

Indigenous Ecofeminism? Decolonial Practices and Indigenous Resurgence in Lee Maracle's Works

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ABSTRACT

Ecocritical and ecofeminist studies have frequently borrowed from Indigenous epistemologies to conform new approaches to human-nature relations, particularly now that the pressing climate crisis is making western societies contemplate the need for radical solutions. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson remarks, "the western academy is now becoming interested in certain aspects of Indigenous Knowledge" such as "Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)" (373). However, the scope of this interest is reduced and disconnects ecological knowledge from decolonial practices, such as land claims or Indigenous feminisms.¹ Maile Arvin et al. emphatically support that "settler colonialism has been and continues to be a gendered process" (8) and thus its ramifications and effects (upon nature or Indigenous communities) cannot be detangled without an Indigenous feminist perspective. In this article, I focus on an ecocritical analysis of several works by Lee Maracle, who dedicated her career to the regeneration and revalorization of Indigenous systems of knowledge, in order to pinpoint the intersections between feminism, decolonization, and nonhuman ecological thinking that might develop into a potential Indigenous ecofeminism that truly recognizes Indigenous epistemologies in their full context. Basing myself

1. "The issues facing Indigenous women... are resolved via decolonization and sovereignty, not (just) parity" (Arvin et al. 10).

off Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's theories on Indigenous radical resurgence, which assert that a cultural resurgence (such as a revalorization of Indigenous ecological knowledge) cannot take place without a political resurgence (such as the acknowledgement of Indigenous sovereignty), I argue that Maracle's portrayal of natural elements and her imagining of human-nature relations is inextricably linked to a decolonizing perspective foregrounded on Indigenous feminism.

Keywords

Decolonial; Ecocriticism; Ecofeminism; Indigenous; Refusal; Resurgence

1. Introduction

The need for human beings to envision and enact new ways of existing on Earth has become dire in the face of the unprecedented climate crisis that is irrevocably changing the planet as we know it. Temperatures are increasingly abnormally higher to the extent that people all over the world are being impacted. However, as Indigenous activists have reminded the world during the 2021 COP26 climate summit in Glasgow, their communities are bearing the brunt of climate change, and are facing, in the words of Daniela Balaguera, from the Arhuaco community in the North of Colombia, the threat of "the second extinction of our cultural practices" (Barret). With these words, Balaguera firmly links the dire consequences colonial oppression had over First Nations with the over-exploitation of natural resources that have brought us to where we are today. Beyond the annihilation of the lives and cultures of Indigenous communities, both processes are brought about by the anthropocentric philosophies of the Enlightenment and the consequent practices of capitalism.

As Rosi Braidotti explains, there is an urgent need to reformulate our relationship with the natural world beyond capitalist exploitation, "which is the root cause of the climate change emergency" (27). In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, Braidotti is firm in the need for "an affirmative relational ethics... driven by environmental principles, which combine more inclusive ways of caring, across a transversal, multi-species spectrum that encompasses the entire planet and its majority of nonhuman inhabitants" (28), thus de-centering the anthropocentric modes of being and knowing that have landed us in this man-made environmental emergency. The need to examine and rethink the ideological orientations behind the destructive practices that have led us to this point has prompted many strands of thought, such as ecofeminisms, which look to establish a conceptual reorientation of our relationship with the non-human that destabilizes a very specific subject—"masculine, white, Eurocentric, practicing compulsory heterosexuality and reproduction, able-bodied, urbanized, and speaking a standard language" (Braidotti 29)—from the oppressive

position at the top of a hierarchy of importance. In an effort to displace this normative perception of subjectivity from the top of the hierarchy, certain strands of ecofeminism widely known as spiritual or cultural ecofeminisms,² have sometimes "utilized the beliefs and historical experiences of Indigenous peoples to support feminist theories of women-nature connections. By drawing upon Aboriginal cultures to support these claims, Indigenous beliefs, knowledge, and experiences are at times appropriated" (Wilson 334). In their in-depth exposition of Indigenous feminisms, Hawaiian scholar Maile Arvin et al. "plea that feminists must avoid New Age forms of recognition that idealize and appropriate Indigenous cultures and religion" (21) and acknowledge instead Indigenous feminist theories as an ongoing project of resistance that contests patriarchy and its power relationships, including decolonization and ecological exploitation. For Kim TallBear, citizen of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate, her wish to "dismantle hierarchies and 'be in good relation' with one another" (qtd. in Nickel and Fehr 2) was what led her to Indigenous feminism, claiming that "Indigenous thinkers need to be at the table with feminists, we need to be at the table with disability scholars, and we need to be at the table with Queer theorists because we have very similar critiques of power. So that's how I became a feminist. It wasn't because of Indigenous women" (2). With this statement, TallBear highlights the profoundly intersectional nature of Indigenous feminism, and its potential for dismantling patriarchal power relations and re-imagining new relationalities.

Similarly, in the search for alternative modes of relating to other Earth-dwellers, many are looking at the connection Indigenous communities have with the natural world. As Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson remarks, "[a]fter centuries of benefiting from the promotion of European colonialism and the denial of Indigenous Knowledge as a legitimate knowledge system, the western academy is now becoming interested in certain aspects of Indigenous Knowledge" such as "Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)" ("Anti-colonial" 373). However, the scope of this interest is specific and disconnects ecological knowledge from decolonial practices, such as land claims or Indigenous feminisms, and from "the spiritual foundations" of Indigenous Knowledge and

2. Ecofeminisms are rooted in the notion that "land is tied to the conceptualization and treatment of women, and how the feminizing of land facilitates its colonial and patriarchal possession" (Bedford 203). However, many strands diverge into more essentialist conceptions of women/nature, and scholars like Kathi Wilson establish a difference between a "spiritual ecofeminism" which reclaims and celebrates a "gendered connection to nature" and a "social ecofeminism" which contends that this connection "represents a patriarchal artifice that reinforces oppression" (333).

“the Indigenous values and worldviews that support it” (374). Simpson notes that the use made of TEK by western science is often relegated to a mere data gathering of factual knowledge in regions where it is lacking to “better control those environments” (374), an approach that only furthers the practices of modernity that see the natural world as a non-being that must be tamed in the service of humanity.³ Consequently, western incursions into TEK are oblivious to the “impact of colonialism on Indigenous Knowledge systems” (375). It is my position that for white audiences to fruitfully engage with Indigenous thinking, ecocritical readings of Indigenous texts will help displace anthropocentric thinking and re-imagine new systems of relations with the natural world. Furthermore, engagement with Indigenous feminism, which has acknowledged the intersectionality of the oppressions it seeks to dismantle from its very conception,⁴ presents a fruitful opportunity to radically re-think the metanarratives that have led the western world to the terrible crisis we are experiencing.

As a white, feminist scholar brought up in European academic institutions who firmly believes in the need for a revalorization of Indigenous knowledges, I am concerned with the way in which we may engage respectfully with Indigenous epistemologies from western academia without risking the re-production of exploitative colonial practices.⁵ In the search for an answer, the spirit of bridge-crossing evoked by Lee Maracle’s *Ravensong* and its sequel, *Celia’s Song*, comes to mind. In this article, I seek to establish whether we can talk of

3. Amongst other scholarship, Walter Mignolo’s *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (2011) expands on the inextricable links between modernity and colonialism, arguing that coloniality (the ongoing colonial oppression consequence of Imperialism and firmly linked to capitalism) is the direct consequence of the logic of western modernity. For Mignolo, the rhetoric of religious salvation, the civilizing missions (including the submission of nature at the service of mankind), and the discourse on democracy and advancement that are staples of modernity have justified different iterations of colonialism from the 16th century onwards.

4. It is widely acknowledged that the feminist movement was spearheaded by white educated women who fought for (much needed) rights to vote, political representation, and access to education and the workforce, but it has largely been a fight for parity, whereas Black and Indigenous feminisms have long claimed the need for the dismantling and reformulation of western capitalist and patriarchal societies.

5. As a white reader engaging critically with Maracle’s work, a key part of the process of writing has involved the continuous reassessment of my own assumptions and an attempt to place my reading in a position where I was not “speaking for” Indigenous voices. Thus, my investigation has included an in-depth reading of Maracle’s theoretical texts and interviews about both her writing and activism, which have informed my analyses of her novels. Nevertheless, I acknowledge the position of my reading to be one unavoidably rooted in western capitalism, and I would like to consider this exercise one of deep listening.

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Indigenous ecofeminism in Lee Maracle's works, and what it may entail. I pose that an analysis of the intersections between feminism, decolonization, and non-human ecological thinking in *I am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism* (1988), *Ravensong: A Novel* (1993), and its sequel *Celia's Song* (2014) reveals a potential Indigenous ecofeminism that truly recognizes Indigenous epistemologies in their full context. Basing myself off Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's theories on Indigenous radical resurgence, which assert that a cultural resurgence (such as a revalorization of Indigenous ecological knowledge) cannot take place without a political resurgence (such as the acknowledgement of Indigenous sovereignty), I argue that Maracle's portrayal of natural elements and her imagining of human-natural relations is inextricably linked to a radical decolonizing perspective foregrounded on Indigenous feminism.

2. Ecocritical Analysis of *Ravensong* and *Celia's Song*: Survival vs. Resurgence

Without song, all that's left is the thinnest sense of survival. This spiderweb of survival has snapped from whatever mooring it attached itself to and the silk threads lie all withered and tangled in a heap on the floor of a burned-down longhouse that has not been rebuilt.

—Lee Maracle, *Celia's Song*

Lee Maracle, who unfortunately passed away in 2021, was a writer and activist from the Stó:lō Nation who dedicated her long career to the recovery and revitalization of Indigenous knowledge. Together with authors like Tomson Highway and Maria Campbell, she was part of the so-called Indigenous literary renaissance of the 20th century. As a writer, activist, orator, and cultural critic, Maracle devoted herself to the examination of the harms perpetrated against First Nations by European colonization and the subsequent emergence of the Canadian nation-state. She continuously highlights the fact that colonialism is still an ongoing process, and advocates for the revalorization of Indigenous knowledge and the sovereignty of Indigenous nations. A dedicated researcher of Stó:lō Nation cultural practices, her storytelling follows what she refers to as "orature," a combination of traditional "oratory and European story" (Maracle, "Trickster" 11), which maintains the pedagogical orientation of Indigenous storytelling as a transmitter of traditional knowledge.⁶ Thus, her writings

6. Maracle took special issue with the problematic over-generalization of Indigenous cultural elements (Maracle, "National Literature" 88) and consequent erasure of tribal

“merely pose the dilemma” (Maracle, “Trickster” 12), challenging the reader’s preconceptions and guiding them to a position of critical thinking instead of providing a pre-packaged solution, thus establishing storytelling as a vehicle for activism, an engine for transformation and social change.

The challenging dilemma presented in *Ravensong* is, precisely, the difficult coexistence of the Indigenous and settler communities in what we know as Canada, within the colonial structures of the nation-state. Although Maracle was an advocate for the resurgence and liberation of the Indigenous communities of Turtle Island, the extreme precarity and segregation imposed upon them mean that for the Indigenous nations to resurge, first they must survive under the forces of lateral violence, transgenerational trauma, and assimilation, all emerging from colonization. In the three selected books, I argue, we can identify a constant tension between the need to guarantee the survival of Indigenous communities, sometimes benefitting from structures and institutions that may acknowledge Indigenous identity and even the harms of colonialism, but which exist within the settler colonial state, and, on the other hand, in the words of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, a radical resurgence dependent upon the destruction of settler colonialism, and capitalism as its economic model.⁷ In the short essay “Law, Politics, and Tradition” published in 1988 in *I am Woman*, Maracle presents the tension between individual resilience and communal resurgence in a clear-cut way that leaves very little room for nuance: “[t]hose who held fast to the essential principles of their culture went in the direction of sovereignty; those who became alienated from their communities trod in the direction of sub-normal integration” (37). With these words, she establishes a clear binary between “self-determination” and “continued dependence” (37). In the process, she condemns a middle-class Indigenous elite that grew thanks to opportunities funded by the Canadian government, as she argues that “[t]his elite owes both its existence and its loyalty to the piper that paid it to play the tune” (38). Similarly, in “Rebel” she expands on this dichotomy to claim that

identities, and her work shows no inclination to stand as representative of a multitude of tribal systems of incredible complexity. She attempted, however, to draft a homogenous way forward, both for the Indigenous community and for their settler neighbors.

7. Simpson predicates the Radical Resurgence Project on a generative refusal of “colonialism and its current settler colonial structural manifestation” (*Always* 34), one that calls for the formation of constellations of organizing and activism against heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy and their forces of dispossession, generating an Indigenous alternative (35). Simpson’s *radical* resurgence is not “compatible with the reconciliation discourse, the healing industry, or other depolitized recovery-based narratives” (49) and decries forms of cultural recognition that co-opt Indigenous cultural resurgence for the Canadian multicultural state without recognizing a political dimension (50).

rebellion is not possible from within the system of oppression. To illustrate this point, she depicts the co-option of the Red Power movement by the flag of cultural nationalism (97) and argues that its original power, rooted in civil disobedience, was lost after government funds administered by those educated in white institutions set the guidelines for any possible actions, making it impossible to resist against the settler state. Succinctly, she claims that "we had no way to move beyond survival" (100), delineating the idea that a battle for survival had no room for radical resurgence.

It is my position that *Ravensong*, published only a few years later in 1993, develops the nuanced tension between survival and resurgence by acknowledging the terrible material and spiritual conditions in which many of the Indigenous communities of North America find themselves, and the very real threat to their continued existence they experience. In *Ravensong*, Maracle seems to privilege guaranteeing the resilience (and survival) of the Indigenous communities before a project of resurgence may emerge. Set in the 1950s, the novel focuses on a small Stó:lō village in British Columbia where sisters Stacey and little Celia live with Momma and their extended family, and the neighboring settler town of Maillardville. Raven, a trickster figure and narrator of the story, is witness to the seemingly inevitable path to the demise of the Indigenous village, which struggles with terrible precarity and appears disconnected from the world. As a result, Raven decides to send a terrible flu epidemic that will force the villagers to "come out of the house" (Kelly 75) and engage with the nearby settler town.⁸ As a harbinger of change and a symbol of "transformation and agency" (Maracle, "Understanding" 88), Raven sets its hopes for bridge-crossing on Stacey, a 17-year-old Indigenous girl who attends the high school in Maillardville and dreams of becoming a teacher and coming back to the village to create a school where the Indigenous children may learn their own traditions.

The dilemma presented in *Ravensong* involves the difficult coexistence of the white and Indigenous neighboring communities in the face of a health crisis that Raven claims will prove to the Indigenous village the need to bridge the cultural gap and learn from each other in terms of equality. The opposing options between integration and radical sovereignty appear nuanced and developed here: Raven is insistent throughout the novel that salvation will only come with the engagement of the settlers, and the hope for the village's future

8. Maracle repeatedly warns against the dangers of segregation and the consequent silencing of Indigenous voices. In the preface to *Ravensong*'s new edition she states that "[t]his country knows very little about us. We are something of a mystery. For decades no trespassing signs kept Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people separated. The mystery surrounded us, turned to speculation, and eventually stereotypes were born" (xii).

relies on Stacey being sent off to university (an elite institution of the settler state if there is one) so she can gain the necessary credentials to open a school in the village. This way, the children will learn traditional knowledge from their Elders instead of being indoctrinated in Euro-Canadian values. However, at the end of *Ravensong*, we learn that the settler government of British Columbia never allowed Stacey to open the school, and that “the village fell apart” (181) over the next decade. Any movement towards harmonious integration within the settler state seems shattered in the epilogue, set twenty five years later, in which Stacey, Celia, and Momma explain to Stacey’s son Jacob the story of the epidemic and the damage caused by the restrictions and prohibitions set on the villagers by the state—“Not allowed’ seemed to be all there was left to their life” (181). Jacob’s response, “Why did anyone pay attention to them?” (182), opens up the possibility of an alternative relation to the settlers, one that will only appear through the generative refusal (Simpson, *Always* 9) of their authority.

Although it is in *Celia’s Song* where Maracle directly outlines how the trauma of colonization is responsible for the expressions of lateral violence, addiction, and suicide in Indigenous populations, *Ravensong* traces the loss of knowledge and tradition and the overwhelming precarity of said communities to first contact. Maracle begins the story with the evocation of a mournful and melancholic song that emanates from Raven and is echoed by water, earth, and wind, and joined by Cedar and Cloud. This forlorn song is translated into images for little Celia, who is able to witness the first contact between the Wolf Clan and the settlers. Celia’s visions tell the story of how colonization brought disease and “a new moral sensibility” that spelled the death of “the old culture” (2) for the village. However, her young age makes her unable to interpret the images of violence and death, and she is incapable to find a meaning that can translate into action for her community. Natural elements appear from the beginning of the story as sources of knowledge, repositories of the long story of the colonization of the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, whose contact with the Indigenous communities was once possible but has been cut off by the loss of spiritual knowledge. This situation echoes theories on place-thought, which argue that “[l]and is a vital element in re-storying body sovereignty” (de Finney et al. 90) since “land can be considered as a teacher and conduit of memory” (Tuck and McKenzie 57). Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie quote citizen of the Chickasaw Nation Jody Byrd, who points out that land “both remembers life and its loss and serves itself as a mnemonic device that triggers the ethics of relationality with the sacred geographies that constitute Indigenous peoples’ histories” (57). Certainly, this is the role Cedar, Cloud, and Raven play in *Ravensong*: that of witnesses to a history of dispossession and de-spiriting that has led the villagers to their current moment of precarity and vulnerability.

Their insistence on trying to communicate the larger framework of the colonial enterprise to Celia, and through her to the villagers, seems to imply that this knowledge is a pre-condition for their survival.

Similarly, in *Celia's Song*, Stacey's son Jacob is the only one, apart from an older Celia, who can connect with Cedar and Mountain and gain knowledge from them, marking him for a position of guidance and leadership in the resurgence of traditional cultural practices. As Celia is able to listen to ravensong, which tells the long story of the colonization of her peoples, Jacob's song "'sits at the edge of the mountain,'" awaiting his voice (61). Celia notices Jacob's initial resistance to listen to cedar's story and embrace his role as a leader for his people, as Celia herself did years before, and she "urges Jacob to be calm. 'Listen, cedar wants to tell you something, listen to cedar.' Jacob ignores her" (61-62). It is not until he witnesses the terrible abuse that Amos inflicts upon Shelley, one of the village's girls, and recognizes in himself the same potential to recreate the cycle of abuse, that Jacob feels the need to seek a different path that may heal the enormous trauma his community is suffering. Amongst a multitude of feminine characters, Jacob stands out as a "decolonial representation of Indigenous masculinities... outside the pathologizing stereotype of being inherently damaged by intergenerational trauma and destined to inherit and perpetuate the violent legacies of colonial gender relations" (de Finney et al. 88). Reconciled with the old ways, he travels up Cheam mountain, where he meets the spirit of his ancestor, Alice. For four days, she guides him to the conclusion that humans have a natural need for ritual that must be consciously channeled into ceremony. The answer for the village, Jacob infers in the mountain, is to revive ceremony to restore their path (181). For Jacob, his journey into the mountain and the consequent acceptance of his leadership role in reviving ceremony for the village involves what Sandrina de Finney et al. have called "rekinning," a re-connection to "land kin [which] offers ways to re-spirit, to rebody all our relations" (86), a re-implication of "Indigenous young people with each other and with place and land" (91).

Reading from a western context, it is important to note that Maracle's representations of human-nature connections develop beyond the spiritual and acknowledge the crucial role played in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples by the settler state's control of natural resources. western readings of Indigenous human-nature are often overly simplistic and rely in romantic and static representations (Schmitt et al.). Aware of this misinterpretation, rooted on racist stereotyping, de Finney et al. are careful to assert that Indigenous "land-body kinships are not romanticized bound-to-land essentialisms but a very condition of our Indigeneity" (90), thus establishing land reclamation processes as an unavoidable condition for resurgence. Maracle also steps away from essentialist connections between Indigeneity and nature by explaining how the control of

natural resources by an exploitative settler state had contributed to the precarity of the Indigenous peoples of North America. Thinking of Old Nora, a single mother of several children, Stacey reflects on how her survival was dependent on “poaching” the natural resources the government had deemed forbidden:

She watched her fish the river without a boat, alone under the cover of darkness, one eye on her children, the other watching for the game warden while her hands worked the deep net, filling it with fish.... Stacey cherished this memory of modest courage. Nora fished when the fish ran, regardless of the law outside herself. She was not interested in discussing her right to fish with anyone. She paid no attention to the men who rattled on about their right to fish—Aboriginal or otherwise. It wasn't relevant to her. Her children may have lacked clothing but they were never hungry. (12)

Similarly, in *Celia's Song*, Maracle

traces the poverty, precarity, and loss of knowledge the villagers experience to the clear-cutting practices that have greatly worked to facilitate Canada's position as a powerful international economy. For the villagers, “[n]o trees in the last century... means no means of acquiring sustenance. No one knows how to carve the hooks or the bowls or make the clothing, and weirs are still illegal to use” (chap. I). In this way, Maracle links Indigenous precarity with the criminalization of resource-gathering practices. (Fraile-Marcos and López-Serrano 10)

The control of natural resources by the settler government in order to make a profit contrasts greatly with the subsistence relationship to the land of Indigenous communities. These conflicting approaches to nature show that it is impossible for both practices to coexist within the same system, which means that a genuine interest from western society in Indigenous human-nature relationships must necessarily move away from for-profit exploitation and start truly considering the impact of said exploitation on both the present and the future.

Such extreme differences in thought may make the reader think that any cultural encounter between Indigenous and western thought is doomed to failure, and indeed, Raven's insistence on bridge-crossing revives the tension between the necessity of survival and the possibility of resurgence. Stacey seems to embody the dangers of bartering with settler institutions in exchange for the power to change the situation for Indigenous communities from within. Educated in the white town so she can access university and the necessary qualifications to become a teacher, she walks the fine line between assimilation of settler culture in exchange for a path that will grant her the ability to create a school for her village. Slowly, she starts to contemplate her family, environment,

and traditions through the white gaze: "It was unavoidable. Half of Stacey's life was spent across the river in the warm sanctuary of white-town's evenly-heated institutions with their high ceilings, the other half was spent looking at the bedraggled single old hall that squatted stubbornly at the centre of her village" (9). Her thoughts infuriate Raven, whose motivation for the Indigenous community's bridge-crossing is the revalorization of Indigenous knowledge: a cultural encounter on equal terms. However, certain events make Stacey realize the hypocrisy and disconnection hidden behind the white façades of Maillardville, and she starts to reevaluate Momma's teachings. At one point Stacey contemplates Mrs. Snowden, a white woman, uprooting weeds from her manicured garden and making them "disappear in a strong black garbage bag out of sight from the public" (21). Stacey, recognizing the plants as "[c]omfrey root, dandelion, plantain and mullein" (21) all used as sources of food in her village, is bewildered by the fact that in the white town, "[a]esthetic waste supplanted good sense and thrift in the care of their yards" (23), effectively de-centering western/Eurocentric (non)relations to the natural world. Stacey's observations of the "neat little throw-away world" (23) of Maillardville revalorize Indigenous epistemologies that predicate the relationships between human and non-human beings on stewardship and sustenance, displacing other motivations like desire, comfort, or aesthetic pleasure, and exposing the damaging effects of western understandings of kinship with human and nonhuman Earth beings. The cultural encounter, in this instance, serves for Stacey to resist assimilation.

An explicit link between Mrs. Snowden's discarded weeds and Polly, one of Stacey's classmates, is established in *Ravensong*, confirming that Maracle contemplates the traditionally ecofeminist connection between woman and nature as productive for critical examination. Polly, a young girl from Maillardville who has been caught arranging an assignation with a boy by one of the teachers is condemned and ostracized for the forced publicization of her sexuality, until the pressure of the town's Catholic morality and the domestic violence experienced at home⁹—"He [Polly's father] beats her [Polly's mother] pretty regular" (69)—drive her to suicide. Initially having disentangled herself from Polly's troubles since she was "one of theirs" (19), Stacey's guilt prompts her to reconsider the social dynamics of the settler town and sees "Polly in her perfection being weeded from the ranks of her own, an unwanted dandelion" (21). Considering these politics of waste, she reflects that "[i]t would have been amusing had it just been the plants these people threw away, but Polly was a young seductive

9. Although "English had been their first language for some three generations" (Maracle, *Ravensong* 20) the Catholic morality brought over by the French settlers is prevalent in Maillardville and heavily influences the Christian section of the Indigenous village.

woman whom no one wanted to see anymore" (23). Disturbed by the patriarchal configurations of nuclear families that leave women isolated from other forms of kinship and "with no more rank in the house than the children" (25), Stacey ponders on the individuality and isolation that prevails in Maillardville: "[t]here were no support systems for white women... No wonder Polly killed herself" (Maracle, *Ravensong* 69).

In contrast, although the same patriarchal constructions have infiltrated the village, traditional systems of community support that endow the villagers with a duty to one another remain and ensure the protection of Madeline and her daughters after her husband, a.k.a. "the old snake," is discovered to have been abusing them. Maracle explicitly links domestic violence to colonialism by stating that it was after the old snake worked in the railroad with white men that "he came back full of crazy notions about his wife's place: "I am the head of my household.'... He said crude things to young boys about making women mind" (134). Maracle describes instances of spousal abuse between Indigenous men who buy into settler understandings of patriarchal hierarchy and vulnerable women who are "mostly illiterate—another crippled two-tongued product of residential school" (135). In the case of Madeline, the old snake's wife, her vulnerability is heightened by the fact that she is a member of the Manitoba Sauteaux, and only came to Salish territory after marrying the old snake, who kept her isolated in the house and unable to form any community bonds within the village.¹⁰ Thus, domestic gendered violence appears as a by-product of the permeation of patriarchal colonial values, a clear illustration of how "colonial violence infiltrates [Indigenous] systems, relations, bodies, and spirits" (de Finney et al. 85). Ultimately, Stacey's bridge-crossing adds nuance to Maracle's thesis that there is no recovering from colonial trauma while under colonial rule, and the forced precarity and conditions of assimilation are explored in depth in *Ravensong*, explaining the unavoidability of thinking in terms of survival. However, the explicit clashing of Indigenous thought with colonial morality, understanding of family, and kinship bonds that exclude the natural world lead the reader to understand that, for Maracle, the only long term solution for the Indigenous communities of Turtle Island is a radical rejection of Euro-Canadian systems of thought and governance in order to embark on a process of resurgence.

In his edited anthology of Canadian Indigenous fiction *All My Relations* (1990), self-identified Cherokee writer Thomas King explains the expression chosen as the title is a reminder not only of the importance of family, but also of

10. In Maracle's 1996 preface of *I am Woman*, she reports her shock at the high level of sexism amongst Indigenous men, claiming "no one would have dared doubt the intelligence of women ten years earlier" (ix).

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the symbiotic relationships that Indigenous peoples have established with the "animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined" (ix). King refers to a framework of connectedness that implicates moral responsibility, "intricate webs of kinship that radiate from a Native sense of family" (King xiv). This resonates with the sense of duty and responsibility that awakens the Indigenous resurgence Maracle envisions in *Celia's Song*, a duty that extends to the natural resources being over-exploited by the settler state. For Maracle, Indigenous peoples must take their "birthright as care-takers of the land" (*Woman* 40). If *Ravensong* exposes precarity and focuses on survival, endurance, and adaptation, which is ultimately proven insufficient to avoid the decimation of the villagers, *Celia's Song* is a chant to radical resurgence. Set twenty-five years after the events narrated in *Ravensong*, Momma, Stacey, Celia, and the rest of the villagers realize that the damages of colonization are destroying the Indigenous communities from the inside: an epidemic of addiction, lateral violence, and suicide that Eduardo Duran and Bonnie Duran have referred to as the expression of a "soul wound" (45) caused by colonial policies.

Still trying to make sense of the suicide of little Jimmy, Celia's son, the family is faced with a terrible crime committed against one of the village's girls. Amos, a survivor of residential school and sexual abuse himself, enacts terrible violence against Celia's cousin Stella and her small daughter Shelley, to the point almost of death. Stella and Amos will then stand as examples of the terrible consequences and manifestations of colonial trauma, which Métis writer Jo-Ann Episkenew has identified "violence, rarely against the settler but against oneself, one's family, or one's community, and addiction as a form of self-medicating to temporarily ease the despair of personal and political powerlessness" (8). Although Maracle's story does not fail to acknowledge the individual's responsibility for the terrible acts perpetrated—indeed, justice is effectively carried out—Stella and Amos emerge as examples of how traumatic events, lack of decision power, and lack of a supportive structure confabulate to erase all sense of self-worth. However, amongst the villagers, Amos' terrible actions, Stella's failure to protect her daughter, and the shame these events provoke trigger a movement towards collective responsibility that will motivate the radical resurgence of their traditional practices:

We are patching a child who has been tortured by one of our own. Someone of us birthed the child who became the beast who did this... We need to have some grave doubts, not about what we are doing now, but what we have been doing. We need to doubt who we have become. (147)

In a moment of terrible crisis in which suicide, addiction, and violence seem to sweep the village, Maracle shifts the focus from victimhood to hopeful futurity

by setting duty and responsibility (to the ancestors,¹¹ to the present, to the future) as the motivation that will drive the characters onwards. The impact of Shelley's trauma awakens for the villagers what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson has called "generative refusal": a rejection of recognition from the settler government that involves the revival of Indigenous institutions of self-government (Simpson, *Always* 35). In a movement that declares the radical separation of the villagers from the settler state, they do not report Amos' abuse and instead, guided by Celia and Jacob and the knowledge they gain from their spiritual connections to the clan's past, they build a longhouse that will serve as the locus of the ceremonial practices intended to maintain the global health and harmony of the community. Its consolidation as an institution that replaces settler authority in the village comes to be realized by the administration of justice to Amos for his crimes against Shelley and Stella. Led to a dance trance inside the longhouse, Amos purges his sins and trauma through the sweat of his body and seems to find a peaceful death. Celia reflects that "[t]he deaths of the two men had been good for the village... it signified the birth of their beautiful smokehouse and its feasting ways, as well as the end of their sickness" (259). Finally refusing to "pay attention to them, of all people" (*Ravensong* 182), Stacey's school opens, allowing the journey towards Indigenous self-determination to begin after the restoration of a system of justice, governance, and education that is separate from that of the settler government.

Maracle has long highlighted the important role played by imagination and storytelling in any movement towards decolonization: "... for the oppressed, art, freedom and feminism intersect and become part of a global struggle for renewal. This always begins with an imagined sensibility of future" (qtd. in Fiola 166), and in *Celia's Song*, she envisions a true path towards Indigenous liberation and the dismantling of the oppressive structures of colonialism. An important step in this path, visible in both novels, is what she has called the "re-matriating" of family and society, a process that includes much more than a dismantling of hierarchies where male identities receive primacy. For Maracle, re-matriating is a process by which modern rationality and objectivity lose their primacy in the system of values established by the Enlightenment, and hierarchy is replaced by kinship and

11. In *Celia's Song*, the village's happenings are narrated by Mink whose role is bearing witness, and who reports the anger and restlessness of the bones of the ancestors of Turtle Island. In a vision, Celia hears them say that "Someone has to pay for decades of neglect. Someone has to appease our need for respect" (7). Although *Celia's Song* is oriented towards futurity, this device serves to reaffirm a sense of connectedness through generations that calls to mind the Haudenosaunee teaching that prefaces Winona LaDuke's *All Our Relations*: "Our past is our present, our present is our future, and our future is seven generations past and present."

balance as a system of relations in the world (qtd. in Fiola 165). This is also linked to the dismantling of the model of heteropatriarchal nuclear family imposed upon Indigenous peoples through colonization, opening possibilities for different models of family kinship and for gender expressions beyond the binary. Both *Ravensong* and *Celia's Song* introduce examples of this, and how they clash with the Catholic morality some of the villagers have assimilated. In *Ravensong*, after the death of Jim, Stacey and Celia's father, Stacey learns that their biological father is Ned, Jim's twin brother. Unable to produce children with Momma, the couple followed the advice of Grandpa Thomas, one of the village's Elders, and Momma "spent time in the city with Ned—four times, in fact" (90), resulting in Stacey, Jim, and Celia. Initially shocked and ashamed, particularly because after Jim's death Momma seems to be rekindling her romance with Ned, Stacey struggles to liberate herself from the Catholic mindset that judges Momma's acts as immoral and sinful. It is not until talking to old Ella that Stacey faces her own hypocrisy and admits that "Polly and Momma were the same woman—good-hearted and passionate" (94) and understands that she is judging her mother's actions through the gaze of the settlers: "she had brought their world into Momma's house" (95). Momma's actions call into question the patriarchal nuclear family as an extension of state sovereignty, and Stacey must critically analyze the ways in which she herself replicates heteropatriarchal and colonial ideas that are unjust with the grounded normativity of her clan's traditions (Simpson, "Co-Resistance" 22).¹² In this case, Indigenous feminist actions (resistance in the face of patriarchal structures) expose the connections between heteropatriarchy and colonization, and kinscapes,¹³ "constellations of relations that implicate people with each other and with place and land" (de Finney et al. 91), substitute the patriarchal model of nuclear family.

3. Conclusion

If "settler colonialism has been and continues to be a gendered process" (Arvin et al. 8), a viable project for Indigenous resurgence must engage Indigenous

12. Simpson incorporates Glen Sean Coulthard's theories on grounded normativity, "the systems of ethics that are continuously generated by a relationship with a particular place, with land, through the Indigenous processes and knowledges that make up Indigenous life" (22). In *Ravensong*, Stacey's relationships to Momma, her family and the Elders, the river and the salmon's cycle, the mountain, and Rena's knowledge of the plants, their uses and cycles, form Stacey's grounded normativity, which stands in opposition to the patriarchal and colonial systems of values present in Maillardville.

13. de Finney et al. insist on the dimension of mutual responsibility and accountability inherent to the kinscape.

feminisms. For Maracle's project of decolonization, the process of dismantling patriarchal systems and re-matriating is central, but those emerge, she seems to say in *Ravensong* and *Celia's Song*, from a sense of duty to oneself, to one's networks of human and nonhuman beings, and to one's nation (with its past and futures adscriptions). Maracle's reflections on accountability "to our kin across time and place" (de Finney et al. 91) display a glocal perspective and emphasize the dilemma of either investing in a project for Indigenous resurgence that is grounded in an exploitative settler state or renouncing the project of resurgence by investing limited resources in survival. In the works analyzed, the difficulties of generative refusal (economic precarity, prosecution of dissidence, vulnerability) are fully acknowledged, and Maracle herself acknowledges the dilemma, far from the radical condemnations of *I am Woman*. Here I reference an interview on transnational feminism where she recognizes the benefits of accessing the privileges of settlers (free time, cheap products, access to higher education, and a stable economy), that allowed her to develop her activism on behalf of Indigenous liberation, but she remarks that much of this comes at the cost of the hyper-exploitation of natural resources and labour forces elsewhere: "we need to be cognizant that when we seek monetary gain here, we are also assuring greater exploitation elsewhere" (qtd. in Fiola 164). To fully achieve the global liberation of Indigenous women, who greatly make up the cheaper labour forces from which the so-called "developed world" benefits, the current economic model must be dismantled. In other words, there is no Indigenous feminism without decolonization, and there is no decolonization under capitalism. A sustainable project must then include "local self-reliance and the recovery of Indigenous systems of knowledge, jurisdiction, practice and governance" (LaDuke 200) that can allow for the cultural difference of Indigenous nations, oriented with a sense of global responsibility towards other human and nonhuman Earth beings, recognizing a non-hierarchical framework that opposes the orders of modernity.

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