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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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Re-Creation, Re-Membrance, and Resurgence: Richard Wagamese's *Indian Horse*

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the novel *Indian Horse* (2012), written by Ojibwe Wabaseemoong Independent Nations member Richard Wagamese (1955-2017) at the height of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission era. Wagamese finds inspiration in the testimonies and experiences of hundreds of victims of Canada's residential school system, including those of his own family members. The article contextualizes the novel in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission era and explores Saul's narrative journey to recover his suppressed memories of personal and collective abuse at St. Jerome's Indian Residential School through the lens of Indigenous resurgence and grounded normativity. Thus, the paper draws on Michi Saagiig scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's writings on Indigenous radical resurgence to explore the retrieval of Indigenous ways of existing in the world as the way towards decolonization and Indigenous sovereignty. The paper argues that Saul is able to overcome his trauma-induced amnesia, born from the necessity to endure and adapt, and to escape the spiral of shame, isolation, and self-destruction in which he engages only after he embraces discursive Indigenous ways of healing. Wagamese therefore constructs a narrative in which the protagonist's development mirrors the ideal that the author sets for Canada, in which reconciliation with Indigenous truth will not take place unless the whole story is acknowledged.

Keywords
Canada; Indigenous Literature; Indigenous Resurgence; Memory; Residential Schools; Truth and Reconciliation

1. Introduction

> Stories are meant to heal. That's what my people say, and that's what I believe.
> –Richard Wagamese, *One Native Life*

At the beginning of Richard Wagamese's novel *Indian Horse* (2012), the protagonist Saul Indian Horse introduces himself replicating sacred Anishinaabeg oral tradition to narrate the story of his life. As Jack Robinson has pointed out, "the text is thus both a written document and an oral story, and it is framed as a sacred story; at the outset, the text invites the reader to conflate casual oral stories, sacred stories, and the contemporary novel" (90). Saul's storytelling takes place while he is recovering from alcoholism at the New Dawn Centre and emerges as the unifying method that brings together all the destroyed parts of his being (91). Going over his own life experiences allows Saul to transit his past with fluidity and adaptability, to reflect on his suppressed traumas with roots in the Canadian residential school system, and to cope with them in the present moment, which is culturally disparate from his childhood. Through Saul's story Wagamese creates a space in which orality and writing bolster each other (Maracle 253) while offering a testimony of the horrors that have marked generations of Indigenous children and their families during the Residential School Era.

While Wagamese's fiction often explores Indigenous processes of healing from traumatic events, it is accurate to say that *Indian Horse* stands out as the only novel in his corpus where Residential School trauma is at the core of the narrative. The Canadian Indian Residential School System was a network of boarding schools administered by Christian churches and funded by the Department of Indian Affairs of the Canadian Government. Although the history of European and Christian efforts to assimilate Indigenous peoples in North America dates to the sixteenth century (Government of Canada 47), this particular system remained in use from the 1870s until the late 1990s. Its main purpose was the assimilation of Aboriginal children into settler European Canadian culture by forcibly isolating them from their communities in "badly constructed, poorly maintained, overcrowded, unsanitary fire traps" (Government of Canada 46) and simultaneously separating them from all their cultural signifiers. Since the shutting down of the last residential school in 1996, the Canadian government has implemented the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement, which began in 2007 and implied "the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history" by including "individual and collective elements to address the sad and terrible legacy of Indian Residential Schools" (Prime Minister of Canada). One of these elements is the the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (hereafter TRC), which, between 2007 and 2015, aimed at raising "awareness of the past,

acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour" in order to establish and maintain "a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country" (Government of Canada 6). This attempt at reparation has been largely criticized, with scholarship, activists, and experts on the matter affirming that it has fallen short to achieve what it initially promised.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission initially brought forth hope for transformative change for many victims, including Wagamese, who believed it was "possible to move forward and to learn how to leave hurt behind" and that "the Commission and Canada need[ed] to hear stories of healing instead of a relentless retelling and re-experiencing of pain" (Wagamese, "Returning" 165). The TRC's Final Report proposed ninety-four calls to action divided into two distinct categories: "legacy," intended to "redress the ongoing structural harms that Indigenous peoples face in the sectors of child welfare, education, health, culture and language, and justice"; and "reconciliation," to "educate Canadians about Indigenous peoples and Canada's Indian Residential School System, and establish practices, policies, and actions that affirm Indigenous Rights" (Jewell and Mosby 8). Since the birth of the Commission, the idea of reconciliation has been contested by Indigenous thinkers. Inuit politician John Amagoalik defends that, because there has never existed a harmonious relationship between Indigenous peoples and new arrivals, reconciliation, which implies the restoration of harmony, is unfeasible (35). Wagamese, however, places the focus on the Indigenous self. For the author of *Indian Horse*, the first step towards reconciliation begins with embracing truth through humility within one's Indigenous identity ("Returning" 165). His novel thus engages in contemporary discussions about the possibility of truth and reconciliation in the nation.

To transform the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the State, Michi Saagiig scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson has cast light upon two main pillars of Nishnaabeg thought: the importance of storytelling and the reconnection with the land (*Dancing* 17). Holding on to the stories of Nishnaabeg ancestors and preserving them for future generations is an exercise in resistance for Simpson (15):

> Storytelling is at its core decolonizing, because it is a process of remembering, visioning and creating a just reality where Nishnaabeg live as both Nishnaabeg and peoples. Storytelling then becomes a lens through which we can envision our way out of cognitive imperialism, where we can create models and mirrors where none existed, and where we can experience the spaces of freedom and justice. (33)

Simpson explains that Nishnaabeg theory begins with the Creation Story. Since Nishnaabeg individuals are taught to insert themselves into their own

Creation Story, Indigenous thought is learned and transmitted collectively through the personal: "this is because our greatest influence is on ourselves, and because living in a good way is an incredible disruption of the colonial meta-narrative in and of itself" (41). Nishnaabeg ways of knowing imply the total commitment of the self, emotionally, physically, mentally, spiritually. As can be clearly appreciated in the case of Saul's addiction in *Indian Horse*, settler colonialism has disrupted such engagements, and thus critically disturbed the possibility for Nishnaabeg peoples to live in the world using their own processes. Simpson proposes the recuperation of storytelling to encourage the "radical resurgence" (*As We Have* 25) of Nishnaabeg ontologies, methodologies, and epistemologies against the backdrop of dispossession and thus rebuild Indigenous political autonomy. Radical resurgence, which intertwines cultural and political dimensions (50), proposes the collective revitalization of Indigenous ways of living and thinking in the present to bring forth a new Indigenous reality of mobilization and self-determination. It is pivotal in *Indian Horse*, since it not only empowers Saul and his community to be able to envision and construct a better future together, but also prompts wider audiences to acknowledge the insufficiency of Truth and Reconciliation efforts in repairing the harrowing reality caused by the Residential School Era and the colonial erasure of Indigenous cultures and sovereignty in Canada.

2. Richard Wagamese and the Residential School System

Indian Horse was published in the midst of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's endeavor to heal the "deep scars on the lives of many Aboriginal people" and to repair the damaged relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. In the novel's acknowledgements, Wagamese thanks the Commission "for being there for the survivors of Canada's residential schools" (Government of Canada 237). In an interview for CBC Radio's *The Next Chapter* in 2012, Wagamese describes his novel as being about "hockey, residential schools, and redemption," but "above all," about Canada. The author sees both hockey and residential schooling as counterposed tropes of Canada's conflicted processes of national identification. If the former is broadly recognized as Canada's national winter sport,[1] while the other is shoved "under the carpet," Canadians are "not hearing [their] own total national story" (00:16:00-00:16:44).

1 The National Sports of Canada Act, passed in 1994, established lacrosse as Canada's national summer sport and ice hockey as the national winter sport.

Although Wagamese did not attend residential school, he attributed much of his struggles with substance abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to the Residential School System. In the interview mentioned above, he points out: "I was confronted with the detritus of a residential school experience through the actions of my family, the people who were supposed to protect and nurture me" (00:05:37-00:05:47). Similarly, in his memoir *One Native Life,* he narrates his experience as a foster kid who ended in the system because his parents "had been sent to residential school and never developed parenting skills" (18). He explains: "they couldn't offer the nurturing and protection I needed" (18). This inevitably severed Wagamese's connections to Anishinaabe culture, which serves as a clear parallel between him and his protagonist: "I was in that foster home because someone had fractured the bonds that tied me to tradition and culture and language and spirituality. I became one of the lost ones, one of the disappeared ones, vanished into the vortex of foster care and adoption" (18). Wagamese also highlighted the impact that working as a young journalist on a Native newspaper had on him and on the writing of *Indian Horse*:

> Every time I sat down to do an interview with somebody about something totally non-related to either hockey or residential schools, it always came back to residential schools . . . And when I started to write this residential school experience in the novel, I remembered those people, and I remembered the way they told me those stories, and they didn't give it to me blow by blow either. They only gave me as much as they could because they couldn't go the whole depth of it . . . It was a bruise on a people, definitely, but it's such a bruise on Canada. Yeah. ("Richard" 00:14:36-00:15:58)

Indian Horse is therefore as much the product of the inspiration and healing that Wagamese found in the stories of those who suffered the effects of residential schooling, as of his own lived experience. Like Saul, Wagamese eventually learned to acknowledge the trauma of his past to thrive in the future:

> And I know . . . that if I don't look at every part of my history and embrace the dark, harrowing, hard parts, I don't know my whole story. And if I don't know my whole story, I can't heal myself. I have to hold on and identify and embrace and actually re-experience those traumatic things in order to learn how to let it go and to move forward into something better. And if that's true for me as an individual, it's true for this community . . . it's true for a nation. ("Richard" 00:16:49-00:17:30)

Saul's journey mirrors the task that Wagamese sets for Canada as a nation and for himself as an Ojibwe individual. Reconciliation with the past involves

the honest identification of the sources of trauma, the embrace of the whole story to heal rather than to resent. The author is not so much interested in the TRC's aim to "redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation" (Truth and Reconciliation 1). Instead, he emphasizes the importance of constructing spaces that allow victims to process the valid but disempowering emotions—pain, anger, resentment, hatred—that block the path towards reconciliation with Indigenous ways of existing, thinking, and behaving.

3. Saul

In the aforementioned CBC interview, Wagamese described his protagonist, Saul Indian Horse, as "wiry," "lean," and "internal." His emotional processes are "deep" and "private," yet he's open to joy given the disconnection, isolation, and loss he has suffered by the time he is nine years old. "And when he finds hockey," Wagamese points out, "he finds an element of joy in all of that. That gives him the opportunity to release himself from his own story" (00:03:46-00:04:25). Indeed, one of the first things we learn about Saul is that he is telling his life story only because he is forced to, motivated exclusively by the possibility of leaving the New Dawn Centre. He has disconnected himself fully from his own narrative.

3.1. Saul's Stories

The act of storytelling is central to *Indian Horse*. Yet Saul is initially reluctant to talk about his own journey: "These people here want me to tell my story. They say I can't understand where I'm going if I don't understand where I've been. The answers are within me, according to them. By telling our stories, hardcore drunks like me can set ourselves free from the bottle and the life that took us there" (Wagamese, *Indian* 2). He does not believe in storytelling as a source of individual healing or re-connection with his own culture, but rather as his only means to leave the centre as soon as possible: "I don't give a shit about any of that. But if it means getting out of this place quicker, then telling my story is what I will do" (2). "If we want to live at peace with ourselves," Saul's mentor at the New Dawn Centre Moses wisely reminds him, "we need to tell our stories" (3). Ojibwe scholar Gerald Vizenor has pointed out that "the Anishinaabe always understood their rights by stories" ("Aesthetics" 2). Despite the protagonist's initial alienation from such idea, his reflections on his own journey soon begin unearthing the power of storytelling as a catalyst for healing.

Despite the alienation of his adult years, Saul is made aware of the potential of stories from early childhood. He recalls his own grandmother Naomi warning him about the dangers of reading Zhaunagush (i.e., white people) books, since "their talk and their stories can sneak you away as quick as their boats" (Wagamese, *Indian* 10). Stories are therefore intrinsically linked to a sense of rootedness. According to Choctaw Nation citizen LeAnne Howe, Indigenous narratives in all their forms "seem to pull all the elements together of the storyteller's tribe, meaning the people, the land, and multiple characters and all their manifestations and revelations, and connect these in past, present, and future milieus" (42). In this line, collective memory, Cree scholar Neal McLeod explains, "is the echo of old stories that links grandparents with their grandchildren" (11). Being removed to residential schools disrupted such an echo, which meant that generational connections and all that comes with them—languages, traditions, identities, epistemologies—are lost. The assimilation propelled by residential schooling forces Saul to undergo such process of disconnection, one which affects his ability to remember. According to Sto:lo writer Lee Maracle, memory in oral cultures "is governance, it is being, and it is the foundation of culture" (90). Nonetheless, despite Saul's apparent amnesia, readers observe that his disentanglement from the cultural importance of stories has never been total. This idea is strengthened by the novel's sense of orality and the fact that he is recalling his life story as a means of healing, even if he does not acknowledge so yet. To add more meaning to the equation, Saul also admits to having found solace in reading other people's stories in his late childhood, as it prompted memories of his own roots: "I liked mythology. The stories reminded me of the stories my grandmother would tell around the fires late at night. Reading them made me feel good. I read a lot while I was with the Kellys. Books had been my safe place all the time I'd been in the school and they still represented security" (Wagamese, *Indian* 158). The pain and rage propelled by residential school and racial discrimination, which will precipitate him to alcoholism as a coping mechanism, sever Saul's connection with stories and storytelling as sources of comfort, spirituality, safety, belonging, and self-awareness.

Alcohol not only calms Saul's roaring in his belly (180), but it also allows him to replace his true Indigenous narrative (Vizenor, *Manifest*)—filled with violence, anger, failure, solitude, and pain—with made-up yet "believable and engaging" tales about his life, none of which "had actually happened": "I discovered that being someone you are not is often easier than living with the person you are. I became drunk with that. Addicted. My new escape sustained me for a while" (Wagamese, *Indian* 181). Saul seeks to replace the "Indian" in him with alcohol-induced fictions inspired by his own readings in the past. Yet he cannot avoid becoming "the Indian again; drunken and drooling and reeling, a caricature everyone sought to avoid" (181), which eventually leads him to live as

a nomad, escaping from his own identity. As Miroux points out, Saul leaves his identity as a storyteller behind to embrace that of a mere raconteur, since "the stories he tells his inebriated audience in the local taverns are adulterated narratives that only serve to conceal his Indianness rather than express it" (209). Intoxication, which is itself a coping mechanism, entirely divests storytelling of its sacredness and erases Saul's past. "What makes an impression on a child and stays in his memory" neuropsychiatrist Boris Cyrulnik argues, "means nothing to an adult who is inventing his past" (31). Such is the case for Saul. The alienation from his Indigenous identity and Indigenous practices is largely brought about by the shame he has interiorized after a lifetime of colonial abuse and discrimination.

3.2. Saul's Shame

Sara Ahmed argues that shame is crucial to the process of reconciliation or healing of past wounds, because "to acknowledge wrongdoing means to enter into shame; the 'we' is shamed by its recognition that it has committed 'acts and omissions,' which have caused pain, hurt and loss for indigenous others" (101). To heal—or to resurge, in Simpson's terms—implies resisting the transgenerational shame upon Indigenous peoples brought about by settler colonialism, which in turn demonizes and devalues the power of Indigenous stories and erases Indigenous resilience. As Tanana Athabaskan scholar Dian Million has pointed out, "it felt shameful to be an Indian in Canada for most of that nation's history" (46). To enact the politics of shame implies the assumption that Indigenous individuals *are* inherently wrong, as Leanne Simpson has explained: "We are not shameful people. We have done nothing wrong. I began to realize that shame can only take hold when we are disconnected from the stories of resistance within our own families and communities" (Simpson, *Dancing* 14). The humiliation and loss of self-esteem generated by shame can be contested through the recuperation of collective and cultural memory and truth. Shame, as a powerful tool of colonialism, "leads to disconnection from the practices that give us meaning. It elicits pain. To cope with that pain, either we turn inward, amplifying and cycling messages of shame leading to self-harm, drugs, alcohol abuse, or depression and anxiety; or we turn our shame outward into aggression and violence" (Simpson, *As We Have* 188). All these symptoms of shame are evoked in Saul's testimony. Efforts to eradicate them have been largely ignored by the federal government, despite the TRC report having stated that there exists a clear health gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians (Government of Canada 208; Katz et al.).

Saul first mentions shame while describing the experience of violence and abuse towards Indigenous children that he witnessed during his nights at St Jerome's: "In the daylight we would look at each other blankly, so that we would not cause any further *shame*" (Wagamese, *Indian* 81; my emphasis). All throughout the novel, shame goes hand in hand with silence. Saul experiences collective shame while playing with the Moose against a white team. The Anishinaabe players are beaten up, urinated, and spat on by white men working at a diner after winning the game. Yet, the episode is never mentioned in the Indigenous boys' conversations, and it surfaces only in the looks they exchange: "but there were moments when you'd catch another boy's eye and know that you were both thinking about it. Everything was contained in that glance. All the hurt. All the *shame*. All the rage. The white people thought it was their game. They thought it was their world" (136; my emphasis). The feeling of shame will eventually increase to the point of transforming hockey into a source of suffering rather than a means of escapism and redemption for Saul: "Finally, it changed the game for me. If they wanted me to be a savage, that's what I would give them. I began to skate with the deliberate intention of shoving my skill up the noses of those who belittled me, made me feel *ashamed* of my skin" (164; my emphasis). When the suffering leads him to fall into the spiral of alcoholism to suppress the pain of shame, Saul disengages completely from any possibility to reconnect with his own story, thus falling victim once again to the oppressive mechanisms of settler colonialism.

3.2.1. Father Leboutilier

As I pointed out above, Wagamese employs silence to intensify the feeling of shame in the text. As a result, Miroux argues, "the reader's attention is drawn to the fact that the text does not always tell the whole story" (211). The most evident instance of such technique is perhaps Saul's memory of sexual violence at the hands of Father Leboutilier, which is not made explicit until chapter forty-nine, barely twenty pages before the end of the novel. Readers gain awareness of Saul's childhood trauma at the same time he does, i.e., when the social context and his own process of psychological maturation allow the young man to revisit his memories instead of blocking them out to cope with the trauma. Ana María Fraile-Marcos and Lucía López-Serrano point out that "shame usually works as a deterrent to distance oneself from a normative social ideal" (5). Shame keeps Saul, who is in the process of assimilating into Euro-Canadian culture, otherized, different, focused on his own inferiority within settler identity and values. In his account of the events, Saul hints precisely at how his abuser took advantage of the shame and fear present at St. Jerome's to present

himself as a familiar figure and gain control over the boy's body: "When he knelt down and cradled me in his arms, *I felt no shame or fear. I only felt love*. I wanted so much to be held and stroked. As he gathered my face in his hands and kissed me, I closed my eyes. I thought of my grandmother. The warmth of her arms holding me. I missed that so much" (Wagamese, *Indian* 198; my emphasis). As Wiese has indicated, "yearning for love and tenderness, he mistakes the sexual approaches for affection" (65).

Similarly, Cyrulnik employs Anna Freud's observations on the Luftwaffe air raids on London shelters during World War II to explain that memories gain meaning once they are embedded within a narrative. This is particularly interesting in the case of traumatic events in childhood: "bombs whistled around [the infants in the shelters], the earth shook, and the walls of the shelter quaked, but that had no effect on them. The explanation is simple, she remarked: their world had not changed. They were still safe in their mothers' arms" (Cyrulnik 37). The emotions felt at the time of trauma thus determine how we incorporate said events into our memories, and in childhood, the emotions triggered by trauma are "a product of an encounter between the child's level of development and its external markers" (43). Saul, who enters St. Jerome's at a very young age, lacks the mental structure to interpret Leboutilier's actions and equates them to his grandmother's love, which temporarily eliminates any emotions of fear, danger, shame, or disgust until he embeds them with meaning in his own narrative as an adult.

Like the children at the London shelters, Wagamese's protagonist feels safe around Father Leboutilier, because such a father-like figure stands as his only available resource to fulfill Saul's longing for familial love at loveless St Jerome's. "The human memory" Cyrulnik explains, "is so constructed that an event that is devoid of meaning leaves no trace" (33). Unable to find further meaning and thus to construct a narrative surrounding sexual abuse, Saul's childhood trauma remains in his mind as a series of silenced, disconnected images, dispossessed of their inherent implications of power, race, or colonialism. As he enters his teenage years and young adulthood, he embraces denial, which "blocks out the unbearable part of reality" and "protects the victim in the same way that the amputation of a gangrenous limb protects an injured person from septicemia" (82). The joys brought by hockey initially contribute to said denial and temporarily protect Saul from the unendurable pain that he carries within.

4. Recognition, Refusal, and Radical Resurgence

In the novel, hockey stands as a symbol of Canada's misguided efforts to achieve truth and reconciliation, since Saul's great opportunity for improvement ends

up eventually worsening his situation. Wagamese portrays Canada's failure to appreciate Indigenous people's self-determining authority through Saul's relationship with the nation's most popular winter sport. During his time at St. Jerome's and later in Manitouwadge, Saul discovers and reappropriates ice hockey. Surrounded by his Indigenous teammates, he thrives in the rink. When he becomes a professional player in the Toronto Marlboros, he is severed from his kin and driven to play alongside settler Canadian players who, far from recognizing him, belittle and shame him. He becomes "the Rampaging Redskin" (Wagamese, *Indian* 165), a "savage" (164), "the stoic Indian" (163) and consequently the game loses "any semblance of joy" (165) it previously offered him. He begins playing like "a puck hog" (165) and eventually gets benched indefinitely. Saul packs his bags and withdraws from the injustice and violence enacted on him by white teammates, coaches, and even the audience. He refuses to engage in the power dynamics of settler colonial hockey, which seemingly welcomes him into the game but never provides the grounds for him to play peacefully and respectably: "I always had to be the Indian" (165), he says. If hockey is read as the symbolic representation of the Canadian state, Saul's relationship with the sport can be connected to what Indigenous scholarship terms "generative refusal of colonial recognition" (Coulthard 4), i.e. the "refusal of state recognition as an organizing platform and mechanism for dismantling the systems of colonial domination" (Simpson, *As We Have* 176).

Audra Simpson, for instance, argues that refusal, as a political and ethical stance, is accompanied by the obligation to have "one's political sovereignty acknowledged and upheld" and that it also poses the question of legitimacy for those who have the ability to recognize: "What is their authority to do so? Where does it come from? Who are they to do so?" (11) Although quitting hockey marks the beginning of Saul's journey of self-destruction, it also signifies the refusal to tolerate discrimination. To achieve peaceful coexistence and refuse the colonial entitlement of the Canadian state as embodied by the Truth and Reconciliation Agreement and Commission, Leanne Simpson offers an Anishinaabe perspective on recognition based around presence, listening, and nurturing relationships. She relates her definition of recognition to "Indigenous complex, nonlinear constructions of time, space, and place that are continually rebirthed," and explains that "diversity, freedom, consent, noninterference" and "reciprocal recognition" are found at its core (*As We Have* 182). Therefore, when recognition is symmetrical, it stands as the basis of positive identity, self-worth, dignity, and individual and communal strength; and subsequently, as the grounds for Nishnaabeg political systems which radical resurgence seeks to regenerate.

While surviving the horrors of assimilation and isolation at St Jerome's, the game gives Saul and his peers a sense of purpose and Nishnaabeg kinship,

and it will eventually become his way out of the institution. St Germ's, as he nicknames the school (Wagamese, *Indian* 48), infects all the Indigenous kids with the painful disease of disconnection and "the ache of loss" (73). Against such a background, Canada's favourite sport offers Saul the opportunity to dispel his loneliness (73) through respectful and reciprocal relationships of teamwork. He finds "solace," "belonging, and acceptance, and non-judgement" in the game (Wagamese, "Richard" 00:08:38-00:08:52). Hockey fosters psychological resilience within Saul, who will employ the game as a means to endure and make positive sense out of his stay at the residential school by contrast with his experience of trauma. However, as explained above, this only lasts until Saul begins to experience discrimination inside and outside the rink. As Saul progressively steps away from his familial network of reciprocal Indigenous recognition and begins confronting and playing within white teams, hockey loses all its charm.

The suffering that Saul endures when playing hockey at a professional level on white teams unavoidably catapults him back to the memories of the abuse during his residential school days. "When the psychotrauma becomes chronic, insidious, and is repeated day after day," Cyrulnik explains, "the disorders it imprints on the child are less visible but longer lasting, and they permeate [his] personality throughout [his] development" (83). Saul grows into a young adult impacted by trauma but unable to overcome it. As Bessel A. Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart argue, the pain of being aware often prevent members of a community from going on with their lives (425). Wagamese's protagonist, unable to remember and thus heal from his traumatic past, drifts away from hockey and goes on to live a life of frustration and self-destruction.

5. Memory, Land, and Kinship

Residential schooling for Saul, as for Indigenous children who experienced the system in real life, severed the relationships not only with his family and ways of living, but also with the land, nature, and ancestry. Indigenous epistemologies recognize the interdependence of all beings for the sake of ecological harmony and sustenance (Battiste and Youngblood Henderson; Fraile-Marcos; LaDuke). Rather than being interested in truth and reconciliation efforts, Wagamese instigates the reviving of kinship and claims the spiritual reconnections to land and community to restore Indigenous memory and wellbeing. By recovering his story, Saul begins to understand how colonial shame caused the detachment from his identity and resorts to his ancestral land, Manitou Gameeng, anglicized as God's Lake, in search of healing. According to Simpson, Nishnaabeg grounded normativity comes "from the place or land through the practice

of [their] modes of intelligence." She points out that place "includes land and waters, plants and animals, and the spiritual world," and that the practices carried out in the land "code and reveal knowledge." Knowledge, in turn, "codes and reveals practices" (*As We Have* 22). It is in Manitou Gameeng where Saul generates the knowledge to contest his personal reality and decides to reconnect with the Kellys, an event which will also facilitate the reconciliation with his own Indigenous self. Once he acknowledges his experience of sexual abuse and shares his story with the Kellys, he is able to recognize the sources of alcoholism: "It lets you go on breathing but not really living. It lets you move but *not remember*. It lets you do but not feel. I don't know why I fell into it so easily, why I lost myself so deep. I just thought I was crazy. But turns out I was just hurt, *lonely*, guilty, *ashamed*—and mostly just really, really sad" (Wagamese, *Indian* 217; my emphases). In escaping the colonialist trap of shame and imagining an alternative, more hopeful future with his human and other-than-human community, Saul recovers and embraces his past to step away from the narrative imposed by whites on Natives (Vizenor, *Manifest*). Thus, he plants the seed for grounded normativity, that is, the retrieval of Indigenous ways of being, governing, knowing, and existing. According to Simpson, grounded normativity is the base of Nishnaabeg political systems, economy, and nationhood, moving away from "enclosure, authoritarian power, and hierarchy" (*As We Have* 22). She argues that "a critical level of anti-colonial interrogation is required in order for us to be able to see the extraordinarily political nature of Nishnaabeg thought" (*Dancing* 20).

Wagamese's hero demonstrates that merely surviving whilst withstanding the effects of colonial hegemony does not guarantee transformative change in the future. As pointed out by Daniel Coleman, "Indigenous peoples appear in discussions of resilience but often as 'objects' or subalterns of resilience" (22). Similarly, Leanne Simpson explains that "in the eyes of liberalism" initiatives that simply absolve colonial nations like Canada from past wrongdoings, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission risks doing, offer the idea that "further transformation is not needed" (*Dancing* 26). Saul critically interrogates the dynamics of settler colonialism present in his life once he reconnects with land and community, the backbones of Anishinaabe cultural memory that propel Nishnaabeg-based political systems. The land, as reflected in Nishnaabeg thought and philosophy, compels Nishnaabeg peoples towards radical resurgence "in virtually every aspect" (Simpson, *Dancing* 18). It carries within it "stories of resistance" (18). It is on the land where Nishnaabeg peoples engage in "hunting, fishing, harvesting rice and medicines, ceremony, language learning, singing, dancing, making maple syrup, parenting, and storytelling" (Simpson, *As We Have* 30), i.e., all the distinct practices that ensure well-being and propel anti-colonial questioning. When returning to the land of his ancestors, Saul

states: "The angst in my belly disappeared. My thoughts cleared. I walked in a peace I could not recall having experienced before. I reached out to touch the broad span of ferns, the trunks of trees, leaves, grasses. A part of me remembered each sensation" (Wagamese, *Indian* 204). Shortly after, he has a vision in which his great-grandfather lets him know that he has come to God's Lake to learn to carry "this place of beginnings and endings" (205) with him. Saul offers thanks aloud in an Ojibway prayer and leaves the lake, mourning his own past. As pointed out by Fraile-Marcos, "the awareness of interdependence enhances place-specific knowledge and the centrality of the land in Indigenous epistemologies to the extent that people are seen as inextricably linked to their land and the land becomes the law ruling all life" (128). After a period of lawlessness, Saul finally returns to the New Dawn Centre, determined to share his truth and to learn how to live without drinking (Wagamese, *Indian* 207). The first stop in such journey is the Kellys' home.

As residential school victims themselves, Fred and Martha Kelly recognize and share Saul's pain and encourage him in his healing process. Simpson argues that reconciliation as a decolonizing force must be grounded in cultural generation and political resurgence. It requires people to move beyond individual abuse to mean a collective re-balancing of the playing field (Simpson, *Dancing* 25). In *Indian Horse*, Wagamese leaves the door open for reconciliation only after Saul re-members, that is, puts the pieces together, of his own true experience, first at God' Lake, and then with his human kin. Finally aware of his own pain, Saul realizes that coming back to Manitouwadge constitutes his own way of dealing with it (Wagamese, *Indian* 217) to move forward. In wanting to give back to Indigenous kids the joy, the speed, the grace, the strength, and the overall resilience-triggering power he initially found in hockey (Wagamese, *Indian* 212), Saul levels the playing field quite literally. The novel ends with Saul back in the rink, asking his old teammate Virgil, the Kellys' youngest son, how they will play the game, to which he answers "'Together, . . . 'Like we shoulda all along'" (221).

6. Conclusions

As of 2023, eight years after the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Final Report, eighty-one out of the ninety-four calls to action remained unfulfilled, according to a study conducted by the Yellowhead Institute at Toronto Metropolitan University (Jewell and Mosby 5). Many socioeconomic inequity gaps pointed out in the Report have actually widened during the precarious post-pandemic period due to lack of action (Bratina 14). Although Wagamese acknowledges the importance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

explicitly in his novel, he moves away from the Commission's claims to address the historical impact of the Residential School Era through unrealistic changes in national structures of education, healthcare, justice, and religion. He shows instead that the focus be put on the affirmation of Aboriginal epistemologies, spiritualities, political systems, and ways of living and well-being as well as on the feeling of self-fulfillment within their exercise, i.e., grounded normativity. Saul's testimony, which is sparked by the need to heal from several trauma responses—alcoholism, isolation, nomadism—stands as his own re-creation story. Loyal to Indigenous aesthetics, Wagamese's novel follows a circular pattern, and thus Saul progressively reinserts himself in his own personal narrative while building the grounds for his own healing as an adult by means of heeding and adopting the Indigenous practices at the core of Indigenous resurgence thinking. His own memories eventually trigger the reconnection to Nishnaabeg ways of existing and envisioning alternative, hopeful futures with his kin. Without leaving the nation of Canada out of the picture completely, Wagamese manages to portray the struggle for Indigenous nation-building in the Truth and Reconciliation Era and employs the Canadian sport as a symbol of the asymmetrical and unfruitful recognition of Indigenous peoples by the state. The author thus offers his audiences—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—a vision that does away with the shaming and victimization of Indigenous peoples and rather seeks to mobilize collective efforts towards Indigenous radical resurgence.

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Indigenous Environmental Activism and Media Depiction: Using Critical Dispositioning to Read Protest Photography Ethically[1]

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ABSTRACT
Media bias is a reality of the infoglut we are bombarded with every day. However, we often consider bias to be consigned to the textual realm of information. I argue that anything human-mediated holds bias, including photographs. Because of this, I propose reading the performance of Indigenous-led environmental activism through media representation, specifically photographs used in media coverage of Indigenous environmental activism. This paper considers open-access media photographs of Indigenous-led environmental protests, such as the Kanehsatake Resistance (1990) and Wet'suwet'en Blockade (2020), as springboards for practicing ethical *reading*. As a settler-scholar, this work is mostly geared towards a settler-scholar or non-Indigenous audience interested in Indigenous literary studies, as a way to find tools to engage in this scholarship. The purpose of this article is to elucidate media bias as a way of informing our individual teaching and learning practice, as well as shaping how we engage with and talk about Indigenous issues. While all public activism engages with some levels of performance, the performance itself and larger narrative being told by the activists

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is filtered through who is able to tell the story. Here, I use a methodology that I am developing as part of my ongoing dissertation work, Critical Dispositioning, which is an ethical reading praxis designed for settlers to use when engaging with Indigenous literatures. Critical Dispositioning requires community-specific reading of Indigenous materials and rejects settler imposition or appropriation of Indigenous voices and texts. This work is essential in building anti-racist practices and equity, diversity, and inclusion into the classroom space, as well as a tool for consideration when building syllabi.

Keywords
Indigenous Activism; Environmental Activism; Critical Dispositioning; Ethical Reading; Kanehsatake Resistance; Wet'suwet'en Blockade

1. Introduction

Media bias is a reality of the infoglut we are bombarded with every day. However, we often consider bias to be consigned to the textual realm. I argue that anything human-mediated holds bias, including photographs. Because of this, I propose reading the performance of Indigenous-led environmental activism through media representation, specifically photographs used in this media coverage. Using photos from media coverage of two Indigenous-led environmental protests, the Kanehsatake Resistance of 1990 and the Wet'suwet'en Pipeline protests that began in 2020, I will engage in a *reading* of photographs from mainstream and Indigenous media outlets in what is colonially called Canada.

To situate myself: I am a settler-scholar of Greek descent and Canadian citizenship. I am currently living and learning in Southern Ontario, which is the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe. As a settler-scholar, ethical engagement with Indigenous texts and material is essential to keep my work grounded in Indigenous frameworks and in order to resist appropriation. Finding ethical reading practices is a foundational part of my research praxis. In this paper, I will find ethical ways to *read* protest photography, keeping Indigenous frameworks and perspectives centred in my reading approach.

Some questions I am thinking about are: Who are taking these photos and who are publishing them? What narrative does the context surrounding the image tell? What details can I pull out of these photos that support these thoughts? How does recognizing bias make me more critical of my own media consumption? And finally, how does considering context help myself do this work? I am influenced by the work of settler-scholars (Pratt; Eigenbrod; McKegney; King) as well as Indigenous scholars (Ermine; Kovach) who are asking similar questions in the vein of ethical engagement with Indigenous texts.

The purpose of this work is to examine the personal bias that we all hold and filter our lives through every day. By identifying and raising awareness of this bias's influence on our lives, we can know where it is necessary for us to distance ourselves from the texts we are analyzing or where to read critically to help minimize bias as much as possible. I would like to be clear that I am not suggesting that it is possible to eliminate bias altogether. However, the effort and awareness to do this scholarly production shows ethical intentions for interpreting Indigenous works.

I will be using a methodological praxis I am developing as part of my dissertation project, called Critical Dispositioning, as a way to do this work ethically. Critical Dispositioning is not necessarily a tool, but rather a framework I believe can be used to position oneself, especially if one is a settler-scholar engaging with Indigenous (or other minority) literature, ethically. This framework sets up an alternative space, one that is separate from both the settler and Indigenous contexts, for settler-scholars to engage ethically with texts. The purpose of this separate space is not to absolve responsibility for a settler and allow them to apply whatever conventions they choose to a text, but is actually a kind of safeguard against appropriation of Indigenous materials. By using a separate analytical space, one can be sure that they are not removing Indigenous texts from their particular cultural or community context, as well as allows for a resistance against settler-scholars who try to enter into Indigenous analysis frameworks (where they do not belong) or risk appropriating Indigenous voices (as suggested by Tuck and Yang). It also prevents settler-scholars from bringing Indigenous texts into settler spaces. Critical Dispositioning, instead, allows the settler-scholar to stay removed from the text without imposing Western methodological conventions onto it, letting them observe and engage with the text from a willful and informed *outsider* perspective.

Considering the critical conversations surrounding ethical scholarship in the field of settler-studies, Critical Dispositioning is drawing on the work of other Indigenous and Black scholars, as well as settler-scholars (Ermine; King; Pratt) that also consider the impact of and potential limitations of settler-scholars engaging with Indigenous texts. Renate Eigenbrod, when trying to bridge her settler and immigrant status, intentionally "problematize[s] [her] subjectivity, the situatedness of [her] knowledge, and the context of [her] subject position in order to underscore partiality and de-emphasize assumptions about the expert" (xv). Similarly to Critical Dispositioning, this practice of Eigenbrod's touches on the necessity of introspective work on the part of the settler before engaging with the texts in question. Sam McKegney, alternatively, "rejected the reigning strategies for ethical disengagement in order to seek out strategies for ethical engagement" (63), which is also in the vein of Critical Dispositioning's call for critical distance. While McKegney does not support "disengagement" in

ethics-based work, he still acknowledges the need for separate spaces for ethical engagement to occur. Critical Dispositioning also does not set up settlers to *disengage* from their positionalities, and therefore the responsibilities they have as settlers doing this scholarship, but instead asks for distance in order to find community-based frameworks to analyze Indigenous materials with. McKegney, interestingly, flags something that Critical Dispositioning inherently remedies, which is the limitations of scholars, who "must be self-reflective" but also "do not need to make themselves the stars of their studies, especially to the ongoing neglect of Indigenous voices" (60).

This work is essential in building anti-racist practices for settler-scholars, as well as centering equity, diversity, and inclusion in the classroom space. This article, as well as the Toolkit included (Appendix A) can be used by teachers and professors as a tool for consideration when building syllabi with ethics at their core. Rather than a definitive and rigid set of rules, both this article and Toolkit are to be considered as potential *springboards* to launch a settler audience into deeper conversations surrounding ethical engagement with Indigenous texts. Taking a note from Eigenbrod's discomfort from her "expected 'expert' position" (xvi), I am providing questions and further reading that helped guide my thinking with enough space for an audience to surmise and interpret based on their own experiences and knowledge base.

Indigenous activism has been ongoing in what is colonially called Canada from the moment of settler's first contact. Through Critical Dispositioning and ethical reading of protest photography surrounding Indigenous activist movements, I hope to elevate Indigenous voices and the activist potential of photography within mainstream Canadian media outlets. I am cautious, as Eigenbrod was, to avoid a kind of reading practice of "Indigenous literatures within the authoritative discourse of a scholarly publication" which could "easily become another 'conquest,' in Todorov's meaning of the term" (qtd. in Eigenbrod xv).

2. Identifying Bias and *Reading* Photographs

While one can hope that those mediating and disseminating information, like journalists, are, as Kimberley Jakeman and Mollie Clark outline, "assumed to be neutral, independent and impartial third parties," it is important to remember that "humans intrinsically have unconscious biases" (695). While this unconscious bias we all hold is, to a degree, "helpful to our survival" (696), we still must be aware of the levels of pervasiveness that bias interferes with in our lives. Some examples that Jakeman and Clarke mention are "culture, gender, traditions, past experiences, religion, race, sexual identity, and age" (696). These aspects that make up our identity are imbued with bias, which we in turn

use to filter our lives through. It is true that anything human-mediated holds this bias, but acknowledgment is the first step towards overcoming it.

Switching gears, when talking about the practice of *reading* photographs, I am drawing on a facet of close-reading. As a literature student, close-reading is a *secret weapon* used to unpack and draw meaning from a variety of different kinds of texts, including photographs. In this case, I will be *reading* specific photos in an attempt to make meaning and decipher bias.

When *reading* photos, it is important to consider the context surrounding composition and publication. Some details to consider are: What is the source of this photo? Where is it being published? Who took the photo? As well as compositional elements, like the background, framing, posture of subject, lighting, editing, and whether it is candid or staged, just to name a few.[2] Visual semiotics (Lister and Wells) of images asks a viewer to acknowledge these structural and denotative elements (qtd. in Wilkes and Kehl 488) for a more wholistic reading of an image's elements and larger conversations and contexts underpinning the photograph.

Considering the praxis of Critical Dispositioning, this methodological lens functions as a kind of postmemory praxis, or a framework linking meaning-making and historical approaches. Critical Dispositioning asks that settler-scholars locate themselves in relation to the voices and contexts of Indigenous writers, do introspective work to unpack their intentions (and any biases they might have) before settling into analysis, and calls for a *pulling back* or *dispositioning* of their positionality to ensure Indigenous texts stay rooted in their community-specific frameworks. Postmemory, according to Marianne Hirsch, is a kind of tool for memory production and preservation for the next generation of a community after the experience of a collective traumatic event. Hirsch states that "postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (5). In relation to Indigenous experiences of colonial imposition and systemic erasure of their language, culture, and communities, postmemory is a way to connect Indigenous peoples with their past, while also finding avenues of futurity. Critical Dispositioning can be used by settlers to understand and unpack this process, while not entering into or taking on the Indigenous struggle of resisting colonial imposition. Similar to settler-scholar Joni Adamson's approach to "narrative scholarship," which she sees as "a middle place between scholarship and experience" (qtd. in Eigenbrod 3), Critical Dispositioning also functions here as a

2 See Appendix A for a more comprehensive ethical *reading* Toolkit for non-Indigenous scholars to use when analyzing Indigenous texts.

space for settlers to distance themselves from their Western perspectives and views of Indigenous connection to community.

3. Kanesatake Resistance

I want to start by first drawing attention to my intentional use of Indigenous-positive naming of this event. Media representation often refers to the 78-day standoff between Mohawk land defenders and the Quebec police and Canadian military as the Oka Crisis. I will be referring to this event as the Kanehsatake Resistance as we are called to do by Mohawk land defenders and activists, like Ellen Gabriel (Kanehsatà:ke).[3] In this, I hope to shift the focus away from rhetoric that positions Indigenous resistance as a *crisis*, or a problem that requires the Canadian government, military, or police to *fix*. Instead, I hope to highlight Indigenous activism and resistance, rather than slip into this settler-centric naming of Indigenous movements.

The Kanehsatake Resistance took place in 1990, from July 11th to September 26th, occurring between the Kanyen'kehà:ka (Mohawk) protesters and the Quebec Police, and later involving the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and the Canadian Military. The standoff occurred when the town of Oka proposed an expansion of an existing golf course and a new townhouse development. These proposals were supposed to encroach on land that was part of an ongoing land dispute between the town of Oka and the Kanehsatake. Most significantly, this land included a Kanyen'kehà:ka burial ground (Meng).

This standoff was a violent one, resulting in the death of a Quebec police officer and a Mohawk protestor. Ultimately, there were injuries on both sides, with 22 soldiers injured and 75 Mohawks injured "ranging in age from four to 72" (de Bruin). The Resistance ultimately ended on September 26th, 1990, about a month after the Canadian military was called in. When the standoff ended, everyone was leaving the Reserve, and in the shuffle, "a soldier stabbed 14-year-old Waneek Horn-Miller in the chest with a bayonet. She had been carrying her four-year-old sister, Kaniehtiio, to safety after weeks behind the barriers while their mother, Kahentinetha Horn, served as a negotiator" (de

3 I am intentionally referring to this event in Indigenous-positive language, which is in line with Kanehsatà:ke activist and spokesperson, Ellen Gabriel, who calls for this shift. Gabriel asks that people stop referring to this event as the Oka Crisis because, as she says, "the people of Oka did not bear the brunt of colonial and military hostility, Kanehsatà:ke did" (Hassencahl-Perley 277–78).

Bruin). This became a widely publicized moment at the culmination of the Resistance, disseminated widely across both mainstream and Indigenous media outlets.

Fig. 1. Face to Face, by Shaney Komulainen, Canadian Press, 1990. Image used for The Canadian Encyclopedia's page on the "Oka Crisis" (de Bruin, from Canapress).

Turning towards Figure 1, "Face to Face," this is one of the most famous photographs from the Kanehsatake Resistance, found in *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (de Bruin). Originally taken by photographer and journalist Shaney Komulainen, this image has received considerable analysis and has been discussed extensively alongside the events of Kanehsatake.[4] In this image, we have a soldier in a face-off with a Mohawk land defender. We can start *reading* this photo by taking in the details of its composition. Firstly, the Indigenous figure on the right is completely covered in camouflage. They are unidentifiable with the camouflage, bandana, and sunglasses. If you look at the lower right corner, you can see the rest of their body is blurred out, meaning the camera is not focussed on them. On the left, we have a Canadian soldier in a tactical uniform and helmet. They are staring up into the sunglasséd eyes of the Indigenous activist, face to face, a stand-off position. As Rima Wilkes and Michael Kehl said, because "the viewer is at arms' length and looking directly at the subjects, the

4 For a more in-depth analysis of "Face to Face" and the politics surrounding this image in media representation, see Wilkes and Kehl's 2014 article.

photo conveys a sense of equality between the viewer and the two men" (489). The responsibility is on the viewer to create a critical distance when observing this photograph in order to stay situated in their present context and not slip into this illusion of equality that Wilkes and Kehl highlight.

The soldier's face is determined, his jaw tense and clean shaven. The camera has trained its focus on this soldier, offering crisper details of his face and body. The bias of the photographer is in this selective focus, a metaphor for the distortion of Indigenous presence and activism by mainstream media in favour of settler issues. Initially, the public response to this photograph in English-language media "was that the image was emblematic of Canadian heroism and Canadian peacekeeping" (490–91). "Face to Face" is an interesting case study, as Wilkes and Kehl are able to trace public response to it over the three decades it has been in circulation. When the photo re-appeared in 2009, it was included in Mark Reid's edited collection called *100 Photos that Changed Canada*, where Wilkes and Kehl flag the written text that was published alongside this image, which stated that "'Face to Face' served as a 'reminder to all Canadians that despite solid steps—such as the 2008 federal apology for residential schools and the creation of a native land claims commission—there is still work to be done to bridge the gulf between [Indigenous peoples] and [settlers] in Canada'" (qtd. in Wilkes and Kehl 482). The overall response to this image has shifted drastically towards being more Indigenous-positive, which I can only hope is reflective of the larger political climate surrounding Indigenous-settler relations.

Fig. 2. Police assaulting a protestor on bridge near Châteauguay, Quebec. Photo by Allan McInnis (The Gazette).

Figure 2 offers a snapshot of the political climate at the time of the Kanehsatake Resistance. This photo was taken by photojournalist Allan McInnis. McInnis, in 1990, was capturing the Mohawk activism and counter-activism of anti-Mohawk protestors. This photo specifically was taken when anti-Mohawk protesters tried shutting down the bridge in St-Louis-de-Gonzague, near Châteauguay (Magder) in response to the Mohawk blockade of the Mercier Bridge. McInnis' photo captures the moment when Quebec police are assaulting a pro-Mohawk protestor. By the protestor's body language, we can see that his back was turned towards the police, in an attempt to retreat. The protestor's arms are raised as a result of the impact of the police baton on his neck, not in self-defence or as an attack towards the officers. This photo captures a clear moment of police brutality.

In an article written 33 years later for the *Montreal Gazette*, McInnis reflects on the events at the time, noting that "there was a bad climate between police and the news medi . . . as well as between police officers and protesters" (Magder). At this protest, police were targeting journalists and destroying their cameras. In an effort to preserve his work, McInnis "removed the film from [his] camera and gave it to a stranger with the instructions to meet him in Châteauguay" (Magder). Through sheer trust and a bit of luck, McInnis was reunited with the film thanks to the stranger, whose name McInnis never learned. Figure 2, as well as the other photos on McInnis' preserved film roll were used as "evidence in the ethics commission hearings" about these events later on (Magder).

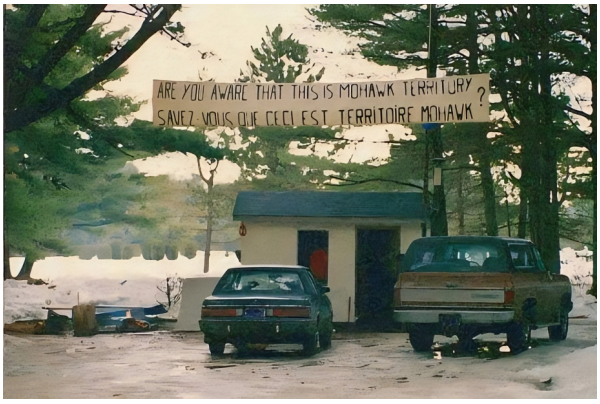

Fig. 3. Image of traditional Kanehsatake land in Oka, Quebec. Photo by Ellen Gabriel (CBC).

Moving to Figure 3, this photo was taken by Ellen Gabriel who was an influential Mohawk spokesperson and activist for the Kanehsatake in 1990. This

image, used in news coverage from CBC on the 20th anniversary of this event, shows a different side of the resistance. The source of this image is a traditional mainstream Canadian news network, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), but the photographer offers a different perspective to the events. The article itself includes other photos from their original reporting on the event which are quite contrasting to Gabriel's image, most of which were not taken by Indigenous photographers like this image was.

Between the tall pines that activists were protecting hangs a sign that reads: "Are you aware that this is Mohawk territory?" in both English and French. The tone is polite and respectful, informing people of the Indigenous claim to this land. The photo itself is peaceful, the muted colours and gritty quality show it is a personal image (kind of like home photography), one from someone who is close to this place. Gabriel's love and passion for this land is imbued in this photo, through the distance that allows the majority of the tall pines to be seen.

Figure 1, captured by a settler photographer and disseminated by mainstream media outlets, focuses on the white soldier figure, positioning the Indigenous activist as a kind of *guerilla* solider in comparison. The Indigenous activist is blurred, seen as a sinister and dangerous threat to the *lawful* plight of the Canadian soldiers. This perspective overwrites the initial land dispute issue, causing viewers to forget that this event was incited by a developer's desire to literally overwrite Indigenous presence and history by taking land used as a traditional Mohawk gravesite to build a golf course. Figure 3, captured by a Mohawk woman who was deeply connected to the plight and activism of the Kanehsatake people, shows an alternative view of the land, one that exhibits how peaceful the place is, how tall and old the sacred pines are, and allows us to sympathize with the Mohawk activists in their desire to protect this place.

Using Critical Dispositioning, we can read each of these images according to the context of their composition and community-framework. I, as a settler, can read the aspects of each photograph, like the focus in Figure 1; the body language of the activist in Figure 2; and the quality and composition of Figure 3, like I would read a piece of literature, focussing on the aspects readily visible in the photo. Ultimately, in order to participate in an ethical reading of these images, it is necessary for me to take a step back from each of these photos and consider the context in which they were taken, as well as the way that they appeared in mainstream media, like who published these photos, what kind of article did they appear in, as well as the temporal distance between their publication and the events they were depicting, especially in Figure 2's case. To do this is to instill a sense of analytical and critical distance between my own perspective and reading, and the photos themselves that Critical Dispositioning calls for.

Distance, while potentially reminiscent of the Euro-Western desire for *objectivity* that aligns with frameworks of their own fabrication, creates a necessary

degree of separation between myself as a settler-scholar and the Indigenous text being viewed. This distance does not, however, equate to a lack of context or elimination of larger political underpinnings. These are both necessary and built into Critical Dispositioning, which demands the onus of additional contextual work and locating community-specific frameworks for analysis on the settler-reader of Indigenous texts. Distance, here, instead allows me to gain this additional perspective and do this added labour. Critical Dispositioning sees the application of Western-based generic frameworks onto Indigenous texts as unethical, just as pulling settlers into Indigenous modes of analysis is equally dangerous as it can easily slip into appropriative modes of analysis. Distance created by this separate third space, this space where Critical Dispositioning takes place, allows for a safe-guard against appropriative analysis as well as ethical models of engagement between disparate communities to occur.

4. Wet'suwet'en Pipeline Protests (2020–ongoing)

Fig. 4. Image used in media coverage of Wet'suwet'en Blockade (The Narwhal).

Moving towards a more contemporary example, I am going to look at some images of the Wet'suwet'en Pipeline protests in Western Canada. These protests arose in 2020 when the Coastal GasLink company planned to build a pipeline through the sacred and unceded lands of the Wet'suwet'en community, but the conflicts over this unceded land and Indigenous land-activism is something that has been occurring in this region since the time of colonial contact.

The Coastal GasLink pipeline is a project that was proposed to cover 670 km (420 mi) from Dawson Creek to Kitimat, in British Columbia. The pipeline runs directly through the unceded territory of the Wet'suwet'en and Gitxsan peoples. The project violates "Wet'suwet'en sovereignty and put[s] the lan . . . of the Wet'suwet'en Nation at risk" (Shah). Through the protests, land rights activism, and blockades, the Wet'suwet'en and Gitxsan peoples have been able to delay the progress of the pipeline project. Ultimately, the "government's response to this land defense has also violated the rights of the Wet'suwet'en and Gitxsan by forcibly removing Indigenous peoples from their lands and not respecting their rights to self-government" (Shah). Finally, in October 2023, the "pipeline installation on the project was 100% complete" (Stephenson), but Indigenous pushback continues.

Taking a look at Figure 4, this image of the blockade was used for The Narwhal's coverage of the Wet'suwet'en protests. This image centres an Indigenous activist, clad in camouflage, arm raised mid-throw, in front of a wreckage of machinery, tarps, and logs used to block the road. The caption for this image on The Narwhal's website reads, "Land defenders fortify a blockade near the Wedzin Kwa ([or] Morice) River as RCMP units advance deeper into the territory" (Simmons). While this caption attempts to place Indigenous activists in a position of power, the photo works to recapitulate the narrative of Indigenous activism as *terrorism*. Lastly, the red containers of gasoline at the protestor's feet and directly beside the forest remind the viewer of the potential danger of this space.

In the centre of Figure 4, spray-painted slogans left on the wreckage of sheet metal and vehicles that made up the blockade are the focal point of the image. One message reads, "RCMP off the Yintah" which is the Wet'suwet'en word for "lands." Another sign reads "LAND BACK," connecting this land-based activism to other activists' movements across the country and the world. #LandBack is an international movement of Indigenous peoples (from Canada, the United States, Australia, etc.) that calls for a universal transferring back of land from settler states to the Indigenous nations that have lived on them for time immemorial, foregrounding Indigenous sovereignty as part of their activism.

As a settler, when I look at Figure 4, I am tempted to think that this image's focal point is, for lack of a better word, a pile of debris. However, when I critically examine my own biases and enact an appropriate distance between myself and the image, as Critical Dispositioning calls for, I can see that there is more happening in this image beyond the pile of objects creating a blockade. The media coverage of such activism usually centres around the effect of the blockades on Coastal GasLink and their workers. The capitalist struggle is centred in the narrative: the number of workers disrupted, the number of days workers have been cut off from work; the halt in the pipeline's progress, etc. It is easy to forget that these pipelines are not lawful; they are not sanctioned by the

Indigenous nations whose land is being used and polluted for the profit of corporations that do not and will not give back to these communities what has been lost. This kind of news coverage effectively dilutes Indigenous voices and decentralizes Indigenous land sovereignty and activism from the actual events taking place. Intentionally creating distance between my initial reaction and the larger political underpinnings in this image is one tool of Critical Dispositioning. Distance, in this sense, is an intentional stepping back for settlers to get a better vantage point within a larger conversation. This is not an opportunity for settlers to use distance to disengage from critical conversations, but is instead a tool used to strengthen one's positionality within such conversations.

While the news coverage is quick to villainize the Indigenous land defenders, we are reminded that in the case of this blockade specifically, "Hereditary Dinï ze' (Chief) Woos, Frank Alec, expressed regret that workers are stuck in the camps behind the blockades" but reminded everyone that they "gave ample notice to [Coastal GasLink] that we were going to act on this" (Simmons). Alec said they gave an eight-hour notice for workers to evacuate, as well as an additional two-hour extension. Despite this notice, of the 500 individuals who were "housed at Costal GasLink's two remote work camps, only a handful left" (Simmons).

Fig. 5. One of three blockades set up in 2019 as part of the Wet'suwet'en Pipeline Protests. This blockade, assembled by the Gidimt'en Clan, was to halt Coastal GasLink's drilling under the Wedzin Kwa (Morice River). Photo by Michael Toledano (CBC).

Figure 5 is depicting the blockade that Gidimt'en Clan protestors set up in 2019 as part of the Wet'suwet'en Pipeline protests. This blockade caused "more than 500 pipeline workers" to be stranded (Trumpener). This particular blockade was "set up to halt Coastal GasLink's plans to drill under the Wedzin Kwa (Morice River)" according to the media co-ordinator for the Gidimt'en checkpoint, Jennifer Wickham (Trumpener). This was just one protest set up for this particular movement. Three blockades in total were set up by the Wet'suwet'en Nation to

cut off access to "two work camps in a remote part of northern B.C." (Trumpener). The British Columbia Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor General at the time, Mike Farnsworth, said that these "blockades endanger[ed] dialogue and 'good faith commitments' between the Office of the Wet'suwet'en and the province, and also breach a court injunction against blocking access to pipeline worksites" (Trumpener). While Coastal GasLink says that they are "committed to dialogue" they cite the "support of all 20 elected band councils across the pipeline route" as *permission* to violate Indigenous sovereignty and ignore the traditional unceded land rights of the Wet'suwet'en (Trumpener). Unfortunately, the Coastal GasLink company has used internal community politics to pit Indigenous peoples against themselves. While the band council voted in favour of the pipeline, "Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs have opposed the project, saying that band councils do not have authority over land beyond reserve boundaries" (Trumpener).

These protests are essential in protecting and preserving Indigenous land and culture, which are inherently linked to land. For the Wet'suwet'en, we can turn to Unist'ot'en Hereditary Spokesperson, Freda Huson, for a community-specific reading of the importance of land to the Wet'suwet'en. Huson says, the Wet'suwet'en peoples' "belief is that [they] are part of the land. The land is not separate from [them]. The land sustains [them]. And if [they] don't take care of her, she won't be able to sustain [them], as [they] as a generation of people will die" ("Background").

Fig. 6. APTN coverage of Wetsuwet'en Blockade, Amanda Polchies standing off in front of a wall of RCMP officers.

Conversely, Figure 6 offers an alternative perspective. This photo of Amanda Polchies, a Lakota Sioux and Mi'kmaw land defender and activist, was used by APTN (or the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network) for their coverage of the Wet'suwet'en Pipeline protests. In the image, Polchies kneels in front of a wall of RCMP officers, an eagle feather held in her upraised hand, her palm open. This position typically is one of vulnerability and submission, but Polchies' spine is straight. We cannot see her face, but her body language tells the officers that while she is beseeching them to stop, she is still not standing down. Her raised arm and outstretched fingers ward them off. Judging by the placement of the RCMP officer's feet, they are standing still, rather than approaching forward. For now, in the moment of this image, Polchies is holding the line and defending the land. The photographer is positioned directly behind Polchies, aligning the viewer's vantage point with her, allowing us to metaphorically stand behind her and take her back.

There is a certain level of performativity at work in public activism. Activists are literally putting their bodies on display in order to make a statement. This perspective can get reflected in the 'reading' of the activism photos. Are the figures that are being highlighted activists or actors? If we are not able to be present at the site of activism, especially in the case of land-based events and movements grounded in land-centred Indigenous issues, often times the closest we can come to experiencing the event is the surrounding media coverage.

The crux of this issues lies in where this media coverage is coming from. Over the course of this research, I have noticed a contrast in coverage, particularly the photographs used in articles and the framing of such images, between mainstream Canadian news and Indigenous news organizations. More mainstream news sources, like the CBC for example, focus on the blockades or violence that sometimes occurs in the conflict between groups. By focussing on the destruction or breakdown of order within a settler society, mainstream news outlets focus on the violence in order to position Indigenous activism as terrorism, positioning the Canadian military and police as *peace keepers*. Conversely, Indigenous news outlets focus more on the on-the-ground activism, especially surrounding the movements of land sovereignty and land-rights activism. These media sources are concerned with keeping Indigenous voices grounded in the activism, as well as a more distinct focus on treaties (and the breach of them), unceded land, and the neglect of these land rights.

In pairing these photos of activism alongside my analysis, I intentionally position these photos as entry-ways into Critical Dispositioning. Critical Dispositioning is a consistent and sustained process. It is a kind of goal to strive for, one that is always incomplete. Critical Dispositioning, as a framework, calls for the settler-scholar's struggle when engaging with Indigenous materials, as this struggle highlights the attempt at ethical engagement, rather than lets the

scholar *off the hook* through an escape of the responsibility everyone has to the material they engage with. Distance is not a tool for settlers to absolve themselves of responsibility, but rather a way to 'widen the lens' and be able to see perspectives beyond the frame of the photo. Because of this sustained struggle, the process is an ongoing one, rather than a tool for settlers to use and apply universally without critical engagement, which is oppositional to the kind of critical distance of Critical Dispositioning. I would like to make it clear that this methodology is not one to be used as a tool for settlers to insert themselves in and claim space within Indigenous texts. It is also not a tool that leads to a final destination, a culmination of ethical engagement. Because this is a process, one that is always in motion, the engagement needs to be continuous, reciprocal, and ongoing.[5]

In the examples of Critical Dispositioning throughout this paper, I have been highlighting moments for settler-scholars to step back, reassess their claim to or bias towards the material being considered, as well as signalled where Indigenous voices and frameworks should be inserted or used to analyze material so as to not inflict Western frameworks upon them. While I make these suggestions through Critical Dispositioning, I also want to make it clear that I do not presume to have erased my own internal biases or to have completely absolved myself of my own preconceived notions. I think that these things are inherent in our identity and while we can become aware of them and when they are filtering our perceptions, it is impossible to remove ourselves entirely of bias. But, I do think it is possible to see the biases that I hold as layers of myself, something that can be peeled away in order to see other positions within and through.

While I know that it is impossible (and highly unethical) to claim to see from an Indigenous perspective as a settler, my hope, through Critical Dispositioning, is to still attempt to observe each text, and in this case photograph, within its own context. Through Critical Dispositioning, I am able to see each image as connected to and within its own framework of cultural specificity, as well as part of deep historical, spiritual, and community-based frameworks of significance. By 'dispositioning' myself, I can become more self-aware of my worldview, my biases, and the privileges I hold and perceive the world with, while also being able to step to the side, to un-position myself and view the world from a different vantage point. Through 'dispositioning,' I can, as I hope other settler-scholars will try to, find the ethical middle ground when viewing and analyzing Indigenous materials.

5 Dialogue and continued reciprocity between settlers and Indigenous groups is essential in order to keep this work ethical (see Ermine; Kovach).

5. Conclusion

Putting this in context, I am reminded of Judith Butler's work in *Frames of War*. Butler reminds us that "When a picture is frame . . . the frame tends to function, even in a minimalist form, as an editorial embellishment of the image, if not a self-commentary on the history of the frame" (35). When considering framing in protest photography, an observer is looking into a fragment of time and space, doing what Butler sees as seeking "to contain, convey, and determine what is see . . . depend[ing] upon the conditions of reproducibility" (36).

Butler's work establishes the frame as an integral part of the reading and meaning-making process. She says that "the frames through which we apprehen . . . are politically saturated. They are themselves operations of power" (29). This is essentially highlighting the crux of Critical Dispositioning. Butler, here, is reminding us that the frames used to perceive or understand a work through are inherently steeped in politics. I would like to push this further to consider the implications of bias beyond the political realm. This saturation of bias in our perception highlights the need for an ethical framework like Critical Dispositioning, especially for settlers trying to enter the frame of Indigenous (or minority) texts without ethical grounding or intentions. Convexly, when highlighting the potentialities for unethical work, we are calling the frame into question. Butler sees this as subsequently "show[ing] that the frame never quite contained the scene it was meant to limn, that something was already outside, which made the very sense of the inside possible, recognizable" (35). The frame itself may seem to help contextualize what it seeks to contain, but cannot contain the image itself. It will never be able to offer the same scope of context than if someone were to experience the event being pictured first hand; the image will never reproduce the actual experience, though it may get close. The best we can hope for from such images is that they serve as a reminder or recognizable signpost to draw our attention towards, to learn more and go beyond what is presented within the frame.

Butler sees the frame as incapable of pinning the frame in place. If we see the frame as the container of the image, especially in the case of protest photography, then the frame's inherent inability to fix its meaning or temporal place must be part of how we read the photographs themselves. Butler reminds us that "the frame does not hold anything together in one place, but itself becomes a kind of perpetual breakage, a subject to a temporal logic by which it moves from place to place. As the frame constantly breaks from its context, this self-breaking becomes part of the very definition" (36–37). If self-breakage becomes a necessary part of the frame's construction, then the frame's inability to pin down an image in one temporal or geographic place highlights this rupture. This, in turn, makes the frame a necessary aspect of Critical Dispositioning.

When using this methodological framework, one needs to know where they stand in relation to the text or image they are analyzing in order to know how and with what limitations they can 'disposition' themselves. In regards to these protest photographs, I know that my positionality as a settler-scholar, as well as someone living in Ontario (within a colonially Canadian context but also removed from Quebec and British Columbia, the two provinces where the activist movements I looked at took place), I need to approach these photos with a degree of skepticism and critical detachment, or *dispositioning*. While images taken by both Indigenous and settler photographers require different modes of interpretation and context, my positionality as a settler remains the same, which calls for an equal need of this self-reflection and critical distance when engaging with both kinds of photographs and contexts.

Being aware of the framing and context of protest images, focusing on their source and the photographers themselves, can all be ways to try to mediate bias. Indigenous land protests and activism are integral to keeping space open for Indigenous voices and presence, and do important work to counter the ongoing process of colonialism and settler imposition. It is necessary for non-Indigenous scholars to consider this framing and context in order to avoid recapitulating narratives of inequality and positioning Indigenous activism in a negative light.

Appendix A

Toolkit for Ethical 'Reading' with Indigenous Texts for Non-Indigenous Scholars and Readers

Note: This Toolkit can be used as a checklist for non-Indigenous settler scholars who wish to engage ethically with Indigenous or other minority texts. This Toolkit is intended for settlers and non-Indigenous scholars of Indigenous literary studies who are interested in prioritizing ethical engagement in their reading practice. My goal is to provide a list of questions to consider when beginning this work of ethical engagement. By no means is this an extensive list, nor can a non-Indigenous scholar use this list to 'justify' not continuing the ongoing process of ethical reading of texts.

Critical Dispositioning is a tool for settlers to use to create intentional and critical distance between themselves (i.e. their positionality and all the biases and preconceived notions they hold) and the Indigenous text they are viewing. This methodology demands the onus for additional research and locating of community-specific theory and frameworks to apply to reading of Indigenous texts be placed on the settler-scholar. This Toolkit is one entry-point for applying

Critical Dispositioning as a methodological lens to future work of settler and non- Indigenous scholars of Indigenous literary and creative production.

This Toolkit can be used as a springboard for ethical course design, developing a personal research praxis, or for interested scholars or non-academic settlers to guide reading of Indigenous texts. This can also be used as a pathway into larger conversations of ethical scholarship alongside Critical Dispositioning to highlight personal bias and find a separate, ethical space for settlers to read, analyze, and engage with Indigenous texts.

Questions to Consider

How to Practice Ethical Engagement with Indigenous Texts as a Settler Scholar

- What kind of text are you examining? (Document, photograph, etc.)
- What source is this text coming from?
- If the text is written by an Indigenous author, what specific community-framework is being applied to the text?
  - When interpreting or analysing Indigenous texts as a non-Indigenous or settler-scholar, it is important to apply community-specific frameworks to these texts, rather than use Euro-Western methodologies.
- What language is this text written in?
  - Consider the implications of reading an Indigenous text in a colonial language (English, French, Spanish, etc.)
  - If the author includes Indigenous words or passages, how is the language treated? Is it set off from the text in italics? Is a translation (on page, footnote, in an appendix) provided?
  - If no translation is provided, examine your reading experience. Do you feel like an outsider from the text? Is there productive *dispositioning* that could arise from this feeling as a way to derive meaning from the text?
- How has the text (or surrounding issue) been framed?
  - Consider Judith Butler's *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* for further reading on the political framing of photographs.
  - Whether it is a creative or academic text, what kind of social, political, geographical, economic structures or frameworks is the author drawing on? How do these things, when you are aware of their existence, play a role in your interpretation of the text?
- Does the language surrounding the issue feel charged? Is the bias clear?

  - Either consider the text itself, or the context or captioning of a non-textual document.
  - If yes, what way does the bias lean? Is there political language being used explicitly?
  - If no, then the bias is more hidden, can you close-read aspects of the article or text to find where its *creator* might hide their bias? Why might they do this? Is this a conscious or unconscious choice?
- What details in the text stand out to you? Why?
  - In a piece of literature, look at literary devices.
  - In a photograph, look aspects of its composition and framing.
  - In another kind of text/object, look at what different elements would go into its composition.
- How do these details change or impact your reading of this text?
- Were there any moments that stood out for you, as a settler, that highlighted your removal from the text? Were there any moments where *dispositioning* yourself was necessary?
  - Consider these moments, if you experienced them, and use them to springboard further reading and engagement. Discomfort, while unsettling, has the potential to create a productive space for ethical analysis.

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Everyday Magic or Winter Haunting? Kevin Sullivan's Supernatural Re-Visioning of L. M. Montgomery's *Jane of Lantern Hill*

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ABSTRACT
L. M. Montgomery's *Jane of Lantern Hill* employs the *natural* magic of "Jane Victoria" Stuart's environment to convey psychological changes and healing for the main character in what appears to be an *immersive* fantasy comprised of a Prince Edward Island that provides a magical setting for Jane's emotional and social development. In contrast Kevin Sullivan's film adaptation, *Lantern Hill*, employs the magic of the supernatural to achieve those same psychological impacts on *Victoria Jane* in something akin to an *intrusion* fantasy, in which ghosts and haunting dreams propel both Jane and the viewer into an almost-Gothic Prince Edward Island. This article explores the impact of those changes and suggests that the magic of Montgomery's story, which can be revealed over time through beautiful imagery and language in the novel, must be conveyed quickly through highly visual and auditory means in the film, raising questions about the gaps created between *natural* and *supernatural* magic and how those gaps change the meaning or outcome of the story.

Keywords
Adaptation; Fantasy; L. M. Montgomery; Kevin Sullivan/Sullivan Entertainment; Magic; Supernatural; Nature

1. Introduction

Practical magic, natural magic—these describe changes that take place in the titular character of L. M. Montgomery's *Jane of Lantern Hill* (1937). "Jane Victoria" Stuart's transition from awkward and oppressed to self-possessed, capable young lady is tightly bound up with freedom to explore her interests, make new friends, and immerse herself in the natural world when she begins to spend summers in Prince Edward Island with her father. Kevin Sullivan's made-for-television film adaptation, *Lantern Hill*, produced in 1989 and aired in 1990 (Sullivan Entertainment, personal communication), spins the story 180 degrees. Sullivan's work, which closely corresponded to McClelland and Stewart's November 1989 reprinting of Montgomery's novel (Penguin Canada, personal communication), shifts the action from the novel's focus on the everyday magic of summertime and friendship to a winter setting, haunting the film with the eerie magic of the supernatural, creating a gap between the subtle magic of the novel and the obvious magic of the film. *Lantern Hill* thus becomes a "winter haunting" in which second sight and ghostly apparitions replace a more "natural" magic to illustrate the mental, emotional, and psychological changes "Victoria Jane Stuart" experiences within herself. Perhaps the use of almost-gothic visual portrayals of magic in the film, including tropes such as "dark and stormy nights" and an "attempt to scare us" as well as Jane (Fowkes 2), allows for an easily accessible way to unpack the beautifully descriptive and prolific language Montgomery uses in the novel to create a magical atmosphere for her readers. Nevertheless, these decisions nearly eliminate Jane's engagement with the natural environment and instead foreground fantasy elements of the story which are subtle in the novel, encouraging thoughtful questions of how a film may differently transmediate fantasy through sensation in ways that must engage an audience in a limited viewing frame in real time, in contrast with the unfolding magic of nature through the language of the text.

2. Revisioning the Magic

In 2016, Michael Levy and Farah Mendlesohn re-examined the changes in children's fantasy literature over the past 150 years. They carefully discuss the Edwardian period in children's literature, during which Montgomery began writing her novels. Levy and Mendlesohn argue that during this historical moment, which is usually portrayed as an idyllic point in children's literature more generally, children's fantasy was defined—literally—by the safety of a home and a garden (42) which, in the case of Montgomery's fiction, is often broadly defined as Prince Edward Island itself. Characterized by creating Prince Edward

Island as a magical, life-changing place—perhaps even as a "Secondary World" (Tolkien 60)—Montgomery's work continues to reflect this idealized "golden" age of childhood and children's literature long past the end of this period. Ironically and disappointingly, Rosemary Jackson's early work on fantasy literature claims that true "modern fantastic refuses a backward-looking glance" and "focuses upon the unknown within the present, discovering emptiness inside an apparently full reality" (158). Consequently, she dismisses as "'faery' stories and quasi-religious tales," as "nostalgia for the sacred" (158), fantasy authors and literature that are primarily for children (9). Montgomery's work provides one example permitting readers and critics to push back against Jackson's claims and similar theories, such as Todorov's categorization of fantasy as primarily weird and strange rather than magical throughout his text, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Rather than simple nostalgia for a forever-vanished fantasy land of childhood, which Jackson's argument seems to imply, L. M. Montgomery's novel uses the protected magical space of PEI (which challenges Todorov's insistence on weirdness) to allow Jane to grow, change, and challenge her status quo safely. She is also able to see how to change the future by challenging her own past as she works toward reuniting her parents.

This new perspective on Montgomery's work as fantasy resists Jackson's and Todorov's boundaries and brings children's literature back into the realm of the fantastic. Jane and her "tolerable dad," Drew Stuart, are searching for an important characteristic in their perfect home as their first summer together opens. This home will define that safety which Levy and Mendlesohn argue is key to the ambience in children's fantasy literature reflecting Edwardian ideals. The house Dad and Jane find must be "a little house, white and green or to be made so . . . with trees, preferably birch and spruce . . . a window looking seaward . . . on a hill." But, Dad says, "[T]here is one other requirement. There must be magic about it, Jane . . . lashings of magic . . . and magic houses are scarce, even on the Island." Lantern Hill has the requisite features, including "Magic! Why, the place was simply jammed with magic. You were falling over magic" (Montgomery, *Jane* 79, 91, 98). But this "magic" is not the magic of visions, ghosts, and second sight. Instead, it is magic born of Lantern Hill's organic connection to the Island. It is the wonder and awe found in everyday interactions with the natural, real world, a magic which is categorized by Rosemary Jackson as "not to do with inventing another non-human world: it is not transcendental." Instead, "It has to do with inverting elements of *this* world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something . . . 'new . . . and different" (8; my emphasis), as use of the fantastic demonstrating again how Montgomery's work challenges Jackson's own dismissal of children's fantasy. It is a magic that Montgomery's readership might have recognized from other beloved children's novels of the time, such as Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind*

in the Willows (1908) or Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911), with both of which Montgomery was familiar.[1] Such subtle, "realistic" magic stems from a very familiar "literary form" of "the nineteenth century," categorized by "writers like Kingsley [*The Water Babies*] and Carroll [*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*]" who were "well-established figures" and "mainstream novelists, working primarily with realistic conventions" who "also relied upon non-realistic modes" (Jackson 123). Montgomery's work weaves its magic in seamlessly, until it is almost unnoticeable as part of what seems to be the real world. It is the magic of healing and growth that, according to Janet Grafton, Jane Stuart finds as she is allowed the freedom to roam and play outdoors (120–21).

In Sullivan's film, however, the tools for conveying magic and mysticism and portraying psychological change, vary significantly from the novel, with Lantern Hill and Prince Edward Island instead becoming a "focus of haunting and repressed evil" (characteristic of the type of "Gothic" atmosphere presented by the film), rather than "as a site of safety" more common in fantasy (Fowkes 12), as island and home do in the novel. As Meghann Meeusen explains, a film is "a medium in which thoughts are very difficult to represent," so it must "[focus] more fully on the physical, tangible, and external conflict" in order to convey what is represented exclusively through language in a book (36). Thus, while the changes Jane experiences are comparable in film and novel, the performance actively shows changes, and *Lantern Hill* does not use speech or language tools such as voiceovers or diary read-alouds to convey thoughts and emotions or to evoke the imagination of the audience in experiencing the natural magic present in the novel. In fact, very little of the imaginative language from the novel makes its way into the film. Instead, the magic in this film is given a form that is easily identifiable by the viewer, aligning with Alexander Sergeant's argument that "when we watch a fantasy film, the experience seems to be far more reactive than proactive. Rather than letting us imagine fantasy scenarios into being, we are required to experience them onscreen in a way more akin to the way we might see things in everyday life, making the place of the imagination far more difficult to pinpoint and describe" (8). This

1 For reference to *The Wind in the Willows*, see *My Dear Mr. M*: "you sent me this book one Xmas and I've re-read it a score of times and enjoy every reading of it more than the last" (Bolger and Epperly 181). Reference to *The Secret Garden* is made in an unpublished section of a letter to G. B. MacMillan, dated 6 Feb. 1928: "Your Christmas book 'The Secret Garden' was received safely and I am so glad to have it, because I read and loved it many years ago and always wanted to possess a copy but never one came my way. I have forgotten everything about it except that I liked it or that when I find time to read it—as I hope to do after mid-February—I shall have as much enjoyment from it as I had before. Thank you very heartily" (Montgomery, Letter).

creates a space of hesitation (Todorov 25) that seems to lie, for the reading and viewing audiences, between the natural, practical magic of wind and sea and sky that brings about a new life for Montgomery's "Jane Victoria" and the supernatural, ghostly magic which spurs almost-identical changes for Sullivan's "Victoria Jane." As viewers, we are offered "an experience of the fantastic that challenges [us] to think and feel about the narrative events differently from how [we] might otherwise[,] given the impossibility [we] are presented" (Sergeant 37). This necessity of finding new ways to transmediate magic between the novel and the film highlights a point made by adaptation scholar George Bluestone, who argues, "Both novel and film are time arts, but whereas the formative principle in the novel is time, the formative principle in the film is space. Where the novel takes its space for granted and forms its narrative in a complex of time values, the film takes its time for granted and forms its narrative in arrangements of space" (61). Because of the need to play with time and space, Sullivan's production focuses on a supernatural, almost Gothic narrative in order to quickly and efficiently portray long-term changes that take place in one Autumn, lasting approximately 90 minutes in the film, but which take place across nearly three years throughout 200 pages in the novel.

3. Enchanting the Reader

In the novel, it is easy for readers to *see* the many internal changes Jane experiences as she spends her summer days outside in her garden, with her friends, swimming, and walking the fairy-like footpaths in and around her community. "Natural magic" is described through specific language that highlights Jane's jubilant yet, as Elizabeth Waterston calls it, practical and real relationship with her Island environment (202). When Jane returns to Lantern Hill for a second summer, the natural world is personified in the text as embracing her. Outside her bedroom, "a young birch was fairly poking an arm in through the window from the steep hillside," and when Jane goes swimming for the first time that summer, she "run[s] with the wind to the shore and take[s] a wild exultant dip in the stormy waves," throwing herself "into the arms of the sea" (Montgomery, *Jane* 220). The world is alive around her, and the magic of words conveys that vivacity and joy in the everyday, practical magic of the natural world.

Defining this in terms of more recent fantasy scholarship brings the novel into the boundaries of what Brian Attebery calls the "fuzzy set" of fantasy. Fantastical texts, he argues, are not limited by a fixed perimeter at which one may say fantasy ends. Instead, fuzzy sets radiate from a centre point at which there

is a "prototypical [example]" (12).[2] Texts are considered more or less fantastic based on their proximity to that centre. *Jane of Lantern Hill* falls further away from a fantastical centre point, but actively references the idea of magic. Rather than being sword-and sorcery magic, however, the magic in *Jane of Lantern Hill* is evident in story and place. For instance, fantasy and magic continue to inform Jane's relationship to her new world as she learns to garden, discovering she is "one of those people at whose touch things grow" (Montgomery, *Jane* 114), as if she has a Midas touch for living things instead of gold; and to swim in "Magic seas in fairylands forlorn" (105). She goes wandering through the countryside with her father; develops her nascent cooking skills–though she never does learn how to make doughnuts! (133)–and makes friends of children and grown-ups alike. Lantern Hill and Prince Edward Island take on the fairy-tale quality which Elizabeth Waterston describes throughout *Magic Island* as a hallmark of L. M. Montgomery's work, deploying well-developed descriptions and imaginative language to convey readers into the *natural* magic of her story.

If there were any question that Lantern Hill and its environs are magical, simply the names of the many friends Jane makes would satisfy the inquiring mind. They have a flavour of coming straight out of nursery rhymes or fairy tales. The Jimmy Johns evoke Jack Sprat and his wife, but in reverse: Mr. Garland, the patriarch "Jimmy John," is "a little fat man with twinkling grey eyes" (Montgomery, *Jane* 98) while "Mrs Jimmy John . . . was as tall and thin as her Jimmy John was short and fat" (110). The "Solomon Snowbeams were a rather neglected rapscallion family who lived in a ramshackle house where the spruce barrens ran down to a curve of the harbour shore known as Hungry Cove" (111). This calls forth images of both "the crooked man who built a crooked house" and "the old woman who lived in a shoe," while the surname itself, "Snowbeam," seems to connect this family to Jane's imaginary moon world (28). The moon on snow creates a sparkling, bright beam of light, akin to the light the moon casts on both Jane's bed and the harbour during her first magical midnight in PEI (75). "Uncle Tombstone" (108), "Timothy Salt" (115), and "Step-a-Yard" (129) all seem as though they are now-grown-old versions of the foolish characters in "noodlehead" tales or in fairy tales such as "Jack and the Beanstalk," or perhaps the wise fools of so many of Shakespeare's magical dramas. Finally, Ding-Dong Bell's name comes straight from a nursery rhyme (113), though fortunately he does not seem to have tried to drown anyone's kittens in wells. Readers are

2 Attebery believes, with some agreeing and many others disagreeing, that J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is this central point. Disagreement arises from the fact that centering Tolkien not only minimizes fantasy literature of other cultures, but also dismisses fantasy literature published prior to *The Lord of the Rings*.

offered the opportunity to watch Jane's relationships with these many friends develop throughout the novel. Importantly, these friendships are, Rita Bode argues, "facilitate[d]" by nature (80). With rare exceptions, such as the end-of-summer storm she experiences with her father as her first holiday with him draws to a close, Jane constantly interacts with her friends in miraculous outdoor spaces, including her magical garden and the fairy-tale seashore. These friendships, the whimsical names of her new friends, and the location of the friendships in this safe garden-like space of Prince Edward Island not only connect Jane's experience to the natural magic of wind and sea, but also keep her grounded after she leaves to return to Toronto, and keep her centred in herself, allowing her to overcome many of the challenges she has faced in the past.

Consequently, because the natural magic of Montgomery's novel is inextricably bound *with* the story and the place, and bound *by* her lyrical language, the novel may be categorized as what Farah Mendlesohn calls "immersive" fantasy, a fuzzy set in which a fantasy is situated "in a world built so that it functions on all levels as a complete world. In order to do this, the world must act as if it is impervious to external influence" (59). Mendlesohn, whose work both expands and challenges Attebery's definition of the fuzzy set of fantasy, further explains, "The immersive fantasy must take no quarter: it must assume that the reader is as much a part of the world as are those being read about" (59). The natural magic of earth, sea, wind, and sky in *Jane of Lantern Hill* is entirely recognizable to both characters in and readers of the novel, satisfying Mendlesohn's requirement that the reader be an assumed part of the novel's world. Simultaneously, readers are invited into a magical "Prince Edward Island" that has been built through the language and imagery of the text, and which invokes a sense of wonder and longing for the "inner soul" of a beautiful, life-changing world.

4. Natural Magic and Immersive Fantasy

Mendlesohn joins with Michael Levy to point out that, as authors wrote more children's fantasy during the early periods of the twentieth century, child characters more and more "experience the fantastic in the great outdoors, with the outdoors depicted as a safe space in which to explore the fantastic," although they stress that "many of the early fantasies do not" portray children straying far from home as they experience magical events (Levy and Mendlesohn 43). This aligns with a growing body of research into the areas of ecopsychology and its praxis, ecotherapy, which illustrates that human psychological wellness is closely tied to our relationship with the natural environment (Rust; Louv; Korpela et al.; Hawkins et al.). These relationships span a kinship continuum ranging from human-human interactions to human-elemental interactions. Additionally, this

ongoing research shows that, in developing these healthful connections with Nature, humans participate more in acts of care for the environment (Savolainen). For readers of Montgomery, these ideas are already very familiar: from her earliest *Anne of Green Gables* (1908) to *Anne of Ingleside* (1939), her characters engage actively with their natural environments, finding hope, healing, and simple joy in that engagement.

Thus, in *Jane of Lantern Hill*, when Jane arrives in Prince Edward Island and discovers it is a place where children and adults alike can explore and find many ways to connect with others and with the world around them, she—and the reader—feels that she has come home, as indeed she has. As they sit together by the sea, Dad explains, "You may not know it, but it's in your blood. You were born beside it . . . Once I took you down and dipped you in it . . . that was your real baptism. You are the sea's child and you have come home" (Montgomery, *Jane* 79, 92). Drawing partially on "Dad's" declaration of Jane's mystical affinity to the sea and the island, as well as to her ongoing developing relationship with this "home" space, Jennifer Litster concludes that, "[m]ore than any of Montgomery's heroines, Jane Stuart is at one with the land and those who live simply off it—she is a child of the soil as well as the sea" (56). This underscores Jane's relationship to the world around her. Describing Jane as of the soil and the sea illustrates that her connections to her environment span the entire kinship continuum from human to elemental. This container of "home" and a safe outdoor space surrounding home defines the magic we see in *Jane of Lantern Hill*. Even in Sullivan's "Lantern Hill," in which the outdoors becomes a frightening space of haunting, once Jane is on the Island she learns to consider herself at home. She becomes close to Hepzibah in spite of the lack of friendship at school, and continues a developing friendship with her friend Jody, who has followed her to the Island.[3] Jane's increasing sense of home is also characterized by her slowly-growing relationship with her father and her consequent effort to draw her parents back together so that her completed family is also in the "home" space. Thus, the psychological changes illustrated in film and novel are very similar, though the magical methods of portrayal differ significantly.

Montgomery's contemporary readership's familiarity with Prince Edward Island as a magical place which evokes change in characters would have been drawn from past reading experience of Montgomery's extensive body of work. Readers would have seen a similar pattern of the characters' presence in and

3 Jody does not follow Jane to PEI in the novel, but the film portrays her escaping to the Island by stowing away. She becomes an integral part of Jane's quest to find out what happened between her father, her mother, and Evelyn Morrow.

engagement with the natural world as leading to the healing and peace which result from the *natural magic* also present in *Jane of Lantern Hill*.

Before Jane Stuart ever learns that her father is still alive or visits him in Prince Edward Island, she has found ways to care for others and to imagine how she would care for the natural world: "Can I help you?" is the phrase that characterizes her best (Montgomery, *Jane* 18). For example, while under her Grandmother Kennedy's unyielding thumb in Toronto, Jane becomes friends with Jody Turner, the girl next door. Together, Jane and Jody mourn the loss of Jody's semi-imagined rose garden; plan gardens that they know they will never plant in the back yards of Toronto; and dream together about a different childhood in which they are both free from oppressive adults. Privately, Jane also imagines that she tends the moon, polishing it so it shines brightly each night. Her real friendship with Jody—a human-human interaction—and her imagined stewardship for the moon—a human-elemental Nature interaction—sustain Jane, nourishing her and protecting her from the more damaging effects of her grandmother's verbally and emotionally abusive treatment.

The understanding of character relationships to the magic of the natural world, garnered from prior reading engagement with Montgomery's canon, would have meant that her contemporary readers might already expect to see a similar trend for Jane. Consequently, they are enabled to reflect on how the natural magic which characterizes the novel illustrates how Jane changes into a self-possessed young lady who "had somehow learned what to do with her arms and legs and was looking entirely too much mistress of herself," Grandmother Kennedy realizes at the end of Jane's first summer at Lantern Hill (Montgomery, *Jane* 184). In fact, Jane's real relationships with her human and non-human comrades of the Island and her new connections to the magic of the natural environment even replace her ritual of polishing the moon every night, showing a change in her imaginative play as well as in her mental and physical health. These many changes in Jane, brought about by her interconnectedness with Lantern Hill and Prince Edward Island, eventually make her brave enough to confront Dad about rumours that he plans to divorce her mother and marry an old flame, Lilian Morrow (267, 273). This bold confrontation, of which Jane never would have dreamed before becoming immersed in what might be called a "wild magic" on the Island, brings her parents back together again, resulting in a "happily ever after" for the Stuart family.

5. Supernatural Magic and Intrusive Fantasy

Perhaps the need to visually convey magic and internal changes (Meeusen 36; Sergeant 8) for Jane explains the space of hesitation (Todorov) between

the everyday natural magic in the novel and the supernatural in the film. A film based on a text, Linda Hutcheon explains, moves "from telling to showing," and so "a performance adaptation must dramatize: description, narration, and represented thoughts must be transcoded into speech, actions, sounds and visual images. Conflicts and ideological differences between characters must be made visible and audible" (40). Thus, in contrast to the natural magic which "Jane Victoria" (Montgomery, *Jane* 70, 110) finds so abundantly on the Island, the "Victoria Jane" of Sullivan's *Lantern Hill* (00:07:08) is surrounded by the world of the supernatural. Even the change in her name suggests a focus on the supernatural: "Jane Victoria" in the novel is focused on practical natural magic suggested by her first name, while "Victoria Jane" in the film experiences what might be seen as a Victorian/Gothic ghost story suggested by her first (though admittedly unused by herself) name. Thus, rather than aligning with the possible "immersive fantasy," the film instead portrays what Farah Mendlesohn calls an "intrusion fantasy," in which "the world is ruptured by [an] intrusion which disrupts normality and has to be negotiated with or defeated, sent back whence it came, or controlled" (115). Sullivan accomplishes this by adding characters to the film, specifically a clairvoyant called "Hepzibah" and the ghost of Evelyn Morrow, who "intrude" into Jane's world through dreams and visions. In the film, Evelyn Morrow is the sister of Lillian Morrow; both were good friends to Jane's Dad and her Aunt Irene (*Lantern* 00:33:10). Evelyn died in a car accident around the time of Jane's birth, approximately 11 years before the action of the film: "Jane, your mother left your father when you were a baby," her cousin states (00:04:47), and another student at Jane's school exclaims, "There was some simply ghastly scandal, wasn't there?" (00:04:56). Hepzibah, on the other hand, lives near Lantern Hill in Prince Edward Island and is considered witch-like by the community.

The haunted feel of Sullivan's film is heralded by a storm which breaks during the moment when Jane's mother first tells her that her father is still alive, moving audiences toward that Gothic feel that Katherine Fowkes states is characterized by such "themes and iconography" as the "dark and stormy [night]" (2). The wind and rain blow open the window of Jane's Toronto bedroom, creating a visual experience that sets a darker tone for Jane's eventual sojourn to the Island. During the storm, she dreams about a woman she later learns is "Hepzibah." In the dream, Hepzibah speaks one line while holding out a letter: "It's hard to forget someone like that" (Sullivan, *Lantern* 00:20:03), repeating a sentiment Jane's mother, Robin, expresses the evening of Jane's first dream (00:18:45). Hepzibah gives no further explanation of her actions or of the letter, leaving Jane spooked and upset. In this *intrusion* into Jane's otherwise humdrum reality, Sullivan creates a haunting auditory experience for the viewer as well as a visual one: Hepzibah's voice is deep, far-away, and resonant. The music accompanying her appearance sounds like eerie windchimes and her face is obscured by mist and

streamers of filmy white cloth which form a veil blowing in the wind. Together, voice, music, mist, and veil are reminiscent of the darker side of Montgomery's fiction, a perspective which, Christiana Salah explains, "is pervasive," with "sites of unease and even terror recur[ring] throughout her fiction" (98). In this way, Sullivan also invokes the feeling of the "sublime," which Edmund Burke defines as anything that elicits the "strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling," including terror, pain, and danger (58–59), such as that which Jane feels as she tries to make sense of these uncanny events. The prophetic dream creates a ghostly image which frightens Jane. Instead of the comforting and healing relationship with the natural environment which the Jane of the novel experiences, Hepzibah's first appearance both echoes and foreshadows the Jane of the film's upcoming experiences of her father and Prince Edward Island. This suggests Hepzibah has a supernatural ability to see the future and to project herself into Jane's present. It also implies that Hepzibah can orchestrate events in others' lives, drawing people to her and helping them take steps to bring about changes that they might not have considered making alone.

In contrast to the novel, the storm and first dream of Hepzibah set a darker mood in the film, foreshadowing *sites of unease* and *terror*, and underscoring the purpose of this shift in tone as a means of moving Jane rapidly into the realm of the supernatural in order to propel her forward toward the psychological and emotional changes she must experience in order to mature. Through introducing Hepzibah and the ghost of Evelyn Morrow into the story, by foregrounding Evelyn's letter, and by using dreams, visions, and second sight to bring Jane together with these other two characters, the film invokes Alexander Sergeant's description of how "phantasy" informs fantasy films. He explains that the term "phantasy" is used "to describe a set of psychic activities that include dreams, daydreaming, and the wider ability human beings have to imagine situations beyond the physical constraints of the world around them." As a result, he argues, "[f]antasy cinema takes its name partially from this namesake activity and, as such, has been and continues to be associated with the act of phantasizing as a key component of its generic identity" (6). These dreams and visions in Sullivan's film thus help to visualize/actualize the imaginative life of daydreams in which Jane of the novel lives after she goes to bed at night although, as has been demonstrated, the film's supernatural twist darkens the tone of the "phantasy" and the fantastic in the story.

6. The Seer

In keeping with the emphasis on the supernatural as important to the psychological, Jane looks for help in Hepzibah's use of second sight, instead of seeking

for strength and support from relationships with friends, both human and non-human. Hepzibah, the clairvoyant, is witch-like in her appearance, particularly in Jane's dreams, with greying hair styled in a knot, a shawl, and a dark-coloured dress, veiled behind streamers of flowing, misty material and seated on a large chair with an intricately designed wicker back (Sullivan, *Lantern* 00:20:03, 00:38:03). Hepzibah's location in the stereotypical house in the woods, and her spinning wheel (01:06:22), add weight to her supernatural characteristics. Like "Little Aunt Em," her counterpart in Montgomery's novel, Hepzibah's presence in the film guides and provides information to Jane through the experiences she has while she is on Prince Edward Island, helping her to find the inner strength she needs to overcome her fears and to formulate solutions to the challenges she faces from her family and from the community. Hepzibah comforts Jane, as well as pushing her to be a better version of herself. When Jane is frightened, cold, and lost, Hepzibah's magical ability draws her back to the house in the woods, where Jane finds companionship, warmth, and tenderness. In fact, Hepzibah's house is more magical in the film than is Lantern Hill itself, epitomized by Hepzibah's statement, "I've been watching you all your life" (01:07:06), which would have been impossible without magic. Hepzibah's home also forms a more central location to the events of the story than does Lantern Hill. Jane's psychological change and growth take place at Hepzibah's house rather than at Lantern Hill, which reinforces the need for Hepzibah and her location to be represented as magical.

7. . . . And the Goblin

While Hepzibah is an addition to Sullivan's film, intended to reinforce Todorov's space of hesitation created by the supernatural magic, she has a "natural" counterpart in Montgomery's novel. Among the many human connections Jane creates while in PEI, her one-time meeting with a character called "Little Aunt Em," whose "invitations are like those of royalty in this neck of the woods" (*Jane* 153), is perhaps the most fantastic encounter and certainly one of the most important, because she enables Jane to enter a past in which her parents are still together. Descriptions of Aunt Em reflect a sense of magic about her. She is "about as high as my knee," Drew Stuart explains, and is "a wise old goblin" who "once blew over the harbour and back" (153). This places her in the category of the fairy folk of the so-called Old World, which situates her to have knowledge about people and things that others in the neighbourhood might not have. In truth, this knowledge is gained from her age and her long-term residence near Lantern Hill, rather than from second sight or any other supernatural ability, though it seems magical to Jane, who has long struggled with understanding what happened between her parents.

Little Aunt Em's location down "that little side-road" (Montgomery, *Jane* 153), a "timid little red road, laced with firs and spruces, that tried to hide itself by twisting and turning" (155), connotes a magical location entrenched in the natural world. The fairy-like nature of both the character and her location is almost overemphasized when Jane finds and drinks from "a deep, clear spring, rimmed in by mossy stones," as she walks "down a fairy path between the trees" on her way to Little Aunt Em's house (156). This hints that in order to gain all she can from visiting this fairy-tale cottage in the woods, Jane has to leave the real world behind her, and the spring, as well as drinking from it, provide the threshold into a different world. To cap the witch-like nature of the experience, Little Aunt Em is, like the fates or George Macdonald's elder Princess Irene, "spinning on a little wheel set before her kitchen door, with a fascinating pile of silvery wool rolls lying on the bench beside her" (156). The image of silvery wool sounds like a reflection of the moon, which has played a significant role in Jane's life before Lantern Hill, and sets up a contrast to most of the witches or spinning wheels that contribute to the magic in fantasy and fairy tales. Instead of frightening Jane, Little Aunt Em provides her with much-needed comfort and information about her parents and their relationship to each other, as well as how they felt about Jane at her birth. This in particular has been—and remains—a sore spot for Jane, who feels increasingly that she is the reason her parents separated, that she was unwanted and became a point of contention between them (158, 169, 261). Aunt Em is able to tell Jane that her mother and father loved each other and loved her, assuaging some of the hurt. The text suggests that this is at least partially a result of Aunt Em's personal connection to the natural world: she has her own little "untidy" garden; she cares for the little creatures of the woods, planting honeysuckle for the hummingbirds; and she appreciates the contrasts in beautiful colour between the many flowers in her garden and "the dark green of a fir coppice" (161). Like so many of the characters in Montgomery's books, Little Aunt Em sees the magic in the world around her, and through her relationship to that world, is able to help Jane heal emotionally as Jane herself learns to access the natural, practical magic of PEI.

8. The Natural-Supernatural: Reading Everyday Magic

Meeting Little Aunt Em is one of the many ways in which Jane's attempts to make meaningful connections with the natural environment, begun in Toronto, blossom in Prince Edward Island. Another emerges at Jane's arrival on the Island. While Elizabeth Waterston cites Jane's first morning in PEI as the moment of recognition that this new place could be transformative (Montgomery, *Jane* 201), something rather fairy-tale-esque happens during the night. Jane wakes

in the middle of her first night on this "magic Island"—whether at midnight or past we are not told, but it is clear that a witching hour has come and gone, because a "bar of shining light lay across her bed" and when Jane gets up to look out the window, "The world had changed." This change is epitomized by further description of a beautiful night: "The sky was cloudless and a few shining, distant stars looked down on the sleeping town. A tree not far away was all silvery bloom. Moonlight was spilling over everything from a full moon that hung like an enormous bubble over what must be a bay or harbour, and there was one splendid, sparkling trail across the water" (75). The language used to describe this scene invokes a new, different world from the one Jane has grown accustomed to in Toronto. This new place is both ephemeral and untouchable, and as beautiful as the world she has always imagined in the moon—"shining," "silvery," "sparkling." It is also solid, real—with a bed, a window, a town, and a bay, all of which point toward the life to come when she and her father find Lantern Hill and create a home space there, surrounded by its "lashings of magic" (91).

9. The Natural-Supernatural: Seeing Winter Haunting

Sullivan provides a cinematic counterpart to the experience Jane has on her first night in Prince Edward Island in the novel by using Evelyn's ghost and visions of Hepzibah in connection with Jane's sojourn at Lantern Hill, thus solving the problem of how to visually represent that "[t]he old place has magic" (Sullivan, *Lantern* 00:44:50). In the film, Jane's dreams about both the ghost and the seer when she is still in Toronto provide a supernatural, gothic transition into the Island as opposed to the natural, fairy-tale change at the witching hour of midnight. This re-visioned version of the story is, Colleen Dewhurst-as-Hepzibah explains, "so mysterious . . . like out of those old English novels, you know, the Brontës and everything. It has that kind of feel to it" (Sullivan, "Behind the Scenes" 00:01:25).[4] In other words, it plays with familiar images of the British Gothic genre, popular in the Victorian period. Thus, the film falls more in line with some of Montgomery's other stories and novels, such as the *Emily* series, in which Emily Byrd Starr has second sight; Anne Shirley's "Haunted Wood"; or short stories in which the supernatural plays a key role, such as "The Closed Door," "The Girl at the Gate" (both collected by Rea Wlimshurst in *Among the Shadows*), or "Fancy's Fool" (collected in *The Blythes are Quoted*). The film

4 Dewhurst plays the character of Hepzibah. When she refers to "old English novels" and specifically mentions the Brontës, she is referring to British Victorian literature, not to Early Medieval English (or "Anglo-Saxon") literature.

contains what Christiana Salah calls the "characteristic tropes" of Gothic literature that emerge in Montgomery's fiction, which can include "ghosts, clairvoyance, prophetic dreams, confinement, isolation, and domestic violence." However, rather than being "in the periphery of the text" (Salah 99–100), the film foregrounds these haunting magical conceits as the means of illustrating Jane's psychological changes.

Jane's intrusive visions of ghostly figures continue when she reaches Prince Edward Island. She first learns about Evelyn and Lillian Morrow from her Grandmother and her uncle before she leaves for the Island. She overhears them discussing the unfounded rumour that Jane's father caused the accident which killed Evelyn (Sullivan, *Lantern* 00:23:52). After Jane arrives on the Island, she learns from her new schoolmates that those rumours are alive and well. Many members of the community still speculate that Drew Stuart caused Evelyn's death by pushing her car over the North Shore cliffs—a horrifying burden for Jane's father to carry. On her first night in PEI, Jane has a second intrusive nightmare in which she watches Evelyn drive away from a house during a snow storm, while both Jane and her father call after her (00:37:04). The dream ends with Hepzibah once again appearing and repeating, "It's hard to forget someone like that" (00:37:57). The snow, darkness, and cold associated with this dream are unlike the weather the Jane of the novel experiences when she spends summers at Lantern Hill. Instead, the weather and season of the film, both in the course of regular life and in Jane's dreams, highlight the emotional turmoil she faces. They emphasize the supernatural characteristics of the magic in the film as opposed to the natural magic of the novel. They might also symbolize the loneliness Jane feels on the Island. It takes her several weeks to begin feeling comfortable with her father, as opposed to the immediate closeness she feels to him—and indeed, felt before she ever met him or knew he was still alive—in the book. Additionally, she makes few friends in the film, and is bullied and harassed by the children at school (00:50:33), rather than accepted almost immediately, in the novel, as "one of the gang." Jane is confused and frightened by the rumours swirling around her father and by the unkind treatment from her classmates, who suggest that Evelyn Morrow's ghost will take revenge on Jane by pushing her over the North Shore Cliffs (00:52:20). Instead of freely and happily roaming the woods and fields around Lantern Hill, she is afraid to be outside alone.

This fear of the outdoors is enhanced when Jane becomes lost one evening after visiting Hepzibah and is confronted by Evelyn Morrow's ghost (Sullivan, *Lantern* 01:05:17). The calls of owls and ravens create an eerie atmosphere reminiscent of haunted forests. The twilight enhances Jane's feeling of disorientation and fear, while Evelyn's ghost reinforces the use of supernatural magic in the film as a replacement for developing connections with both the natural environment and other humans in order to resolve conflicts. When Jane finds

her way back to Hepzibah's house after this ghostly appearance, Hepzibah explains that Jane is "the only one who can help [her] family now" (01:08:41) and that "Evelyn needs help, too" (01:07:46) because "sometimes a troubled soul needs to make peace with itself" (01:07:51). This implies that Evelyn's ghost is intruding on Jane's world because Jane has the power necessary to resolve the many conflicts in both her own and Evelyn's families.

Further dreams and visions of Evelyn, as well as a lost (or hidden) letter from Evelyn to Jane's mother, apologizing for the misunderstanding which split Jane's parents, add to the supernatural and mysterious feel of the film. The focus on Evelyn's missing letter, which Jane and her friend find in the Morrows' home (01:19:16)—where Aunt Irene currently lives, (00:32:51)—and Evelyn's ghostly attempts to right the wrong through revealing the letter is a significant change from the novel. There is also a missing letter in the book, but that letter was from Drew Stuart to his wife, Robin, begging her to come back to him and attempting to resolve the misunderstanding that caused their separation (Montgomery, *Jane* 171). However, rather than a supernatural discovery of that letter, as of the letter in the film, in the novel Jane learns that her mother never received her father's letter because her grandmother destroyed it through jealousy and spite (265). Ultimately, of course, the film has the same happy ending as the novel, but the method of achieving that goal emphasizes Jane's growth and change by making her psychological conflict immediate, "visible," and "real" through dreams and visions, ghosts, and a seer. The goal is achieved when Jane delivers the lost letter to her father on behalf of Evelyn's ghost, leaving it out where he'll find it (Sullivan, *Lantern* 01:29:11). Consequently, Jane is able to negotiate with the "intrusion" represented by the ghost when she sees it one final time. Jane has Evelyn's letter with her, but she tears it up and says, "It's all right, Evelyn. The letter won't make any difference anymore. Dad's got to do the rest on his own. Rest now, Evelyn" (01:39:37) As Evelyn slowly vanishes from sight, the scene transitions through mist and veil to Hepzibah, who looks outward to the audience, as if she has seen or heard what Jane has said. She smiles, sighs, and sinks back into her chair, signifying that Evelyn's ghost has finally been laid to rest and Hepzibah's role in Jane's life is complete (01:40:01). For all three characters, this moment serves as a release from the "intrusion" fantasy (Mendlesohn) and propels the film to its resolution—a return to traditional family life for Jane and her parents who, as in the novel, realize they still love each other (Sullivan, *Lantern* 01:43:34).

10. Conclusion

Practical magic, natural magic—or supernatural, fantastic magic? Summer sun or winter haunting? Linda Hutcheon reminds film viewers and critics alike that

an adaptation is always its own story, whether tightly or loosely based on an original text. Adaptations may be "derived from" another story, she argues, "but are not derivative or second-rate" (169). Instead, adapters "use the same tools that storytellers have always used: they actualize or concretize ideas; they make simplifying selections, but also amplify and extrapolate; they make analogies; they critique or show their respect, and so on" (3). In order to make the magic come alive and heal in the film, *Lantern Hill*, screenwriter and producer used ghosts, dreams, and seers in order to show the magic, to *concretize* it. They had to find a way to move from Montgomery's so-often-magical language and the beautiful textual imagery it creates for the reader to an all-sensory, almost tangible magic that would be easily identifiable for the viewer. Nevertheless, through its use of *supernatural* magic, the kind that evokes imagery of ghosts, witches, and other worlds, the film eliminates one of the most important mechanisms of Montgomery's original text: Jane's relationship with the natural environment. Instead, the film creates an *intrusion fantasy* that opens a space of hesitation between itself and the novel's *immersive* natural magic of love, friendship, sunshine, wind, and sea—which have a numinosity all their own—in bringing about the denouement for L. M. Montgomery's Jane in Kevin Sullivan's re-visioned *Lantern Hill*.

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From Villainess to Gilead's Nemesis: The (Un)easy Rehabilitation of Aunt Lydia

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ABSTRACT
The article takes under scrutiny the evolution of the key antagonist from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, namely, Aunt Lydia. In the sequel to her most popular novel, that is, *The Testaments*, the author boldly rewrote the villainous Aunt as Gilead's undercover agent, forcing the reader to reconsider their own perception and reception of this character retrospectively. Predictably, many critics and fans found the said transformation implausible. Taking *The Testaments* as a point of departure, the article rereads the original tale, which, astonishingly, discloses a number of equivocal passages that in fact might provide credibility to Atwood's audacious refashioning of Aunt Lydia as a Mayday spy. The article offers a reevaluation of Aunt Lydia's villainy in *The Handmaid's Tale* through the lens of her undercover identity, revealed in *The Testaments*. Firstly, it dissects the techniques and ploys the author used in the sequel to breed readers' empathy for hitherto despised Aunt Lydia. It focuses on the overlap between the transformation of her character and the shift from the original novel's criticism of second wave feminism towards the sequel's embrace of the fourth wave. Finally, and most importantly, it discusses a selection of equivocal fragments from *The Handmaid's Tale* that specifically pertain to Aunt Lydia.

Keywords
The Handmaid's Tale; *The Testaments*; Gilead; Feminism; Sisterhood; Rereading

1. Introduction

The aim of the article is to take under scrutiny the evolution of one of the key antagonists from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, namely, Aunt Lydia. Though the vast majority of reviews of *The Testaments* are laudatory,[1] some claim the book did not live up to its predecessor.[2] There are also voices that have specifically found the transformation of the villainous Aunt implausible,[3] while others refused to condone her deeds altogether.[4] The most disparaging evaluation of the character of Aunt Lydia seems to come from Madeleine Kearns, who considers her "the novel's fatal flaw" and "little more than a plot device used to demonstrate female 'agency'" (42). Coral Ann Howells, an Atwoodian critic of long standing, perceives the protagonist as "the latest in a long line of 'spotty-handed villainesses,'" "a keeper of secrets and a ruthless strategist who finally gets her revenge" ("Atwood's Reinventions" 20).

For more than three decades Atwood resisted going back to the Republic of Gilead despite her readers' recurring queries about the ultimate plight of Offred and the circumstances of Gilead's fall. Yet, when history took a sudden turn with Donald Trump's victory in presidential election, the writer decided to

1 In her review of *The Testaments*, Dinah Birch applauds "Atwood's writing is at its incisive best throughout this novel" (23). Ruth Scurr concurs saying that "In *The Testament*s, Atwood succeeds in regaining control of Gilead through words" (33). Brian Bethune hails Atwood's latest novel "as creepily gothic, compulsively readable, and richly thematic and topical as its predecessor."

2 Rebecca Abrams writes that the sequel "falls far short of Atwood's best books" and finds "many of the plot twists in *The Testaments* . . . predictable and contrived." Ramona Tausz also underscores the lack of sophistication that marked Atwood's previous novels and their characters, stating that "In *Testament*s, [Atwood] has simplified her best characters" (44).

3 Tolentino observes that it is "not exactly plausible that Aunt Lydia has been waiting all this time to join the resistance. But her story functions as a parable" (56). A parable is not exactly Atwood's usual writing style. Tausz's criticism is much more bitter as she claims that by "absolving her cruellest female character, Atwood ruins one of her most interesting creations" (44).

4 Brian Bethune responds to Atwood's pronouncement that "There are various opinions about Aunt Lydia," in a light-hearted manner saying "That's not strictly true among fans right now, unless the division is over whether Lydia should be shot or hanged." Julia Kuznetski finds Aunt Lydia "the villain of the series, unredeemable even through her back-story" (293). Sophie Gilbert, nonetheless, sees this need to pardon Aunt Lydia lying beside the novel's point: "Bearing witness, [Atwood's] work has implied all along and now makes explicit, is a crucial step toward liberation in times of crisis, but witness-bearers shouldn't mistake themselves for heroes—or hope to be heralded as heroes by others" (127).

revive her theocratic regime to construct the world which the reader promptly comes to recognize as a thinly disguised America in the Trump Era (Enright). Following the character of Aunt Lydia from the initial days of religious coup, Atwood forced her readers to contemplate the complicity of women in establishing and sustaining a regime like Gilead for, as Atwood tweeted in a response to a desperate student forced to write an essay on control and power in *The Handmaid's Tale*, "Gilead is a theocratic totalitarianism, not simply a Men-have-power Women-do-not world" ("Margaret Atwood offers"). Lucy Feldman observes that Atwood "has tapped a timely nerve with her expansion of the character in *The Testaments*, probing the fraught territory of women's complicity in the bad behavior of men and walking a line that leaves room for readers to debate." Importantly, her article has a direct link that transfers the reader to the issue on infamous Ghislaine Maxwell that allegedly helped late Jeffrey Epstein "recruit and groom girls for sexual abuse" (Enright) in a manner eerily reminiscent of Aunt Lydia's favours to Commander Judd.

The following article offers a close rereading of Aunt Lydia's plot in *The Handmaid's Tale* through the lens of her undercover identity, revealed in *The Testaments*. Firstly, it dissects the techniques and ploys the author used in the sequel to breed readers' empathy for hitherto despised Aunt Lydia. It focuses on the overlap between the transformation of her character and the shift from the original novel's criticism of second-wave feminism towards the sequel's embrace of the fourth wave. Finally, and most importantly, it discusses a selection of equivocal fragments from *The Handmaid's Tale* that specifically pertain to Aunt Lydia.

2. Breeding Readers' Sympathy for Aunt Lydia and Foregrounding Sisterhood

The Ardua Hall Holograph, which is one of the three narrative strands in *The Testaments*, written by Aunt Lydia herself, provides the reader with the thus far concealed and unsuspected information about this character and "reveals a more complex female subject than the sadistic figure from *The Handmaid's Tale*" (Howells, "Atwood's Reinventions" 20). Namely, before the rise of Gilead, she was a middle-aged child-free professional who served as a family court justice. Her backstory, including an abortion at a young age, now punishable by death as the new law is retroactive, a divorce after a failed marriage and voluntary work at a rape crisis centre, reveals her to be a woman with progressive feminist views rather than a religious fanatic or the New Right supporter. Her involvement in the legal protection of women rights is now held against her, which is evident in the way Commander Judd enumerates her work experience as if it was a list of

her own criminal offences "Domestic cases? Sexual assault? Female criminals? Sex workers suing for enhanced protection? Property rights in divorces? Medical malpractice, especially by gynecologists?" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 171). Ironically then, pre-Gilead Aunt Lydia was far more devoted to women's causes and feminist struggles than Offred and her generation, who took feminist gains for granted. In the olden days, she and Offred's mother could have walked hand in hand in women's marches. After the coup, along with other well-educated women past childbearing age, Aunt Lydia poses a threat to the new order for "The opposition is led by the educated, so the educated are the first to be eliminated" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 116). She is presented with an impossible choice, that is, to kill or be killed. For, as Commander Judd makes it explicit, "those who are not with us are against us" (172). Upon turning down the said commander's offer of cooperation, she finds herself confined to the Thank Tank, a form of a solitary confinement, a dark four paces by four cell with a shelf for a bed and a bucket for "human food-by products" (147). Though she initially sets her mind on getting through that experience intact, she soon realizes it is easier said than done, "You'd be surprised how quickly the mind goes soggy in the absence of other people," she confesses, "One person alone is not a full person: we exist in relation to others" (148). The deprivation she suffers is additionally magnified by the daily performance of cruelty and torture involving other female prisoners that pervades the detention centre's audioscape:

> [T]here would be a scream or a series of shrieks from nearby: brutalization on parade. Sometimes there would be a prolonged moaning; sometimes a series of grunts and breathy gasps that sounded sexual, and probably were. The powerless are so tempting.
> I had no way of knowing whether or not these noises were real or merely recordings, intended to shatter my nerves and wear away my resolve. Whatever my resolve might be: after some days I lost track of that plotline. The plotline of my resolve. (Atwood, *The Testaments* 148)

When her defensive powers are already dwindling, the regime administers "a precise kicking, and other attentions" (148), including Tasers, to aid her make the right choice. The cruel procedure is repeated twice more as, Aunt Lydia sarcastically observes, "Three is a magic number" (149). Following her ordeal, she is treated to a three-day stay in a hotel room, where she is offered all the luxuries previously denied: a bed with sheets, towels, a shower and fancy food. And although she "was still in a state of mental disarray . . . a jigsaw puzzle thrown onto the floor," she was able "to think the word *I*" again (150). The subsequent experiences of violence and pampering, which the protagonist compares to "a recipe for a tough steak: hammer it with a mallet, then marinate and tenderize" (170),

turns out to be effective. Confronted anew as to the prospective cooperation with the new government, Aunt Lydia accepts the offer. The test of loyalties takes place in a stadium eerily reminiscent of the venue that was used by the Chilean dictator Pinochet following the 1973 military coup as a mass imprisonment, torture, and extrajudicial execution facility (Pike 30). To prove their allegiance to the Gileadean state, its prospective members must play their part as a firing squad, annihilating those who refused to collaborate. Although Howells maintains that "[Aunt Lydia's] survival narrative and her justification for the choices she has made do not necessarily make her more sympathetic, for she remains a morally compromised figure, who is a collaborator with the regime" ("Atwood's Reinventions" 20), the scenes of torture and breaking of Gilead's opponents effectively forestall the reader from passing easy judgment on her ultimate decision.

Choosing survival, Aunt Lydia joined the upper echelons of power becoming one of the Founding Aunts of Gilead.[5] While the beginnings of her espionage are shrouded in mystery, that is, the reader never overtly learns whether she accepted the offer with every intention of bringing the new regime down, or this resolution came later in her life, she does eventually become Gilead's nemesis through first thorough chronicling and then exposing of the crimes and trespasses committed by influential Commanders. However, she does prompt on a vengeful third eye that coldly observed her oppressors throughout beating and torture and pledged "*I will get you back for this. I don't care how long it takes or how much shit I have to eat in the meantime, but I will do it*" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 133), which would suggest her hidden agenda from the onset. Machała also interprets this passage as the very instance that Aunt Lydia "starts planning her retribution" (193).

The three epigraphs that precede the main narrative seem to prepare the ground for this quite unexpected rehabilitation of Aunt Lydia:

> *Every woman is supposed to have the same set of motives, or else to be a monster.*
>
> *When we look one another in the face, we're neither of us just looking at a face we hate—no, we're gazing into a mirror . . . Do you really not recognize yourselves in us . . .?*
>
> *Freedom is a heavy load, a great and strange burden for the spirit to undertake . . . It is not a gift given, but a choice made, and the choice may be a hard one.* (Atwood, *The Testaments*)

5 For an in-depth discussion of the power relations in *The Testaments* (especially the interrelation between power and the will to survive) set against other Atwood's texts, see Pilar Somacarrera's chapter "Margaret Atwood on Questions of Power."

The excerpts from George Eliot, Vasily Grossman and Ursula Le Guin's novels, respectively, problematize the notion of natural and *unnatural* choices for women, the thin line that divides a victim from a victimizer or people overcome by seemingly diverging ideologies (be it Stalinism or Nazism), and the concept of freedom as a burdensome choice. Altogether, these inscriptions urge the reader to reflect sympathetically on the limited options the villainous aunt, like many people before her, was presented with and refrain from judging too harshly the choices she ultimately made. The fear of prospective condemnation paired with the hope for condonement by future generations links the characters of Offred and Aunt Lydia in the respective novels, for as Michaela Keck observes, "their narratives show ruptures that indicate an awareness of their complicity, which haunts them no less than their traumatic experiences" (19). Although Aunt Lydia is fraught with doubt as to how posterity will assess her because of her role as one of the Founding Mothers, Atwood employs a number of techniques to engender sympathy for her character. As Sarah Ditum reflects, "*The Handmaid's Tale* asked us to sympathise with the inertia of the prisoner; *The Testaments*, even more unsettlingly, invites our compassion with the jailer" (1404). The aforementioned scenes of Aunt Lydia's imprisonment and torture, which are all in all a part of witness narrative and testimony, are genuinely heartbreaking and rather unlikely to leave any reader indifferent. Megan White finds these drastic scenes reminiscent of the experience of Nazi prisoners depicted in Primo Levi's *The Drowned and The Saved*, pointing to the employment of parallel practices of systemic torture and dehumanization in order to forestall any resistance (7). Given Atwood's epigraph from Grossman's novel, White's comparison does not seem unsubstantiated.

Apart from orchestrating a devious master plan to smuggle the evidence against Gilead and its commanders out of the country to Canada, the "tyrannical and simultaneously maternal Aunt Lydia" (Somacarrera 40) is capable of acts of kindness towards other women. Namely, the help she offers to both Agnes and Becka to save them from marriage that they dread is a completely charitable gesture. Providing the girls with a place at Ardua Hall that trains prospective aunts and gives access to knowledge through teaching literacy foregrounds the sequel's shift towards the theme of sisterhood and female agency. Aunt Lydia seems to derive pleasure from Agnes and Becka's education and their progressive discovery of Gilead's fallacies as well as their true family backgrounds. Gaining access to their bloodlines, classical literary works or unaltered version of biblical stories, the girls commence to engage in critical thinking instead of taking things at a (regime's) face value. As Oana Celia Gheorghiu and Michaela Praisler observe, not only does Aunt Lydia write "*herstory*, which becomes the history of the totalitarian Gilead itself," but she also "*brings women to writing* by creating an order of feminine power in its own

right—one that would regain *language and power*, or the power of language, whichever comes first" (94). Reformulating the misogynistic concept of Freudian "penis envy" into a new assertion, namely, that "Pen Is Envy" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 140), thus, superseding the alleged biological superiority of men with literacy seen as a bona fide tool of power, she foregrounds the value of knowledge in female empowerment. Needless to say, denying women access to knowledge, not only Gilead but various regimes, many still in power, have intended to control their fertility and agency and suppress any opposition that may arise from learning that societies may be organized otherwise. The heartfelt Nobel Lecture by Malala Yousafzai (2014), possibly the most fervent supporter of education for everyone, attests to the immediacy of these concerns.

Moreover, the revenge Aunt Lydia orchestrates on Becka's father, a confirmed child molester, also testifies to her engagement in bringing sexual offenders to justice even if her methods are unorthodox since they involve a false testimony from Aunt Elizabeth. The sympathy she shows towards Shunammite, one of the least likeable characters in the sequel, by preventing her from "join[ing] Judd's Blubeard's chamber of defunct brides" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 349) may also be interpreted as a demonstration of her covert ethical stance against gendered violence. The documentation she systematically gathers to help overthrow Gilead tips the scales to her advantage despite her rather unflattering portrayal in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Her character, however, is far from one-dimensional as prescribed by the spy novel genre. The sequel's resonances of "spy thrillers by Ian Fleming and John Le Carré" (Howells, "Margaret Atwood's Recent Dystopias" 172) result in the creation of an undercover agent that is forced to make harrowing choices, including the sacrifice of someone else's life should a cause require that. Yet not all critics are convinced by the necessity for such drastic plot solutions. Michaela Keck, for example, notes that "Lydia's manipulation of Becka is . . . perfidious and reveals that Lydia does not hesitate to exploit the friendship and devotion among others for her own purposes" (28). Nonetheless, the Aunt's own misgivings about the role she played first in creating Gilead and then its fall also breed a significant degree of sympathy for the elderly figure, the way Iris Chase from *The Blind Assassin* engendered mixed response of reproof and pity. Pondering about her complicity in the manuscript known as *The Ardua Hall Holograph* discovered inside a nineteenth-century edition of Cardinal Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Aunt Lydia provides the defence of her own life. Howells views her creation of the holograph as "a reaction to the fear of death" (Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead* 157), referring to the notion Atwood discussed extensively in her collection of essays devoted to writing per se. The critic observes that "Aunt Lydia lives in constant fear in Gilead's world of intrigue. Another of Atwood's spotty-handed villainesses, she is a morally compromised figure, liar and truth teller, keeper of secrets, 'a

female Thomas Cromwell,' as Atwood has described her" (Howells, "Margaret Atwood's Recent Dystopias" 185). Aunt Lydia seems to be fully aware of the fact that the breach between her official persona of a Founding Mother of Gilead and her true convictions that led her to conspire against the regime she had helped to establish may result in questioning the veracity of her words. Hence, the primary aim of her manuscript is to defend herself against the accusations of dishonesty, the same way John Henry Newman wished to "redeem his own personal reputation as an honest Englishman" (Turner 5). The Aunt hopes that posterity will acknowledge her role in the toppling of Gileadean regime rather than "suppose the manuscript is a forgery" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 410), the possibility prompted by Professor Pieixoto during the Thirteenth Symposium on Gileadean Studies. Just as the "powerful, seductive autobiographical narrative of the *Apologia* portrays Newman's Roman Catholic faith and personality as emerging from a Protestant chrysalis through a difficult process of self-discernment, spiritual development, and combat with opponents of dogmatic religion" (Turner 6), so does the Ardua Hall holograph confront the reader with a poignant character transformation propelled by self-reflection, moral dilemmas, deception and struggle against the opponents of gender equality.

While readers are entitled to their own opinion, the three key young heroines see Aunt Lydia as their friend and saviour. Agnes and Becka especially are extremely grateful to her for delivering them from marriage and the former for reuniting her with her half-sister and the mother. In *The Testaments*, "Atwood balances the treachery, jealousy and hatred shown in *The Handmaid's Tale* with values of female friendship and sisterhood" (Labudová 103) or, as Julia Kuznetski observes with reference to the novel and its sequel, "these works expose extreme failures of empathy alongside the quest for a new ethos of partnership and connectivity" (289). The inscription on the monument erected by Agnes, Nicole and their mother (Offred) which says "IN RECOGNITION OF THE INVALUABLE SERVICES PROVIDED BY A.L." is one of the final lines in Atwood's sequel, annotating another lecture by misogynistic Professor Piexoto. This time the final word belongs to female characters and they choose to publicly acknowledge the role Aunt Lydia played in ousting Commanders from power and thus restoring the democratic rule. The original novel is frequently read as a critique of the exclusive and radical character of second-wave feminism that resulted in the rise of postfeminism, understood as a reactionary anti-feminist ideology that many women of the next generation subscribed to (Howells, *Margaret Atwood*; Tolan; Neuman). As Gheorghiu and Praisler note:

> [I]n *The Handmaid's Tale*, the protagonist's generation (women in their thirties or just under) no longer needs the activism of their mothers. They have careers, rights, sexual freedom, and freedom of speech; in a nutshell, they already have

> everything for which their predecessors fought, thus rendering the fight superfluous, until they no longer have anything, and it is too late to fight back. (89)

The Testaments, on the other hand, is unanimously interpreted as the tale of female solidarity and the power of sisterhood as evidenced in all the quoted reviews and analyses of the sequel. Whether every critic or scholar finds this woman camaraderie convincing is a different issue.

The shift in the portrayal of Aunt Lydia from someone who sustains and perpetuates Gileadan regime and wishes to divide and control women into someone that fosters a community of women in Ardua Hall and protects vulnerable teenagers from marital sexual abuse may seem initially implausible. Yet, the careful rereading of *The Handmaid's Tal*e does reveal numerous spaces of ambiguity and allows for alternative interpretations of Aunt Lydia's words or deeds. Most importantly, since Offred's narrative is a first-person account of her oppression in Gilead prior to her escape, the perspective she offers is inadvertently limited to the knowledge she has, which excludes Aunt Lydia's involvement in Mayday resistance. Like many postmodern narrators, as "[t]he perceiving subject [Offred] is no longer assumed to a coherent, meaning-generating entity" and "often undermin[es] [her] own seeming omniscience" (Hutcheon 11). Aunt Lydia's presence in the original novel is primarily circumscribed to "a disembodied voice in Offred's mind which the narrator usually reiterates, but which she sometimes distorts or ridicules"; she is "a cliché, a catchphrase that is ingrained so deeply in every Handmaid's mind that it becomes inescapable" (Machała 193). Thus, in the original novel, she reads more like the narrator's projection rather than an actual character in her own right. In both novels, however, she is a larger than life, quasi Orwellian Big *Sister*, present "everywhere and nowhere" and "cast[ing] an unsettling shadow" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 32).

3. Rereading *The Handmaid's Tale*: Verbal and Non-Verbal Ambiguity

Taking *The Testaments* as a point of departure, I commenced rather skeptically rereading the original tale, which, to my astonishment, disclosed a number of equivocal passages that in fact might provide credibility to Atwood's bold refashioning of Aunt Lydia as a Mayday spy. Since the first novel "is largely silent on the workings of the aunts' minds and motives" and "we have only the deductions of their, largely hostile, observers" (Shead 5), the lacunary character of the titular handmaid's tale enabled Atwood to fill the gaps with new meaning, portraying in minute detail the various machinations among seemingly pious and faithful to the regime Aunts. First and foremost, if the reader, who is fully aware of Offred's control of the original tale and her critical assessment of the

discussed aunt, approaches some of the latter's words without prejudice they do not need to be considered as Orwellian Newspeak but might in fact mean what she says. For instance, when she states that "There is more than one kind of freedom . . . Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 39), she might be referring to the choice she was given herself. Freedom from suffering, torture and death though highly dubious is a privilege in a totalitarian rule. It is always either/or. Telling the handmaids that she is doing her best and it is not easy for her either, while simultaneously blinking, her mouth trembling (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 66), Aunt Lydia does not have to be playing a pretend game of false sympathies but actually voicing her own misgivings about Gilead and the situation all women found themselves in.[6] Her highly sarcastic from Offred's point of view pronouncement that "The future is in your hands" (57) instead of meaning the reproductive powers of handmaids and the rebirth of a nation may refer to their potential for rebellion and the power to change their fate.

On a number of occasions Aunt Lydia's reactions, especially expressed through her body language, are incongruous with the situation. This dissonance between words and gestures might manifest the rift between her official persona and her true self that struggles to resurface. Her sudden outburst of tears at the reminiscence of men and women lying on the blankets in the park, which handmaids take for her piety and pity over fallen pre-Gilead women, can in reality result from grief and loss embedded in her own memories of dates and casual picnics in the park. What seemed to be a theatrical insincere gesture in *The Handmaid's Tale*, in the light of *The Testaments* becomes a genuine reaction stemming from actual anguish at having her own old life dispossessed. Her outburst of laughter, for a change, at Saint Paul's verse regulating the length of women's hair (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 72) clearly betrays that she finds such rules preposterous. The incongruous affect she occasionally displays

6 A similar observation is made by Cristina and Liviu-Augustin Chifane: "From Offred's description, we imagine the Aunts as accomplices of the regime since they run the re-education centers with torture techniques, brain washing slogans, and nursery-rhyme indoctrinations. However, there are clues embedded in the text that indicate an untold story of the Aunts" (1185). The scholars single out two fragments from *The Handmaid's Tale* as potential sites of Aunt Lydia's sincerity: "Don't think it's easy for me either" and "I'm doing my best, she said. I'm trying to give you the best chance you can have" (65). Then they go on to conclude that "Offred reproduces Aunt Lydia's words with the aim to denounce her falsehood and the discrepancy between what she says and what she does. After reading *The Testaments*, one realizes Aunt Lydia's words could have actually been much closer to the truth than we might have suspected" (1186).

signals the artificiality of her adopted persona which she must sustain in order to survive and secure the success of her undercover operations and which is in stark contrast to her actual creed. When referring to the risk that handmaids are taking through their prospective pregnancies that may result in Unbabies and Shredders, Aunt Lydia calls Offred and her colleagues "the shock troops [that] will march out in advance, into dangerous territory" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 115). Her seemingly agitprop slogan "The greater the risk the greater the glory" (115), accompanied by a gesture of clasped hands may be a way of pleading with them to take the risk and oppose Gilead. It may even serve as a clandestine gesture of pleading with and praying for those among handmaids that are already members of Mayday not to give up their subversive practices, which is not unsound for through the inclusion of the character of Ofglen in the original novel Atwood unveils the selected handmaids' involvement in the resistance movement in Gilead.

As Janet Larson observes, "Atwood's witty prose is thick with *double entendre* and allusion, including hidden puns whose meanings dawn on us only later, and outrageous jokes that don't so much dawn as 'bomb'" (496). Aunt Lydia's commentaries and pronouncements are no exception, starting with the notorious quote "Republic of Gilead . . . knows no bounds. Gilead is within you" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 38). If read as a reference to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which is a banned book under the regime but rests securely on Aunt Lydia's private shelf, in which Satan famously claims that "The mind is its own place, and in itself/ Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (Milton 7-8) and hence hell can be made paradise by the power of one's mind, then Aunt Lydia might be seen as the one that encourages handmaids to resist Gilead from within.[7] She might be telling the captive women that they can choose not to allow Gilead to penetrate their minds even if it has repossessed their bodies. In fact, that is exactly what Offred does for, as Janet Larson notes, the eponymous handmaid's "taletelling . . . is her resistance to the Gilead within that brings her to the brink of deliverance from the Gilead without" (497-98).

Aunt Lydia's metaphor of handmaids as the army (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 22), so readily undertaken by the producers of the TV series, and announced as the arrival of a new dawn at the end of season one, may indeed be read as her call for action, for consolidation of handmaids' power and ultimate rebellion. When talking about modesty as invisibility Aunt Lydia does not need to be only preaching but perchance reminding other undercover agents that

7 Aidan Johnson discerns yet another parallel between *The Testaments* and *Paradise Lost*, namely, "Like Milton's Satan, the main narrator, Lydia, is a near-perfect example of a character whose sins make her compelling and even beautiful" (48).

the more pious and humble they seem, the less likely they are to be discovered. Speaking of the mistakes that women in pre-Gilead made that women of Gilead should not repeat, she does not have to be condemning women's feminist choices but rather may be pointing to the disregard the second wave manifested towards motherhood and family structures and its exclusive white middle-class character. True sisterhood should leave no woman out. Aunt Lydia's repeated appeals to handmaids to sympathize with Wives on the account that their situation is not easy either may in fact stem from her desire to consolidate the divided women of Gilead. No woman in Gilead was granted freedom but they were all presented with more or less limited choices.

One of the most intriguing fragments that leaves room for a valid alternative interpretation is Aunt Lydia's decision to share the story of Moira's escape with Janine, who predictably related it to the rest of handmaids. While the Aunt's intention in sharing the secret with Janine is primarily to ask her to spy on her colleagues from Red Centre, her detailed account of Moira's master plan and humiliation of Aunt Elizabeth who was taken hostage did strike as odd from the very beginning, that is, prior to the publication of *The Testaments*. The way it is recounted sounds almost like a manual for a successful absconding. And Moira's getaway tale does sow seeds of hope among her fellow handmaids who share her story widely with one another. "In the light of Moira, the Aunts were less fearsome and more absurd. Their power had a flaw to it. They could be shanghaied in toilets. The audacity was what we liked" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 135). The story of Moira's escape adds fuel to handmaids' resistance, revives their faith in the possibility of breaking out of Gilead. Under the veneer of a request for infiltration, Aunt Lydia's depiction of how easily Aunt Elizabeth was tricked can be read as an attempt at offering the handmaids a beacon of hope. Their guardians can be outsmarted after all.

The other three examples that might have had a counterproductive effect on handmaids' education are connected with the propaganda movies that were shown by the Aunts. Whereas their official aim was to reform handmaids morally and brainwash them into condemning the liberated women of the second wave feminism, which in the twisted logic of Gilead was synonymous with pornography it deprecated, the documentaries acted in fact as a double-edged sword. Firstly, they served as prosthetic memory, reminding of the times when women were free to express their dissatisfaction and protest against violence or infringement of their rights. The inclusion of such slogans as "TAKE BACK THE NIGHT,", "FREEDOM TO CHOOSE. EVERY BABY A WANTED BABY. RECAPTURE OUR BODIES. DO YOU BELIEVE A WOMAN'S PLACE IS ON THE KITCHEN TABLE?" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 129-30) into the broadcast videos might not have been "an oversight" (129), as Offered suspects. Since Aunt Lydia was responsible for crafting propaganda,

she might have selected these rallying cries purposefully in order to remind handmaids of their women power and of the freedom they lost and might collectively try to regain. She knows that "when memories of freedoms fade, compliance replaces complacency" (Shead 5). The choice of these placards is curious indeed for all of them resonate with the situation handmaids found themselves in Gilead, having no control over their bodies or lives. Offred is herself astounded by the use of these films, asking if this is "an oversight, have we gotten away with something?" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 122). Similarly, when discussing another agitprop movie which showed Unwomen, that is, pre-Gilead professional child-free women like Aunt Lydia herself, she does confess that "some of their ideas were sound enough" and "We would have to condone some of their ideas, even today" (121). The comment that the government gave Unwomen money to waste time working as various professionals may also be read as a remark on the contingent nature of governments and their agendas. Reminding handmaids of the pre-Gilead times, Aunt Lydia suggests that governments come and go, or sometimes need to be ousted. Peculiar is also the inclusion of the 70s and 80s porn movies into the moral instruction of Red Centre inmates. Exposing handmaids to scenes of graphic sex, sexual violence or what seems to be snuff movies is highly debatable as an efficient tool of moral reform. Aunt Lydia's urge to "[c]onsider the alternatives" (128) does sound ambiguous. For what alternatives might she have in mind? The inclusion of The Jezebels in *The Handmaid's Tale* exposes the hypocrisy prevalent among the upper echelons that flies in the face of their officially declared chastity. Moreover, through the character of Commander Judd in particular, the sequel makes it evident that the broadcast porn movies do not differ significantly from what handmaids experience within the confines of Commanders' bedrooms either. Thus, the 70s and 80s porn movies, instead of providing a sense of relief from being freed from the allegedly historical and therefore non-extant abuse, *de facto* mirror the handmaids' own experiences of sexual violence in the Republic of Gilead. The alternatives therefore are out of bounds of Gilead rather than with in it. Aunt Lydia's observation "That was what they thought of women, then," (128) sounds highly ironic for how is "then" different from "now" for handmaids? Her voice trembling with indignation may easily express her resentment towards Gilead's treatment of women not merely pre-Gilead past exploitation of female body. In fact, it may refer to the way women have repeatedly been subjugated, abused and violated since times immemorial. Weirdly enough, one of the movies shown at the Red Centre portraying "a woman being slowly cut into pieces, her fingers and breasts snipped off with garden shears, her stomach slit open and her intestines pulled out" (121) is mirrored in *The Testaments* in the biblical story of the Concubine Cut into Twelve Pieces that

Agnes and Becka are taught as part of the Religion class.[8] This Old Testament tale, whose cruelty and senselessness severely upset Becka, is, as Aunt Vidala explicates, "God's way of telling us that we should be content with our lot and not rebel against it" (Atwood, *The Testaments* 74). In this light, violence and cruelty against women are timeless.

The last type of excerpts I wish to single out are, what I dubbed, strategies of survival. Some of Aunt Lydia's teachings are concerned with training Red Centre inmates in forbearance. As an official tool of reeducation of fallen women that the handmaids are considered to be, these exercises in fortitude treat patience as an ultimate virtue. The direct quotation from Milton's "On His Blindness": "They also serve who only stand and wait" (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 33) foregrounds the value of stoic acceptance of God's will even in the face of dire circumstances. After all, the word '*patience*' derives from the Latin word for '*suffering*'. Yet, Milton's words juxtaposed with Aunt Lydia's urging handmaids to think of themselves as seeds in a "wheedling, conspiratorial" (33) voice calls for a fresh reinterpretation. Perchance, they should think of themselves as seeds of dissent, of future revolution. Their patient waiting should not be tantamount to resignation to their plight but should be publicly displayed to lull the Gileadean regime's vigilance. Their forbearance and humility are in fact duplicitous lull before the storm. The double meaning of "stand and wait" is also sustained by Aunt Lydia's call to play a pretend game or to practise the visualization of the Ceremony beforehand. Both these mental exercises enable handmaids to master detachment from their body in the traumatic circumstances that the non-consensual character of a sexual intercourse with a Commander places them in. Dissociating from their body handmaids save up their life energy, which is necessary for survival and overthrowing Gileadean regime. The last quotation that reveals the ambiguity embedded in the character of Aunt Lydia in the original tale, about handmaids power to manipulate men, also reads like an implicit lesson of survival. Although the official doctrine of Gilead does not allow for any sexual activity but for procreational purposes, Offred reads between Aunt Lydia's lines that their sex appeal is a potent weapon that might be wisely used to their advantage. Last but not least, there is not a single

8 In 1983, Atwood wrote an opinion column for *Chatelaine* as part of an ongoing then debate on pornography in which she argued that "it is naive to think of violent pornography as harmless entertainment" ("Atwood on Pornography" 61) especially as it entailed "women getting their nipples snipped off with garden shears, having meat hooks stuck into her vaginas, being disemboweled; little girls being raped" (118). These very concerns found their way into *The Handmaid's Tale*, highlighting the need for censorship of pornographic material as a common goal of some feminists and religious fundamentalists in the late 70s and early 80s.

passage in *The Handmaid's Tale* that portrays Aunt Lydia being either verbally or physically cruel to anyone. It is mentioned that she would occasionally tap a handmaid with a wooden pointer to retrieve an erect pose (Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* 188). In one of the most poignant scenes in the original tale, when Moira is dragged by the other Aunts after having been beaten up, Aunt Lydia actually closes the curtain to obstruct the view. If she wanted Moira to serve as an example for the rest of the handmaids, shouldn't she rather force them to witness her pain and humiliation? Is it not an act of pity and compassion?

4. Conclusion

Aunt Lydia's holograph does not undermine or annul the narrative of Offred. Their stories exist rather in a dialectic relationship with one another forming a diptych. Yet, the disclosure of the Aunt's true identity as a secret Mayday agent, of which Offred was ignorant, calls for a new rereading of the original tale, which "add[s] yet another layer of context to the single most famous novel in Atwood's prolific career" (Bethune). This retrospective view on the original tale reveals multiple passages that are fraught with ambiguity or imply the Aunt's own unequivocal attitude towards Gileadean regime and its laws. Some of her decisions may be read as subversive activity which, veiled as official propaganda, allowed Aunt Lydia, nonetheless, to incite reflective resistance and fuel suppressed anger. Original pronouncements about female camaraderie and cooperation that were treated by Offred, and readers by extension, as twisted theocratic utopia, may be reinterpreted as genuine calls for the need of women's solidarity and consolidation in order to bring Gilead down together. Talking about the mistakes that women who belonged to the second generation of feminists made, Aunt Lydia did not necessarily have to embrace post-feminism, understood as anti-feminism, but, in the light of new information, could have urged the emergence of a new more inclusive feminist movement, which eventually came with the third wave. In the light of *The Testaments*, her character may be read as a female trickster or rather "trickstar,"[9] who "assume[s]

9 It is a term coined by Marilyn Jurich to denote the character's distinctive features from her male counterpart: "The nature of trickster, then, is substantially intensified in the dealings of the woman trickster, the *trickstar*. Sometimes her artifices shock us, motivated as they are by malice and self-interest. At other times, her caprices amuse; and we admire her ability to contrive her way out of confining, even life-threatening circumstances, respect her determination to seek social justice for others. Tradition, however—that tradition supported by male power—often prefers to see the trickstar as menacing, her tricks as self-serving" (3).

a social mission once [she] refuses the status of victim, and justice becomes [her] consuming passion, even as [she] retains many of the appetites of male tricksters" (Tatar 57). Just like Scheherazade, one of the most renowned trick-stars, Aunt Lydia "knows better than to reason, beg, plead, bargain, preach, or scold. Instead, she relies on the only strategy available to the powerless: deceit" (Tatar 46). She is a double agent that accomplishes her devious plan of toppling the Gileadean regime thanks to a cloak of invisibility that she is unwittingly granted by the said regime simply because she is a woman of past-bearing age.

The shift of novels' focus from Offred to Aunt Lydia forces readers to contemplate their own choices should they be required, to review their "own pragmatic indifference" (Tolentino) adopted as part of everyday survival and its consequences for the present day world. Patrick Williams aptly dubs the sequel "a masterclass in placing readers in the grayest of moral areas and asking, what would you do?" (73). In lieu of sympathizing and identifying with a handmaid, that is, a victim, the reader of *The Testaments* is faced with a harrowing question, namely, what if the only possible option of survival was the one of prospective victimizer, of a cog in a Gileadean wheel. As Sophie Gilbert (25) reflects,

> The witnesses [Atwood] portrays in her fiction aren't saviors; they are (or hope to be) survivors, people constrained and compromised by circumstances, and especially worth listening to for that very reason. *The Testaments* highlights this fact by making a more loaded demand than its predecessor did—that readers place themselves in the seat of an oppressor, not one of the subjugated.

Those who read *The Handmaid's Tale* in their university classes in the twentieth century, upon the arrival of the sequel find themselves at a very different point of life, thirty five years older at most. For them, the question of uneasy identification with Aunt Lydia comes from biological changes they have or are about to experience through menopause. Their dwindling fertility would have them trapped at the stadium and faced with the impossible choice: to kill or be killed. This is the question particularly relevant in the times when in the aftermath of *The Handmaid's Tale* series the omnipresent appropriation of handmaid's apparel and phenomena has led to "An instinct toward solidarity [that] had been twisted into what seemed like a private fantasy of persecution that could flatten all differences among women" (Tolentino). Claiming that all women are victimized and persecuted to the same degree erases the complexity of power relations within the society that intersect with race, ethnicity, education, economic status, sexual orientation or gender identity, to name but a few. As Gilbert confirms, "That Atwood might harbor doubts about glorified, monolithic victimhood doesn't come as a surprise" (126). The complexity

of characters from *The Testaments*, among whom many are complicit in the flourishing of Gilead, dismisses its reading as a feminist utopia but it does unequivocally urge the necessity for female solidarity.

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Presence and Absence in Margaret Atwood's *Dearly*

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ABSTRACT
In *Morning in the Burned House* (1995), Margaret Atwood includes a sequence of elegiac poems mourning the process of her father's illness and death. Her subsequent collection, *The Door* (2007), while not explicitly elegiac, explores topics such as memory, aging, death, loss, and decay. These subjects are often central to both traditional and contemporary elegies. Other poems in this volume deal with writing and poetry, examining their capacity to offer consolation in the face of death, a key aspect of elegy. Drawing on critical studies of elegy in contemporary English-language poetry and on the role of elegy in Atwood's poetry, this essay analyses the elegiac dimension of *Dearly* (2020), Atwood's most recent poetry collection. Many of these poems are dedicated to her partner Graeme Gibson, who was diagnosed with vascular dementia in 2017 and passed away in 2019. Through close readings and formal analysis, I aim to demonstrate how these elegiac poems articulate a psychic landscape of mourning where separation after death is rejected and an alternative space for reunion with the deceased is created. Atwood moves beyond simple lamentation, exploring the liminal space between life and death, presence and absence.

Keywords
Margaret Atwood; *Dearly*; Elegy; Poetry; Mourning

1. Introduction

In *Morning in the Burned House* (1995), Margaret Atwood includes a sequence of elegiac poems mourning the process of her father's illness and death. Her subsequent collection, *The Door* (2007), while not explicitly elegiac, explores topics such as memory, aging, death, loss, and decay—subjects often central to both traditional and contemporary elegies. Other poems in this volume deal with writing and poetry, examining their capacity to offer consolation in the face of death, a key aspect of elegy. Drawing on critical studies of elegy in contemporary English-language poetry and on the role of elegy in Atwood's poetry, this essay analyses the elegiac dimension of *Dearly* (2020), Atwood's most recent poetry collection. Many of these poems are dedicated to her partner Graeme Gibson, who was diagnosed with vascular dementia in 2017 and passed away in 2019. Through close readings and formal analysis, I aim to demonstrate how these elegiac poems articulate a psychic landscape of mourning where separation after death is rejected and an alternative space for reunion with the deceased is created. Atwood moves beyond simple lamentation, exploring the liminal space between life and death, presence and absence (Montassine 111).

Section 3, "Reshaping Loss," examines two poems where the speaker grapples with the impending void her partner will soon leave behind. In these poems, helplessness and grief evolve into an active mourning process, moving beyond passive remembrance into a more engaged response to loss. In section 4, "Liminal Spaces," the selected poems portray the speaker's partner as existing in the in-between space that those with dementia often inhabit, caught between life and death. Symbols such as thresholds, doors, and flatlines represent the passage to "the other side," where the speaker continues to reshape the presence of her absent lover. The poems in section 5, "Lost Landscapes as Sources of Memory" depict the memory of vanished landscapes that can be reclaimed through repeated visits, where each return generates new layers of memory. Section 6, "Poetry and Memory," explores the power of poetry to give form to absence and addresses death through the transformative impulse at the heart of all elegiac poetry.

2. Contextualising the Modern Elegy

The experience of death is undeniably universal, but ways of responding to death are both period- and culture-specific. The word "elegy" comes from the Greek *elegeia*, which means "lament," and the term "elegy" in its present use in English literature refers to a lyric poem written in response to the death of a particular person (Uppal 1–6). In his book on the modern elegy in contemporary poetry in English, Jahan Ramazani states that poetry has become an

important cultural space for mourning the dead. He considers that contemporary poets question and subvert many of the conventions of traditional elegies. However, mourning and the ancient literary dialogue with the dead persist in these poets' compositions (1). For Stephen Regan, at the core of the elegiac form, lies the urge to confront the mystery of death and to make the dead live again, if only in the realm of poetry. He believes that there is still a genuine public need for celebrating rituals of mourning and a persistent drive to resort to the consoling powers of art and song in the face of loss (119). According to Ramazani, modern elegists question the propensity of the genre towards the transformation of grief into consolation, refusing the closure, rebirth and substitution and the use of the elegiac composition as a replacement for the person it mourns. They tend to represent mourning as ambivalent, unresolved and sometimes violent. Loss is an open wound and grief is often complicated by guilt. Other times the elegies exude rage and attack the dead. The erosion of social codes of mourning has enabled the modern elegy as a private refuge from the social denial of grief. The often intimate representations of mourning and the dead resist the impersonality of modern mortuary institutions (1–18).

Priscila Uppal, in her work on the contemporary English-Canadian elegy, considers that English-Canadian poets present an alternative elegiac strategy to their English and American counterparts in their response to loss: in their poems of mourning, the living refuse to accept separation from the dead and try to establish a dialogue and engagement with the dead loved ones. She emphasises that many English-Canadian elegies discover the possibilities for healing in language and landscape and use the elegy for reconnection between the living and the dead (13–14). Contemporary English-Canadian elegists "want their dead to return to them and remind them not of death but of the possibilities of continued life and how the past can interact with the present and the future" (37). In her study of elegiac poetry by Margaret Atwood and contemporaries such as Dennis Cooley, Patrick Lane, Libby Scheier, Daphne Marlatt, Anne Carson, and Roo Borson, Uppal illustrates how these poets seek to transition from passive grief to active mourning (39). Their psychic landscapes of loss are populated by dreams, fluid and elusive memories of the deceased, natural elements and multiple voices that challenge the conventional role of the mourner poet whose voice traditionally shapes the mourning process (44). These poetic strategies foster moments of connection and shared experience between the living and the dead, as well as between past, present, and future (265).

Margaret Atwood writes in her volume *Negotiating with the Dead* that all writing involves and responds to a fascination with mortality. Writers descend into the realms of death in search for something of use to bring back to the surface (178). Atwood observes that poets are the ones who "can bring the knowledge held by the Underworld back to the land of the living, and who can give

us, the readers, the benefit of this knowledge" (173–74). The underground is for Atwood the site not only of knowledge but of riches, excitement, the loved, the lost, and other imaginative treasures (Huebener 109).

A number of critics have already discussed Atwood's poems of mourning. Janet Fiamengo shows that topics such as death and the process of mourning have been an ongoing concern in Atwood's fiction and poetry. In *Surfacing*, the unnamed narrator starts a trip to the Canadian bush with the aim of restoring her present life through a search for her father which ends up in her acceptance of both her parents' deaths and her reconciliation with their humanity. *Cat's Eye* also reexamines the narrator's dead parents and her need to forgive them for their human failures. Elaine, the narrator, is aware that her parents' lives have been as complex as hers and that they are part of herself, even though she will never be able to understand them in full (146–48). Fiamengo briefly mentions the presence of elegiac compositions in Atwood's early poetry. In "The Totems" and "Elegy for Giant Tortoises" (*The Animals in That Country*), the speaker laments what we have destroyed. "Girl and Horse, 1928" (*Procedures for Underground*) presents a picture of the speaker's young mother and explores the illusion of permanence pictures create. According to Fiamengo, critics have not considered Atwood's writing in the context of personal elegy because of her poetic voice, which would seem to be aggressively anti-elegiac, something that changes in *Morning in the Burned House* (150). Here Atwood works within and against the traditions of the elegy. She deals with the ambiguous relationships between preservation and loss, and the futility of language to offer consolation in the face of excessive grief and mourning (152–55). Fiamengo suggests that Atwood's elegiac poems feature self-elegy because "mortality is at the root of our relations to others, every act of mourning is also a mourning for one-self, especially with the death of a parent, which prefigures one's own death in taking away the person who stands between us and mortality" (156). Also, in her analyses of Atwood's elegiac poems, Fiamengo states that memory does not provide consolation because the images of the deceased person always elude the speaker (158) and cannot substitute for him/her. These images offer a representation which testifies to loss without achieving consoling substitution (158). Fiamengo concludes that the elegiac sequence in *Morning in the Burned House* articulates the complex gift of loss, which allows the poet to accept her sadness though not overcoming it completely. Atwood is not a religious person, so in the absence of faith, consolation becomes difficult. However, she refuses to succumb to despair and pessimisim (160).

Sara Jamieson agrees with Fiamengo in her appreciation of the ambivalence of Atwood's uses of some of the conventions of elegy in *Morning in the Burned House*. For Jamieson, Atwood tries to write consoling memorial poetry in the context of a secular and materialistic society in which death is often absent. She

portrays her father as a sympathetic and nurturing man, but without idealising him. Atwood's father remains enigmatic, which stresses the writer's limited knowledge of him (40–44). Jamieson supports Fiamengo's vision that Atwood questions the power of the poem in place of the dead man, that it to say, the extent to which writing about a beloved dead person offers any consolation, particularly in a world where a general attitude of death denial prevails. Atwood is aware that poetry lacks big audiences, consequently, its consoling powers may come to nothing. Nevertheless, she seems to believe that mourning rituals are necessary and that they have a value even in the arenas of modern death: the nursing home, the hospital and the cemetery (46).

For critic Pauline Montassine, the elegiac poems in *Dearly* can be considered an elegy-to-be because they were written before Atwood's husband died. By anticipating her partner's death, Atwood gains a sense of control over the future tragedy (110). According to Montassine, Atwood uses poetry not to accept and process separation but to keep the object of loss closer and fight the reality of death. The figure of her partner occupies a liminal space, between presence and absence, in which death can be redefined and relegated (112). Montassine suggests that, in *Dearly*, Atwood questions the assumption that elegiac poetry just expresses sorrow and grief, on the contrary, her poems encourage the reader to redefine separation thanks to art and language. Words retain the loved one through their physical presence on the page (122), and they can metaphorically reanimate the dead loved ones (124).

3. Reshaping Loss

"Late Poems" is the first poem in *Dearly*, acting as an introduction to the rest of the book. The speaker explores the polysemic title, and writes variations on what "late" means, all of them linked with futility and uselessness:

> These are the late poems.
> Most poems are late
> of course: too late,
> like a letter sent by a sailor
> that arrives after he's drowned.
>
> Too late to be of help, such letters,
> and late poems are similar. (lines 1–7)

Poems may be too late to console someone, like the message of a dead person. The enumeration of the information contained in the letter intensifies the

desolation of the addressee who must accept those words as a replacement for the dead one:

> Whatever it was has happened:
> the battle, the sunny day, the moonlit
> slipping into lust, the farewell kiss. The poem
> washes ashore like flotsam. (lines 8–12)

According to Montassine, the repetition of the word "late" provokes a feeling of helplessness. Action seems impossible and hope is lost (122). The fourth stanza reinforces the futility of words because they are "cold or eaten" (line 14), or "thrice-gnawed songs / Rusted spells. Worn choruses" (lines 18–19). The last stanza closes the poem in a circular way, emphasizing the initial idea of futility, "It's late, it's very late; / too late for dancing" (lines 20–22), but this helplessness is suddenly counteracted by a change in the speaker's tone and syntax. Instead of enumerations and passivity, the poetic voice turns to the imperative mode to move the reader into action, in the hope that something can be done:

> It's late, it's very late;
> too late for dancing.
> Still, sing what you can.
> Turn up the light: sing on,
> sing. On. (lines 20–24)

Maybe it's too late for dancing, but dancing is more difficult than singing. Everybody cannot dance, but everybody can sing. The string of imperatives "sing," "turn up," "sing on" creates a crescendo which reaches its climax in the last line "sing. On" (line 24), which echoes "switch on." The speaker insists on continuity and activation, as suggested by the particle "on." Both defeat and counteract the initial helplessness as reaction to tragedy. Poetry is what "washes ashore like flotsam" (line 12), after all is lost, thus allowing for a reshaping of the experience of loss (Montassine 123).

"Invisible Man" describes the future life of the speaker in her partner's absence. It starts in a casual and anecdotic way. The speaker explains how the problem of drawing invisible men was solved in comic books: "They'd solve it with a dotted line / that no one but us could see . . ." (line 4). After this light introduction, the speaker identifies the invisible man with her beloved:

> That's who is waiting for me:
> an invisible man
> defined by a dotted line:

the shape of an absence
in your place at the table,
sitting across from me,
eating toast and eggs as usual
or walking ahead up the drive,
a rustling of the fallen leaves,
a slight thickening of the air. (lines 8–14)

The painful topic of separation is delayed here by the speaker's completion of the dotted line through the reference to activities of their daily life together. This way she keeps him closer and present in the poem: "It's you in the future, / we both know that. / You'll be here but not here . . ." (lines 18–20). The poem gives shape to the lover's absence, much like the dotted line in cartoons that outlines unseen characters (Montassine 119). It transforms into a space for ongoing dialogue and interaction with the dead (Uppal 53).

4. Liminal Spaces

The poem "Ghost Cat" alludes to the liminal space occupied by people with dementia, such as Atwood's husband. In the first line "Cats suffer from dementia too. Did you know that?" (line 1), the speaker adopts an informal tone to address the reader, drawing a parallel between the cat and Graeme Gibson, who suffered from dementia. In some parts of the poem, the speaker reports the cat's words, in a juxtaposition of bathos and pathos: "*Is this what I'm supposed to eat? / Guess not. But what? But where*?" (lines 12–13); "*Let me in, / enclose me, tell me who I was*" (lines 19–20). The absurd image of a cat with dementia is used by the speaker to alleviate the suffering provoked by her sick partner, who inhabits the same liminal space of the cat, a threshold between their bodies and their minds: "No good. No purring. No contentment. Out / into the darkened cave of the dining room, / then in, then out, forlorn" (lines 21–23).

In the last lines, the speaker trivializes the fact of aging and the loss of autonomy:

And when I go that way, grow fur, start howling,
scratch at your airwaves:
no matter who I claim I am
or how I love you,
turn the key. Bar the window. (lines 24–28)

These lines can be understood as a self-elegy, which has been defined as "the genre for the self-standing meditation on the author's mortality" (Ramazani

120). The speaker sides with the situation of her partner by imagining her own physical deterioration. Her partner occupies that liminal space between life and death, a place one day she may also inhabit. This vision of herself in that place diminishes her suffering for the prospective loss of a beloved person and establishes a common ground for interaction with him once he is not here (Montassine 118).

The opening lines of the poem "One Day" introduce a "you" who adopts the role of the speaker, thereby diminishing traditional elegiac authority and challenging conventional notions of mourning. This shift disrupts the elegy's typical structure, where a singular voice is often seen as the definitive expression of the mourning process (Uppal 44):

> One day I will be old,
> you said; let's say
> while hanging up the wash–
> the sheets, the pillowcases–
> with their white smell of June rain
> in the years when you still did that
> and pear blossoms fell around you
> joyous as weddings
> and your brain sang Yeah yeah yeah
> like a backup group,
> three girls with long legs
> and thigh-high boots, wagging their miniskirts
> like bees announcing honey in some complex dance
> in time. (lines 1–14)

The anticipation of old age is mentioned at a moment when that person has the energy of youth. Unfortunately, the line "in the years when you still did that" (line 6) contrasts a past of youthful vitality with a present marked by physical decline, signaling that the once-distant "One day" has now become a reality.

The following stanza continues with a description of how that aging process will be: "In time my eyes will shrink, Yeah, yeah / my mouth will fill with metal, / my spine will crumble, Yeah yeah" (lines 15–17); "But maybe I'll get wisdom, / you said, laughing, / like stepping through a door" (lines 21–23). In the imaginary world of the young, old age is the threshold you cross into the country of the wise.

The optimistic and casual tone of these first stanzas evolves towards the disappointment expressed in the second half of the poem. The distant and hopeful expression "One day" has shifted towards the hard realism of the word "Today":

> Today you're poking with your stick
> among the wilted hostas
> in the quiet garden.
> Where is it? you say . . . (lines 27–30)

In this stanza, the energetic "you" of the first lines of the poem is an old person looking for wisdom "among the wilted hostas" (line 28). The "it" in line 30 works as a cataphoric reference to "wisdom" in line 34, "Where is that wisdom?" But the searching is fruitless, as we learn in the last stanza: "You pry with your stick: / Just earth and roots. A stone. / Maybe it's a door, you say" (lines 45–47). The speaker's partner turns the stone into the imaginary door mentioned in line 23, which led to the promised wisdom of old age. This could be the statement of a person whose mind does not work properly because of dementia or any other illness, an old person who mistakes a stone for a door. Instead of pitying this person's situation, the speaker concludes that

> But nothing is locked. There's nothing
> to it. Never was
> Just open.
> Just walk down. (lines 49–52)

This invitation to open the door and walk down confirms Atwood's interest in the psychic landscape of the underworld, which for her is the site not only of knowledge but of riches, excitement, the loved, the lost, and other imaginative treasures (Huebener 109). The speaker is not afraid of opening the door to the other side and exploring what is there. She's going to find her fears, her weaknesses but also treasures that can be brought back to the land of the living. In this way, death can be redefined and even pushed back (Montassine 112).

The loss of memory causes a person's dissolution of the self in the poem "Mr Lionheart." This person's name is "Mr Lionheart," maybe as a reference to his unconscious bravery and his unpredictability, like wild animals. Mr Lionheart inhabits a liminal space of selfhood and loss of the mind:

> Mr Lionheart is away today.
> He comes and goes,
> he flickers on and off.
> You might have heard a roar,
> you might not. (lines 1–5)

The speaker articulates the contrast between the golden days of plenitude, of celebration of life and his present condition of mental deterioration:

What is it he forgot
this last time?
I don't mean the keys, the hat.
I mean his tawny days,
the sun, the golden running.
All of our furry dancing.

but then what? Then regret
because we're not. (lines 6–14)

Once they danced together, now their union has disintegrated. The speaker recalls their shared interest in identifying birds in the past, "Birds don't need them, those lost names. / We needed them, but that was then." (lines 17–18), but now the ability to name both others and onself has faded. This loss becomes a powerful symbol of one partner's isolation, as he loses the sense of who he once was, and the speaker's resulting desolation.

In "Flatline," the speaker addresses an undefined "you" in the liminal space between life and death. The first stanzas describe the deterioration of different body parts and the uselessness of the body when not ruled by the mind: "Things wear out. Also fingers." (line 1); "Feet have their own agendas." (line 5); "Ears are superfluous: / What are they for, / those alien pink flaps?" (lines 8–10). For the speaker, her beloved's body has become a trap: "The body, once your accomplice, / is now your trap" (lines 12–13). The fifth stanza depicts his previous life as a landscape of "knotted snares" (line 17), "lacework" (line 17), "tornadoes" (line 18) and "rubble" (line 19), that is to say, complexity, dangers and risks. She imagines him in his present situation as craving for "the end of mazes" (line 20). The following stanza opens with images of natural lines, "a white shore (line 21), "ocean with its horizon" (line 22), which converge into a "flat line" (line 24). The flat line, usually linked to encephalograms and to the end of life, is resignified here as a desirable resting destination for a worn-out body and mind:

and pray for a white shore,
and ocean with its horizon;
not –so much– bliss,
but a flat line you steer for.

No more hiss and slosh,
no reefs, no deeps,
no throat rattle of gravel.

It sounds like this: (lines 21–28)

The flat line is the entrance to a void, a gap, a tabula rasa, represented by a blank space in the page, where, in my view, the speaker can continue recreating the shape of her absent lover. According to Uppal, what is preserved is not as important as what can still be created (51).

The speaker fantasises with the idea of being buried alive with her beloved in the poem "Within":

> Outside we see a shrivelling,
> but from within, as felt
> by heart and breath and inner skin, how different,
> how vast how calm how part of everything . . . (lines 1–4)

The initial "We" gives way to "The lovers caught / and sealed inside a cavern" (lines 6–7). But these dream images of union in death are abruptly interrupted by a memory of the speaker's more realistic experience of her lover's passing:

> Well, anyway
> I held your hand and maybe
> you held mine
> as the stone or universe closed in
> around you.
> Though not me. I'm still outside. (lines 10–15)

The last line intensifies the painful experience of loss and separation that death involves. The speaker admits that she is not sharing this moment with the beloved, that their initial proximity in death was just a fantasy. She is alive and her lover dead and she must continue living with the burden of his absence. The poem provides no comfort in the prospect of a future reunion with the departed, nor does it depict a peaceful farewell. Instead, the speaker expresses uncertainty about whether her lover was even aware of her presence in his final moments: "I held your hand and maybe / you held mine" (lines 11–12). According to Fiamengo, "For Atwood, the clasp of hands represents more than bleak solidarity; it is a celebration rescued from suffering. As the best we can hope for, we reach out to one another in the awareness of our own and one another's mortality" (160).

5. Lost Landscapes as Sources Of Memory

The poem "Salt" starts with direct self-questions the speaker asks herself about a generic past time, "Were things good then? / Yes. They were good. / Did you know they were good? / At the time? Your time?" (lines 1–4). The persistence

of questions in the previous lines adds a sense of urgency for an answer which can only be elusive, as we observe in the second stanza:

> No, because I was worrying
> or maybe hungry
> or asleep, half of those hours.
> Once in a while there was a pear or plum
> or a cup with something in it,
> or a white curtain, rippling,
> or else a hand.
> Also the mellow lamplight
> in that antique tent,
> falling on beauty, fullness,
> bodies entwined and cherishing,
> then flareup, and then gone. (lines 5–16)

The vagueness of the speaker's memories is emphasised by the numerous alternatives introduced by the word "or." The softness of the "white curtain" (line 10) and the "mellow lamplight" (line 12), the evocation of the "the antique tent" (line 13) are abruptly interrupted by a flareup which precedes their vanishing.

In the following stanza, the speaker attempts to repress a past which perhaps was only a mirage: "Mirages, you decide: / everything was never" (lines 17–18). However, her own body seems to affirm the reality of that "mirage":

> Though over your shoulder there it is,
> your time laid out like a picnic
> in the sun, still glowing,
> although it's night. (lines 19–22)

The last stanza questions the biblical story of Lot's wife who turned into a salt statue by looking back to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The poetic persona counteracts that old discourse with some rhetorical questions:

> Don't look behind, they say:
> You'll turn to salt.
> Why not, though? Why not look?
> Isn't it glittery?
> Isn't it pretty, back there? (lines 23–27)

Although the past is a lost landscape that will never return, the speaker insists on recovering that landscape as a source for the creation of memories

and as a site where she can establish a continual dialogue and interaction with herself and with the dead ones, those bodies entwined and cherishing mentioned in line 15.

In the poem "Hayfoot," the poetic persona contrasts her true love's current state as an old man with her memories of his prime, when he was healthy, strong, and able to explore the wilderness. In the first stanza, the speaker follows his love while he walks along a street with great effort due to his difficult physical condition:

> My truelove limps along the street
> hayfoot strawfoot lame foot
> who once was an army marcher.
>
> He's up there now, ahead, in silhouette
> against bright windows, against
> the leather coats, the Sunglass Hut,
> the Ladies' Jewellery:
>
> Hayfoot, straw ...
> Now gone. Blended with shadow. (lines 1–9)

The contrast between the young and the old man dominates nearly every stanza in the poem. In the opening ones, the speaker creates a sense of immediacy by using the present tense, giving the impression that she is reporting her partners' movements as they happen. The alliteration of "limps" and "lame" and the juxtaposition of "hayfoot strawfoot lame foot" underscore the physical deterioration of someone who "once was an army marcher" (line 3). As a young man, he could keep the army cadence of right (hay-foot) and left (straw-foot) foot, but now he must add "lame foot" which is both comic and sad.

The second stanza continues with his difficult and unglamorous walking along the streets. The juxtaposition of "against bright windows, against / the leather coats, the Sunglass Hut, / the Ladies' Jewellery" (lines 4–7) projects a double perspective of this person: the vision of his physical shape against the shop windows but also the effort he is making to complete a simple stroll. In the third stanza, the poetic voice shifts from reporting his steps to simply announcing his disappearance: "Now gone. Blended with shadow" (line 9). The figure of the limping man has slowly faded, from silhouette into shadow. This vanishing image precedes the fourth stanza, where the speaker's certainty about her lover is questioned. She admits the gap between the man she once knew and the man she sees now:

Maybe not himself. Not the same one,
the strider in the autumn woods, leaves yellow,
a whiff of snow
on the frozen ground, bears around,
a skim of ice in the ponds.
then uphill, hayfoot, me gasping
to keep up. (lines 10–16)

The speaker's true love is here "the strider in the autumn woods" (line 11), an energetic and brave man who is neither afraid of bears nor of winter hazzards. In the first stanzas, her partner appeared with his back turned. Now the speaker also sees his back turned but this time because he walks faster than her.

The final stanzas confirm the increasing distance between the speaker and her beloved. He walks on, despite his having no knee: "Why are you still walking? / said the doctor. You have no knee. / Yet on he limps, unseen by me" (lines 18–20). The speaker does not gasp behind him but appears to be waiting for him. Despite the darkness, on this occasion she is able to recognise him:

The red light changes. Darkness clots:
It's him all right,
not even late, his cane foot
hayfoot, straw,
slow march. It's once

it's once upon
a time, it's cane
as tic, as tock. (lines 25–32)

The speaker's beloved is identified because of his cane foot. The repeated syntactic expressions "it's him" (line 26), "it's cane" (line 31) strengthen the metonymy of the cane, symbolising the old man. The sounds "tic" and "tock" (line 32) replace the old marching cadence of "hayfoot" and "strawfoot" and intensify the absence of the person he once was "once upon / a time" (lines 30–31).

In this poem, the speaker affirms a love that continues despite the decrepitude of the body. At the same time, long-term love always involves a certain mourning because we must confront the loss of the selves we once were (Fiamengo 153).

6. Poetry and Memory

The poem "Souvenirs" begins in a conversational tone. The speaker evokes time spent in "alien moon shores" (line 2) and describes the common habit of buying souvenirs for other people. The use of enumerations simulates the accumulation of those objects:

> We'll give these foreign things away,
> the ones we bought at stalls:
> folkloric knitting, droll hardware,
> wooden trolls. Shells, hunks of rock.
> They silt up our luggage.
> They're souvenirs for our friends,
> remembrances. (lines 5–11)

The word "remembrances" becomes fundamental in the later stanzas, where the speaker contemplates the nature of memory and gradually shifts from the casual tone of the opening stanzas to a deeper reflection on poetry and writing as tools to combat loss and oblivion.

In the second stanza, Atwood offers a witty comment on souvenirs and their role. She plays with the word "remember" as if it was a Russian doll:

> But who is to remember what?
> It's a cute hat, but you've never been there.
> I can remember buying it
> and you can remember that I once
> remembered: I remembered
> something for you. (lines 12–16)

The following stanza begins with the speaker transitioning from memories to dreams, detailing how she appears in other people's dreams:

> I appear in other people's dreams
> much oftener than I used to.
> Sometimes naked, they say,
> . . . . . .
> Sometimes as an old dog
> . . . . . .
> Sometimes as a skeleton . . . (lines 21–28)

Finally, the last two stanzas culminate this vision of souvenirs, remembrances and dreams:

> This is what I've brought back for you
> from the dreamlife, from the alien moon shore,
> from the place with no clocks.
> It has no colour, but it has powers,
> though I don't know what they are
> nor how it unlocks.
>
> Here, it's yours now.
> Remember me. (lines 33–40)

As in so many poems by Atwood, this "you" can be personal or collective and she may be addressing her partner or any reader. The speaker shows the final souvenir, the most important one, the one which is not physical but is made of dreams and found in alien moon shores. Its powers are enigmatic and unpredictable, because once it is delivered, it escapes the owner's control. The final lines "Here, it's yours now / Remember me" (39–40) confirm that, for the speaker, only art, poetry and writing will survive and will vanquish death. No other souvenir is more important than the poem. In a materialistic and secular era, the poem becomes a prayer that resurrects the poet. Every time one reads it, she will be there. The poems question separation or severance as a result of death (Uppal 43).

"The Dear Ones" mourns the painful absence of those dead beloved ones. The title sounds like a variation of the expression "the dead ones," which anticipates the content of the poem. It starts with a naive question, "But where are they? They can't be nowhere" (line 1), as if posed by a child asking for absent people. In the following six stanzas, the speaker reports in a conversational tone all the stories told to justify the fact that there were people who disappeared. Those tales were populated by Little People, gypsies, magic places, gold, dancing ceremonies:

> But where are they? They can't be nowhere.
> It used to be that gypsies took them,
> or else the Little People,
>
> who were not little, though enticing.
> They were lured into a hill,
> those dear ones. There was gold, and dancing. (lines 1–6)

The key element in these stories was that the dear ones came back, even though those who awaited them had died:

When they finally reappeared
not a day older
wandering down the road in tatters

in bare feet, their hair all ragged,
those who had waited for them so long
were decades dead. (lines 13–18)

The speaker felt conforted because these stories confirmed that "everyone has to be somewhere" (line 40). Yet, over the years, the same question resurfaces insidiously, but this time the response shapes a narrative of absence:

But the dear ones, where are they?
Where? Where? After a while

You sound like a bird.
You stop, but the sorrow goes on calling.
It leaves you and flies out

over the cold night fields,
searching and searching,
over the rivers,
over the emptied air. (lines 23–31)

The poetic persona tries to dissociate herself from her suffering which, like a bird, starts an impossible search that cannot be completed. Sorrow is associated to inner and outer emptiness: it "leaves you and flies out" (line 27), "over the emptied air" (line 31). The expression "searching and searching" (line 29) conveys perseverance and futility at the same time. As mentioned by Fiamengo, language always fails before the excess of grief (155). The dead ones are the dear ones, and they are not somewhere. This time poetry and language only represent emptiness and offer no consolation against loss. A desolate landscape of "cold night fields" (line 28) and "emptied air" (line 31) is all that remains, where the magic, gold, and dancing have long disappeared.

The poem "Zombie" focuses on how poetry can create zombies, that is to say, on its potential to bring dead people back to life again. Atwood uses a light and comic tone:

How many poems about
the dead one who isn't dead,
the lost one who semi-persists,

nudging hungrily up
through the plant litter, the waste paper,
scratching against the window? (lines 6–11)

According to Montassine, the poetic voice is aware of the power of poetry to bring the dead back to life (121). Former lovers and chilhood monsters are resurrected in poems, haunting the writer with their warnings from the page. Once these figures and stories from the past have been reshaped in a poem, they become eternal and going back is impossible. In a comic way, the speaker begs "*Stay dead! Stay dead!* you conjure, / you who wanted the past back. / Nothing doing. The creature / ambles through the dim forest . . ." (lines 29–32). The poem is the poet's reflection in the mirror and also "The hand on your shoulder. The almost-hand: / Poetry, coming to claim you" (lines 39–40). Poetry may be the best way to win over death, because poems will be there once her own life has ended but, at the same time, the past stories and people that populate those poems cannot be erased and remind us of the painful gap between life and death. Poetry and writing are just attempts to close that gap in order to alleviate the sorrow of living.

In "Dearly," the penultimate poem in the collection, Atwood once again demonstrates that poetry can serve as a space for active interaction with the dead, and that language can be a tool to give shape to absence.

The poem starts as a reflection on the word "Dearly," which the speaker views as old-fashioned and nearly obsolete. She playfully explores it by weaving it into several familiar expressions:

It's an old word, fading now.
Dearly did I wish.
Dearly did I long for.
I loved him dearly. (lines 1–4)

An introspective and nostalgic tone permeates this first stanza, empahsised by the shift from present tense in the opening line to past tense in the final three lines, evoking the remnants of a lost past.

In the second and third stanzas, the speaker is still thinking about the use and meaning of "dearly" while involved in her daily routines, which she depicts in a humorous and playful style: "I make my way along the sidewalk / mindfully, because of my wrecked knees / about which I give less of a shit / than you may imagine" (lines 5–8). While having a coffee, in a mixture of pathos and bathos, another expression with "dearly" comes to her mind:

bearing half a coffee
in a paper cup with–

dearly do I regret it–
a plastic lid–
trying to remember what words once meant. (lines 11–15)

Stanza four opens with the speaker producing more linguistic sequences with "dearly," which form part of the ritual of marriage. The anaphoras reflect the speaker's efforts to revive this old marriage formula, imbuing it with new meaning. Instead of "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in the sight of God to join together this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony," the speaker adopts these ritualistic words to create a personal elegiac prayer:

Dearly.
How was it used?
Dearly beloved.
Dearly beloved, we are gathered.
Dearly beloved, we are gathered here
in this forgotten photo album
I came across recently. (lines 16–22)

This parodic use of linguistic formulas associated to different rituals challenge traditional notions of grief and mourning (Uppal 49). The pictures in "this forgotten photo album" have deteriorated. Images of fading photographs have appeared before in Atwood's work ("This is a Photograph of Me," *The Circle Game*, 1966; "Girl and Horse, 1928," *Procedures for Underground*, 1970; "Daguerrotype Taken in Old Age," *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, 1970; "Man in a Glacier," *Morning in the Burned House*, 1995; "War Photo," *The Door*, 2007). Atwood exposes the limited and deceptive nature of photographs themselves, because they offer only an illusion of permanence and stability (Jamieson 48):

Fading now,
the sepias, the black and whites, the colour prints,
everyone so much younger.
The Polaroids.
What is a Polaroid? asks the newborn.
Newborn a decade ago. (lines 23–28)

The speaker shows an emotional attachment to the photographs, but it is difficult for her to accept them in place of the dearly beloved. In the sixth stanza, the speaker struggles to convey to others her connection with the people in the photographs, along with the ambivalent emotions of preservation and loss these images evoke in her:

So hard to describe
the smallest details of how–
all these dearly gathered together–
of how we used to live. (lines 33–36)

In stanza nine, the speaker concludes the linguistic comments that started in the initial stanza where she paid particular attention to the word "dearly." She broadens the challenge of describing flowers in detail into a deeper reflection on the potential of language and poetry to authentically capture the essence of others' lives and deaths. Poetry would be an unsatisfactory substitute for the dead one, failing to offer consolation against loss and death (Fiamengo 12):

It's the smallest details that foil translators
and myself too, trying to describe.
See what I mean.
You can wander away. You can get lost.
Words can do that. (lines 63–67)

However, the speaker makes a last effort to connect with the dearly beloved by repurposing the traditional marriage vows, creating a secular prayer that expresses both her yearning to preserve their memory and her grief over their absence. The speaker moves from a passive grieving state into an active mourning one (Uppal 39):

Dearly beloved, gathered here together
in this closed drawer,
fading now, I miss you.
I miss the missing, those who left earlier.
I miss even those who are still here.
I miss you all dearly.
Dearly do I sorrow for you. (lines 68–74)

7. Conclusion

For Margaret Atwood, all writing involves and responds to a fascination with mortality, as she explores in her book *Negotiating with the Dead*. In her long career as novelist and poet, topics such as death, memory and the process of mourning have played a significant role in her oeuvre. Atwood's first sequence of elegiac poems appears in the volume *Morning in the Burned House*, where she juxtaposes her father's long paralyzing illness and death with her memories

of him as a younger man. The poet struggles to come to terms with his death by writing a series of poems where she makes an ambivalent use of the conventions of the elegy. The figure of her father remains enigmatic and is never idealised, and the poetic persona questions the potential of poems as consolatory artifacts. However, Atwood resists despair and pessimism in the face of death by crafting dream landscapes where she envisions future encounters with her father.

In this essay, I have discussed a selection of poems from the volume *Dearly*, where Atwood mourns the future absence and the death of her husband, who died after a long illness. In a casual and conversational tone, mixing pathos and bathos, the author portrays psychic landscapes of mourning which reshape loss by placing her beloved one in a liminal space where past and present are juxtaposed as sources of memory. Some poems reveal the difficulty of finding consolation and the painful reality of absence. Yet, Atwood holds on to the act of writing poetry as a means of engaging in an active mourning process, creating a legacy populated by the presence of beloved departed ones. In *Dearly*, Atwood's elegiac poems transform into secular prayers, functioning as both private and communal mourning rituals that facilitate interaction between the living and the dead. The repetitive nature of these rituals suggests the possibility of future encounters with lost loved ones. While art and poetry cannot replace the dead, they serve as spaces for dialogue and connection. The poems emphasise active mourning and memory-making over passive remembrance.

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Assembling Reading and Writing in the Face of Loss: Christa Couture's *How to Lose Everything* and Dakshana Bascaramurty's *This Is Not the End of Me*

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ABSTRACT
Through nonfictional texts dealing with complicated and traumatic experiences related to loss, readers and writers seem to become more intricately entangled. Following Rita Felski, reading is said to ignite a process of "recognition" (23) which might be paralleled to the self-discovery process which writing may achieve. Sympathy and mutual identification arise and bring readers' and writers' identities closer, creating an intersubjective space where health and illness assemble their relations. This analysis of Christa Couture's *How to Lose Everything* and Dakshana Bascaramurty's *This is Not the End of Me: Lessons on Living from a Dying Man* will attempt to show that there is a tight link between reader and writer through nonfiction which transcends the literary text. In addition, the healing nature of this connection will be highlighted, which supports the idea of using reading and writing techniques as therapeutical strategies in the coping with emotional turmoil and distress.

Keywords
Bibliotherapy; Care; Healing; Life Writing; Loss; Scriptotherapy

1. Introduction

Literature hosts an evident potential for communication. Literature communicates—through words—fact or fiction, experiences, ideas, emotions, and sensations. Undoubtedly, narration occurs as a result of a narrator's voice; ultimately, the literary connection operates when the narrative voice finds a reader with whom to share those experiences, ideas or emotions. For that reason, reader and writer are thought to be interconnected by the text. The figure of the reader was remarkably valued after the emergence of the so-called reader-response theory in the 1960s, but the figure of the author may have been disregarded after the publication of Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author," as he no longer considered the author as "the past of his own book" (145). However, for the purposes of this article, the role of the author will gain relevance in the consideration of a particular genre known as life writing, which encompasses a wide range of autobiographical texts like diaries, memoirs, travel narratives, epistles and personal testimonies. More specifically, there will be a focus on illness narratives where the writer's experiences are highlighted, and still, the possibility of a reader is acknowledged. Thus, intimacy becomes a cornerstone in the concoction of autobiographical pieces which face straining situations which can appeal to readers' current needs.

Revealing intimate thoughts and emotions related to painstaking issues like loss can be thought to expose one's vulnerability. Nonetheless, it is interesting to ponder on life writing texts dealing with instances of loss like illness, death or separation, as they are intrinsic components of life. It is our aim to explore the benefits of producing life writing texts delving into loss, and what is more, the benefits which those texts can project on the reader or the receiver of such stories. With this, there will be an attempt at unveiling the potential healing nature of a relationship originating from a nonfictional text based on a grieving experience, especially if that experience is shared. The occurrence of trauma binds sufferers together, following Patrick Carnes's idea of "trauma bonding" in the event of abusive relationships and addictions in general (30). It will be stated that readers and writers enduring a particular sorrowful situation may forge a collective identity emerging from loss and intended to initiate or to contribute to a healing process. For this, we will first prove that there is solid background supporting the idea that readers and writers—or the narrative voice in a text—interact throughout the reading and writing process, creating a tight link between both. Rita Felski's *Uses of Literature* and Nancy Miller's notion of entangled identities will be pivotal in this sense. Then, we will place a narrower focus on the nature of the emerging relationship between reader and writer selves, based on healing and mutual care. As reading and writing can have a therapeutic effect on the treatment

of physical strain, or mental or emotional disorder, the terms bibliotherapy and scriptotherapy will gain relevance in the discussion, demonstrating that creativity, and arts and literature in general, can have a therapeutic potential. The contemporary world should now seek the union of different disciplines to obtain more profitable results in the confrontation of problems and challenges. The Health Humanities originate from this notion of interdisciplinarity, as literary and artistic ways of expression have much to offer to the medical field. In fact, it will be suggested that, above all, human welfare can be achieved through basic gestures like listening, understanding and caring for others, which promote a sense of collectivity and togetherness.

Interdisciplinarity is at the heart of contemporary science and modern thinking. The new millennium brought a paradigm shift which would entail a more integrative and connective conception of science, one that involves the convergence of different ideas, perspectives and disciplines (Ahnert et al. 3). The Health Humanities, hence, seem an appropriate example to explore in this discussion, as it introduces humanities into the medical field, which suggests the productivity of artistic and humanistic products in relation to healthcare and wellbeing. It is our aim to prove that literature can be deemed a caring mechanism, especially in emotionally challenging situations marked by loss. However, it is important to remark that, in this paper, we will consider healing as a *process*, in contrast with the *state* of health (Kristeva et al. 56), which can be initiated through reading and writing. For this, a reference to bibliotherapy and scriptotherapy will be incorporated into the discussion, highlighting the importance of the figures of readers and writers and their experiences. That is the reason why our focus will be placed on nonfiction as a potential genre where to explore how readers and writers interact, not only through the literary text, but also beyond it. This enables us to see further implications which can transcend the literary relationship between both, suggesting the possibility of promoting a symbiotic connection that may personally enrich, or heal one another. To conclude, these ideas will be applied to the reading of two Canadian life writing texts: Christa Couture's *How to Lose Everything* (2020), and Dakshana Bascaramurty's *This Is Not the End of Me: Lessons on Living from a Dying Man* (2020).

2. Literary Healing Through the Dialogue Between Reader and Writer

Literature can be understood as a channel of communication through which ideas, sentiments and thoughts flow from the writer's side to the reader by means of a text. According to Felski, literature is capable of igniting recognition, of achieving a personal assimilation onto the text and its ideas. Felski explains:

> While turning a page I am arrested by a compelling description, a constellation of events, a conversation between characters, an interior monologue. Suddenly and without warning, a flash of connection leaps across the gap between text and reader; an *affinity* or an attunement is brought to light . . . In either case, I feel myself *addressed*, summoned, called to account: I cannot help seeing *traces of myself* in the pages I am reading. (23; emphasis added)

Through the act of reading, a connection arises between readers and writers. In fact, this link immerses readers not only in the text or in others' words, but also in themselves. Felski's words suggest that this link also triggers self-discovery or "self-scrutiny," which might contribute to discerning one's own personality and identity (26). As the text unravels, readers are invited to explore their inner selves, which proves the intricate connection between the text and the reader. However, we will also take notice of the role of the writer, even if disregarded after Barthes's "The Death of the Author." We will consider the text, especially in the field of nonfiction or life writing, as a composite of personal experiences and multiples selves which encounter, rejoin and share. That is, the text based on experiences becomes the link between reader and writer; from the combination of different, although interrelated, experiences, reader and writer can be said to create a sort of "social recognition" (Riestra-Camacho 92). Reader and writer do share a common experience through which one shows the other how to cope, how to undergo pain and how to pave the way for healing (96).

It is, thus, our contention that readers and writers can engage in an almost personal relationship through reading and writing, respectively, on the grounds of shared experiences. This approach is concerned with the figures of the author and the reader beyond their literary roles. Indeed, the text becomes the link between both, but it is important to remember that, in this case where nonfiction is the main focus, the text results from the writer's experience and the reader is particularly appealed to it because of its content—probably, because there is a particular interest in becoming acquainted with the writer's coping strategies in a given challenging situation. Therefore, reading and writing life writing texts can be identified with a process of personal discovery, assimilation and reciprocity.[1] There seems to be a kind of "self-extension," as Felski puts it, that reaches out to the reader in such a way that they "can see aspects

1 "Life writing" serves as an umbrella term to account for autobiographical or testimonial narratives, encompassing all its possible formats and subgenres, like diaries, memoirs, letters, biographies, autobiographies, travel narratives or journals. Throughout this article, synonymous expressions have also been used, like "autobiographical writing" and "nonfiction."

of [themselves] in what seems distant or strange" (39). The writer's self is projected onto the text to be merged with readers' own self and experience. Life writing provides a more convenient scenario to account for reader involvement in a story, as there exists a personal implication with the narration, whereas in the case of fiction, readers can be said to "never fully abandon their real-world parameters" (Martínez 112). Autobiographical writing, as well as testimonial writing, "expands the representation of an I, making it difficult to separate individual from collective experience" (qtd. in Riestra-Camacho 98). The interaction between the familiar and the distant, although related, results in the creation of entangled identities that are bound together through nonfictional texts which deal with a shared background.

Miller explores the notion of entangled identities in connection with the reading of autobiography and memoirs in "The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir." Through texts dealing with loss, among other traumatic situations, readers can become emotionally attached either as a result of their empathic abilities or their shared experiences. The latter case enables the reader to immerse in the writer's own thoughts and perceptions, participating in the writer's narrative construction. Reading, then, becomes an act of companionship through which shared experiences converge and relate. Readers' recognition and participation give another dimension to the text, as it triggers the construction of what Friedman calls a "collective identity" (qtd. in Miller 544). The occurrence of loss—shaped through illness, death or separation in this discussion—can be deemed a common source of trauma which abounds in life writing texts and which, beyond writers' or readers' personal experience, creates an "affective atmosphere" (Anderson 77; Duff, "Atmospheres of Recovery" 58) that operates under relationality, as "the social is relationally constituted" (Anderson et al. 172). In this study, loss is considered the common ground behind readers' and writers' experiences, the one that brings them both to the literary arena. Links are created as well as a new collective self extends from one another encompassing their different—though parallel—experiences.

The resulting extended, collective self operates through similar experiences which mediate in the relationship between reader and writer. Given the truthful personal implication with the story, reading life writing texts can bring readers closer to a community of people affected by loss. By the same token, writing contributes to the notion of sharing, of unburdening, of giving visibility. Then, readers' recognition of the events narrated, together with writers' perspective, can establish a dialogic relationship which helps to build a common understanding and feeling. On the one hand, and more evidently, readers are given access to writers' account, but on the other, writers do also take part in readers' recognition and sympathy, as the former triggers and expands those processes in the latter. A web of relations thus appears and moves back and forth, from

one subject to the other, creating a sort of relational intersubjectivity. Miller states, "in autobiography the relational is not optional. Autobiography's story is about a web of entanglements in which we find ourselves" (544). In addition, "[t]he self and that which the self contends with in the world make up one nexus" (Larson xii), being the self both the reader and the writer, as each of them interacts with their experience of loss and moves beyond individuality to create a collective environment based on sharing.

Being part of a collective contributes to a sense of interconnectedness due to the process of sharing. Sharing experiences of trauma and loss would imply a clear need for collective work towards assimilation and acceptance. For that, mutual presence and group witnessing are fundamental in the process of overcoming trauma (Hübl and Avritt 199). It can be claimed that accompanying others through this *process* of acceptance targeted to healing (Kristeva et al. 56) reveals condolence and empathy, which suggests that the link existing between both sides is grounded on care. Nonfiction can open a channel of communication between reader and writer which, to our eyes, offers a field of mutual engagement and support. This can certainly be compared to friendly conversations through which relief and understanding can be achieved. Putting a traumatic experience into words is an important step towards recovery, which also implies that those listening are able to recognize their peers' suffering and, above all, are willing to render help (Cummings 386). Listening to others' stories, being willing to read them, or accompanying them through the process are intelligible instances of the caring network which expands through the processes of reading and writing thanks to life writing texts delving into traumatic experiences. Storytelling can build a literary community which may rise above the written material and reach a personal benefit through companionship, compassion, sympathy, and active listening/reading.

As stated above, the figures of the reader and writer are intricately related through the text. In this discussion, readers and writers are said to share experiences and, thus, to undergo similar pain, stress and emotional burden. Readers can approach the nonfictional text in an attempt to work through their trauma, but writers may also be inclined to write because of a need to unburden themselves. Reading and writing can thus be contemplated as potential healing tools, which leads the discussion to the therapeutic power of literature and autobiography. In this case, reading and writing can be linked to therapy thanks to the rewarding effects which they bring to readers and writers. Writing can be attuned to the remembrance of past experiences together with the retrieval of its subsequent feelings. Throughout this process, the writer actively engages in conscious remembering—even if biased or distorted—,which is thought to result in the initiation of the healing process (Lapsley 73). Revisiting the past establishes a connection between the writer's present and past

selves in an attempt to reconcile their present state with past "ghosts" and with their future to come, allowing for advancement, progress and improvement (Brewer 40). This is why, according to the main ideas behind scriptotherapy, writing through trauma is said by Henke to cause the "therapeutic reenactment" or "empowerment" of the subject (qtd. in Horáková 165). On the other hand, Smith also argues that the reader accompanies the writer through this remembering, which triggers recognition and accelerates a similar process in their inner selves, allowing for a personal *transformation* (qtd. in Ostenson 61).[2] Reader and writer see their identities entangled, as well as their experiences relatable. All in all, readers' and writers' past and present selves are mirrored through the text, deriving from the sharing of past wounds which are now intended to move towards acceptance and healing.

The therapeutic power of literature has been studied under the name of bibliotherapy. However, this notion does not make any distinction between genres; that is, it refers to the healing power of texts, either fictional or nonfictional (Beatty 106). The development of this technique as a therapeutic practice "is being taken up enthusiastically up by a range of healthcare professionals, libraries, bookshops, local government departments and universities who see value in providing guided reading materials to help people deal with mild to moderate mental health issues" (Canty 32). The occurrence of loss is generally associated with the development of some type of subsequent emotional strain or post-traumatic stress, which justifies the increasing tendency, production and sale of nonfictional books related to overcoming hardship since 2002 (Rak 78–79) as well as self-help books (McLoughlin). Life writing comprises a wider range of texts which, in contrast with self-help books, do not establish prescriptive rules regarding *how to cope* with anxiety or depression. Life writing authors advocate for revealing and sharing, following no prescriptive purpose. The author—characterized as an ordinary individual—seeks in writing their book a personal challenge whereby his or her traumatized self can be retrieved from forgetting and be healed. For that reason, reading these non-prescriptive sources is not only a diversion from the current hardship the reader may be

2 In the article "The Healing Power of Stories: Reading and Rereading *A Monster Calls*," Ostenson refers to Smith's difference between informative and transformative reading, especially in the context of education. Informative reading is aimed at the retention of facts and data, whereas transformative reading seeks a deeper engagement of the reader in the text through self-reflection. Within the classroom, transformative reading practices need guidance as their effects do not occur naturally in every reader. It might be argued that, for these purposes, life writing texts could work more efficiently in the provocation of such transformative effects, as the connection between reader and writer becomes more intimate thanks to the closeness of the first person.

experiencing, but also a source of interconnectivity, fellowship and solidarity, which can boost a sense of comfort and contribute to the healing process.

As noted earlier, the roles of reader and writer are complementary, and even reciprocal, as nonfictional texts of our interest generally appeal to a potential reader, and then, readers manage to assign meaning to the text through the reading process and its subsequent self-reflective exercise. The uses of both reading and narrating have been proven beneficial in the context of psychotherapy, helping to create "new cultural, symbolic and linguistic attachments" (Kristeva et al. 57) that may heal patients dealing with past traumatic experiences connected with illness. In this case, authenticity is pivotal, as it will help the reader identify with the writer's concerns, problems and struggles. The narrator's "capacity for self-description and self-analysis" (Sommer 198), together with the reader's recognition of it can be conceived as a "means of repair" (Frank 135). Loss, either shaped by illness, death or separation, becomes a disruption in one's course of life, which first requires the individual to digest the new circumstances. Writing can be paralleled to this process of "digestion," assimilation or acceptance, through which the writer can find his or her true self, the true, permanent one despite the occurrence of loss (138). Through the writing process, authors can see themselves as endowed with the ability to overcome disruption—the illness *per se*—and its destabilising effects (139). This deliberate use of writing aimed at a therapeutical effect is known as scriptotherapy, through which we may argue that writers become their own therapists while also being patients. Indeed, writers gain agency by narrating their experiences, as the self-discovery process in which they engage becomes healing in nature. Stories marked by disruption and destabilization are the main focus of illness and recovery narratives; the individual then uses writing to "work through" trauma—following Dominick LaCapra's words (697)—and initiates a curative process.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, more and more texts exploring emotionally challenging situations have been published (Barnett). This might be seen as an attempt to establish a connection between those who narrate their personal experiences and others who might been struggling through similar situations. Christa Couture, author of *How to Lose Everything*, which will be analyzed in the following section, once said, "I wanted to kind of put something out there that might help someone else as much as I was helped by other people's work" ("How to Lose Everything"). She had previously read others' experiences, so the time came when her instinct led her to continue the ripple. Thus, care has been suggested to characterize reader-writer relations in the genre of life writing. Carol Gilligan proposed the idea that care implied "hearing the difference" (120), which derives in the development of mutual concern, of reciprocal relations and, more generally, of a committed relationship with the other. The dichotomy between self and other eventually blurs and they all interact in equal

terms (Riestra-Camacho 98). That is to say, the other is suddenly associated with the familiar, which highlights the fact that similar experiences can bring all of us closer and create a caring network based on the four pillars proposed by Joan C. Tronto: caring about, taking care of, care-giving and care-receiving (qtd. in McAvinchey 130). Both readers and writers, thus, relate to one another and become active in the healing process, as agents attempting to take care of others and subjects to be taken care of.

This connection arising between reader and writer and the intermingling of their different, though similar, experiences eventually creates a web of relations that is supported by a caring structure in which both readers and writers aim at the initiation of healing. The relatedness of experiences, as well as the idea of mutual concern, lead us to the consideration of assemblages. An assemblage is defined by Deleuze and Parnet "as a multiplicity, which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns—different natures" (qtd. in DeLanda 1). The world implies, by nature, diversity and heterogeneity based on non-uniformity and "symbiotic" relationality (DeLanda 2). We may suggest that an intertwinement of identities towards a collective sentiment is bound to occur between reader and writer through life writing texts. Individuals may develop a feeling of belongingness which is articulated around the text, as a result of a common experience related to loss. We may consider that life writing *assembles* readers and writers together after the occurrence of a shared traumatic experience. Furthermore, the existing connections operating among these literary identities and their experiences defines the notion of the assemblage as dynamic and socially nurturing, as every reader and writer can benefit from a caring structure. Writing and reading about experiences concerned with loss can be deemed the source of an interhuman assemblage which triggers healing among its participants.

All in all, life reading and writing seem a potential field where to explore the intertwinement of experiences, feelings and identities. It has been contended that autobiographical testimonies delving into one's past experiences with loss may serve as a unifying component that brings the other or what is different closer. Despite the heterogeneity of experiences, a common ground remains. Relations are likely to be established, through differences or similarities, through sympathy and recognition. These individuals who trust on the literary text to establish personal connections conform an assemblage based on social relations that, above all, attempt to bring positive effects for each other. The nonfictional text serves as a gluing and sharing structure where to articulate liaisons and where to seek comfort and care, a place that Cameron Duff defines as an "assemblage of health" ("The Ends" 1; "Atmospheres of Recovery" 1) and which can be understood as a safe space in which recovery can be explored communally.

3. Analysis Of (Con)Texts: Christa Couture and Dakshana Bascaramurty

Together with the increasing popularity of life writing texts, memoirs are specifically making their name in the field lately. Canadian society seems to be warmly welcoming autobiographical texts. Not only is this being sensed through the increase in sales in recent years (Alarcón), but also through other elements operating in Canadian popular culture, like television. *Canada Reads* is a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) programme which attempts to promote English Canadian literature (Hazlett). Even though a particular focus was placed on Canadian fiction, there is a growing interest in the consideration of nonfiction, too. In 2020, a memoir was awarded the final prize: *We Have Always Been There*, by Samra Habib. In this case, the spotlight was placed upon stories concerning current issues and controversies which delved into the lives of others, and which highlighted their difficulties and acknowledged their personal progress. Therefore, the relevance of nonfictional texts—especially memoirs—dealing with personal, cultural or social issues seem to have been introduced into the Canadian literary arena with remarkable success. Our primary concern in this case lies in two different texts related to the occurrence of illness, death and separation, mostly connected with cancer and its consequences. The analysis of Christa Couture's *How to Lose Everything* and Dakshana Bascaramurty's *This Is Not the End of Me: Lessons on Living from a Dying Man* will conduct the development of this section, intended to showcase how life writing provides a space for a caring and therapeutic relationship to develop between reader and writer.

The memoir entitled *How to Lose Everything*, by Couture, shows the resilient character of its author, whose life condenses several instances of loss which had unravelled through one Canadian woman's life until mid-adulthood. Hit by the amputation of her leg due to cancer, by her two children's death and by her ultimate divorce from her husband, Couture resignifies loss and adopts it as a way of life. Her aim is not necessarily concerned with providing a guide on how to cope with loss, but rather, a friendly approach to one plausible attitude towards illness, death or separation. In 2020, Bascaramurty published *This Is Not the End of Me: Lessons on Living from a Dying Man*, an interesting biographical text narrating the story of Layton Reid, a man diagnosed with cancer in his thirties in the midst of his joyful marriage and parenthood. Bascaramurty plays the role of the author as well as witness to Layton's physical and mental weakening towards death. The text can be described as a composite of different voices which are not only restricted to Bascaramurty's appreciation of Layton's single experience; there are also references to Layton's family's own coping, together with Layton's own writing retrieved from his Facebook account or from some letters addressed to his then infant son.

3.1. Being There: Reader as Writer, Writer as Reader

It is our argument that readers and writers are entangled through nonfiction. Their inner selves are connected and assembled together through a process of sharing, and thus, a collective relationality which in the books is presented through the "listener/storyteller" binary. In the event of sharing, these figures become intertwined in such a way that they both benefit from the role of the listener and the role of the storyteller, since unburdening occurs by listening to others' advice and by opening oneself up to others. This proves the suitability of life writing as a potential channel to allow for this symbiotic relationship in which writers take advantage of their capacity to self-narrate to unburden themselves and readers profit from others' words to ignite their own revisiting of the past, acceptance and healing.

In her memoir, Couture reflects on this interconnectivity underlying the roles of listener and storyteller, hence of reader and writer, as the former relies on the latter and *vice versa*. As a therapeutic activity, reading a nonfictional text of this sort gives prominence to the way in which past traumatic experiences may affect us. For that reason, Couture suggests that we can all become not only passive readers behind a text but the active narrators of our own story: "Find a place for them [your memories], for safekeeping. Tell a person close to you . . . Write a letter and drop it . . . in a mailbox . . . Walk into the woods, dig a hole and cry or sing or sob or tell your most painful memory into the earth" (149). This acknowledges the value of every experience and every individual, of ordinariness, going back to Felski's words (43). Couture is the author of her memoir as well as the narrator and the protagonist of her story, but she volunteers to become a witness to others' experiences: "Or *tell* me. *Tell* me right now to this page, and I will remember for you. I will remember the name of your child. I will remember the laugh of your sister. I will remember the place where your home stood—just as you will remember these pages for me" (149; emphasis added). Having finished her own writing process, through which she has become able to address the sources of loss and pain, she wishes to accompany others through the process. She is now able to reverse her role as storyteller into a listener. The patient/author can now become a sort of caretaker or doctor who is willing to take care of others' problems and preoccupations, as it happened when Couture herself tried to comfort her therapist when remembering her own losses (145). In compelling the reader to tell their own story which the author volunteers to listen, the relationship between the narrator and the reader transcends the literary, becoming a human link grounded on listening, sympathy and care. What is more, reviews like Lye's show this duality by saying that the book can be perceived as "a heartfelt conversation with a friend" (qtd. in Couture 3). In the event, it can be seen that loss gathers readers and the author around the text.

Likewise, Bascaramurty's text serves to illustrate the ambivalent nature of this link between reader and writer. Whilst Bascaramurty authors the book, the story is focused on her friend's story. As the author attempts to verbalize the consequences of Layton's advanced cancer diagnosis, she acts as a witness, as a *reader* of the whole situation. The journalist accompanies Layton throughout the whole process, as a friend and supporter. At some point, we might sense that he lacks emotional support at home. Layton's wife Candace is portrayed as a brave, strong woman who manages to sustain the family and raise a child without the presence of a healthy father. She takes care of everything in the household, including Layton's medical treatment and appointments. However, we learn that: "[Layton] just needed [Candace] to *listen*, not to always try to find a solution to his problems" (64; emphasis added). With this, Layton reinforces the importance of listening in caregiving, asserting its valence as a therapeutic action. Bascaramurty's witnessing of Layton's and his family's experience through cancer allows a faithful writing of Layton's thoughts and feelings, turning the text into a source of solace for those who, little by little, lose Layton. On the other hand, Bascaramurty herself admitted that this process of "writing Layton" helped her reconcile with the unexpected loss of her father: "Writing about these last years of Layton's life helped me in this very unexpected way with coping with, you know, all of the grief that came with losing my dad" ("What a Dying Young Father"). Even if writing in this case is not triggered by an internal motivation, its self-analytical outcome is achieved anyhow. Bascaramurty sees Layton day after day, she *reads* his emotions and puts it all into words. Acting as a reader and a writer simultaneously provides her and Layton's environment with comfort and solace which can contribute to ease the pain (Bascaramurty, "What I Learned").

Couture's and Bascaramurty's texts show how tight the link between readers and writers is. In fact, their connection transcends and gives way to the creation of a collective caring structure—an interhuman assemblage—based on compassion and sympathy. Listening and understanding are pivotal in therapy as well as during any relationship (Jonas-Simpson 222; Reis et al. 15). Through life writing, the roles of reader and writer intermingle and operate symbiotically, in such a way that they are enabled to unburden themselves and also to attend others' needs. All in all, human relationships should function on the grounds of balance, coordination, cooperation and comprehension. The universality of loss will reach each of us, meaning that we will always need support from others. For that, it is important that we sustain our closest and stand by their side when they most need it. Following Couture's reflection, we all have a story to tell and we all deserve to count on someone who wishes to listen to it (149).

3.2. Healing Words

As stated above, reader and writer may mirror the "patient-therapist" duality, highlighting the connection between the life writing genre and the notions of bibliotherapy and scriptotherapy. Couture's and Bascaramurty's books can be representative of these trends, as Lye—one of Couture's reviewers—mentioned her ability to find solace in the author's words after having undergone cancer and motherhood herself (qtd. in Couture 3). Then, Bascaramurty herself finds comfort throughout the narration of Layton's story to overcome her father's death ("What a Dying Young Father"). When considering bibliotherapy and scriptotherapy, the power of words should be openly recognized, since healing through words is possible (Kaur 219). The therapeutic effects of these practices stem from the expressive flow of words inherent in both reading and writing. In life writing, these processes involve not only recalling memories but also embarking on an introspective journey which gives name to the sources of pain and the emotions that they evoke. For Couture, the most effective way to address her pain and multiple losses was songwriting and writing her own memoir. "Letting the words pour" from her (69) served to recall memories and to be healed from the burden that these words represent.

In the event of losing a beloved one, words may also serve a fruitful purpose. Layton's interest in writing letters and Facebook posts is concerned with the survival of his memory. He would like to have a part of himself with his son after his death. Through objects meticulously collected in a box, his letters and his posts, Layton's family—and especially his son—would be able to remember him; or rather, to feel him closer. Words in this case can be sensed as an illustration of a healthier Layton, so the words in his posts can remind his friends and family how he would have been like had the illness not assaulted him. Candance finds comfort in her remembering the beginning of their relationship thanks to those letters which Layton left for her: "The letters helped transport her back to the earlier days of their relationship—before Layton's sickness had consumed their lives. It was a nice way to reset her memories of him" (Bascaramurty, *This Is Not the End* 188). When she read and reread them, she could hear his voice in her head. Therefore, words are connected with Layton's identity before the onset of the illness. Those surrounding Layton, and Layton himself, were suddenly attacked by the so-called "good grief" (248): a sentiment that condenses a sort of nostalgia for what life could have been for Layton and his family if it had not been for cancer. Then, reading Layton's words, as if he were personally talking to us, can be curative because of the permanence which characterizes written words. Cancer and death imply loss, whilst words can still retain Layton's thoughts, ideas and emotions and ultimately, his personality and his sympathy and care for others. Relatives and friends acknowledge the helpfulness of these

letters, recognizing their friend's effort while writing, compiling and arranging those letters (Bascaramurty, *This Is Not the End* 149). It is even Layton who invited his friends to say what words they would like to be told after he died, appreciating the healing potential of his own words: "He had planned to write letters initially, asking close friends for prompts on what sort of greeting they might take comfort in receiving from him after he was gone" (186).

The connection between language and one's memory leads us to consider materiality as an interesting component within life writing. The "Finn box" in *This Is Not the End of Me* becomes Layton's material biography, as it contains not only Layton's own letters to his son, but also a series of objects that could help the child "get to know" his father (162–63). Objects do also retain one's identity, or rather, remind others of one's identity. Similarly, Couture's house, and especially its walls, would remind her of the happiness of love and motherhood, as well as of the loss of both: "These walls had witnessed too much . . . Every dark moment / Every dark night" (125–32). Objects—and even scents or views—bring us back to particular moments in life. It is our contention that words can also operate as a container, not only of linguistic sense, but also of personal content. On the one hand, Layton's Facebook posts retained his lively spirit, which proves the power of words to convey one's personality. On the other hand, Couture composes her own songs which attempt to preserve every "heartache" known for her (56). Her lyrics are strongly connected with emotions; for her, songwriting in the first person serves as a channel to unburden and externalize her preoccupations, as if it were a lyric diary or any other kind of expressive writing in which the first-person voice—and its emotional upheaval—is heard all throughout the text (Carroll 170). Words can then become a potential tool to retain some part of ourselves in a process of growth, transformation or decay. Remembering and reminding are easily triggered by a type of self-narration, so when returning to those texts, we are enabled to see beyond the present moment and sympathize with our previous state of self. Any other witness to these texts, as it could have been the case of Layton's family and friends, will approach the writer's most intimate and truthful side and profit from the remnants of his or her self.

4. Conclusion

The analyses proposed for Couture's memoir and Bascaramurty's chronicle of Layton Reid's illness are intended to support our thesis that life writing can gather people together and bring therapeutic effects throughout the process of both reading and writing. These texts show that individuals and their individual stories can be relatable. Through a common experience, individuals can

be assembled into a collective. Collectivity is assembled by means of relatability, recognition and sympathy. Readers who might engage in the reading of both works are motivated to follow a process of healing similar to the writer's. Couture proves to have reached resilience, to have accepted her wounded past. She is now able to recall memories and to assume the impact of loss. On the other hand, Bascaramurty's narration shows the intertwinement of different perspectives, as she performs the role of an observer and intermediary while also giving prominence to Layton's voice and his family's. Remembrance becomes Layton's major concern; while Couture was concerned about the recollection of life experiences, Layton also conveys his will to use memories to maintain him alive. Not only does Layton worry about his own irreparable loss, but also about the idea that his existence—after death—might result in oblivion. Confronting loss, either through Couture's account or Layton's texts, is about courage, about acceptance, about overcoming denial, about expressing oneself. For those undergoing similar situations, readings these accounts can result in the creation of human, caring bonds.

Nonfiction treating situations related to loss, like Couture's and Bascaramurty's texts, can be further explored as a healing tool to be actively employed in medical practices, which seems to align with the main aims behind Health Humanities. The concept of care in this analysis is not necessarily related to chemical treatments, but to humanity. Caring for others becomes an indispensable step to reach cooperation, sympathy and solidarity. Reading about others who are vulnerably positioned widens our horizons, as this contributes to develop a realistic outlook on life. Sympathizing with those testimonies implies getting in tune with others' souls and, consequently, getting to know oneself better. The reader, in these transformative types of reading, is no longer an observer, but a participant in the story. Sympathy creates bonds among people in the world, especially when sharing a traumatic past (Carnes 30); though life writing texts of this sort, then, readers and writers become entangled and can relate to each other.

Although the notion of loss is known for its vastness, our focus on the topic throughout this article has been articulated by Couture's and Bascaramurty's approach to illness, death and separation, which are depicted as universal facts, because life also implies losing, no matter age, place or social status. To cope with it, literary pieces and more specifically, life writing texts like memoirs, autobiographies or chronicles, may be helpful thanks to the extra-literary connection which arises from the reader to the author or narrator. Careful listening, thorough comprehension and human sympathy feature this relationship, operating dialogically among all the participants in the resulting interhuman assemblage. Raising awareness about others' circumstances can, additionally, provide more thorough self-knowledge, as we may recognize ourselves in others' words and experiences. Human bonding emerging from literature is

symbiotic, which leads us to the conclusion that medical practices touched with human closeness and care might result in a—to some extent—relieving experience despite illness, loss or even death.

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The Edible I in Kim Fu's *For Today I Am a Boy*

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ABSTRACT
This article explores Kim Fu's 2014 *For Today I Am a Boy* through the lens of critical eating studies. In this novel's portrayal of Peter (see note 3), the trans woman protagonist, images of food and acts of eating (or the denial of these acts) are deployed as a meditation on the navigation of body, hence of self. This paper positions the act of eating as representing more than just a physical, biological process, but rather a placing of people in relationship with the edible matter and all the conditions of its production, including its socio-cultural/familial meanings. In interpreting Peter's experiences of self in continuum with the experiences of both Peter's mother and Mrs. Becker (the mistress of Peter's father), this paper observes characters figured not only as hungry, but also as edible due in part to their battered subject positions but even more so due to the forced repression and denial of these identities.

Keywords
Chinese Canadian Literature; Critical Eating Studies; Gender; Trans Literature

1. Introduction

> . . . with our gastronomical growth will come, inevitably,
> knowledge and perception of a hundred other things, but
> mainly of ourselves.
> –M.F.K. Fisher, *How to Cook a Wolf*

Since its publication in 2014, Kim Fu's *For Today I Am a* Boy has garnered both popular and scholarly discussion of its representation of Peter, the novel's largely closeted trans woman protagonist. With some discussion of the novel critiquing it as forwarding a "'transness as tragedy'" (Horvat 80) message,[1] the majority of the scholarship centres on the implications of Peter's intersectionality as a second-generation Chinese-Canadian trans woman. As Andrea Ruthven summarizes, *For Today I Am a Boy* is "[a]s much a story about coming of age as a transgender individual as it is about the competing claims of second-generation Chinese-Canadian identity"; thus, it is a narrative that "addresses the ways in which heteronormative masculinity intersects with racialized identities" (Ruthven). As such, scholarship about this text, while remaining largely focussed on the protagonist's navigation of gendered identity, is interested too in the dynamics of family and culture and the resulting pressures of heteronormative and patriarchal constructs.[2] In line with this scholarly conversation,

1 Both Casey Plett and Ana Horvat critique the novel as an example of a cis-gender author writing a trans narrative that is not representative of the fullness of lived experience and that, therefore, instead reiterates old tropes. Plett, for instance, notes a tendency in such novels to make the character's navigation of their trans identity the sole focus of the plot to the exclusion of other dimensions of their identity and experience. While Plett's and Horvat's concern regarding the impact of representations that focus on trans identity as tragic is, of course, well-founded, neither Plett nor Horvat acknowledge the racial and cultural specificity of Peter's character as a factor in Peter's navigation of trans identity. As such, while their main point that cis-gender authors need to be more careful in their representations of trans experiences is true, they seem to overlook the intersectionality of Peter's character and, in doing so, risk denying the validity and authenticity of such experiences of hesitancy and dilemma.

2 Scholarship interpreting the intersectionality of Peter's identity is growing. While Stephanie Hsu positions *For Today I Am a Boy* alongside other Asian-American texts to "imagin[e] a trans feminism that is also anti-racist" (135), Ruthven looks to this novel's intersections between race and gender in order to demonstrate that this novel rejects the "homecoming narrative" of trans identity. Danielle Seid argues for a trans-generational approach that "makes visible the narrative and aesthetic dynamics of generational conflicts and intimacies surrounding gender and sexual expectations, debts, and roles within the immigrant family, as well as affinities between trans and immigrant experiences across generational lines" (142). Lily Cho and Serena Guarracino both turn their focus to specific tropes evident in the novel. Cho interrogates the experience of visibility seeking to "reorient[] the question of visibility as one of capture" (71). Cho thereby asks "what it means to be captured" and conceptualizes "capture as something more than subjection" (71). Guarracino focusses instead on the representation of "the high male voice," arguing for "the association of male falsetto with ethnic difference, to highlight the intersectionality of race and gender as complementary but also competing para-

the following discussion positions the trope of eating as a voice for the novel's broader exploration of the conditions that compromise Peter's ability to claim I's womanhood.[3]

Looking to the novel's frequent focus on food, cooking, and acts of ingestion, this article approaches *For Today I Am a Boy* through the field of critical eating studies. As coined by Kyla Wazana Tompkins, critical eating studies "weds food studies to body theory" (2) with the aim to "more closely bind food studies to feminist, queer, and gender studies, as well as to critical race theory" (3). It does so by turning the attention to eating as action that both literally and metaphorically unites a body with its surroundings. As Tompkins describes, "acts of eating cultivate political subjects by fusing the social with the biological" (1). What this means is that, as Sidney Mintz argues, "eating is never a 'purely biological' activity" (7). Instead, foods carry with them their histories, personal and cultural significances, and conditions of production (Mintz 7), all of which are ingested when the food is consumed, and thus all of which become the body and/or the energy to sustain it. In this way, acts of eating not only "involve[] us in relationship with others, whether human, animal, or otherworldly" (Roy 194), but also signal our bodily dependence on and development out of these relationships, histories, and conditions. In other words, as many have said before, we are what we eat, but what we eat is not just the food object itself, but rather all that has produced that object and inflected it with meaning.

digms in Peter/Audrey's journey" (129).

3 This essay uses "I" to refer to Peter in the third-person and thus, aims to have "I" hold the third-person much as "they" has come to hold the singular. Within the context of this novel, no other available third-person pronoun—"she," "he," nor "they"—is suitable for Peter. "He" is an undesired identity, and while "she" may be Peter's identity, it remains largely out of reach and unexpressed, except in fleeting moments. Furthermore, Peter has been conditioned to construct gender too much in terms of a binary to be able to experience the self as fluidly inhabiting a "they." The novel's choice of a first-person perspective is vital: Peter can be an "I" and have that "I" hold together a complexity of experience—a despised masculinity, a wished-for femininity, and all the doubt, hesitancy, and chaos that the constant clash of these identities bring for Peter. In this essay's use of "I" as a third-person pronoun, the complex unity of self that only "I" itself can hold is respected. Although others have read the conclusion of the novel as a scene confirming Peter's transition, the following reading will suggest that that hope remains unrealized. This essay, consequently, uses "Peter," rather than "Audrey," to refer to this character. Given the context of the narrative, "Peter" does not represent a deadnaming of this character, who, while desiring to be Audrey, struggles to imagine being called anything but Peter: "'What else would you call me?'" (Fu 226). In Peter's worldview, "you couldn't just rename yourself, you couldn't tear down the skyline and rebuild and think there wouldn't be consequences" (226).

In reading *For Today I Am a Boy* through critical eating studies, this essay draws on Maggie Kilgour's assertion that "images of eating provide a model for the encounters between individuals" (6). The discussion subsequently expands upon arguments that declare that "we are, in fact, constituted by the food we eat" (Curtin 12)—or the food we do not eat, as the case may be. In this text, the portrayal of food, and, by extension, the interrogation of what is edible, speaks the story of Peter's identity construction, namely, Peter's navigation of trans identity and the difficult claiming and expression of I's womanhood. With a father who both forwards a toxic heteronormative masculinity and enforces a denial of ancestry for the purposes of assimilation, Peter comes to navigate I's identity in terms of threatened destruction. In this way, the novel places Peter in a continuum with the narrative's other female characters. Peter navigates I's own womanhood through I's observations of how the various other women in I's life are treated and how they react. For example, Peter puts on make-up desiring to be beautiful like I's eldest sister, Adele, but must also then contend with next oldest Helen's condemnation of Adele's beauty as a signal of "[h]ow badly [Adele] needs people to like her" (Fu 33); even more destructively, Peter experiences a dark satisfaction, a "terrible unexpected pride. A kind of sisterhood. A womanly rite of passage" (137) after experiencing sexual assault and realizing that younger sister Bonnie has also experienced this violence. Although Peter's navigation of womanhood occurs through I's interpretation of the experiences of many other women, the following discussion argues that Peter's observations of I's mother and Mrs. Becker are particularly key to Peter's troubled expression and birthing of self. Through these characters, Peter must confront I's own edibility. What the imagery of food and eating reveals is not that those inhabiting subject positions that the father seeks to deny are edible, but rather that the repression of identity makes them so. In other words, it is not their womanhood and/or their Chineseness that has rendered them consumable, though toxic attitudes like the father's would wish them so. Rather, the very repression of identity and consequent denial of desire threatens to turn these characters into the eaten. For Peter's mother, Mrs. Becker, and Peter, finding voice to express their battered subject positions is largely not an option; the novel's imagery of food and eating instead becomes the voice that the characters can not themselves achieve.

2. Consuming Mother

In this novel, Peter's mother—a character who remains unnamed aside from "mother"—is a powder keg of repressed identity. With a husband whose "project of Westernization" (Fu 47) seeks to make the family's race "invisible" (46),

the mother's expression of cultural heritage is silenced except in vague actions of unspoken desire: secret visits to the Chinese Association (43, 174); "[a] flash of pleasure" (129) when finding an opportunity to speak Cantonese at a dim sum restaurant; a quick and fleeting question about whether Peter's girlfriend is Chinese (130). The opening of the novel performs in graphic detail the impact of this repression of racial and cultural identity. The novel begins, "On the day my sister Adele is born, my mother goes to the butcher" (ix), a description that fashions the mother to be both consumer seeking meat and the animal about to be sold as meat. Seeing "[a]n enormous sow . . . laid out in the display case" (ix), Peter's mother becomes that animal:

> Mother replaces the pig's body with her own: her legs hanging on hooks at the back; her tiny feet encased in rounded, hoof-like leather boots; the shinbone ready to be held in a vise and shaved for charcuterie. Her torso is cut below the breast and lies flat, showing a white cross-section of vertebrae. Her head is intact, eyes clouded yellow and rolled upward. The dried-out edges of her ears let light through. Human ears probably taste similar to pig's ears, she thinks. A glutinous outer layer with crisp cartilage underneath. She could stew them, char them in a skillet, watch her skin blister and pop. (ix)

In this image, the mother does not just see herself as consumable flesh; she sees her body in pieces: legs hanging, meat from the shinbone ready to be shorn, torso cut revealing bone. With all of this imagery of dismemberment, the head being whole becomes a contrast of note; the head, often perceived as the locus of personality, announces here that what appears is not solely edible matter but an animal who once lived. This figuring of the abject is furthered by the permeability of borders that become apparent in this imagery: the bone that should be hidden is visible; the skin is not intact but blisters and pops; the expected opaqueness of flesh lets light through.

Culinary acts may, in general, be considered acts of empowerment with the preparer and consumer exerting control over the edible material "as the self [the eater] absorbs the other's [the eaten's] energy in its own interest" (Kilgour 229). The mother's vision, however, positions her as more than cook and consumer; she too is what is cooked. In this scene of imagined edibility, the dish that the mother becomes is pig's ear, a cuisine not exclusive to Chinese culture but, in this scene, certainly suggestive of her navigation of repressed heritage. After this envisioning of self as butchered pig, the mother is brought back to reality with the butcher asking her what she would like: "'A pound of sausages,' she says. She feels a stab—homesickness, maybe, or dread at the thought of more burned sausages and boiled potatoes" (Fu ix-x). To order sausages and be brought away from her vision of pig's ears is to become aware of her loss of

home. Her desire for pig's ear warps into a vision of herself as consumable flesh precisely because her desire for this object of alimentation is impossible due to the Westernized appetite forced upon her by her assimilation-driven husband. Further, as the "stab" of the contractions of giving birth begin, the mother's legs "give out and she lands on her hands and knees" (x), a quadruped posture that symbolically further enacts her transformation. In showing the mother to be both the cook/consumer and the consumed in this scene, the imagery speaks the impossibility of the mother's hyphenated identity. Because she cannot have pig's ear, she must become it.

The incommensurability of her cultural cuisine with her husband's ideals of assimilation is even further confirmed in Peter's depiction of her attempt to share her gastronomical heritage: her own mother's white-fungus soup. That food is an expression of culture is well-known. As Anita Mannur argues, food plays a key role in creating "the cultural imagination of diasporic populations" (8); Wiebke Beushausen and colleagues similarly assert that "[e]ating and drinking nourish an individual but also serve as a means to reconstruct communities and identities" (21) by "translat[ing] memory, longing, and nostalgia" (19). Peter's mother, however, is denied this opportunity of reconstructing heritage and expressing culture. Despite the mother's attempt to share the familial legacy of this dish, her husband discards her effort, "dump[ing] it on the lawn" (Fu 6) before it even makes it to the table. Dinner the following night features instead "split-pea soup with ham" (6), a more Westernized food choice, much like the sausages and boiled potatoes that the mother earlier dreaded. Peter describes the discarded white-fungus soup as follows: "The sweet broth sank into the earth, leaving behind a heap of frilly white. On the first day, it looked like a girl had stripped off her nightgown and abandoned it there. On the second day, like a pile of bleached bones" (6). The remnants of this soup personify the mother's loss, her heritage becoming corpse, interred without dignity, and decomposing down to its skeletal remains. It is not, however, the dish itself that is portrayed as abject; it is the discarding of this dish, the denial of culture, that makes it so.

Furthermore, one must recall that it is through Peter as narrator/focalizer that this scene is depicted. In fact, Peter's narrative perspective throughout the novel is noteworthy for its simultaneous internalization of the father's toxicity (re: masculinity, heteronormativity, and cultural assimilation) and contention with it. That the image in this scene is a girl's discarded nightgown transforming into bones speaks also to Peter's own navigation of identity: to discard girl's clothing is to decompose. As well, Peter's contention with the father's toxic cultural assimilationist ideals is also confirmed by this scene. The father force-feeds Peter the split-pea soup despite Peter's physical revulsion. Beyond Peter's agency over I's own eating being thwarted in this scene, the act of eating itself is

rendered slant. Instead of ingesting this food, Peter describes "inhal[ing] it like air" (7), replacing one life-sustaining act of the mouth/throat—eating—with another—breathing. Yet, these life-sustaining activities become destructive when combined. If this metaphor is extended, one would note that to inhale food is to compromise one's airway; to inhale food threatens infection, even death.

In Peter's portrayal, thus, the mother cannot nourish the family, and the effort to do so becomes grotesque. While watching her prepare the shrimp for dinner, Peter observes, "[s]he inhaled sharply as she cut her finger on a spiky leg. She lifted her finger high enough for me to see the drop of red falling into the bowl of naked shrimp, and then she went on. Their briny gray juices got into her wound, and she went on. We would eat her blood for dinner" (Fu 39). Although a mother's body, her production of milk, is often a child's first food source, in this image, the mother's body is not excreting food, but rather losing a modicum of its own life force. Amidst circumstances wherein she has been so repressed, she can feed her children with little more than her own destruction.

And yet, despite this scene's figuring of the mother's seeming hopelessness in combatting her own edibility, the focus perhaps need be instead on Peter's fleeting, yet repeated observations of her perseverance: Her blood falls, and "she went on"; the brine gets into her wound, and "she went on." In Peter's portrayal, despite the repression that renders the mother edible, she is not, in the end, destroyed. In this way, her character can be read as an example of Tompkins's observation that "the fantasy of the body's edibility does not mean that body will always go down smoothly" (8). In Tompkins's context, "nineteenth century black bodies and subjects stick in the throat of the (white) body politic" (8); they "fight back, and bite back" (8); they "choke[]" (92) those who seek to consume them; they, "pictured as edible[,] hardly concede to that relationship" (11). In Peter's mother's case, the husband who rendered her edible dies, and as Peter observes, "Mother was like a different person" (Fu 172). Importantly, Peter's focus is on the re-emergence of her voice. Her mouth, which once not only was silent but also went hungry, is now generative: Peter's image is that she "blossomed at the mouth" (172). Even though her stories of the past are said to have "grown strange or impossible from too much time in the dark of her closed throat" (173), these stories signal that despite the conditions of her married life, she was not fully consumed, a lesson that proves important for, though unacknowledged by, Peter. Furthermore, two of the stories she shares concern one of her children's triumph of consumption and desire: Helen, the second oldest daughter, is said not only to have "bit a wasp right out of the air and chewed it before it could sting" (173), but also to have emerged from her early speech delay to voice her first words in the form of a full sentence: "'Can I have a cookie?' Can you believe that, Peter? 'Can I have a cookie.' No jibber jabber, no *mama, dada*, like the rest of you" (173). That her memory of her own

child is figured in relation to food suggests a valuing of the strength to be an eater and of pursuing those desires, even if she herself did not have the same opportunity. These stories of the past coupled with her having earlier placed the "household gods" (154) and a number of photographs of the ancestors on the *kitchen table* suggests that she can now offer a form of nourishment to her children, even if, as turns out, she does not offer it in a way that is healthy or that makes them want to consume it.[4]

3. Apricots and Pennies: Mrs. Becker

Mrs. Becker's experiences of edibility are likewise an important touchstone for Peter. While more a minor character, Mrs. Becker, the family's neighbour and secret mistress to Peter's father, is portrayed in ways akin to I's mother. In Peter's depiction, Mrs. Becker too is in a constant state of threatened consumption, her perfume's "generic berry scent" (Fu 54), for instance, prefiguring her body's edibility. With Peter as the storyteller, the portrayal of Mrs. Becker, much like that of the mother, is in terms reflective of Peter's own confrontation of the pressures of the father's heteronormative and gender-biased worldviews. Through Peter's narration, Mrs. Becker's edibility, much like the mother's, results from repressed emotions and unfulfilled desires, in her case those having to do with becoming a mother.

Although Mrs. Becker's motivations for the affair, and whether becoming pregnant is one of them, go unspoken, the affair's role in Mrs. Becker's self-destruction is disclosed in part through the corruption of her ability to nourish others. After having first attempted to connect with Peter's mother and the children through a failed offering of toys, Mrs. Becker bakes an apricot cake and cooks apricot jam for Peter's family, yet her efforts go unconsumed; Peter's mother dumps the cake in the trash the moment she receives it and Peter leaves the fallen unbroken jar of jam with Mrs. Becker on the floor of her kitchen. Symbolically, these culinary acts can be read as Mrs. Becker's attempt to expel her guilt about the affair and have it be consumed, hence eliminated. And yet, the family does not ingest her offerings nor allow her guilt to nourish them. Her

4 The scene after the father's burial wherein Peter finds the household gods on the kitchen table and wherein the mother brings out the photographs and places them there is, in the end, not a particularly hopeful scene. The mother's attempted forcing of Helen to bow to her ancestors results in an explosive argument that leads to the mother banishing both Helen and Peter from the house. Regardless of the exacerbated familial fissures, the mother's reclaiming of ancestry here is nevertheless a reclaiming of agency.

kisses too are figured in terms of abject nourishment, her husband describing that she "liked to eat sour candies crusted with sugar by pressing them to the top of her mouth . . . crystals cutting in and wearing away her soft palate, often doing it until she bled. He could taste it when he kissed her" (Fu 48). According to him, kissing her was "[l]ike sucking on pennies" (48); in consuming, or at least, tasting her blood, Mr. Becker experiences her body not as living body but as metal object literally and figuratively devoid of nutrients.

Peter is silent regarding the significance of Mrs. Becker in I's life; why her story is narrated as part of I's own is not overtly announced. Nevertheless, Peter's descriptions suggest that Mrs. Becker's role in I's story is in large part a contemplation of the paradoxes of transgression and, by extension, the paradoxes of pursuing one's desires.[5] Mrs. Becker is at once a symbol of transgression—she pursues an affair—and a barrier to transgression—she informs Peter's father both about Bonnie's teenaged sexual activity and about Peter's wearing of an apron. She too is a symbol of pursuing one's desires, a moment of overt wistfulness regarding the prospect of having a child that looks like Peter revealing that the affair at least in part is valued for its possibility of yielding a child. Nevertheless, she too is a symbol of the costs of that pursuit: her mental health is fractured to the point of suicide. When Peter reflects upon the affair and Mrs. Becker's suicide, I's characterization of Mrs. Becker is telling. Peter asks, "Where was Mr. Becker when my father clutched a fistful of red hair and she pretended it didn't hurt, pretended to like pain?" (Fu 56). Although not directly admitted by Peter, Mrs. Becker's experience becomes a mirror for Peter's own: the father's hold is destructive and there are costs to pretending your experience is something other than what it is.

4. Peter and the Edible I

Through the narrative's positioning of Peter's experiences as corollary to those of I's mother and Mrs. Becker, the difficulty of Peter's expression of womanhood is demonstrated. As much as Peter is a woman and desires to be able to express that identity, womanhood is not an easily claimable position. Thanks both to broader heteronormative, gender-biased, and assimilative cultural

5 She too may represent in some way Peter's own unfulfilled desire for children. In one scene of daydreaming, the magic of imagining dissipates and Peter's vision of having a husband and children ends with "[t]he children d[ying] where they stood, stiffened into painted smiles and stickers for eyes" (Fu 206). In this instance, mothering is revealed to be a key aspect of Peter's idealized femininity.

currents and, most particularly, to the father's repressive enforcement of such ideologies, in Peter's experience of role models, to be a woman is to be forcibly repressed and victimized. As such, for Peter, with the added complexity of having been born biologically male, pursuing womanhood is not an easy choice. Of course, for Peter, not being openly a woman is equally unsustainable; this repression of identity renders I unnourished and consumable.

Throughout Peter's portrayal of I's development, acts of ingestion—or the lack thereof—come to symbolize the complexity of Peter's relationship with body. Peter is rarely an eater and, even more so, rarely a healthful eater. For Peter, the fact that food breaches the borders of an outside and inside serves as a symbol of the impossibility of the connection between Peter's own outwardly gendered identity and I's internally repressed one. As Parama Roy observes, "the body in alimentation stages the fraught relationship between an inside and an outside" (194). Such an assertion generally addresses the fact that to eat is to challenge the autonomy of the self—the inside—by signalling its dependence upon outside matter, matter that at once is conquered by being subsumed and yet that to which one is vulnerable. I here draw on Maggie Kilgour's assertion that "bodily needs also indicate that the appearance of autonomy is an illusion, for the body must incorporate elements from outside itself in order to survive" (6). She continues in her argument to contend that "eating, physically tasting, reveals the fallaciousness of the illusion of self-sufficiency and autonomy that the inside/outside opposition tries to uphold by constructing firm boundary lines between ourselves and the world. The inside depends upon, is nourished or harmed by, substances that come from outside" (9). Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* even further focusses on the act of eating as bringing an inside and outside together. For Bennett, ingestion is "a series of mutual transformations in which the border between inside and outside becomes blurry" and the outside matter is an actant with the "power to affect and create effects" (49). In other words, that which is eaten is not merely subsumed by the eater but must be acknowledged as having the power to change the eater.

In terms of eating staging the complex relationship between an inside and outside, what Peter ingests—or does not—performs I's struggle with the internalization of heteronormative, gender-biased, and assimilationist ideals. Importantly, Peter does have one key period of becoming an eater, although a gluttonous and unsatiated one. Peter realizes I's intimate "hyperfeminine fantasies" (Fu 168) when in a relationship with Claire, a likewise closeted individual. As they binge on animated Disney romances, "[they] ate all of the cookies and two whole cakes without noticing. The next cookie was in [I's] hand before [I] had finished the last one so that there were no pauses in the pleasure" (168). In this instance, Peter may be able to consume, but the eating is harmful; the calories

are empty and both Peter and Claire eat voraciously until they are "too full to move" (168). The food being taken in, cast as it is in terms of a heteronormative ideal, is ultimately unnourishing, even self-destructive for Peter.

Peter's use of ingestion as a means of thinking through I's experience and expression of gender becomes particularly overt towards the end of the novel when just after learning that workmate John too is transgender, Peter attends a dinner party at John and his girlfriend Eileen's apartment. While the conversation is outwardly about food allergies and sensitivities, Peter is clearly speaking about matters of personal agency over identity construction. As Peter later reveals, I's key frustration with this group is their inability to acknowledge their privilege: "Who were these kids? What right had they to be born into a world where they were taught to look endlessly into themselves, to ask how the texture of a mushroom made them feel? To ask themselves, and not be told, whether they were boys or girls? You eat what's there or you starve" (Fu 218). In other words, in Peter's philosophy, one's only option is to internalize that which has been externally proffered. Since, to Peter, the "food"/gender identity given to I at birth is inedible, Peter must suffer the consequences and go hungry. As Peter observes, in a room full of people with a litany of food restrictions, Peter's plate ironically is "the only one still empty" (216). For Peter, this metaphor of I's plate staying empty signifies the barriers Peter faces in accessing and expressing I's closeted self. Much as Peter cryptically notes, "[i]f you lived somewhere where the dominant food was shellfish, you'd just have a reaction and die, and no one would know why" (216), no one knows that Peter is being destroyed by the assigned-at-birth identity that I has had to digest.[6]

Furthermore, one must note that the ingestion of identity is in fact a literal act in this text. Early in the narrative, Peter relates one particularly climatic act of ingestion. Peter is forced by the father to ingest a remaining shard of I's destroyed apron. Peter had experienced this apron as a conduit into womanhood; it is what Peter wears while nakedly cooking and cleaning for the family and taking on the persona of the sultry television host Giovetta. Although an inanimate object, this apron, to Peter, becomes a body to put on.[7] Peter's treatment of this

6 Although this article's discussion of Peter in terms of alimentation focusses primarily on I's expression of gender, one would note that eating—or the lack of doing so—also performs Peter's difficult relationship with cultural heritage. Peter, for instance, brings I's mother to a dim sum restaurant where she can connect with the "trailing the sounds and smells of what [she] had lost" (Fu 130). But simultaneously, this is a place where Peter remains hungry: "I could hear the women pushing the carts shouting the names of their dishes, could smell the breading and garlic, feel the wet heat, but they never seemed to come any closer" (130).

7 Peter's treatment of this apron as a second skin, a womanly skin, to don can be seen

apron as a new, more comfortable body is clear in I's descriptions: Peter first observes that the apron is "starting to get the rubbery smell of [I's] own body" (Fu 45) and then that it is "like a second skin—a better one" (50). When Peter's donning of the apron is discovered, the father's hands and keenly apparent disapproval corrupt it. The apron loses its "shine"; it now "looked like skinned animal" (54). Since the apron was a "second skin," Peter, and Peter's womanhood too, is animalized and, by extension, rendered edible matter. Even further, according to the progression of the imagery, the apron in its destruction becomes even more horrific; it is a corpse—a "skinned animal" (54)—brought to life. It "twist[s] inward as though alive" (55) while on fire.

But importantly, despite Peter's father's attempt to annihilate this object that expresses Peter's womanhood, the apron is not consumed entirely by the flames. A remainder remains. The survival of Peter's womanhood is signalled by the continued existence of the apron as ashen shards. The father's destructive work is, thus, not complete. Consequently, he forces Peter to engage in an act of self-cannibalization by swallowing "a chip, about the size of a pebble" (Fu 55). Although the father's reasoning for forcing this act goes unstated, his actions suggest an attempt to force Peter's conquering of I's own womanhood through the act of ingestion. Peter must consume I's womanhood, not to integrate it into I-self and have it become like the food that "turn[s] into tissue, muscle, and nerve and then provide[s] the energy that drives them all" (Tompkins 3). Rather, this consumption conquers and annihilates as in Bahktin's figuring of the eater as one who "triumphs over the world, devours it without being devoured" (qtd. in Kilgour 6). To consume the apron shard is to re-internalize what had been an outward, albeit largely secret, expression of I's identity so as to hide it.

Beyond a repression of identity, however, this scene of ingestion is framed as a failed birth of self thanks to the narrative structure that juxtaposes this scene with Peter's contemplation of Mrs. Becker's pregnancy and suicide. The scene of swallowing the apron shard directly leads into Peter's narration of Mrs. Becker revealing her seeming pregnancy with Peter's father's child and her suicide. This juxtapositioning suggests that Peter's vision of her death describes more than just Mrs. Becker's own experience. Peter narrates: "I see her, sometimes, leaning back in her seat, clutching a pear-size baby in her hand, staring into its tiny, sloping eyes, its body hard as plastic, its crown of dark hair no larger than a fingerprint" (Fu 58).[8] Beyond the narrative structure bringing these events

as a precursor to Peter's later assumption of a woman's body through having Margie lie upwards on top of I. Through this positioning, Peter takes on Margie's breasts and genitalia as I's own (Fu 126).

8 In that the next chapter opens with Peter's mother peeling a pear, the very food ob-

and characters into relation with one another, the shard and the (imagined?) miscarried foetus are linked together as edible matter and as plastics. The apron, though not edible, is eaten; the baby, though not edible, is described in terms of edible material, a pear. Further, the apron had been described as an acrylic—hence, a plastic—and Peter's vision of this foetus, which echoes Mrs. Becker's earlier description of a previous miscarriage, is that it is "hard as plastic" (58). This link between the apron shard and the miscarried foetus casts Peter's swallowing of the apron symbolically as a failed birth, namely a failed birth of Peter as woman. Both the apron shard and the miscarried foetus are plastic corpses of unmet desire, and both signal a breeching of the body's borders in monstrous ways: Mrs. Becker's baby should be alive inside her womb, not dead in her hands; Peter's apron, and the womanhood it represents, should exist externally, not be swallowed and forced inside. By swallowing the shard, Peter takes into I's stomach the corpse of I's womanhood, matter than cannot nourish, a foetus that cannot grow, develop, or be birthed.

In this forced swallowing of womanhood, cycles of repression that result in Peter's edibility throughout the rest of I's development emerge. If Peter must consume I's womanhood, then it makes sense for Peter to see I's self as consumable by others. Peter, consequently, frames I-self as food. Peter has a linear-shaped navel that looks like "I had been stabbed in the stomach with a boning knife" (Fu 125), an image that equates Peter's body with meat. Furthermore, Peter is locked in the freezer by a co-worker, thereby symbolically becoming food just like the other items that the freezer holds. Even more importantly, much like Peter's mother had envisioned herself as a pig at the butcher's, Peter has a flash of self as the corpse of a calf. Upon witnessing John with his girlfriend, Peter's narrative makes a non-sequitur leap into the past to a time when Peter was attacked by black flies. Peter depicts John and Eileen as an "uncomfortable" (209) sight in part because John represents an ease of gender transition that Peter feels impossible for I-self and in part because Eileen, to Peter, manifests an unfettered womanliness. This expression of discomfort leads into the following description:

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ject used to describe the foetus, there is a subtle suggestion that Peter's mother too is figured by Peter to be complicit in fostering the conditions that make Mrs. Becker's child an impossibility and that hence contribute to Mrs. Becker's hopelessness and subsequent self-destruction. As Peter narrates in the segue between the scene of swallowing the shard and the contemplation of Mrs. Becker's suicide, the mother has done little to prevent the affair: "We wanted her [the mother] to call him [the father] out, but she didn't, and we were too afraid" (Fu 56).

> That past summer, at the café, someone had left the skins from the roasted hams in the metal garbage bin out back. They sat baking in the sun. When I lifted the lid off at the end of the day, a cloud of black flies poured out and engulfed my head. Their wings brushed my cheeks and hissed in my ears. I thought of a picture I'd seen of a calf dying from black-fly bites, its sores red and swollen. No one heard me screaming in the alley. That moment, flat on my back in the filth around the bin, and this moment, watching John watch his girlfriend back out the kitchen door, felt the same. Loneliness exploding out of nowhere in a screeching swarm, dark and dense enough to blot out the sun. (209)

Unlike the mother who had seen herself as a consumable, even tasty, food, Peter's vision of self is as a rotting corpse, edible only in decay and only by entities lower on the food chain.

In the navigation of identity and subsequent consumability, Peter is caught in a catch-twenty-two. While Peter experiences the constant repression of self as "[d]iscipline *consum[ing]* [I's] life" (Fu 170; emphasis added), in Peter's vision, to be out is also to face the threat of edibility. While John aims to show Peter that acceptance is possible, Peter experiences John's pressure as devouring. As described by Peter, John's reaction to Peter not immediately dismissing the possibility of going out with them for Halloween is that of "a dog who hears the kibble bag being shaken in the next room" (223-24). In this image, John is the eater; Peter, and Peter's potential willingness to "be whoever [Peter] want[s]" (224), is the eaten. By extension, Peter's moment of triumph—a metamorphosis into Audrey Hepburn through I's choice of Halloween costume—is not without hints of possible destruction. Peter's eyes become his sister "Adele's almond eyes" (228), notably not 'almond-shaped' or 'almond-coloured' eyes, the wording here directly casting Peter's eyes as edible matter. Furthermore, Peter may name the donning of this costume joyful, but the "sweet[ness]" (227) of this experience is one that simultaneously intimates that Peter is under threat of being consumed. Peter describes the physical sensations of wearing the gown as a "sweet constraint around my hips from the dress, tight as a sausage casing" (227), this image again associating Peter, even in an expression of I's ideal of womanhood, with food.

Ultimately, Peter's narration of self concludes with little resolution. The repression of self that has made Peter consumable renders Peter's fantasies of expressing womanhood, too, in terms of threatened consumability. Even in Peter's envisioning of self as woman, there is no recasting of self with the agency of becoming the eater. The novel's final scene, for instance, that has been read by others to suggest Peter's achievement of transition, does not, in fact, offer that certainty. The final paragraph of the novel reads: "Four grown women sit in a pub, raising their tourist steins to the camera. The waiter who holds the camera

comments on how much they look alike. 'We're sisters,' Bonnie says. '*Wir sind Schwestern*. This is Adele, Helen, and Audrey'" (Fu 239). Whether this scene signals a goal realized or a continued imagining of what might be, but is not, remains uncertain. While the majority of the novel is narrated in the past tense, the present tense is employed strategically at times to situate the reader within episodes of past trauma (e.g., the opening scene which depicts the mother's animalistic birthing of her first child) or within Peter's dreams for the future. For example, when Peter and Bonnie earlier imagine a reunion with their older sisters, the passage begins in the past tense–"I looked at the same spot, the same speck of dust, where her eyes were focused. We looked at it together. It was Helen's deck" (137)–and morphs into the present tense as it conveys a daydream for the future–"Helen stands over the barbecue, cloaked in hickory smoke. Tomato plants in the garden box, some of the fruits a shy, blushing orange, some of them explosively red. Adele plucks one and slices it into a salad. Bonnie hands me a drink in a glass overwhelmed by limes" (137-38). The concluding scene's use of the present tense links it to this earlier deployment of the present, suggesting it to be likewise an imagined, not actual, reunion, hence, an imagined, not actual, transition into womanhood. Furthermore, in both of these visions for the future, Peter's/Audrey's acts of ingestion remain incomplete. The dinner is prepared, the drink is offered; the stein is raised. But Peter/Audrey does not consume; Peter/Audrey may be in the proximity of nourishment, but the taking in of that nourishment remains unimagin(ed/able). Furthermore, the disappearance of Peter's first-person perspective in the novel's concluding paragraph is striking. Peter is hailed "Audrey" by Bonnie; Peter's own claiming of Audrey as a permanent identity goes unrepresented. To be recognized and accepted as a woman may signal an achievement and validation of that identity, but the disappearance of Peter's "I" suggests that Peter remains left at the mercy of other people's definitions and assignments of identity.

5. Conclusion: How To Be I

That eating is about more than eating is made clear by this novel. The mother, Mrs. Becker, and Peter all must contend with a repression of and/or struggle to assert their subject positions. Subsequently, they must confront their own edibility. As revealed by this text, the trope of eating can be considered a meditation on the forces that inform and construct, nourish and/or consume one's sense of self. Acts of eating, or not eating, thus become the conduit through which navigations of body and self are performed. In the end, the novel circles on many questions: how to be oneself and not be consumed, how not to

go hungry, how to eat without being made vulnerable to that which is eaten. As these characters demonstrate, to repress identity and desire is not to be protected from consumption; it is instead to be threatened even more so with one's edibility.

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We Are Already Ghosts: Reflections on Composition

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We Are Already Ghosts, which is my first (published) novel, took nine years to complete. I wrote the initial draft of this novel while I was a Visiting Fellow at the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada during the 2015-2016 academic year. I was at the same time completing my nonfiction book *Malled: Deciphering Shopping in Canada*, a book that was published by Wolsak & Wynn in 2017. After *Malled*, I returned to the novel and to other projects. I co-edited two academic books published in 2020 and 2021 by the University of Alberta Press, and I also wrote, edited, and published my nonfiction book *Field Notes on Listening* with Wolsak and Wynn (that book was published in 2022). I did much of the substantive work of *Field Notes* during the first half of 2020, during the early days of the pandemic. In January 2020 I held a brief residency at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity; in February of that year – until the pandemic intervened – I was a visiting faculty member at the University of Salamanca, Spain. I rewrote *We Are Already Ghosts* alongside my nonfiction project. I later received a promotion from Associate Professor to Professor at Mount Royal University and, in 2021, moved from Mount Royal to the University of Calgary. More personally, my children grew from young people into young adults. Behind the composition, editing, and publishing of this book, then, a great many other things took place in my writing, professional, and personal life. It is a tremendous pleasure and privilege to be afforded some space to think through these times now with some grace and hindsight.

My novel intends to do multiple things at once. If I can summarize it in two ways, I will say that *We Are already Ghosts* is a novel that, first, endeavours to be an engaging summertime cabin read (or cottage / camp / chalet, depending on where you are), and, second, it equally posits itself as a work of post-conceptual experimental fiction. These two purposes are ones that are perhaps difficult to reconcile, and my readers are the ones who will let me know if I have been in any measure successful in this endeavour. An additional goal that connects both of these threads is that this book also strives to provide us with more nuanced, meaningful representations of the place currently known as Alberta during the ending of settler innocence in Canada. I will explain all three of these elements of the novel, as they all go beyond the surface level of the text – though one final hope for this project is that I wish for it also to be a straightforward read, one that remains meaningful as literary fiction as well.

1. A Summer Read

We Are Already Ghosts takes place over four summers at the Briscoe-MacDougall family cabin on an unnamed lake in the central parklands region of the province currently known as Alberta. The summers on which we meet with the family occur at five-year intervals. This set-up means that the main elements of the story take place in August of 1996, August of 2001, August of 2006, and August of 2011. Short passages – "corridors" – detail the passing of time between each of these summertime visits. Although it is a fictional place, the lake on which the cabin is situated lies specifically in Treaty 6 territory, a treaty signed in 1876 by representatives of the British Crown and local Nakoda and Cree nations. The lake closely resembles other lakeside communities in central Alberta like Sylvan Lake, Pigeon Lake, Gull Lake, and a few other spots. The Briscoe-MacDougall family cabin is, notably, an early one among those built along the lakeshore. It is one that was built by the Briscoe generation previous to the older generation depicted in the novel.

The novel is inspired by Virginia Woolf's works, first and foremost, and by the 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse* in particular. Like Katharine Smyth in the 2019 book *All the Lives We Ever Lived: Seeking Solace in Virginia Woolf*, I find that Woolf's novel is one to which I return regularly. It is a book in which I find great comfort and, indeed, solace. *To the Lighthouse* is a novel that, famously, occurs in two long passages with a ten-year interval between them (the "Time Passes" section in the novel's middle). The First World War occurs during that interval section in Woolf's novel, with consequences for the entire family. *We Are Already Ghosts* links to *To the Lighthouse* in significant – but hopefully not overdetermined – ways. First, a careful reader can observe that Clare Briscoe

is the granddaughter of Lily Briscoe, the oft-unhappy artist of Woolf's novel who has a moment of final clarity at the book's end. Clare is descended from an imagined child born to Lily not long after the end of Woolf's novel in 1919, a child born outside of marriage and whose arrival leads – in my imagining – to Lily's departure for Canada. Perhaps Augustus Carmichael in Woolf's novel is the child's father, but that is uncertain; this out-of-wedlock child runs counter to much of how Woolf imagines Lily, as well as Augustus, but Woolf leaves room, I think, for characters to behave in surprising ways (Woolf scholars may disagree with me on this point and others). Clare inhabits a stream-of-consciousness world not dissimilar to Lily's and, indeed, the characters of my novel are ones whose consciousnesses the novel moves between in a manner somewhat akin to Woolf's narrative techniques. Significantly, though, my use of the paragraph is quite different than Woolf's; hers are generally longer, and they are truly amazing things. Mine are briefer, with – in my thinking – more space to breathe between them. Perhaps with increased attunement I might be able to achieve something of the scale and scope of Woolf's paragraphs in time. The secondary Woolfian note in the novel is the pageant that takes place in Part II of the novel, a pageant that recreates, from the children's perspective, a condensed history of Canada and of the twentieth century through puppetry. This pageant takes some inspiration from the pageant of British history that forms the backbone of Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts*, the novel that was completed just before Woolf's death in 1941.

We Are Already Ghosts, then, deals with family relationships, with the tensions between generations, and with the ways in which world events lead to change over time. Between 1996 and 2011 the world was a different place than in Woolf's time, yet it was marked also by major technological changes and by warfare. The advent of mobile technologies, to start with a relatively minor point, leads to changes at the cabin, as everyone has to agree to put their phones in storage when they are there. John, more significantly, serves in Afghanistan after the wars that are declared in the wake of the attacks of September 11th, 2001. The global financial crisis of 2008 impacts the generation of kids by the end of the novel, as they struggle to get underway with their lives and they are not quite able to establish careers in ways akin to what their parents were able to achieve. This is a novel in which, often, very little happens, as the time at the cabin is one of quiet reflection. Instead, characters consider their lives, their loves, and their losses. They swim in the lake; they go canoeing (not dissimilarly to the sailing trip in *To the Lighthouse*); they go to the store and to the dump. They go for walks. They are loving to the best of their abilities. Along the way, however, life happens. People die, a new generation begins to be born. Things change, but many things also stay the same. By the end of the novel, though, I think that it becomes hard to say that the world of

the Briscoe-MacDougall family will remain the same going forward. This novel marks, too, a time when it becomes impossible for a relatively privileged, white settler family like this one not to recognize the ways in which they are implicated in the existence of Canada—and Alberta, specifically—as a settler colonial state. This dawning recognition, especially among the younger generation, forms an important political element of the novel.

2. Experimental Fiction

We Are Already Ghosts equally strives to be an example of experimental fiction. We might call it a form of lyric conceptualism, to follow Sina Queyras, or an attempt at post-conceptualism. I am not too set on any label that would imply that this novel is part of an aesthetic movement. It is, rather, an attempt to reply to a series of different conversations taking place in the literary world, many of them from the world of poetry. There are multiple experimental layers to my novel and I can only discuss some of them here.

First, at the level of structure, my novel endeavours not simply to be Woolfian—written with four sections at five-year intervals rather than Woolf's two sections at a ten-year interval—but also to combine the mournful modernist spirit of *To the Lighthouse* with the playful spirit of my favourite Canadian poet, the experimental writer bpNichol. Many know Nichol's work well, and I heartily recommend and teach his work often. The specific reason that I have sought to link these two authors is a result of their unlikely shared affinity for the letter H. bpNichol is well known for his play with this letter. It was his favourite letter for many reasons, starting with a time living in section H of Wildwood Park, Winnipeg, in his youth (see Davey), and it shows up very often in his work. Nichol creates concrete poetry and comic-style images out of letters, especially this one, and I think of his formal play at the level of letters and words often. Woolf's association with this letter is more specific to this context. Writing notes toward the composition of *To the Lighthouse* in her notebooks, she described the shape of that novel as "two blocks joined by a corridor" (this choice also explains my calling the short sections of *We Are Already Ghosts* "corridors"). Here is how Woolf illustrates that concept:

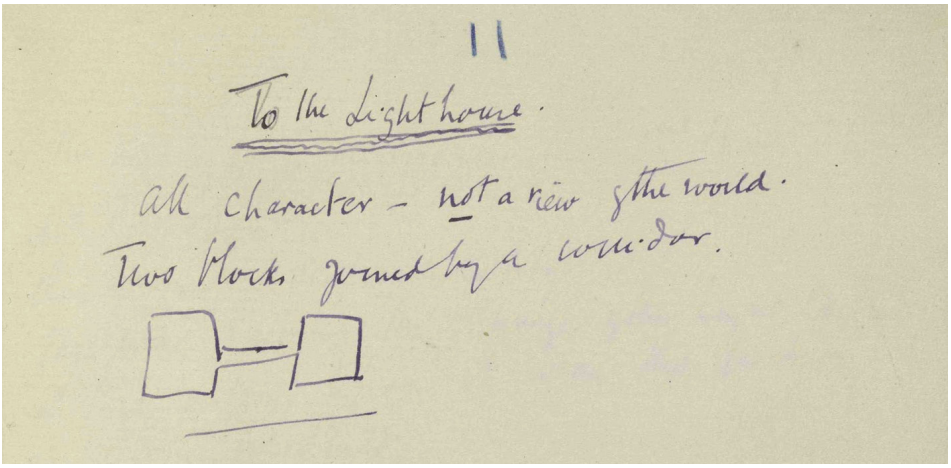

Figure: Virginia Woolf, "II." *Notes for Writing*.

This depiction of the blocks and corridor looks suspiciously to me like a giant letter H. I meditated on this structure for a long time. One day, I recalled something from bpNichol's "allegories" series. I couldn't recall exactly where I had seen it, but it compelled me to think about the possibility of mixing Woolf and Nichol together. I described what I was looking for to several of my friends who are leading scholars of Nichol's work: a giant blockish letter H rendered in three dimensions, with an H on each side making four connected letters. My friends and I were stymied for a long time, all of us remembering the likely existence of this figure in Nichol's works, but not knowing where, exactly, in the extensive archive of his oeuvre it was to be found. My colleague and friend Gregory Betts eventually sleuthed it out, finding it in a copy of the 1974 Nichol book *Love: A Book of Remembrances*. Here is the image in Nichol's work:

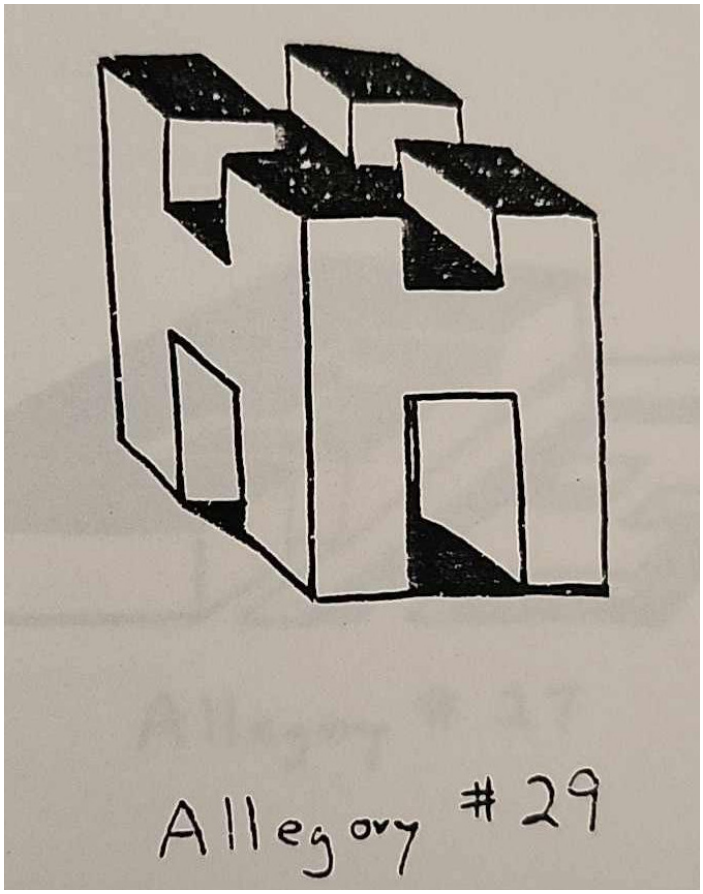

Figure: bpNichol, "Allegory 29." *Love: A Book of Remembrances*.

What would it take to create a novel in the shape of Nichol's "Allegory #29"? It came to me that a novel with four "blocks"—four main passages—connected by narrow corridors would allow for me to combine the spirit of both Woolf and Nichol. This is the reason why the novel has the shape that it does, with four passages happening at five-year intervals. This is the reason, too, why *We Are Already Ghosts* endeavours to be reflective, meditative, and mournful, as well as playful, joyous, and light. Endeavouring to bring together two unlikely writers in the background of this text has been tremendously challenging and, for me, fruitful. My younger child felted me a version of the novel's structure after a conversation about what I was trying to achieve with this work, and I think that this version is perhaps the best representation of the novel's structure:

Figure: Clementine Hanson Dobson, "Untitled."

The colour blue in this piece, it should also be noted, is also important. Blue is the dominant colour of the novel (and is why the interior of the cover of the physical book is printed in blue as well). Characters reflect on the artist Yves Klein and his particular shade of blue; one character meditates on the blueness of the August sky; at another point a very blue collaborative piece between bpNichol and Barbara Caruso called *From My Window* is referenced as well. Blue runs throughout this H-shaped novel.

As such, we might consider *We Are Already Ghosts* to be a form of lyric conceptualism or post-conceptual writing. I was inspired by Sina Queyras' "Lyric Conceptualism: A Manifesto in Progress," a piece published online in 2012. Queyras is a poet, novelist, and essayist whose work I admire tremendously. My novel quotes a line from their book *Expressway*; their novel *Autobiography of Childhood* is a deeply moving text; and their book *Rooms: Women, Writing, Woolf* is a sustained, personal inquiry into Woolf's influences and the complexities and challenges of the writing life. At the moment of Queyras' 2012 essay, conceptual writing—and conceptual poetry in particular—occupied a great deal of critical attention in Canada. Texts that were dominating much of the conversation were characterized by the concepts that drove them, rather than by their contents, forms, or meanings at the level of language. There is a great

deal of conceptual writing that I admire and it remains an often vibrant movement; I edited, for instance, Derek Beaulieu's *Please, No More Poetry: The Poetry of Derek Beaulieu* for the Laurier Poetry Series in 2013. Beaulieu is a writer whose work is very much influenced by Nichol; he has edited Nichol's works on multiple occasions, most recently in 2024 with Gregory Betts (see Nichol, *Some Lines of Poetry*). Conceptual poetry also, however, dominated much of the conversation about writing at that time and led to some seemingly very strong, gendered (and at times vitriolic) divisions in the poetry world between conceptual and lyric poets. I don't wish to rehearse that history, as it belongs, really, to others who were more active in those movements at the time. Wayde Compton's recent intervention, *Toward an Anti-Racist Poetics*, in my view does a very good, succinct job of re-reading some of this vexed history from an anti-racist perspective. Queyras' suggestion in the manifesto sought to bridge the divide between the conceptual and the lyric. I read it not long after the essay came out, and it stuck with me—now for over a decade—as having real promise. My novel, as a result, has a conceptual framework in its overall H-shaped structure, but it is also deeply personal, lyrical, and driven by a series of strong narrative voices and characters. It is a character-driven work, and I mean that very literally, while also being a conceptual—or perhaps post-conceptual, if one prefers—project.

Other experimental elements animate this text, but I won't be able to detail them in as much detail. One key to planning the novel was to begin to get to know my characters. I did so by determining which ones were my main characters—those who spoke to me the loudest—and I assigned each of them a punctuation mark. That punctuation mark was the starting point for their characterization. I won't reveal all of my characters' punctuation marks, because that would take some of the fun out of the book, but I will say that Clare's punctuation mark is the exclamation mark. In the final version of the novel these affiliations with punctuation are not intended to determine each character in a narrow fashion – the language that I use with each character is allowed to be broadly expressive – but these decisions allowed me to get to know each of my characters and in many cases their mark remains apparent in the final, published version of the text. (Not all of the characters have punctuation marks assigned to them, however; there are too many characters for this practice to be feasible. The main ones all do, however.)

Beyond that, the novel has many literary references. By and large my characters' references are conventional, "high" literary ones marked by canonicity and a comparatively narrow range; while the characters in my book view themselves as progressive, they are constrained by their Euro-Western backgrounds and educations. They read Marcel Proust and Leonard Cohen; they remember Tragically Hip lyrics and quote Shakespeare to one another. I play at multiple

points with Gertrude Stein's 1914 *Tender Buttons* and I return to that text, in particular, at the moments in which characters are contemplating or making food. Stein's book is perhaps the single most humorous book about food—especially chicken—that I can think of. I taught it in a class on experimental modernist writing one time and the whole class broke down in laughter more than once, not laughing at the text, but, rather, laughing along with Stein (though Michael's preparation of duck *à l'orange* also parallels Mrs. Ramsay's *boeuf en daube* in *To the Lighthouse*). I have had many experiences with experimental texts where they can become joyful, humorous, witty, and deep, when read and discussed together in community, and it is in that spirit that I have sought to create what is also an experimental text.

3. Depicting Alberta

I have already said that my characters in this book are limited in their perspectives. Indeed, this portion of the novel is deeply important to understanding its historical moment. Alberta was created in 1905 out of territory that had previously been part of the Northwest Territories. The Northwest Territories were created, in turn, after the 1868 Rupert's Land transfer from the Hudson's Bay Company and then the 1870 Northwest Territories Act. The government of Canada thereafter pursued the negotiation of the numbered treaties with the First Nations that have been on these lands since time immemorial. I live in Treaty 7 territory (1877); *We Are Already Ghosts* is set in Treaty 6 territory (1876); my family also settled in Treaty 8 lands (1899) in northern Alberta. I think of my treaty responsibilities daily and endeavour to work in the best relations with Indigenous peoples as possible in my personal life. In writing this novel, it was imperative to me to heed Indigenous criticism's caution against settler writers appropriating Indigenous voices (a perspective with a long history, advocated strongly by Anishinabe writer Lenore Keeshig-Tobias in 1990, and repeated at intervals ever since when settler writers have overstepped). At the same time, it was necessary to show that colonialism underwrites my characters' privileged lives and, indeed, the undercutting of this privilege is a key element of the text. Near the landfill to which the characters return at intervals – and in a few other, possible moments in the text – we see evidence of ongoing Indigenous presence. Many have observed that settlers have not respected Indigenous lands, stowing their waste in disrespectful ways, and this pattern is repeated in my novel as one more note about how colonialism impacts Indigenous people and their territories. This evidence shows up in a sign that reads "You are on Native land" that William sees in part three of the novel, but that we never see him investigate or learn about fully. Later, in part four, Celeste and Daphne

encounter signs that read "Your home on Natives' land" and "Stolen land" when they encounter a blockade on the rail line that bisects the road that leads to the dump. As a result, they are unable to unload their refuse in the dump, symbolically unable to get rid of their detritus on Indigenous lands and at the expense of Indigenous people. For the younger generation, it is no longer possible to ignore their ties to the colonial project that is Canada, even if this shift occurs in seemingly small ways.

The temporal period is important. The novel is set between 1996 and 2011; the Kanehsatake Resistance of 1990 (often called the Oka Crisis in settler media at the time) still hovers in the background of the novel's opening, in part because the final report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which was struck in August of 1991, would deliver its final report in October, 1996, shortly after the novel's opening. This report noted, among many things, the key role that the residential schools system in Canada played in settler-colonialism and, in turn, laid elements of the foundation for the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which spanned 2008 to 2015. The Idle No More resistance movement would come to public view in 2012, a little more than a year after the novel's final section, but it is important to note the long-running activist movements across Turtle Island in Indigenous communities (see Armstrong; the Kino-nda-niimi Collective; and many others). The blockade in the novel, occurring in August of 2011, then, prefigures Idle No More and the outcomes of the TRC, but is consistent with long-running resistance movements. These are movements about which many white settlers remained unaware for too long. When Celeste and Daphne encounter the barricade, they don't quite know what to do; Daphne asks "What next?," and although the immediate reference is a question about where they literally go from there, the extended resonance is intended to refer to the possible ways in which they will need to confront their own privileges and roles in the ongoing oppression of Indigenous peoples. Whether I have struck an appropriate balance with this issue is for my readers to determine, once again, but the context of Indigenous resistance against white settlers like the Briscoe-MacDougall family has deeply informed the setting, place, and organization of the action of the novel.

4. Conclusion

I will end with the beginning – or, rather, with the title of the book. *We Are Already Ghosts* is so named for multiple reasons, one of which links to the settler-colonial context to which it responds. There is a tradition of haunting in literatures in Canada, but it is one marked by absence as much as by presence. The title is taken from a line in the novel, one that Clare thinks to herself as she

views the pageant in part two. During this portion of the pageant, the children's puppets reenact colonial encounters and Canada's early settlement. They reenact, specifically, a section of Susanna Moodie's 1852 novel *Roughing It in the Bush* in which a character states that "the country is too new for ghosts." A bit more than a century later, poet Earle Birney, in the 1964 poem "Can.Lit," wrote that in Canada "it's only by our lack of ghosts / we're haunted" (notice his somewhat slippery use of the supposedly inclusive "we"). Those statements irritate me and there is a robust critical literature about ghosts and haunting in this literary field (see for instance Goldman). In both cases, the writers ignore Indigenous presences and hauntings—let alone Indigenous conceptions of life and the afterlife—and they downplay their own roles in being and becoming part of the story. More recently, in the 2007 novel *Soucouyant*, David Chariandy's narrator says to his mother "there are no ghosts here" in discussing their old house above Lake Ontario (113). Readers know, however, that Chariandy's narrator is a limited one; by the time of this novel's publication, there is no way to assert that Canada is not haunted. Chariandy, in my view, is offering a way of speaking back to that settler tradition. So: my title is a different response to that settler tradition of erasing both Indigenous people and ignoring settlers' own ways of haunting Indigenous lands. Taking a longer view of things, we are already ghosts, at least in my view. The "we" of my title risks being troublesome, but it intends to contest the exceptionalism with which European settlers in Canada have often viewed themselves, to recognize the harms of colonialism, and to prevent such narratives from providing its characters with exculpation and exoneration. To follow the thinking of Eve Tuck (Unangax) and K. Wayne Yang in the key essay "Decolonization is not a metaphor," settler innocence has ended in Canada within my lifetime and, with it, the uncritical celebration of the nation-state. While my characters may remain in place at the novel's ending, they do so uncertainly. What the future brings remains to be determined.

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Interview

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Building Bridges through Writing: An Interview with Rohini Bannerjee

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Rohini Bannerjee, daughter of immigrant Settlers from Himachal Pradesh, India, was born and raised on unceded Mi'kmaki territory, on the Dartmouth side of the great harbour of Kjipuktuk. Chevalière de l'Ordre de la Pléiade, Rohini earned her PhD in French Studies at Western University in 2006 and is a Full Professor of French in the Department of Languages and Cultures at Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

A scholar, translator, and creative writer, Rohini's primary research focuses on the literatures and cultures of the Francophone Indian Ocean. Papers on Mauritian literature have appeared in *Nouvelles Etudes Francophones, Indialogs* and *portAcadie*. In 2021, she co-edited *From Band-Aids to Scalpels: Motherhood Experiences in/of Medicine* with Demeter Press and, in 2024, *Premières Vagues: Poèmes covidiens des espaces minoritaires et diasporiques de la francophonie* with L'Harmattan, Paris. During her tenure in both senior academic administration and as Faculty union president, Rohini led equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts at the University. Her short stories and poetry exploring themes on belonging, identity and body image, written in both French and English, have appeared in Canada, Spain, France, and India.

The following interview took place on March 14, 2023, at the University of Salamanca, when Dr. Rohini Bannerjee led the seminar "W/Righting Trajectories

of Diaspora" organized by Dr. Jorge Diego Sánchez. The interview was finished in an on-line chatroom on November 14, 2023.

Sara Casco Solís: *In one of your talks, you discussed the idea of self-identification. Why do you think self-identification is important?*

Rohini Bannerjee: I think I have to use my privilege to empower young people. African American writer Dr. Toni Morrison did teach us that when you get to the position of power as an educator, you need to make sure you make the space for them to be in that same place in the future. Dr. Morrison talks a lot about the power of education and my job as an educator is to make sure that the next person behind me feels worthy before they walk into the classroom. This is not simply about acquired knowledge or formal education, but to show up, fearlessly, as themselves. This is why self-identification is vital. We ask racialized people to self-identify; we need to acknowledge all of their layered identity. Many people question why this is important. It is important because we need to know who we are talking to, we cannot make changes unless we know this, we need the data. So, why are white people not asked to self-identify? Because the assumption is that they at the centre of mainstream society and everybody else is *Other*. The racialization of white people, at least in Western society, is something that we are not used to imposing. So, when we all self-identify and if we all use language that is accessible for everyone, it really changes the playing field. We are in fact decentralizing racial identity.

SCS: *Canadian writers who migrated to Canada or were born there to immigrant parents have dealt with the issue of social rejection, especially at school. Annahid Dashtgard for example, is one of the writers who addresses this topic in her writings. Do you think this is still a problem in Canada?*

RB: Absolutely. When we are young people, there is a social conformity, a psychological connection with others by feelings: if I look like everyone else, I will not be pointed out, I will not look different, I will not be questioned or judged. So, young people, whether they are from an immigrant family or not, just want to look like their friends. Also, when we carry a name that is outside of the white dominant culture norm and when we pray differently or we eat that smells different than that of our friends', we are pointed out, we are found out. The differences are seen as an obstacle. This could change if children can learn at a young age that when they show up as themselves, no matter what, it is empowering, as we lessen the burden of trying to change.

I think that with the social rejection piece the number one is that we abandon ourselves first, we let go of who we are. And as we age, this gets worse and

worse. When we are young, we like ourselves, we do things that we like, and then we are told to be quiet, to stop, to listen, to behave, not to be creators, not to simply play with the crayons, not to explore, not to be curious, not to ask questions. That is a perfect student. We are actually indoctrinating our children into our education systems. Ironically, I am in education, but I want to decolonize education. I want to break the rules constantly—I do it from a safe place of privilege because I do not have a discerning accent when I speak English, I am able-bodied, I am married to a man with whom I have had three biological children—I have this whole set of societal perks, but I am very much trying to decolonize it every day, bit by bit.

One of these things is social rejection—I get rejected from social spaces all the time (sometimes I am oblivious to it and for some moments and spaces, I do not care about it), but when you are young, if those have impacts on how curious and how open you are to yourself, we abandon ourselves, that is, we are not creative, we do not love curiosity, we left that young child behind to ourselves. If we stop abandoning ourselves, the impacts of being socially rejected will lessen; it takes a lot of bravery and courage. The Canadian writer of Iranian heritage Annahid Dashtgard did a wonderful job on this matter with her book, *Breaking the Ocean: A Memoir of Race, Rebellion, and Reconciliation*.

SCS: *How would you describe the current situation in Canada with respect to immigrants and refugees?*

RB: I was on a panel on whether immigration policies are racist, and my question was: the policies can be changed but who are the people who are reading the dossiers when newcomers arrive, who are the people who are reading their applications? Do they have intercultural competence? Do they have a learned and lived history with people's marginalized spaces? Do they know what life might be for someone who is gay in Uganda? What is their intercultural competence? So, you could have all these great policies, but the people who are implementing the policies must have intercultural competence; they have to have a certain *formation* in the humanities. Humanities are going to save us. So, that was one of the questions that I had on that panel. I talked about the fact that there are people who are making decisions who are not interculturally competent. We have bias; however, many of us who come from privilege do not acknowledge the bias. I am not very aware of all immigration policies right now, but I can say that Ukrainian refugees who have come to Canada have had fewer problems finding housing, healthcare support, jobs, schooling for their children and language interpreters than their counterparts from other non-European parts of the world. There have been crises in Yemen, Egypt and Indonesia, from the Global South, and those peoples who would be defined as racialized, do not find the

same kind of welcome. We also have communities in Eastern Canada of African-Nova-Scotian descent, and many have been in Nova Scotia for four hundred years and some of those healthcare centers that provide care for those communities do not have running water, for example. Many of our Indigenous communities do not have running water. So why is that Ukrainian immigrants are treated differently? We do not want to talk about it—we want to say that being a refugee is not a choice, no one chooses to be a refugee (my family history is attached to refugee experience). However, the experiences of refugees are not the same. Our immigration policies must reflect this.

SCS: *Have you ever felt out of place in your own country (Canada or India)?*

RB: Yes, all the time, every single day. I am not going to lie and say it is perfect. Are you a Professor? Yes. What do you teach? French. And then I just get a lot of questions about that: why it is not Chemistry or Science or Immigration Law or something that works because of the way that I see you? I, a cis-het white dominant person, see you as this, I think that you would be better at this. I was the leader of our Faculty Union, for example, and I was told by faculty members that I am too maternal, and I should not be a Union Leader. Why would you say that? Because I present as feminine, with eyeliner and sarees, because I have children, so I cannot be a Union Leader? Who decides whose professional? I decide, I need to tell people who I am and if I keep abandoning myself and not letting myself be who I am, then I am not going to be able to do justice to my students and my colleagues. We are actually in control of our lives much more than we think because we believe that other people's perceptions are important; however, they do not actually matter. It is very difficult because we worry so much about what other people's perceptions are and it is so draining to our systems and to ourselves. And if we cannot be ourselves, we cannot help others be themselves (this is what we do not understand).

When I go to India, I am an outsider, clearly from the diaspora—I do not speak Hindi, Urdu or Punjabi very well, I walk with a cadence that is particularly seen as othered. When I went to Mumbai, I was a foreigner in a space that was so beautiful and exciting and scary at the same time and it made me long to better know India. I am a mother of three children who are now second generation, whose answer to the question "Where are you from?" takes longer than simply, "India." As a parent, I want to keep that thread to India, and it gets thinner and thinner, but with effort, it still stays. My job is to keep the reinforcement—I cannot add to the thread, but I can reinforce it as much as I can, so that it does not break. There are different ways that I do that: I am delighted that my children can come here to Spain and witness their mother, someone with no Iberian ties, talk on inclusion. There is an irony in all of that: they have come to

Spain for their mom, who is not Spanish, who is visibly and linguistically othered, but attempting to show up for herself as best as possible. So, the challenges will always be there, but it is important how we approach them and that we can choose to stop abandoning ourselves.

In Canada, as someone who is non-white, I will always be non-local, I will always be of immigrants, as Settler, and I understand that acknowledging this fact is empowering. I am of immigrants and so are all of us on Turtle Island; all of you are Settlers unless you are from a First Nation or Indigenous lineage.

SCS: *When did you know you wanted to become a writer?*

RB: Always. I was a very quiet kid, but I have always made up stories in my head–I have always loved citations and quotations. I love the power of words, I love how words control, dysregulate, and evoke emotions. It is very evocative and visceral for me to utter words. I taught writing for so long; I taught other people's books and stories. I remember one of my teaching evaluations came back and one of the students wrote: "She talks so much about things other than the writing; it is very annoying." It is true because I love telling stories and I am attracted to storytellers, troubadours, the movement of stories. I love oral tradition. I spent some time in Ireland and I was fascinated with Irish travelers and how they tell stories by word of mouth. It is fascinating how my mother's side family, whose roots are from Baluchistan and are tagged as a scheduled tribal nomadic group in India, carry stories through words. So, I feel I have always been a storyteller–I love describing things in detail. I do not always surround myself with people who want to listen to me and that frustrates me sometimes, but then I realize that those who want to listen to me, will. I find the power of the pen is a very vulnerable space and very scary, but I enjoy it.

SCS: *Do your experiences shape your writing?*

RB: Yes. I think that for a long time I am muffled by experiences. I did not want to talk about my sexuality or interest in the erotic. I did not want to talk about the body shame I carried or my Brown skin. White women would ask me why I wore make-up. For such a long time I hated how I looked, I wanted to look like a white woman with blue eyes and blonde hair because that was what most of what I saw was seen as beauty. This was an internalized racism. I remember one of my Spanish friends, Silvia, said: "Rohini, your eyes are so dark" and I said: "I do not like them because they are so dark." She quickly retorted with, "Do you not know how beautiful your brown hair and eyes are? I love that your eyes are so dark because we in Spain can never get eyes so dark." I never understood it because I was abandoning myself, I was looking

outside of myself for the light. And now, I want to write about our perceptions of ourselves and our experiences because I hope that somebody will read it, and someone will say I know what it feels like or I wish someone had told me that some time ago. I am a cis-het woman, but I am very fascinated with gender and gender nonconformity—it is so courageous. When I meet someone who is gender non-conforming (e.g. the Hijras community of India, who are the third gender), it actually gives me a lot of hope.

SCS: *As you are a scholar and a writer, I am curious about the differences you encounter between expressing yourself through fiction and non-fiction.*

RB: Beautiful. Someone told me that Neil Gaiman said (I never actually verified this) that "fiction is truer than the truth." I think with fiction we give some power to the truth. When the Spanish students here are commenting about my short story "The Landing" and asking if the female protagonist is me, I am not sure how to answer. That version of Rohini the writer has become wiser—I am not the same woman who wrote that story the first time. So, I think that when I write a creative essay or creative non-fiction, there has to be the truth in it. However, when you are writing fiction, there is so much more freedom and I love to make up stories—I find that empowering because I can control what a character is going to do, and I can question what the character might do. I have not explored that deep enough. To delve into fiction is very freeing for me. There are many differences between how you can control and develop the characters, but I have a lot of respect for short stories. One of my favorite ones is M. G. Vassanji, a Canadian writer of India descent from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. He is my literary crush. I have been reading *Uhuru Street: Short Stories*, which is a compilation of short stories set in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and they are so short, and I feel so abruptly abandoned. Never have I felt so much emotion upon the end of a short story. I am almost angry at the end of the story and Vassanji truly succeeds. The author wants you to want more and that is the emotional attachment that I have with short stories. And if I can get better at them, that is really where I want to go with short stories. I think that a novel would be a great commitment and I would love to do it, but I think short stories are truly powerful.

SCS: *Do you think that creative writers have a responsibility to represent or, even better, to make visible some parts of society that are in a way hidden from ordinary people?*

RB: This is such a good question. The responsibility part is sometimes an element I struggle with fully accepting. The late great Dr. Toni Morrison was

asked: when are you going to start writing for white people? However, the question she could ask before responding: Do I want to have white characters in my stories? In the poetry that I have been writing, most of the men are white and have been perpetrators of sexual violence because this is what I have experienced. For me the most threatening is the white male. So, I am trying my best to reappropriate that, taking back to my body and re-empowering my body. There is responsibility for me to show up as myself in my writing and if I can keep going back and saying I showed up myself and maybe a young person would read this and identify with it too. So, the responsibility to tell the truth is really important. The truth is really hard, and we do not want to talk about the truth, that is, we do not want to talk about our vulnerabilities. I want to show that I am a Professor, and my life is not perfect. That is what I should ideally tell the students, but I am not, and I want students to know that I am a normal person: I have problems, insecurities, worries and that is why I can connect with people because I know that I am like them and they are like me despite any and all differences. That is exactly what it means for me to be human. The responsibility to be truthful is a burden that we all bear, but I think for a racialized woman myself, I want to make sure that I do not paint my people, my culture or my history in a way that adds to xenophobia or misogyny. I am not, however, responsible for how readers perceive my art. I am responsible for only being myself in the art and offering truth.

SCS: *What about genres? Does genre matter?*

RB: Good question. Creative non-fiction is one of the genres that I like most because it is sharing a story without a true form—when I write, I find my own rhythm in poetry. There is a point of breath, there is the blank space on the page and even the unwritten and unspoken remain part of the process without having to appear. I think that this genre is the most unregulated and this feels like decolonizing, barrier-free writing. We have issues with Canadian Literature being boxed into racialized people and non-racialized people. Writers like Annahid Dashtgard would be seen as a certain type of writer, which can be empowering but also isolating, and I think creative non-fiction and poetry both break all of that. Poetry I will say is tough to write. Anybody can write poetry, like modern art and abstract art. If it is laced in the sentiment surrounding the image, the depth of an experience readers and writers alike need to stop trying to pigeonhole things, stop telling us that abstract or modern art does not belong as part of the canon. Who is establishing the canon? We worry about the hierarchy of what has the most impact and we think that novels need to be wordy, dense and opaque. *Sense and Sensibility* or *War and Peace* are iconic pieces that have lots of words and they are the ones that have the most impact

on our literary canon. However, a blank page with three words has the same impact, if not more.

SCS: *I would like to know about your writing process. How do you approach your writing?*

RB: I have a day job, so what I do at the moment is to try to schedule thirty or twenty minutes a day to write. I say try. I really should say, I book and confirm this time. But the reality is, the time does slip away with other life obligations. Sometimes I write in a notebook, on my phone or directly into a document on my computer. I am more in the constant direction of writing and self-expression. It is just putting down words into a space. Then I go back and listen to my voice. It does not have to be so immediate. Words, experiences, lights, space, smells—all those things come to me and I have to be open to hear them. For a long time I did not listen because I was afraid, I did not want to know what the world was telling me because I just wanted to stick to my work, my children and my obligations. I was coping with the overwhelm of my emotions with more productivity and *keeping busy*. However, rest is resistance. I have been resisting and resting, thinking, letting go, emptying the mind and things will come to me now with more flavour, more colour, more realism. Things come and then I subsequently arrive, and I place the sentiment, the words, the description, the turn of phrase, in different places: sometimes it is a poem, an image of a character, a dream or simply an observation of how, for example, my perception of how I passed a glass of water to my child. I am here in life and this grounding of space and stopping of time in the now is helping my writing. And then later, if I reflect on the water I gave my son, other feelings or words will come up and this is also writing. I might not have a blank page so I will record with a voice memo on my phone. This is writing and living at the same time. It is like I am living my writing. The scenes are always happening all the time and then I bring them into words.

SCS: *You are based in Nova Scotia: how has living in Nova Scotia influenced your writing?*

RB: What a beautiful question! The geographical location has influenced my writing because particularly when it comes to the context of Turtle Island, North America, I understand it and honour this land as a daughter of immigrant Settlers. I am also grateful that Nova Scotia is Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral territory of the Mi'kmaq. This is something that I did not fully understand until very recently. I have to be aware of the historical space I am living in and that I am sharing this land with other Settlers and I am grateful to the ancestors and

present knowledge keepers of this land and the ongoing learners of this land to share the same with me. When we think of Canada, our first images are not of Indigenous peoples, so when I write, I do write from a space of knowing that I have been othered in this space and that I am a visitor in this land, but sometimes writing in itself is a space and a land in itself. It becomes a country in itself, and I also like the idea of writing as placing myself outside of the confines of land and sea but simply in the geographies of the blank paper, aching to manifest as story.

On a GPS, yes, I situate myself in Nova Scotia—I am grateful to be living here, I work and play here, I raise my family here, so I root into this land. I always laugh when people say they can write on planes or trains (places that are in movement), but I like the idea of being nowhere or everywhere at the same time. In this in-between interval space, one can write. I feel that the Nova Scotia space is intertwined to who I am: my English is influenced by my space, the people that I encounter every day. However, I have lived in France, Nepal and other parts of Canada, and understand that I am beyond borders, partly because of my own intersectionality.

SCS: *In line with this question, in many diasporic writings, one of the issues that many writers explore is the quest for home. How would you define the concept or idea of home? How do you approach this theme in your writings?*

RB: I feel that as somebody who has been born and raised in one geographical space, I have a great privilege because I can feel home, I can see home, I can be in my home. I feel that people who are immigrants and make the movement themselves (my parents, for example) can experience the loss of home. So, their home maybe is actually you—you carry your home with you all time.

I understand the internal space I occupy. I look for home in my children, my friends, my work. It is like being at home when somebody makes you feel comfortable. But maybe home is me. This might sound egocentric, but perhaps it is actually very empowering—it is a reminder that my body is my home. Even if I am looking for home somewhere else, I already have one. I think it is returning to the core of me, letting go of what others think. I am letting go of falsehoods and becoming me. I think I have learned that I am carrying my home all the time. I am like a turtle, in a way. Once you realize that you are your own home, then, wherever you go, you are never alone; you are with yourself, and you have your breath; that means you are alive. I am learning to understand to be alone, to be at home, to be in myself alone. To be home is something that I am rethinking, and I think this will be seen in my work that I am writing right now. I am still interested in the Other and the Otherness of Others, that is, how we

create Otherness. I am trying to see it from a place of home and that home being themselves. I am really working on home being me.

SCS: *On a similar note, and this is somehow connected to what you have said: in an interview you mentioned Dr. Toni Morrison's words, "if you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else." Is this one of your main purposes in writing fiction?*

RB: I feel that if others can experience someone else's experiences through writing, then they can see themselves a little bit. I am not going to write for Brown women or just women. In fact, the compilation of short stories I am working on is tentatively titled *Broken Men, Broken Women*. At the beginning, I thought including just only men because I am very curious about masculinity and looking at some of the issues that I am seeing in people, but then I decided to look at the binary of it and to break the binary as well. I am looking at women as well and the women who are perhaps attached to these men. It reminds me of Haruki Murakami's *Men Without Women*. It really speaks on the relationship and the co-dependency piece of men with women. In the short stories I am exploring sexual fluidity and breaking the binary by calling men and women. I want to assume that they can break and that we can break into gender and fluidity within that brokenness, so I am playing with that.

I think that showing up for other people because I have privilege is important. Moments, scenes, dialogues, venues, people that appear in my writings may have happened at some point in my life journey. So, I think that fiction for me is so powerful because you can find a lot of truth in there and allow the imagination and creativity to create whatever experience you like from that fictional space. It is so empowering. I like the idea of being able to be free and just change lanes back and forth in writing. I have these fixed roles as an academic and a mother, and writing is just a way to let loose. I want the writing to feed me as well. So, Dr. Morrison is calling us to say, if you have these privileges, you must share and show up for others and I take that very seriously.

SCS: *Some scholars, especially scholars working on resilience, express the idea that writing can be a powerful means towards individual and collective healing and, therefore, a transformative mechanism that might foster agency and resilience. Do you see writing as a tool to regain agency? What is your advice to people who struggle to express themselves?*

RB: Agency is to retake and rechange the mind every day. I think that writing allows for that freedom. I know for a long time I was afraid to pursue the Arts because I was afraid of the freedom it would allow me. I wanted to stick to the

sciences and sustain the lane of reason, didactic reasoning, logic, memory, and despite a deep desire to play with writing and words and my love of learning languages, I was afraid to go to the Arts. I am in the Arts now and I am still letting loose. Writing allows to hold on to emotions, thought, trauma, sadness, joy. Writing is just another tool to allow freedom, so writing is a tool for me.

The agency piece is important to see that you can use it as a therapeutic tool—I do use writing as a therapeutic tool. There is a project I am working on right now titled *UnSent Love Letters*, which is based on love letters that non-white women write to their young teen version of themselves. I am going to be preparing a call for papers with another colleague of mine and we want to put together these odes, these letters of love. That will be an agency piece for me because that collection of writing would be very much in relation to trauma therapy. It would be creative writing as well: formulating and creating a story in that letter while talking to yourself, which many of us do not know how to do. It would be very interesting to bring our thoughts together and talk about agency through writing.

SCS: *In line with the previous question, your writings also deal with the topic of identity and its fluidity. Could you say something about it?*

RB: For me, this goes back to the point of Nova Scotia as well. I have to code-switch how I present myself and that is something that I have heard with members of the African Canadian communities, particularly where one decides to enunciate every single word perfectly. I am making some over the top effort to ensure my English is very clear that I do not have an accent that could be perceived as distasteful and lacking formal post-secondary education. When I speak French particularly, my mannerisms do change. Depending on who the recipient of my discussion might be, my body and my English change. I am generally aware of my audience and that can be very tiring because you are not really your full self. I am working on being less hyper vigilant and letting loose, like in my writing. It is like that I have versions of myself to show up in different spaces and places. I feel that when we are talking about being ourselves and really truly saying what we want you have to show all your parts of yourself and this implies so much interior work. Writing helps to figure that out.

I was talking to a young PhD female student this morning, and I told her that she should be writing a memoir. If someone had told me that when I was writing my PhD, I would laugh and say: "I am not very famous." I think that writing a memoir is incredibly empowering and everybody is worthy of a story of their lives. I love knowing other people's stories and so maybe I need to start getting curious about my own too. I think it is so interesting that everybody is walking around with their stories inside of them. I have thought about writing

something about my academic career, my writing career, and also some of my personal life. This is a very transformative experience for me because a lot of childhood trauma has come up. Things that I have suppressed and oppressed keeping busy and staying busy. I am wondering about this writing piece and I like to do it—writing a memoir partly means coming to grasp to who you are. My father died in April 2023 and the cans upon cans of suppressed, oppressed and compressed emotions have resurfaced. I am squeezing the pools of emotional pus from my wounds. I am cleaning those wounds. I am exposing them to life. I am healing. I will be scarred. I will continue to share my story.

SCS: *In some of your writings, you tackle the topic of body shaming. Would you like to expand on this topic and its importance?*

RB: I think shame is something that many of us carry and it can be about a lot of different things. For me, comparing myself to a white woman and the assumption I am not desirable. I wanted to be blonde, fair-skinned and blue-eyed. I see that there is a reason for that: to be honest, most of it is related to my father's infidelities and that is a theme I will be exploring in *Broken Men, Broken Women* and in my own memoir. I am looking to how sex addiction affects families. Body shaming with that is my irrational and unhealthy relationship with food, and also not understanding that food is really for fuel and to feed myself when I need food, but also enjoying lovely food. The luxury of food and the privilege of beautiful food is okay to experience as a large woman. And, so, the more that I realize that I am very strong, but also soft and vulnerable and hurt, the more that I start changing my mind-set.

I had an accident in September 2023 when I fell down some stairs in my house and ended up on the sidewalk and I was very close to becoming paraplegic. I am very lucky that I am walking and talking and moving my body. My body saved me. The physiotherapists said: "Rohini, you are actually extremely lucky because of the body that you have, because you are robust, because you are thick and strong and not thin, you saved yourself, your body saved you." And, so, I am really honoring my body, I love exercising. I have always been told, even myself, that I did not belong in gyms. Our mutual colleague, Dr. Jorge Diego Sánchez reminds me that I do belong in a gym. Now, I am walking a lot, I love weight training. I used to have male trainers who would tell me that I am very lucky because I can gain a lot of muscle, but women do not want to hear that, and so I was afraid to exercise because I knew that I have this propensity to build muscles. However, after this accident, I just said to myself: "You are a strong person, and your strength is what saved you and, so, why not honor your body?" For me, yoga, exercise, walking, running is all part of taking care, honoring myself. So, body shaming has now really turned into body

honoring and I do not shame, but I honor it. I honor that girl who used to hide or wanted to eat more chocolate and felt bad about it. I honor that little girl instead of shaming her. I wrote some poems for a journal on "Excessive Bodies" and shared my experience exercising in the body I have. They should be out in the Fall of 2024.

SCS: *Now, could you say something about your next writing project?*

RB: I have some short stories in English titled *Broken Men, Broken Women,* a series based on actual people that I know, who in my mind have been broken or will be broken. The idea is to explore their breaking points and when one breaks open, what loosens around them. Some of the stories are interconnected, so readers will see perhaps the same story but from a different perspective. I find that really interesting. There is the great Clint Eastwood film, *Letters from Iwo Jima*, that was produced many years ago on World War II when one is from the Japanese perspective and one from the American perspective, but it is the same story. Or is it? It is the same series of events but not the same story. I find that this is a powerful way of seeing the same person but from the perspective of a woman or a man and outside of the gender binary.

I am also working on a series of poems on love. This is an act of self-love, actually. I want to celebrate love and I want poetry to be the genre.

The third one is the unsent love letters. I want to call upon people who I know, South Asians or people of African descent, who want to write about themselves and write to themselves.

And, finally, I have a series of French love and erotic short stories. In my mind I see somebody from one part of the Francophone world falling in love with another person from the Francophone world. My French will be poetic and romantic and pulled from my lived experience as learned speaker. For example, I have an idea of a Mauritian marrying a Haitian. I am really interested in transnational love. And the title would be *The Interval*.

SCS: *Have you been inspired by other writers?*

RB: Yes, by so many. I recently met Dr. Kim Thúy when she received her Honorary Doctorate at Saint Mary's University, and she was an incredible inspiration for me. Her story of leaving Viet Nâm and making her way to Canada was powerful. She speaks of kindness and she shared with me how she wrote her first novel, *Ru*. It was based on little notes she wrote to herself. Those notes came together in this beautiful novel. She is probably one of the most inspiring people I have met as a writer. She learned English and French in Canada and that is pretty incredible. There are other names, but I will stick with Dr. Kim Thúy

because I think she has been somebody very real and relatable to me. I have met other writers before, but I simply love how she is a person that takes risk and uses her situation to the best way she can. I find her very inspiring.

SCS: *Finally, I would like to finish this interview by asking you about your role as Vice-Chair of Senate and President of the Faculty Union at Saint Mary's University. Could you explain more about your main functions?*

RB: I am no longer at those roles. I left the Faculty Union and became a Senior Administrator and have now left that role. I am back to the classroom and I am looking forward to it. In March 2024, I received the Ordre de la Pléiade form the French government and am now a Chevalière. As for the transition from the Union to Administration, it was very difficult because of how I was treated by Faculty. I will leave it there. I left Administration for several reasons, but one of them was to secure my health and wellness. I could no longer withstand the way I was being treated by Faculty. What I am also learning is that my academic duties and responsibilities are not my main meal of life. I think that work is a *tapa* and it is a small part of my life. This is a very big mind-set change for me. This is not a North American way of thinking, this is not an immigrant way of thinking—you work, work, and then you die, and I do not want to do that. How much more do I need to do to prove myself? I am saying: "Work is a *tapa*, but I still have another main meal, I have my *paella* in the middle and that is me." I am the main meal and my job and even my children and my husband are a *tapa*. They are all important and I love them all, but they are on the side and I am the *paella* in the middle (not with calamari, because I don't like octopus!). I am really trying to recalibrate where my energy goes, and a thing that I do every night is asking myself: Have you made sense today? And sense is sleep, exercise, nutrition, soul work and emotional health. And I also say: How will you make sense tomorrow? And that really guides me to say work is important and it is part of my campus community, but it is a *tapa* and I have to keep it in the *tapas* region.

SCS: *Thank you, Rohini. Thank you very much for your time and for this inspiring conversation.*

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Journal Information

First published in 2011, *Canada and Beyond* is a peer-reviewed open access journal specializing in Canadian literary and cultural studies. It seeks to prompt meaningful interventions in how the literatures and cultures emerging from what is currently called Canada are perceived, analyzed, and interpreted both within and beyond Canada's borders. It also aims to place the limelight on the function of literature and criticism as transformative social forces. The journal favors a trans-national, global outlook spanning genres and schools of literary and cultural criticism that engage political, cultural, and environmental concerns. All in all, *Canada and Beyond* endeavors to make a significant contribution to the humanities.

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