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Kiskisitotaso, Don't Forget Yourself: Indigenous Resurgence in David A. Robertson's *Barren Grounds*

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ABSTRACT
David A. Robertson's (Norway House Cree) children's novel *The Barren Grounds* (2020) intervenes in Canada's historical and ongoing child welfare systems' impacts on Indigenous children and youth. This article argues that Indigenous children's literature could significantly contribute to the ongoing efforts towards reconciliation in Canada. Robertson, as a specific example of this, presents a decolonized version of foster care that is rooted in Indigenous resurgence and grounded normativity. This representation encourages young readers to reconsider entrenched settler-colonial structures that, potentially, advance the projects of reconciliation and decolonization in Canada. *Barren Grounds* considers alternatives to current foster care structures that are predicated on Indigenous foster children and youth being directly reconnected with Indigenous peoples, lands, and knowledge systems. This reconnection transmits grounded normative ethics and builds Indigenous resurgence—both of which Robertson demonstrates are key in combating settler-induced disconnection and dispossession.

Keywords
Canadian Literature; Indigenous Literature; Children's Literature; Foster Care; Grounded Normativity; Indigenous Resurgence

Position Statement

I live and work on Treaty 7 land, the traditional territory of the Blackfoot, Tsuu T'ina, and Stoney Nakoda peoples, and Treaty 6, the traditional lands of the Métis, Cree, and Saulteaux. As a settler-Canadian, I am implicated in the ongoing networks of colonial power that I critique in this article. Consequently, I have attempted to let the words of Indigenous scholars and writers guide my analysis as I work to become a better listener and reader.

1. Introduction

David A. Robertson's (Norway House Cree) children's novel *The Barren Grounds* (2020, herein referred to as *Barren Grounds*) intervenes in Canada's historical and current child welfare systems' impacts on Indigenous children and youth. This article argues that *Barren Grounds* presents a decolonized version of foster care rooted in Indigenous resurgence. In doing so, the novel encourages young readers to reconsider entrenched settler-colonial structures and, potentially, advances the projects of reconciliation and decolonization in Canada. After the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (herein referred to as TRC) released its final reports and summaries in 2015, much of the project of reconciliation has been appropriately focused on the history and legacy of residential schools.[1] However, as the TRC explains in Volume 5 of their report, "[t]he closing of residential schools did not bring their story to an end" (TRC 3), because "[t]he child welfare system is the residential school system of our day" (TRC 4). Through Canada's child welfare system, the domineering structures of settler colonialism that are predicated on the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples from land, language, and culture are continued (Coulthard and Simpson 251, 252). The severity of this ongoing colonial institution is apparent from the disproportionate number of Indigenous children and youth in the foster care system across Canada: according to the 2021 federal census conducted by Statistics Canada, 53.8% of children in Canadian foster care are Indigenous, and yet Indigenous children account for only 7.7% of the total child population

1 The TRC was formed in 2007 to establish a historical record of residential schools in Canada. Over six years, the TRC interviewed survivors of the residential schools and the sixties scoop. In addition, the Government of Canada provided over 5 million documents to aid in establishing the historical record. The commission's findings were released to the public in 2015 ("Truth").

in Canada (Hahmann et al.).[2] To address and transform such systemic discrepancies, the TRC created ninety-four Calls to Action. Many Calls directly cite reforms in Canadian education for non-Indigenous and Indigenous children and youth, such as creating an "age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools" that spans kindergarten to grade twelve ("Calls to Action" 62.1). Several scholars emphasize the imperative role of education in reconciliation, as shifting away from damaging settler narratives that breed prejudice and racism could disconnect students from these narratives before they take root (Harrison 153; Wolf and DePasquale 88; Regan 11). Aubrey Jean Hanson (Métis) notes the positive potential of Indigenous literatures to meet such calls, as they "can enable healing, carry forward histories, embody ways of knowing and ways of being, envision better worlds, facilitate memory, inspire social change, foster empathy, and encourage relational understanding" (75). As a result, there has been meaningful work done in Indigenous children's literature with residential schools, but texts that speak to the "legacy of residential schools" ("Calls to Action" 63.1), such as foster care, are not as common.[3] Robertson's *Barren Grounds* breaks necessary ground in beginning to fill the gap in foster care narratives.

Barren Grounds, the first book in Robertson's Misewa Saga (2020-ongoing), introduces the saga's protagonists Morgan and Eli: two pre-teen Cree foster children living with a young settler couple. Robertson describes his novel as an Indigenization of *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950, herein referred to as *Lion*) by C. S. Lewis, whose young characters, the Pevensie siblings, are foster children displaced by World War II (Robertson, "Wordfest"). With such a framework, there are numerous significant intertextual links between Lewis's and Robertson's novels. For example, much like the Pevensie siblings first experience in their physically isolated foster home, Morgan and Eli reckon with a diminished sense of self, worth, and purpose in being severed from their families and communities. The Pevensie siblings are given purpose through adventure when they discover a portal to Narnia in their foster home; similarly, Eli feels compelled to draw a winter scene that inadvertently creates a portal to the world of Aski (Swampy Cree for Earth) that is, like Narnia, frozen in a perpetual winter. Mirroring the Narnian prophecy that the Pevensie children's

2 This is the most recent statistic at the time of writing.

3 As a sampling, the following are bestselling and critically acclaimed picturebooks about residential schools: Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton's (Inuit) *When I Was Eight* (2013); Nicola Campbell's (Interior Salish and Métis) *Shi-Shi-Etko* (2005) and *Shin-chi's Canoe* (2008); Jenny Kay Dupuis (Anishinaabe), Kathy Kacer, and Gillian Newland's *I Am Not A Number* (2016); Melanie Florence (Cree) and Gabrielle Grimard's *Stolen Words* (2017); and Phyllis Webstad (Northern Secwepemc) and Brock Nicol's *Phyllis's Orange Shirt* (2018).

presence and actions are required to rid Narnia of evil (Lewis 76), Morgan and Eli meet Cree animal beings who direly need their help to restore the natural seasonal cycle and save their community from starvation. Lastly, just as the Pevensie siblings return to our world with a greater sense of self, purpose, and agency, Morgan and Eli, because of their relationships with the Cree creatures and reconnection with Cree culture, return to our world with a renewed and strengthened sense of self. Petra Fachinger's article on *Barren Grounds* largely focuses on its connection with Lewis's classic. She argues that Robertson's "compulsion" to reimagine *Lion* "decolonizes dominant ways of storytelling on Turtle Island," as well as uncovers that, for Robertson, something was missing in Narnia, "his Cree identity" (51). While Fachinger focuses on the representations of post-traumatic stress disorder and intergenerational trauma in *Barren Grounds*, and how Robertson may be working through his own history, this article builds on Fachinger's analysis with a specific focus on the representation of foster care and argues Robertson's text could contribute to ongoing efforts around decolonization and reconciliation.

Barren Grounds builds upon the history of children's literature's use of fantasy (largely established by Lewis, among others) to speak to real issues and conditions. This can empower young readers to consider their responsibilities and roles in upholding or combatting such conditions. *Barren Grounds* does so by presenting alternatives to Canada's oppressive foster care structures that are predicated on Indigenous resurgence. The novel demonstrates the need for Indigenous children and youth in foster care to have relationships with Indigenous peoples, knowledge systems, and the land so they might meaningfully combat the historical and ongoing disconnection and dispossession that foster care has created in Canada. Through this depiction, Robertson also shows the importance of the self being transformed to flourish and thrive before transforming the settler state—a decolonial shift away from centering the colonial state to that of Indigenous Peoples' well-being (Simpson, *Dancing* 17). This is made possible for Morgan and Eli through their immersion in Cree practices enacted by Cree animal beings while in Aski, which bolsters their self-determination, confidence, and identity as Cree people. Robertson offers Morgan's and Eli's transformations through resurgence as one alternative to current foster care and as a first step to transforming relationships with the settler state.

In the following sections, *Barren Grounds* is positioned within the genres of children's fantasy and Indigenous wonderworks to establish its potential role within Canada's reconciliation project. The second section opens with a description and discussion of Indigenous resurgence and grounded normativity: the two concepts that evolve the type of foster care that Morgan and Eli experience. Lastly, these concepts are directly applied to *Barren Grounds* to demonstrate how foster care is decolonized and altered through their

application, showing the transformative capacity of Robertson's work as it applies to reconciliation.

2. Potential for Social Reform and Reconciliation Through Genre

By using *Lion* as a framework for *Barren Grounds*, Robertson draws upon the children's fantasy tradition of imagining new world orders to encourage readers to consider alternatives to their realities—here, decolonial foster care. Michael Levy and Farah Mendlesohn argue that Lewis's entire Narnia series marked an important and distinct shift in children's fantasy where "adventures have greater import and are less fundamentally oriented to childish concerns; there is a general upgrading of threat" (103). World War II was pivotal in this shift, as the child refugees from the war contributed to "changing expectations for children," and that what "happened in the wider world was relevant to them" (Levy and Mendlesohn 103–4). With Lewis's White Witch serving as a placeholder for the Nazi regime, Narnia is not an escape for the Pevensie siblings, nor readers, from threats in their world. Rather, Narnia is a training ground to practice and experiment with being active agents in meeting such threats. Robertson builds upon this tradition by mobilizing settler colonialism to create the conditions for Eli and Morgan's foster care *and* the eternal winter in Aski. The perpetual winter not only draws upon Lewis's Narnia, but is also a retelling of the Cree Fisher constellation myth.[4] Like in the Cree myth, endless winter is caused by the selfishness of one person: Mason, a white-settler man and uninvited guest in Aski. As a metaphor for settler-colonial consumption, Mason steals Aski's summer birds so that he alone can continually live in the plenty of summer. Thus, the resurgence, skills, and character growth Morgan and Eli experience that saves Aski from Mason's greed also serves them in our world. It is in the overlap between the portal world and our world that Robertson, as an authorial descendant of Lewis, encourages readers to reconsider the current Canadian structures of foster care and suggests that the first step to changing Canada's foster care system is reinvigorating the cultural identities of Indigenous children and youth (Indigenous resurgence) by reconnecting them with their communities, land, and traditional knowledge.

To further understand how Robertson's reimagining of Canada's foster care system could contribute to reconciliation efforts, it is useful to consider *Barren Grounds* not only as a work of children's fantasy, but an Indigenous *wonderwork*: a generic label coined by Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee). Justice pushes

4 What Euro-Western cultures call The Big Dipper constellation.

against labelling *any* Indigenous literature as fantasy, "given that so much of what people think they know about Indigeneity is self-serving colonial fantasy that justifies and rationalizes the continuing theft of Indigenous lands, violence against Indigenous bodies and relations, marginalization of Indigenous lives, and displacement of Indigenous being" (141). Justice does note the transformative potential of fantastical works, but he offers an alternative generic label of wonderworks: Indigenous literatures that offer hopeful alternatives to oppressive settler-colonial structures, the conditions we are continually told are inevitable or inescapable, and that model "different, better relationships . . . that give hope for a better future" (152). As a specific example, children's literature on residential schools can be brought under the umbrella of wonderworks as they often focus on Indigenous resurgence being a balm to the cultural genocide wrought by the schools.[5] Justice notes that wonderworks are not fantasy (imagining the impossible), but social dreaming of what *could* be possible with Indigenous "epistemologies, politics, and relationships" (152). They are works that "gesture" towards other ways of being and knowing that remind readers "that the way things are is not how they have always been, nor is it how they must be" (152). Justice's arguments are not dissimilar to broader conversations within fantasy and speculative fictions of how fantastical worlds speak to our present and imagine alternatives (Jakober; Ventura; Atwood); however, what differentiates Justice's wonderworks is that social dreaming is grounded in Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, and practices—just as Robertson grounds his social dreaming in specifically Cree ways of being that are positioned as key in combating settler-induced disconnection and dispossession.

As *Barren Grounds* lives in the intersections of Indigenous and children's literature, considering the novel as a wonderwork is additionally effective within the context and history of children's literature. A defining feature of children's literature is its intended audience of young readers, and as childhood and adolescence are commonly considered a time of learning, defining, and negotiating one's place and role in society, children's literature has often been utilized as a vehicle for social reform. Such reform is achieved by encouraging readers to reconsider existing conditions from different perspectives and to interrogate what social structures are worthy of being sustained or need reform (Reynolds; Bradford et al.). Like Indigenous wonderworks gesture towards other ways of being, children's literature can similarly have transformative intentions that "propose or imply new social and political arrangements by imagining new

5 See for example Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton's *Not My Girl* (2014); Katherena Vermette and Irene Kuziw's *Amik Loves School* (2015); and David A. Robertson and Julie Flett's *When We Were Alone* (2016).

world orders" (Bradford et al. 6). As such, when children's literature promotes readers to imagine other worlds, readers may question their own. Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak argues that this questioning can lead to action, as literature that offers new world orders can "enhance readers' ability to take prosocial action in the real world" (156). It is here that Indigenous children's literature could play a vital role in reconciliation and decolonization in Canada. As an Indigenous children's literature text, *Barren Grounds* lives within the fruitful intersections and legacies of Indigenous wonderworks and children's fantasy. Doing so enables Robertson's fantastical elements to illustrate the real ways Indigenous children are severed from their families and culture through foster care, and he offers hopeful alternatives of what could be possible through Indigenous resurgence.

However, for literature to aid in reconciliation, it cannot be simply the "transfer of knowledge" (Regan 23), but it must link critical thinking to action. Paulette Regan advocates for texts that move readers to "assume responsibility for challenging their own world views, engaging in truth telling about the past, and taking action to address historical wrongdoings" (48). As such, Indigenous children's literature that features resurgence can unmoor young readers from false settler narratives, and this in turn implicates young readers in the project of reconciliation and decolonization by imagining and implementing alternative ways of being. As a concrete example of this in action, Lynne Witlse conducted focus group interviews with students who had studied such texts in schools. Wiltse found these texts "helped equip the students in their development as advocates for change," and they opened space in the classroom for "disruptive knowledge" that aids in reconciliation (24). With this history and the genre potential that *Barren Grounds* holds for informing, challenging, and transforming readers' worldviews, it is a significant text in its presenting an alternative to settler-colonial structures of foster care (a legacy of the residential schools). In the next section, the specific alternatives Robertson provides are explored and analyzed in the novel.

3. Grounded Normativity and Indigenous Resurgence

Barren Grounds gestures towards other ways of being that can aid in reconciliation; these other ways of being can be better understood through the concepts of Indigenous resurgence and grounded normativity. The foster care that Morgan and Eli experience (as they remain in settler-state foster care throughout the series) is expanded with their travels to Aski. The world of Aski is not an improbable fantasy, but what *could* happen when care is rooted in and led by Indigenous Peoples. For Morgan and Eli, their experience in Aski is transformative and stimulates their Indigenous resurgence. Gerald Taiaiake Alfred

(Kahnawà:ke Mohawk) defines resurgence as the reclamation of Indigenous contexts *in* Indigenous nation-building that is centered on recreating:

> cultural strength . . . cultural knowledge, the capacity to love and trust, family relationships, child-rearing, language, knowledge of traditional healing practices, all of these things that give people the ability to stand with some confidence and some security in their own skin and not have to live with the constant anxiety and the anomie that comes from living out someone else's vision of what it is to be an Indigenous person. (131)

Building from Alfred, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) understands Indigenous resurgence as an engagement with Indigenous sets of practices and processes that rebuild and re-establish "culturally inherent philosophical contexts for governance, education, healthcare, and economy" that is done "on our own terms" and is conducted in ways that empower Indigenous Peoples to live in contemporary times (*Dancing* 17). Simpson hopes this type of engagement moves resurgence beyond resisting and surviving colonialization, beyond being reactionary, to that of "flourishment" that "ground[s] our people in their own cultures and teachings that provide the ultimate antidote to colonialism" (17). As such, Simpson argues that before transforming Indigenous relationships with the colonial state, there must be the transformation of "ourselves, our communities and nations" (17). Robertson reflects this shift in *Barren Grounds* as the emphasis is not yet on changing the federal and provincial systems, but the immediate concern is providing the conditions for Morgan and Eli to flourish in their present situation.

Also essential to this article's and Simpson's understanding of Indigenous resurgence is Glen Coulthard's (Dene) concept of grounded normativity which emphasizes humans' relationality to land. Coulthard defines grounded normativity as the "modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time" (Coulthard 13). Because one's identity, beliefs, and worldviews are generated by place, Indigenous resurgence is made possible through grounded normativity (Cook and Sheehey 338). The modalities referenced above by Coulthard are informed by the land and encourage an understanding of humans' connection with the land as "a system of reciprocal relations and obligations" that hold the power to "teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms" (13). Brooke Ackerly and colleagues, in their exploration of how grounded normativity could be utilized in political theory, describe that embodying grounded normativity in the way that Coulthard details invites "intellectual humility"

in the emphasis of one's interconnection with other people and the natural world (168). Consequently, this can move one beyond "introspection" to seeing oneself and their actions as part of a larger web of reciprocity (168). This expansive reciprocity is essential for the novel's protagonists who have been isolated through foster care, as their sense of belonging is increased alongside their developing understanding that they are integral parts of the larger web of grounded normativity's reciprocal obligations and responsibilities.

3.1. Grounded Normativity and Indigenous Resurgence in Barren Grounds

At the opening of the novel, both Morgan and Eli reckon with being disconnected from their families and culture. The level of disconnection differs for each child: Morgan has lived in seven different foster homes—all of which were white-settler families—whereas Eli has been removed from his family for the first time. For Morgan, her first six foster homes made no effort to connect her to Cree culture, nor did they meaningfully incorporate her into their *own* families and cultures; for example, Morgan recalls one family put her in respite care when they visited their out-of-town grandparents—they brought the dog, but not Morgan (Robertson, *Barren* 60). Another family makes it clear to Morgan that they foster her to collect extra money, thus using her as a resource to be exploited: if the family went out together, such as to a movie, Morgan was left at home (45). As a result, Morgan has no immediate connection to Cree people, knowledge systems, or the land and this has an enormous impact on her sense of self. Morgan's history in the child welfare system provides a concrete example of how "Canada has structured its relationship to Indigenous peoples" in part by "impeding and systemically regulating the generative relationships and practices that create and maintain Indigenous nationhoods, political practices, sovereignties, and solidarities" (Coulthard and Simpson 254). The consequences of impeding and regulating such generative relationships are established at the beginning of the novel as Morgan does not feel comfortable calling herself Indigenous, nor as worthy of the title: "I don't think I even want to be Indigenous. I grew up whith . . . I'm *not* Indigenous anymore" (Robertson, *Barren* 75). This disconnection has culminated in self-hatred and a belief that she does not deserve kindness or love—this is best expressed when a classmate, Emily, is friendly to Morgan, and Morgan questions "what's there about me for anybody to like?" and concludes that Emily being "nice to her was more a reflection on Emily than it was on her [Morgan]" (34). Before her time in Aski, Morgan distrusts kindness from others, including her new foster parents and Eli, believing there must be ulterior motives rather than her being deserving of receiving it.

In Morgan's seventh foster home, Robertson makes it clear that these foster parents have better intentions than previous families; yet, there are still limitations. Morgan's new foster parents are Katie and James: a young, settler couple without children of their own and fostering for the first time. Katie, a schoolteacher, had been moved to foster after an Indigenous student confided to Katie about her traumatic experiences in care. Katie was unable to directly intercede for this student but hoped to help those like her by fostering. She explains to Morgan that she and her husband are not "good-intentioned settlers" (Robertson, *Barren* 74), but genuinely want to help Morgan and Eli. On the one hand, drawing from Genevieve Fuji Johnson's exploration of how grounded normativity can be utilized in political theory, Katie and James could be seen to embody grounded normative theory themselves as they are taking a solidaristic approach that entails "actively taking a side in the struggle for justice with those experiencing oppression" (Johnson 56).

On the other hand, Katie's wording is significant as being "good-intentioned" is an accusation Morgan made of Katie and James earlier in the novel, in that "[t]hey're saviors . . . [who] want to save kids like us" (Robertson, *Barren* 12). Here, Morgan gestures toward the "white savior complex" which is a mechanism of colonization that renders colonized subjects unable to help themselves and therefore requires the aid of the colonizer (Cammarota 243). In this case, Eli's and Morgan's families have been rendered *incapable* of caring for their children (or are considered so by the settler-state) because of their systemic poverty and intergenerational trauma, and it is determined the children need the aid of those who have helped to create these conditions. While Katie is, as Johnson describes, taking a solidaristic approach, as a settler she is also implicated in the mechanisms that create and sustain Morgan's and Eli's disconnection and dispossession from their culture, land, and families. From Katie's descriptions, she does not meaningfully distance herself from this patronizing history of white saviorism, but at the very least, Robertson's descriptions of the foster parents' actions establish they are not making empty promises in their attempts to build a legitimate family. In many ways, Katie and James *do* expand their kinship network beyond blood relations to encompass their foster children. Alongside trying to create a family atmosphere that includes smiley-faced breakfast pancakes and corny dad-jokes, Katie and James attempt to combat Morgan's and Eli's cultural disconnections; however, there are restrictions to what Katie and James, as white settlers, can offer in this realm. Thus, Robertson demonstrates that integration into Indigenous cultures cannot happen without Indigenous Peoples, nor be divorced from the land.

Katie's and James's efforts to include Indigenous cultures in their home functions as a key inciting incident that artfully highlights the emptiness and limits of reconnecting to Indigenous cultures when it is separated from Indigenous

Peoples and the land. To make Morgan feel more welcome in their home and connect her with Cree culture, Katie and James throw her a two-month anniversary of being in their care. They order takeout from an Indigenous restaurant, which even a morose Morgan admits looks "amazing" (Robertson, *Barren* 46), and they gift Morgan a pair of moccasins from the Indigenous-run and Winnipeg-based company Manitoba Mukluks (51). They explain this has all been done to make Morgan feel "more at home" (51). However, Morgan notes that these efforts have highlighted the forced removal from her family and culture: "You thought that giving me something *cultural* as a totally lame two-month anniversary celebration, from a place I was taken from, would make me feel more at home *here*?" (53). Morgan points out the dark situational irony of giving her tokenistic objects from the home and culture she was forcibly taken from as a method of building a sense of belonging. Rather, these gifts remind her of the forced separation and of the absences the separation has created. As well, Morgan notes that because she does not "even know [her] culture" (52), these gifts have no meaning to her other than serving as a reminder of her disconnection. Here, Morgan's "exposure" to her culture is filtered through settler colonialism in Katie and James being the sole facilitators and this emphasizes to Morgan that her culture is one of "being a kid with no real home" (52).

The food and moccasins have no meaning to Morgan because they are isolated and removed from the people, practices, and places that created them. Simpson describes life as a "creative art, with self-determination making or producing at its core" (*Always Done* 22). In removing these objects from their creators, and the context of their creations, they are reduced by the colonial focus to objects for consumption (for Morgan to eat and wear) rather than emboldening creative self-determination/production. Katie and James are not equipped to teach Morgan her culture in a way that enacts grounded normativity and Indigenous resurgence. Rather, in being the ones to deliver the food and moccasins to Morgan, James and Katie empties them of their potential to foster grounded normativity in being vehicles of experiential knowledge when linked with the Indigenous Peoples who created them. Instead, there is an inverted structure where white settlers attempt to "expose" Indigenous children to their Indigeneity. The systemic colonial apparatus that fuels the foster care system is not fully realized by Katie and James—they are trying to be kind, and they are not demonized or villainized by the narrator for their efforts, but they are not fully cognizant of how their role in the foster care system continues to perpetuate the "past mistakes" that Katie alludes to wanting to address (Robertson, *Barren* 52).

It is the portal world of Aski that fills this gap for Morgan and Eli. Though, technically, the children remain under the care and guardianship of Katie and James (as this is where they return at the end of the novel and continue to live

throughout the Misewa series), Robertson demonstrates the need for care to be paired with relationships with Indigenous Peoples, knowledge systems, and the land to meaningfully combat the historical and ongoing disconnection foster care has created. Robertson's social dreaming mirrors Coulthard and Simpson's assertion that the required response to settler colonization's dispossessive forces is to "reconnect Indigenous bodies to land through the practices and forms of knowledge that these practices continuously regenerate" (Coulthard and Simpson 254). Morgan and Eli cannot enact grounded normativity that leads to their resurgence without having access to the land and the sets of practices and experiential knowledge that is regenerated through the land. It is their immersion in Cree practices enacted by Cree animal beings while in Aski that bolsters their self-determination, confidence, and identities as Cree people.

In the novel, grounded normative ethics and practices literally regenerate a dying Cree village in Misewa, and, importantly, re-establish the youth characters' Cree identities through the creation of a kinship network between themselves, the beings of Aski, and the land. The characters' investment in their Cree community functions as their means of resistance against settler colonial enforced dispossession. Grounded normativity is nurtured by Morgan and Eli in their reenactment of the Fisher Constellation myth: they directly witness and experience the insidious consequences of domineering and exploitative relationships with the land when in Aski. After Mason steals the summer birds and plunges everyone else into perpetual winter, he overhunts and decimates whatever land he is on (Robertson, *Barren* 213). Ochek, the children's Cree guide and a mentor-guide descendant of Lewis's Mr. Tumnus, directly explains that "[t]he land provides everything that anybody would need. If you take only what you need, the land renews itself so that it can provide more . . . When you take more than the land can provide, it stops giving. It *can't* give" (190). In freeing the summer birds, Morgan and Eli demonstrate their understanding of their obligations to the land, and in learning how to nurture reciprocal relationships with the land, water, animals, and each other through Cree land-connected practices, they experience Indigenous resurgence. This adventure embodies a rejection of the "groundlessness of Western normativity" that severs "ethics from connections to land and place" and instead "considers land as a source of knowledge and understanding" (Cook and Sheehey 335). Morgan's and Eli's internal transformations are made evident through their increased sense of self, self-determination, and confidence—all made possible through their renewed and ongoing grounded normativity. Aski presents Morgan and Eli with the conditions they need to enact grounded normativity which in turn stimulates their Indigenous resurgence. It is here that Robertson's novel functions as a wonderwork that socially dreams alternatives predicated on Indigenous foster children and youth being directly reconnected with Indigenous peoples,

lands, and knowledge systems to transmit grounded normative ethics and Indigenous resurgence—both of which Robertson demonstrates as key in combating the ongoing legacies of foster care.

The importance of place is quickly emphasized, for as soon as Morgan steps into Aski she senses the familiarity of the place and feels "an unmistakable tug in her chest" (Robertson, *Barren* 82). This "tug" culminates later in the novel with Morgan knowing "something about herself that she'd long forgotten: she belonged in a place like this. She belonged on the land" (191). The "tug" is revealed to be Morgan's blood memories that have been activated by Aski/place. In his memoir, *Black Water* (2020), Robertson describes blood memories as the memories and lives of ancestors being "woven into the fabric" of one's DNA (257). Here, Morgan's memories of those who have gone before, in this case her mother, are recalled through her envelopment in Aski's land. The deep-seated sense of familiarity triggers a dream (or dreamt blood memory) during Morgan's first night in Aski: the memory of Morgan's last moments with her mother. In the dream, Morgan's mother whispers the Cree word *kiskisitotaso*, which Eli explains means "[d]on't forget who you are . . . [d]on't forget yourself" (Robertson, *Barren* 92). Alongside being a blood memory, the wish of kiskisitotaso for Morgan also aligns with the Nishnaabewin concept of *Biiskabiyang*—what Simpson describes as "the process of returning to ourselves, a reengagement with the things we have left behind, a reemergence, an unfolding from the inside out . . . an individual and collective practice of decolonization and resurgence" (*Always Done* 17). In his thesis, Graeme Kennedy's arguments about memories in *Barren Grounds* align with this reading. Kennedy employs an ecocritical lens to *Barren Grounds* to consider how cultural and personal memory impacts identity and one's connection/relationship to place (85). Kennedy argues that Morgan's memories of her mother connect her to Aski/place and that this further connects Morgan to her identity. Taken together, it is evident that Aski provides the kindling to reinvigorate Morgan's suppressed sense of self, and the reemergence and unfolding of her identity leads to a resurgence of her Cree-self.

Though the children meet several animal beings on their journey, Ochek (a young fisher) acts as their primary guide through the adventure and as a mentor in grounded normativity. During their journey to find and free the summer birds, Ochek models a grounded normative sense of ethics through his Cree practices and respectful treatment of the environment. The children's time with Ochek is filled with learning, enacting, and observing Cree practices such as storytelling, language (Swampy Cree), governance (the Misewa council), ceremony (smudge), and maintaining traplines. All these practices are deeply relational and demonstrate to the children alternative ways of ethically relating to the people around them, as well as the land—this all highlights

interconnectedness to Morgan after a lifetime of disconnection. A repeated sentiment throughout all these practices is reciprocity—humans to the environment, humans to one another—and the obligations and responsibilities towards others and the environment that reciprocity requires.

For example, Ochek teaches the children through word and action the intricate connection between environmental and human well-being. Oral storytelling is key in this education, as throughout their journey Ochek shares stories with the children about the history of Aski, specifically how the summer birds came to be stolen and the consequences of this theft. Through these oral history lessons, Ochek imparts his Cree worldview about the relationship between humans and the environment. In one of his more direct moments, Ochek explains that the:

> Land provides everything that anybody would need. If you take only what you need, the land renews itself so that it can provide more. Medicines, water, plants, meat. In exchange, because we don't really have anything the land wants, we honor it for what it gives us . . . When you take more than the land can provide, it stops giving. It can't give. That's what's happened here. (Robertson, *Barren* 190)

Ochek's lesson and warning to the children embodies grounded normativity: he advocates for a reciprocal relationship with the natural world that does not seek to dominate or exploit. In turn, treating the land with such reciprocity and respect influences the children's actions towards all creatures, including themselves.

Ochek leads the children by following, which Simpson explains is the process of "empowering youth to self-actualize, make mistakes, figure out solutions, grow, and become fully present creative forces in our communities" (*Dancing* 119)—this is a belief that closely aligns with the previous arguments about children's literature's role in providing a space for experimentation. Ochek never gives orders to the children but rather models certain behaviours and actions. He empowers Morgan and Eli by creating space for them to replicate or mimic these behaviours in whatever ways and times they choose. Leading them in this way increases Morgan's and Eli's self-determination and, in Morgan's case specifically, confidence. One of the most striking examples of Morgan's increasing confidence from Ochek's mentorship comes from her active participation in making camp. Travelling along the trapline when first in Aski, Morgan acts as a passive witness to Ochek's and Eli's traditional knowledge and skills. After several days of observing their actions, Morgan takes a more active role in helping to build their camp; Morgan shows a self-determination and agency that she has not had space to explore or exercise before. Actively participating in what seemed impossible increases Morgan's sense of worth and self-confidence.

This feeling is meaningfully communicated after she helps Ochek make a spit for cooking over their fire: Morgan feels *pride* when Ochek compliments her work (Robertson, *Barren* 161). In later books, readers witness Morgan's skills deepen. For example, in Robertson's *The Stone Child* (2022) Morgan makes a spit for the fire unaided to prepare food for her companions (38). For a character who has been systematically belittled and disregarded, and has internalized a sense of self-hatred and shame, feeling pride in being able to care for herself and her community is an important turning point.

Throughout the characters' journey to confront Mason and free the summer birds, Morgan and Eli acquire valuable skills and build meaningful relationships with the group—all of which facilitate the success of their mission. Morgan and Eli have learned from Ochek to sustain themselves on the land in a way that is respectful and non-exploitative, making it possible to travel the long distance to confront Mason. More importantly, from Ochek's modelling and storytelling, the children have learned about living in the "good way" by acting like a good relation to both the land and each other. Applying these lessons creates fissures in Morgan's defensive armor and provides a safe space for her to become more vulnerable with her companions. This is powerfully demonstrated when Morgan claims Eli as a member of her chosen family by hailing him as her "brother" (Robertson, *Barren* 192)—no qualifiers like "foster" or "step" are applied, but rather he is her full-fledged brother. Her declaration is spurred by Morgan's assertion of her obligations and responsibilities towards Eli as his "big sister" to keep him safe (192), revealing that Morgan is applying grounded normative ethics in making sense of the world and her place in it. As a result, Morgan's sense of belonging is further increased: firstly, to place (Aski) and now to community and family.

Morgan's claiming Eli as her sibling overlaps with the group's success in freeing the summer birds from Mason, thus creating the opportunity for healing in Aski. Enough trust has been established among the group members, and valuable knowledge shared, that they can effectively work together to first rescue, and then free the summer birds, thus restoring the natural seasonal cycles. Morgan and Eli, as individuals, are strengthened through the journey from learning and applying grounded normative practices that they learn from Ochek, and this in turn strengthens and heals the larger community. This symbiotic relationship is echoed in arguments that Mandy Suhr-Sytsma makes about Indigenous young adult literature (herein referred to as YA) more broadly: she finds that often the growth of both individual and community happens simultaneously and nurtures one another (8). In the YA texts she examines, individuals are strongest when they commit to participation in cultural community, and communities are made stronger when they nurture individual's self-determination and agency (8). We see this in Morgan through her becoming an active

member of the Misewa Cree community and formally committing herself to Eli by declaring him a brother. These relationships increase her sense of competency, agency, and worth—she, as her mother wished, remembers who she is. Reciprocally, Morgan's individual development strengthens the community, as it is because of her new skills, competencies, courage, and relations that she helps free the summer birds.

Morgan carries her resurgence with her back into our world. The narrator highlights Morgan's growth in her interactions with Emily, the peer from school who had been kind earlier in the novel. Morgan greets Emily with a warm hug, and Emily asks, "What's gotten into you?" (Robertson, *Barren* 244), to which Morgan replies, "I just had a good night. I'm a changed girl. Everyone can change, you know" (245). The type of change Morgan has undergone echoes the character development of other protagonists in children's and YA Indigenous literature. Suhr-Sytsma argues that YA Indigenous literature protagonists' self-determination is increased with community membership and maturity is marked by protagonists becoming "deeply rooted in their Indigenous communities" and making this connection "their own" (112). While a children's novel, the same mark of developing maturity is witnessed in Morgan. She maintains her new sense of self and confidence by carrying the lessons and values learned in Aski with her and by frequently returning to Aski throughout the rest of the series. Throughout Lewis's Narnia series, the Pevensie siblings return to Narnia several times, positioning Narnia as a space that grows with the characters by providing new challenges to meet their continued development. The same is true for Aski, as the subsequent journeys continue to prepare Morgan and Eli for new and ongoing challenges. However, their returns to Aski often happen daily and are thus more frequent than the Pevensies' visits to Narnia. The differing number of visits gestures towards significant differences between foster care in the novels: the Pevensies, though removed from their parents and city, are in care with their siblings (maintaining a connection to family) and have not been removed from their culture and customs. Morgan and Eli's settler-colonial foster care have notably created disconnections from all these aspects, and their everyday visits to Aski illustrate the need for their connection to Indigenous Peoples, lands, knowledges, and customs to be ongoing and part of their daily life—this is how their resurgence through grounded normative ethics will further develop and endure, and how foster care itself could be decolonized.

4. Conclusion

Indigenous children's literature holds the potential to meaningfully contribute to reconciliation and decolonization in Canada, particularly in the case of

Indigenous wonderworks and children's fantasy. These genres socially dream of alternatives to our current realities and encourage young readers to consider these alternatives and reflect on their roles and responsibilities in maintaining or changing the social structures that engulf them. Robertson's *Barren Grounds* is a key example of this potential, made more significant in its intervention into Canada's history of Indigenous children and youth in child welfare. He offers readers an update to current settler-colonial structures that is predicated on Indigenous resurgence born from grounded normativity which helps Morgan and Eli thrive and flourish both in Aski and in our world. Through this depiction, Robertson shows it is essential for Indigenous children and youth in care to be deeply connected to their communities, knowledge systems, and customs. This connection is a decolonial move that centers the well-being of Indigenous children and youth in care so they might thrive in their current situations before tackling the transformation of the settler state. Ultimately, this article calls for more texts like Robertson's to be integrated into Indigenous and non-Indigenous children's lives and educations. Further, more focus group studies like Lynne Wiltse's need to be conducted to learn how children are receiving these texts and their effectiveness in facilitating decolonial and disruptive education as a means of working toward reconciliation.

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