet berries are portrayed as existing at the periphery of society and as part of a disappearing people, but their knowledge of animals and nature remains useful to Lou. Before Lucy physically enters the novel, her agedness and decrepit appearance, as well as her Indigeneity, are overstated: "She's as old as the hills and she's got no teeth," Homer tells Lou (Engel, *Bear* 17). He later says, "Lucy says he's a good bear and you know some people don't like Indians and they can't hold their liquor, but around here we respect Lucy" (25). As Aguila-Way argues, while the bear resists his instrumentalisation, Engel "con-sign[s] indigenous peoples to an economy of representation in which they figure only as empty signifiers for stereotypical notions of the 'vanishing' indigene" (23) and are denied agency as white symbols of white settler attitudes.

Depictions in settler literature of the "vanishing indigene" also directly relate to the colonial concept of the untouched wilderness uncontaminated by humans as an example of purity (Plumwood, "Decolonizing Relationships" 57). Human-others become backgrounded, homogenised, and hyper-separated, and their "prior ownership of the land and... dispossession and murder is never spoken or admitted. Their trace in the land is denied, and they are represented as *inessential* because their land and their labour embodied in it are taken over as 'nature' or as 'wilderness'" (Plumwood, "Decolonizing Relationships" 57). Where Lucy, her nephew, and her community live is also mysterious. When Lucy introduces herself to Lou she says that she lives on Neebish. Lou walks to the other side of the island where Lucy's cabin is supposed to be but "found no sign of another habitation" (Engel, *Bear* 101), perpetuating the indigene as ghostly, vanishing, and mysterious. There is also ambiguity surrounding whether the mysteriousness of Lucy's cabin is intended to reflect the Haida Mouse Woman's often mystifying appearances in Traditional Haida Stories. Ultimately, however, Lucy and her nephew Joe arrive on the island as mysteriously as they leave, travelling by boat and consigned to a vanishing past.

5. Claiming the Wilderness through Animals

While Lucy can be interpreted as a vanishing image of indigeneity, in Engel's novel it is the bear and the wilderness that are presented as essential to Lou's

transformation, but the history of the land and the evidence of settlement she seeks to record as part of her job as an archivist is non-existent. Plumwood writes:

Ronald Reagan's famous remark "You've seen one redwood, you've seen them all" invokes a parallel homogenization of nature. An anthropocentric culture rarely sees nature and animals as individual centres of striving or needs... conceived in terms of interchangeable and replaceable units... rather than diverse and always in excess of knowledge and classification. ("Decolonizing Relationships" 56)

This human-supremacist understanding of difference sees beyond-human and human-others as interchangeable components that can be used and exploited to avoid victimisation. As Aguila-Way demonstrates, Engel's novel is an important example of the aesthetic challenges and tensions present between animal studies and postcolonial studies, related fields that can potentially advance embodied understandings of human-animal relationships if a position of decoloniality is adopted (26). Animals have been used in Canadian settler fiction in such a way that has normalised subalternisation and marginalisation of Indigenous peoples despite the intersection of these fields (27). Paul Barrett, Serpil Oppermann, Lawrence Buell, and John Cooley argue that for an ecological conception of textuality that "makes animals and the environment matter in representation rather than somehow beyond representation" (Barrett 126). An understanding of the intersection of depictions of beyond-humans and human-others could lead to better representations that acknowledge "significant difference" instead of further distancing and rejecting these connections and nuances.

Plumwood argues that such hyper-separation, meaning "defining the dominant identity emphatically against, or in opposition to, the subordinated identity, by exclusion of their real or supposed qualities" is a mode of colonialism based on racial exclusion through othering ("Decolonizing Relationships" 54). We can see this hyper-separation most clearly through Engel's portrayal of Lucy Leroy in the novel. Human-centred hyper-separation also defines the natural world as "other" and humans connected to the natural and beyond-human world are viewed as subordinate, especially women as this gendered colonialism has "historically linked [women] to 'nature' as reproductive bodies and through their supposedly greater emotionality, while indigenous people are seen as a primitive, 'earlier stage' of humanity" (Plumwood, "Decolonizing Relationships" 55). Lou fantasises about simultaneously colonising and becoming indigenous to the island with the bear as her male beyond-human partner. Lucy Leroy, as an Indigenous woman, plays no part in this vision beyond the advice she gives Lou about caring for the bear, and instead fades into the margins of Lou's imagined version of her Canadian life. The bear breaks out of this hyper-separation by

rejecting Lou's sexual advances with a swipe of his paw that cuts Lou across her back. This serves as a reminder that the bear is beyond-human and their relationship is therefore imbued with "significant otherness."

6. Settling the Settler: Canadian Instrumentalisation of the Pioneer and the Indigene

Once Lou realises she cannot pursue further sexual relations with the bear, she returns to her position as tourist "ramm[ing] about the channel like any other foolish motorised person," "a woman who stank of bestiality. A woman who understood nothing, who had no use, no function" (Engel, *Bear* 145). She dreams of Tarzan (145), the fictional son of a British lord who becomes stranded in the African jungle as a child and learns to coexist with nature. Soon after, Lou looks at herself in "the female colonel's pier-glass," in a house filled with relics and emblematic itself of colonialism and sees that her "hair and eyes were wild. Her skin was brown and her body was different and her face was not the same face she had seen before. She was frightened of herself" (148). Her physical appearance is transformed, most notably her darkened skin, in keeping with the recurrent trope in settler literature of the settler becoming indigenous to nature through contact with the wilderness. Carol Ann Howells assigns this transformation to "the alien Canadian landscape" where "[t]he brownness of the bear is of a different quality from the whiteness of the whale in *Moby Dick*... his colour makes him a part of the Canadian landscape with its dark forests and curiously dark clear lakes" (107). Howells fails to note that the bear's perceived "otherness" and Lou's darker skin form a problematic nationalistic narrative that through connectivity with nature and animals, the settler can become Indigenous, a narrative motivated by attempts to justify colonial settlement. These connections also directly relate to the relationship between racism and speciesism that has been clearly delineated by postcolonial and animal studies scholars. While Lou romanticises the idea her darker skin might offer her the identity and rootedness she seeks, she is also fearful of being victimised because of it. While catching fish, she fears that "she might get Minamata disease and be arrested for a drunken Indian" (Engel, *Bear* 114). Lou only wishes to become indigenised so far as she can live with her othered and anthropomorphised version of the bear, but not so far that she is perceived with settler colonial prejudices and victimised. Lou's prejudices are reinscribed by her fear of nature and her reiteration of colonial racial hierarchies of power. She temporarily reassigns indigeneity to the derogatory stereotype of the "drunken Indian."

Though Lou envisions her own indigeneity, she also fantasises about subverting the gendered hierarchies of settler colonialism, becoming a

female-colonist and asserting her feminine authority: "She felt victorious over them [the bear and the Carys]; she felt she was their inheritor; a woman rubbing her foot in the thick black pelt of a bear was more than they could have imagined. More, too, than a military victory: splendour" (Engel, *Bear* 63). Of course, there are violent implications in embedding herself in this structure whichever way she attempts to subvert or recreate colonial hierarchies and it is clear that Engel attempts to address the gendered and violent legacies of colonialism here by exposing Lou's flawed and untrustworthy vision of herself as a colonial pioneer. The imperialism and militarisation of her vision only perpetuates a violence that serves to other those lower down the power structure: Indigenous peoples and animals, which appears only partially understood by Lou by the novel's conclusion. In Haraway's examination of human-companion animal relationships, she writes that by touching her dog she also touches many sprawling connections with Indigenous sovereignty rights, settler colonialism, racial justice, ecological survival, and naturecultures where their lives have historically and still intersect (189). Lou touching the bear evokes an interconnected experience of settler colonial violence, which for Lou translates as gendered sexual abuse, as she reflects when Homer makes inappropriate sexual advances towards her that she "won't ever lie back on a desk again," recalling the imbalanced power dynamics in her sexual relationship with the Institute Director in Toronto (Engel, *Bear* 128). By contrast, the imagery of Lou's foot symbolically positioned above the bear's fur evokes violent images of colonisation and the fur industry. Her perpetuation of power hierarchies is symptomatic of settler colonialism and therefore not simply a subversion of gendered power dynamics, because in this image she celebrates having conquered the male Colonel Cary as well as the bear.

The complex tensions between Lou's romanticisation of the coloniser versus the colonised are also clearly drawn in the character of Colonel Jocelyn. Jocelyn appeals to Lou because of her subversion of gendered power dynamics: she was known as "the first woman to wear pants up here" and "[S]he and Lucy got on like a house on fire. You know, people will tell you Lucy's Metis [*sic*], but that was a long time back. I figure she and Joe are nearly full-blooded Indians, and what that means is you never know where they are" (Engel, *Bear* 89). Here, Homer's depiction of Jocelyn as a self-determined woman connected to indigeneity appeals to Lou's desire for sexual agency and power. Homer also demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of what it means to be Métis, and to have a mixture of Indigenous and European ancestry. Jocelyn is described as "an imitation man, but a damned good one" (92), having trapped rats and beavers, even "trooping the pelt of an illegal lynx" (92) which he describes as "tough, cold work, you got to be part Indian to put up with it" (90). Colonel Jocelyn is described nostalgically as radiating hardiness as well as

Hollywood glamour, combined with a knowledge of the cricks and inlets of the shore that recalls the trope of the “ecological Indian.”

Colonel Jocelyn’s racial identity is unknown, but Engel imbues her with qualities that are akin to those traditionally assigned to Indigenous peoples, while also glamourising her physical appearance and social standing within the racially hierarchical structure of settler colonialism. Lou is attracted to Homer’s depiction of Colonel Jocelyn because of her own fantasies of acquiring power and identity, and she views Homer’s image of Jocelyn as possessing the power of a colonist with the identity and place-based rootedness of an Indigenous person, as a way of successfully transcending the gendered sexual abuse she has experienced in Toronto. These paradigms, however, only reinforce such gendered violence because they are undivorceable from settler colonialism. Lou admires Jocelyn as a subversive female symbol with colonial power who enacts indigeneity as a method of demonstrating national belonging, because this conception of Jocelyn suggests that she is more able to resist gendered violence. However, this conception is flawed because it is based on patriarchal and racial power hierarchies that uphold disproportionate violence against Indigenous women and perpetuate power imbalances. Lou seeks to protect herself from gendered violence through settler colonialism which Engel demonstrates ambiguously as problematic through such ironic narrative interactions with postcolonialism, but which still ultimately compartmentalise white female experiences of colonial gendered hierarchies from those of Indigenous women.

Engel certainly effectively utilises Lou’s confliction over her own settler status and her complicity with settler colonialism to challenge nationalistic narratives. When Lou tends to her garden, she ties a piece of cheesecloth around her head and “felt like a colonial civil servant’s wife in India, struggling to endure... with a new respect for farmers and pioneers” (*Bear* 81). Lou plays at enacting the national imaginary of Canada’s past, romanticising a pastoral vision of coloniality, an image intentionally separated from violence against Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples. Later, she muses that the island’s beauty is “unpretentious” and “[s]he had seen parts of Canada that would cause any explorer to roll back his eyes like Stout Cortez” (99), a reference to John Keats’ sonnet in which Keats compares colonist Hernán Cortés’s first view of the Pacific during his conquest of the Baja California Peninsula and northwestern Mexico to the reading of George Chapman’s translation of Homer. Engel’s reference positions Lou as the explorer, the conquistador, the colonist. Engel clearly gestures to Canada’s significant literary tradition of romanticised settlement and appropriated indigeneity through Lou’s fascination with literature. Lou wonders what made the original Colonel Cary want to move to the island and postulates that he might have been “entranced by the novels of Mrs Aphra Behn... *Atala* and the idea of the noble savage then James Fenimore Cooper?” (*Bear* 105). This is a significant mention

mention when considering that Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* (1826) depicts the indigenisation of white characters. A "feminist friend" even writes to her "enquiring why she was not doing research on a female pioneer for International Women's Year" (111). Lou's blatant interest in pioneers and settlement becomes intertwined with her desire to be indigenous to the landscape in order to know her identity better.

While searching for narratives that depict settlement and that relate to her experiences on the island, Lou muses that there must be "something in that enormous library, surely an annotated *Roughing it in the Bush* or a journal" (150). This reference to a canonical Canadian nature text is particularly significant in that Susanna Moodie's *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852) features the depiction of Indigenous peoples described through metaphors involving comparisons to animals and the natural world. Somewhat ironically, Lou muses that she "was never a woman who wore circles of animals eating each other around her neck to church. I don't want his guts for my windowpanes or his shoulder blades to cut my grass. I only want to love him" (Engel, *Bear* 151), as she attempts to divorce and disassociate herself from others who might objectify and cause the bear harm. Yet, in her longing for the bear to help her express her own identity, she most overtly expresses her colonial mentality by commanding, not asking, the bear to give her his skin: "Bear, make me comfortable in the world at last. Give me your skin" (132). Imagery of Lou taking the bear's skin and of Lou asking the bear to pull off her head recalls the violence present in many of the international stories that Lou discovers Colonel Cary collected within the pages of his book collection. Cary's notes reference multiple, diverse bear facts and stories from Indigenous communities; for example, he writes that "[T]he Esquimaux believe that the soul of a wounded polar bear tarries three days near the spot where it leaves his body" and that the Sámi believe bears to be "King of the Beasts" (72).

The violence Lou imagines is also symptomatic of her settler colonial guilt, and she believes that by violently removing her head, symbolic of her mindset, and wearing his skin, she will be rid of this guilt, therefore initiating her indigenisation. By contrast, in Inuit traditional storytelling, the removal of and wearing of skins is literally and symbolically representative of the interconnectivity of human and beyond-human relationships, and violence in narratives tends to illustrate how not to be Inuit (Martin). Through Adams' theory of the absent referent, whose original meaning is undermined and used in another hierarchy of meaning (Barrett 123), Barrett argues that while "the bear and the environment matter only insofar as they fit [Lou's] schema of representation," the bear is constructed as a mythic alternative to gendered violence and patriarchy (139), but he cannot be instrumentalised as a vehicle to indigenisation. While Lou searches for meaning through her construction of the bear, her

instrumentalisation of the bear and her colonial fantasies of human-centred wealth and power deeply ironize any truly alternative vision. This vision is certainly disrupted when the bear rejects Lou's attempt to engage in sexual relations and he swipes her across her back, simultaneously rejecting his portrayal as an absent referent and announcing himself as an embodied subject (Barrett 140). There is tension in Engel's suggestion that living at one with the bear in the wilderness is more knowable and desirable to Lou than the Indigenous woman who advises her, because it demonstrates a level of cognitive dissonance that she cannot seek to better understand Lucy and yet she can seek to better understand the bear, when both the bear and Lucy are othered and hyper-separated by settler colonialism.

The bear's violence disrupts Lou's constant fear of victimisation, but the flux and juxtaposition of her desire to become indigenised and her desire to conquer is sustained. Her involvement of the bear in this internal quandary is exemplified by her anthropomorphisation and utilisation of the bear towards these desires. Lou discovers that the bear's "actual range of expression was a mystery" (Engel, *Bear* 80-81). Here, Engel highlights the uncomfortable relationship between anthropocentrism and the inherent unknowability of translating animal lives into human fiction in that the latter has often been used as an excuse for the former. Throughout the novel, Engel refers to the bear as an object or as something other than what the bear truly is, a bear. He is described in metaphors and similes, "as solid as a sofa, domestic, a rug of a bear" (78) and as "like the books, [he] knew generations of secrets" (79). As Barrett writes, the "Bear is always marked by an absence... repeatedly perceived as a quasi-object" (140). The objectification and instrumentalisation of the bear is part of Engel's use of narrative irony to illustrate tension between Lou's treatment of the bear and Lou's self-described conflict with the portrayal of animals in western literature.

Like Lucy Leroy, the bear is very much depicted as indigenous to the land, despite the reality that he was brought to the island by the Carys: "There had always, it seemed, been a bear" (Engel, *Bear* 23). The bear is "kind of old, nobody remembers how old," according to Homer, not unlike Lou's description of Lucy as "eternal," and initially, although Lou considers herself ambivalent towards animals "the idea of the bear struck her as joyfully Elizabethan and exotic" (27). Within the context of the island and the grand colonial structure of Pennarth, the bear's depicted indigeneity is perplexing given he is kept chained by humans and joins his settler adopters from Europe. That he appeals to Lou because of the colonial associations she makes between the bear and exoticism and the archaic is highly revealing of her mindset: one of entrenched colonial hierarchies that perpetuate racism and speciesism. When Lou plays music to the bear in the living room at Pennarth, Engel writes that she put on a "more primitive record" (134), further positioning Lou as part of a human-centred power hierarchy

with racial implications, reaffirming the convergence of speciesism and racism by asserting a civilised versus primitive dichotomy.

Lou's identification with the bear "often borders on a dynamic of indigenization that echoes troubling episodes of Canada's settler-invader history" (Aguila-Way 6). James Polk argues in *Wilderness Writers* (1972) that Canadians sympathetically portray animals because "the wilderness to us is more than just an empty place out there; it is a part of every Canadian's idea of himself and his country" and therefore, animals are part of a national and cultural sense of self (Fiamengo 8; Polk 13-14). However, Polk's portrayal of the Canadian wilderness as "just an empty place" perpetuates colonial notions of a landscape where Indigenous peoples are made absent, and where the beyond-human animals, although othered, are more readily sympathised with than the Indigenous human. In this way, Polk, Atwood, and Engel are unable to contest the tensions present in this national imaginary or problematise the absence and othering of Indigenous peoples from their originary landscape. The perpetuation of racism through ecological imperialism is explored by Engel as she attempts to disentangle these notions through her relationship with the bear, but this disentanglement does not extend to human-others.

7. Conclusion

The novel ends as Lou leaves the island and the bear is entrusted to the dying Lucy Leroy and her nephew for the winter, and Lou watches "the bear recede down the channel, a fat dignified old woman... He did not look back. She did not expect him to" (Engel, *Bear* 164). Engel disrupts this anthropomorphism by demonstrating that Lou has learned to stop humanising the bear and his behaviour, and instead treats him as a bear. Lou drives through northern Ontario with the windows open "until the smell of the land stopped being the smell of water and trees became cities and gas fumes" and "overhead the Great Bear and his thirty-seven-thousand virgins kept her company" (167). Much has been made of Engel's choice to close the novel with Lou's voluntary return to urban Toronto, despite her transformative experiences. She decides on a new job and therefore rejects the uncomfortable power dynamics of the sexual relationship instigated by her boss. Still, she chooses to return to an environment decidedly devoid of human-animal-nature encounters and instead travels back to the urban-scape that is emblematic of capitalism and of engrained gendered and racial power hierarchies. Does Lou leave the wilderness because of her guilt over performing indigeneity and mistreating the bear? This is unclear. Lou's care-free departure and her treatment of Indigenous peoples in the novel certainly doesn't suggest this. Engel's use of narrative irony is ambiguous and

Guth argues instead that Lou's transformation is one of "'geopsychic' comprehension of impossible connection" rather than "a newly achieved version of humanity" (43), akin to Haraway and Scottish sculptor Andrew Goldsworthy's conception of "the history of the land as living" (Haraway 114).

Lou's newfound "geopsychic comprehension" recalls her earlier anxiety in the novel that she and Colonel Cary were "surely one of the great irrelevancies of Canadian history... Neither of them was connected to anything" (Engel, *Bear* 95), a feeling that she likens to a tradition-bound French novelist unable to "build an abstract structure" (96). In Lou's yearning to belong and to be authentically connected to the natural world, she perpetuates the hierarchical racism and speciesism of settler colonialism, a system through which she has already personally endured gendered sexual violence and discrimination as a woman. Engel's portrayal of Lou's relationship with the bear is as revealing of the "unapproachable otherness" or "significant otherness" of beyond-human and human connections (Guth 43) as it is of the othering of other, namely, Indigenous humans. Haraway writes that "[R]elationship is multiform, at stake, unfinished, consequential" (122). Lou's relationships, beyond-human and human, are intrinsically evident of a sprawling series of complex interconnections that reveal the "significant otherness" that imbues all life forms. The appropriation of Indigenous perspectives in *Bear* and the reproduction of white images of the indigene does somewhat diminish Engel's attempts to remove beyond-human beings from human-centred spheres of meaning. However, this is not to undermine the significant strides the novel has made toward deconstructing harmful depictions of human-animal relationships and of Engel's portrayal of the complex, albeit white, interior worlds of women. If Engel's depiction of indigeneity is entirely ironic and intended to problematise the existing body of Canadian literature that portrays Indigenous peoples as vanishing, it highlights the issues of removing Traditional Indigenous Stories from their specific place-based logics, further underscores the importance of an ethic of formal citation (Ahmed), and underlines the necessity of disambiguating irony through literary portrayals that ultimately or eventually resist instrumentalisation.

Bear further highlights the importance of postcolonial scholars and animal studies scholars working to explore these tensions in settler narratives and to better acknowledge the multiform, complex nature of interconnectivity. What emerges is the possibility that Engel's narrative is more intelligent than the writer and reader. The questions raised are compelling queries of canonical national literary narratives, ones that begin to reflect more meaningfully on the legacies of settler colonialism and on the often appropriative nature of settler relationships with animals and the natural world as extensions of gendered and racial hierarchies of power. Ultimately, Engel's intentions appear to matter less when we consider how interpretations of *Bear* evolve throughout time

and as scholarship begins to meaningfully assimilate understandings of settler colonial violence, scholarship must commit more broadly to decolonising our perceptions of literary portrayals of "otherness."

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