

“We Have Stuff Enough in Us to Get Better”: Healing through
Truth Telling in Contemporary Indigenous Women’s Literature

by

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Abstract

Through its analysis of Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson's *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman*, Katherena Vermette's *The Break*, and Tracey Lindberg's *Birdie*, this thesis explores the ways in which Indigenous women's literature works as both a medium of historical and contemporary truth telling and a medium of healing from ongoing gendered colonial violence. By giving voice to the most heavily silenced – Indigenous women – these texts work to humanize and validate those whom Canada has judged sexualized and disposable. In doing so, they not only have the capacity to positively alter how Indigenous women and their experiences are perceived by settlers, but also to heal Indigenous peoples by offering alternative representations to those circulated by the dominant culture. In these ways, Indigenous women's literature proves invaluable to fostering a better future for Indigenous peoples and settlers alike.

Dedication

For Mom and Dad

and

*For all Indigenous women and girls across Turtle Island – may you continue to bring
beauty and love into the world.*

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
Introduction: Resisting Erasure, Asserting Humanity	1
“It is also the pain of my people”: Colonial Dispossession in <i>Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman</i>	18
“We’re fucked up, but we’re not fucked”: The Lives of Indigenous Girls and Women in Katherena Vermette’s <i>The Break</i>	38
“All My Relations”: Health, Healing, and Reconciliation in Tracey Lindberg’s <i>Birdie</i>	59
Conclusion: Ceremonial Stories	80
Works Cited	85
CV	

Introduction: Resisting Erasure, Asserting Humanity

Sometimes I can't believe what women have to survive.

- Yvonne Johnson, *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* 161

We have all been broken in one way or another.

- Katherena Vermette, *The Break* 175

Her girl is rich, rich with possibility and lifeforce.

-Tracey Lindberg, *Birdie* 1

As a settler scholar engaged in Indigenous¹ women's truth telling, I am approaching this thesis with significant trepidation, as I am exploring the subject of violence against Indigenous women from an ostensibly unearned and illegitimate vantage point. First, I am conducting this work on traditional unceded territory of the Wolastoqiyik Peoples in an institution that continues to privilege my perspective. Second, I am at an incommensurable distance from the pain that marks the lives of the women I am examining, and am therefore able to speak alongside their stories without depending upon them for my survival. Third, and perhaps most relevant to my motivations for undertaking this project, I am very aware that my privilege relies heavily

¹ I use the term "Indigenous" rather than "Aboriginal" for much the same reason as Allison Hargreaves: to depart "from state-defined identity categories" and refer "more inclusively to original peoples and their ancestors" (5). Unless otherwise specified, "Indigenous" is used throughout this thesis to refer to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples.

² The term "white settler" here is drawn from the introduction to Sherene Razack's *Race*,

on Indigenous peoples lack thereof and that I continue to benefit from the racist policies and practices that work to subordinate and even eliminate the women my project examines. Indeed, I am deeply embedded in a society that not only thrives upon resources forcefully taken from Indigenous peoples, but that also exhaustively discounts, rationalizes, and justifies the persistence of colonial violence in Canada today. Conversations held with family, friends, and co-workers about this project have not only shown me the conviction with which white settler Canadians² view this violence as locked away in a distant past (my grandfather recently asserted that he “shouldn’t have to apologize for what [his] grandfather did”), but also the lengths to which they will go to defend themselves against the notion that racism is alive and well in Canada, despite maintaining perceptions of Indigenous peoples as “lazy drunks” (my maternal grandmother) who were “not made to be with white people” (my paternal grandmother, referring to Indigenous inferiority).

Nurtured in such an environment and educated (prior to graduate school, at least) in a system that remains nearly entirely devoid of any (however inaccurate) representations of Indigenous history in Canada, it became imperative for me to probe the systemic neglect, racism, and violence against Indigenous peoples in this country in order to alter my white, middle-class settler community’s misperceptions. As such, this project largely began as an attempt to examine the ways in which Indigenous women’s literature provides indisputable evidence that settler individuals and institutions continue

² The term “white settler” here is drawn from the introduction to Sherene Razack’s *Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society*, which clearly defines “A white settler society...[as] one established by Europeans on non-European soil. Its origins lie in the dispossession and near extermination of Indigenous populations by the conquering Europeans.” Notably, “[a]s it evolves, a white settler society continues to be structured by a racial hierarchy,” which perpetuates a myth of White primacy coupled with Indigenous assimilation and/or death (1).

to invalidate many of the social problems that Indigenous communities experience today and promote profoundly racist ideologies and stereotypes that allow for such effacement. Much like Wahpetunwan Dakota scholar and activist Waziyatawin, I believe in the “transformative power of education,” with the expectation that “once people understand the truth, they will be compelled to act more justly” (71). By exposing the truth of the legacies of gendered colonial violence in Canada, Indigenous women’s literature fosters a critical discourse that challenges the dangerous racist and sexist myths promoted by the colonial state and offers alternative representations of Indigenous peoples, families, and communities that work to humanize them. As such, the texts with which my thesis deals (quoted in the epigraphs above) have the power to alter the public conscious, providing a means through which white settler Canadians like myself—and Indigenous peoples themselves³—can begin to recognize and understand the realities of Indigenous suffering while also creating forms of re-membering that can restore dignity and respect to Indigenous lives.

Such comments made by my loved ones are not to suggest that they – and the majority of settler-Canadians – are aggressively hostile people consciously determined to undermine or even blatantly deny Indigenous experiences. Indeed, according to a public opinion survey conducted by the Environics Institute in 2016, most non-Indigenous Canadians have a relatively positive impression of Indigenous peoples and are aware, at least vaguely, of the ongoing challenges and discrimination they face today. Nevertheless, there is an apparent ambivalence when it comes to understanding the relationship between Canada’s colonial origins and their contemporary legacies. This

³ The specification of *white* settler is used to distinguish from other non-Indigenous Canadians who may also be considered settlers.

is largely due to what Métis Elder Maria Campbell refers to as Canada's "liberal gentleness" (59), the national state of mind that permits Canadians to exclude from recorded history injustices done to Indigenous peoples and encourages them to refuse to acknowledge their complicity in the present-day oppression and violence that marks so many Indigenous communities. As Rebecca Babcock explains:

In Canada the discourses of civility, benevolence, and tolerance that are central to both the ideology and the practice of official multiculturalism have meant that the history of systemic racism in this country was not widely or officially recognized until very recently. As such, and because multiculturalism has come to represent Canadian progressiveness for many Canadians, it has sometimes engendered complacency and has stood in the way of antiracist activity in this country. (1)

The Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988) insists that the nation celebrates and respects its racial diversity, seeking to "acknowledge the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage" and to "promote the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins in the continuing evolution and shaping of all aspects of Canadian society and assist them in the elimination of any barrier to that participation" (3). Proffering such a commitment through legislation permits the Canadian government (as well as the public⁴) to not only mask contemporary racism and discrimination, but also to deny through exclusion the Canadian government's history of practicing precisely that which has prevented Indigenous peoples from achieving the goals of the Act. How, for instance, can

⁴ 43% of respondents to the Environics' public opinion survey named "Multiculturalism/Diversity" as that which most defines Canada as unique.

Indigenous communities exert their “freedom” of cultural expression when colonists and then Canadian officials spent centuries attempting to suppress those very heritages by banning ceremonial practices and installing countless assimilationist policies intent on eradicating Indigenous nations?

The Multiculturalism Act is assimilationist in itself, presenting Canada as the sole nation above the 49th parallel where all inhabitants are expected to set aside (yet somehow also emphasize) their differences and unite in an effort to advance what continues to be a project of imperialism. By committing to assisting individuals and communities in the “elimination of any barrier to that participation,” official multiculturalism permits the Canadian government to eschew responsibility for those very obstacles and to maintain the paternalist, benevolent ideology that justified colonialism. Furthermore, its discourses of tolerance and equality have permitted the Canadian public to blatantly dismiss accusations of racism in Canada, as an overwhelming majority of comments made in response to AJ+’s video, “My Country’s Not That Racist: Canada,” indicates. One commenter suggests that “Canada has a healthy dose of multiculturalism which goes a long way to educate all Canadians and reduce racism. I think we are one of the least racist countries in the world,” while another claims:

Western nations are BY FAR the most tolerant, and peaceful nations, not only today on Earth, but in all of human history. You're all a bunch of poser wannabes, who are upset because you weren't alive during the Civil Rights movement, and you have no real cause to fight for, so you invent invisible problems like privilege and systemic whatever. You're the most counter productive people in terms of equality.

As such, Canada's official policy of multiculturalism proves incredibly dangerous to the lives of Indigenous peoples and the well-being of their communities: not only has such an ideology wrongfully convinced settler-Canadians that racism does not exist in Canada, but it has also provided a convenient means through which to "carry on as usual," for, as Alicia Elliott remarks, "if nothing is racism, then nothing needs to be done to address it" ("Dark Matters").

This past summer's Canada 150 festivities are perhaps the most recent demonstration of that which official multiculturalism neglects to recognize. Despite Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's statement that "no relationship is more important to Canada than the one with Indigenous People," the Canadian government nevertheless allocated half a billion dollars for events commemorating supposed unified national progress. Meanwhile, as Mi'kmaw scholar Pamela Palmater points out, "essential social services for First Nations people to alleviate crisis-level socio-economic conditions go chronically underfunded" ("Canada"). Perhaps even more superficially, a number of the celebrations featured Indigenous art, songs, and dances, promoting the myth of Canadian tolerance and inclusivity of Indigenous identities and cultures. Yet, as Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episkenew explains, such token showcasing demonstrates how "difference is tolerated only in approved venues [... and] is embraced only when convenient, entertaining, and colourful" (25). In this sense, Canada promotes and celebrates cultural differences only when they can be accommodated into predominantly White social gatherings.

By incorporating Indigenous artistic practices into Canada's 150th anniversary, organizers bolstered the notion of reconciliation⁵ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada, outwardly "proving" that these relations are healing (from what, non-Indigenous Canadians remain uncertain), and that little more must be done to "move on from the past." However, without acknowledging the brutal colonization (both past and present) that made Canada 150 possible, such a celebration not only permits non-Indigenous peoples to continue believing the worst is over, but, even more disturbingly, also means that "well-intentioned people, who ordinarily would be horrified at the notion of being complicit in the cover-up of genocide and the ongoing denial of justice for Indigenous Peoples, have done just that" (Waziyatawin 71). Indeed, by planning and participating in Canada 150 at all, both the Canadian government and public have ultimately endorsed the legitimacy of Canada's genocidal origins and the intergenerational pain and suffering they have engendered for Indigenous peoples.

The claim that the murder, torture and abuse of Indigenous peoples in Canada qualify as "genocide" has sparked a great deal of debate from Canadian officials and citizens alike. In 2011, for instance, Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Duncan asserted that the residential school system was not an act of genocide, but rather a case of "education policy gone wrong" (Della), despite the Canadian government's commitment to "kill the Indian in the child." The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) has countered such a statement, explaining that the horrific practices of physical, sexual, mental, emotional, and spiritual abuse committed against Indigenous children in the schools fostered a mission much more sinister than educational assimilation. Rather,

⁵ As Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang explain, "Reconciliation is about rescuing settler normalcy, about rescuing a settler future" (35).

the system, among other policies, was designed to “cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada” (TRC 1). In this way, if Canada’s treatment of Indigenous peoples is considered genocidal at all, it is often deemed a “cultural genocide,” whereby the political and social institutions of a group are destroyed. Nevertheless, the Canadian public continues to approach the notion of genocide in Canada with profound aversion and denial. Indeed, I, like Palmater⁶, have experienced first-hand the outrage expressed by non-Indigenous Canadians when naming genocide in Canada: “It’s not Rwanda!” my mother once exclaimed. Certainly, such a comparison cannot rightfully be made, given the differences in time, place, method, and results. Yet this comment refers to the scale and speed of group exterminations, which are irrelevant to the criteria of the international definition of genocide.

According to Article II of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, genocide is defined as any number of acts committed “with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” These acts include: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and/or forcibly transferring children of the group to another group. Thus, while Canada may not have killed millions of people in concentration camps (the Holocaust) or executed the mass

⁶ “I am often faced with the question of whether genocide really happened here in North America (a place we call Turtle Island and includes Canada and the United States). When I answer unequivocally yes, the first reaction is usually – ‘You can’t seriously compare colonization with the vicious murders in Rwanda’” (“Unbelievable”).

slaughter of approximately 800,000 people over a 100-day period (the Rwandan Genocide)⁷, it did commit *every* act listed by the Convention against Indigenous peoples (cf. Palmater, “Unbelievable”). The deliberate infecting and distribution of blankets with small pox, the sexual and physical abuse and neglect committed against children in residential schools, the theft of land and underfunding of social and health services for Indigenous communities, the forced sterilization of Indigenous women, and the mass removal of children from their families and placement into residential schools and/or non-Indigenous homes are genocidal acts and must be recognized as such.

To understand Canada’s history of atrocities committed against Indigenous peoples without recognizing the intergenerational legacies and contemporary violence initiated by these acts is to further comply with the crime of genocide. Sexual violence, suicide, lack of access to adequate housing and water, substance abuse, police abuse, mass incarceration, and a significant loss of cultural and familial relationships are all consequences of colonial policies and practices that continue to affect Indigenous communities today. However, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine every variation of physical, social, and spiritual damage produced by colonization. As such, I have elected to set my focus on the experiences of those Kathleen Jamieson regards as “victimized and utterly powerless [...] member[s] of the most disadvantaged minority in Canada”: Indigenous women (92). While examining today’s systemic racism and sexism in Canada can certainly support Jamieson’s contention (as my thesis will, in part, demonstrate), my turn towards Indigenous women stems largely from a talk I recently attended that emphasized their power rather than their helplessness. The panel, entitled

⁷ This distinction is not to suggest that Canada’s colonial genocides are lesser than the Holocaust or the Rwandan genocide, but to note that these are the events that most readily come to mind for white settlers upon hearing the term “genocide.”

“Present and Powerful Indigenous Women,” was comprised of Maria Campbell (Métis), Tracey Lindberg (Cree), and Maatalii Okalik (Inuk). Each woman spoke of the gross inequities faced by Indigenous peoples while stressing the strength of Indigenous women as cultural keepers and leaders of the future. Historically, Indigenous women maintained a great deal of respect and authority within their communities, holding important political, economic, social, and religious positions. However, with European invasion came a shift in ideological norms from “an Indigenous woman-centred one to a white-eurocanadian-christian patriarchal one” (Acoose 45). Because this shift is one of the most destructive effects of colonialism, renewing Indigenous women’s power becomes crucial to the project of decolonization and the revitalization of Indigenous relationships and cultures. As such, the texts examined throughout this thesis most pertinently address the ongoing violence against Indigenous women in Canada and their staunch resilience in the face of such dehumanization.

Perhaps the most harmful ideological effect of the subordination of Indigenous women is the degree to which the violence they face has been normalized. Sexual assault and rape is so prevalent in the lives of Indigenous women and girls that it is often regarded as inevitable within Indigenous communities (Deer 5) and inconsequential to the rest of Canada. As recent Amnesty International reports have indicated, Indigenous women in Canada are five times more likely than non-Indigenous women to die from violence (*Stolen Sisters* 14), while their counterparts in the United States are 2.5 times more likely than non-Indigenous women to be raped (*Maze of Injustice* 2). Esselen-Chumash/French scholar Deborah Miranda points out that this is largely due to the notion that “Indian bodies are inferior bodies. Indian women’s bodies are rape-able bodies. Indian bodies do not belong to Indians, but to those who can lay claim to them

by violence” (96). This mentality has its roots in the early days of colonization, where sexual violence against Indigenous women was used as a weapon of domination and a means through which to assimilate Indigenous peoples into a white patriarchal hierarchy. As such, it is extremely problematic to view contemporary violence against Indigenous women as purely historical, as endemic to Indigenous communities, or as isolated incidents that have little relevance outside the lives of the victims. Indeed, as Allison Hargreaves points out, this violence is “*made possible* by the colonial state” (x, original emphasis), through the sexualization of Indigenous femininity, the disenfranchisement of Indigenous women through the Indian Act, and the federal government and justice system’s passive stance towards cases of sexual violence and the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.⁸ This state-sponsored violence authorizes the pervasive perception of Indigenous women as disposable and therefore less worthy of protection and basic human treatment.

These ideologies have seeped into public consciousness as well. When I shared information with my mother regarding the multiple reports of sexual assault committed by cab drivers against Indigenous women in Winnipeg,⁹ her response was not one of horror, but rather one of erasure: “That happens to white women, too.” Similarly, while I was detailing the extreme rates of sexual violence committed against Indigenous women and girls, her leading question was, “And how many of those were perpetrated by

⁸ While the Canadian government has launched a national inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, the recent acquittal of Raymond Cormier in the case of the murder of 15-year-old Tina Fontaine demonstrates how the Canadian justice system, and the settler state in general, continues to fail Indigenous women and girls by permitting their elimination to proceed.

⁹ Kaschor, Kim. “Too dangerous to take cabs in Winnipeg, says founder of Neechi Rides.” *CBC News*. 26 January 2016. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/cabs-neechi-rides-winnipeg-1.3419525>.

Indigenous men?” – as though that would make all the difference. These responses reflect a form of equivocation, or “calling everything by the same name” (Tuck and Yang 17), which permits white settlers to refuse to acknowledge the ongoing nature of Indigenous oppression and to deny Indigenous humanity. Engaging in these evasions of truth conveniently permits settlers to not only neglect their own complicity in what they view as “Indian problems,” but also to maintain their superiority in the racial hierarchy upon which Canada was built. Indeed, as Sherronda Brown explains, “White supremacy’s modus operandi is not only to deny the validity of clear evidence set before it, but it is also to alter narratives in its own favour.” The ease with which my family members derail conversations about Indigenous justice therefore represents one of the most troubling and poisonous legacies of colonial invasion and of what Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson calls an “ongoing ‘settling’ of this land”: the expendability of Indigenous women for the maintenance of the settler state.

While human rights campaigns disclosing the conditions produced by colonial violence have been established over the past twenty years, they have often relied on empirical means through which to collect and relay their information. As such, these campaigns focus heavily on statistics as a means of educating and convincing the public to take notice of the crisis of violence against Indigenous women and girls. Scientific data are certainly invaluable, yet, as Sarah Deer points out, the numbers alone offer little by way of producing long-term solutions (2). Furthermore, exclusively using data to expose the consequences of colonial policies and practices as they exist today may not resolve the compulsion to shift the focus or make excuses for the violence that plagues the lives of so many Indigenous women. Indeed, to do so risks reproducing that very erasure, as so often the stories of Indigenous women become “random facts strung

together which anyone can weave into a pleasing and entreating narrative” (Benaway).¹⁰ Additionally, these facts are in no way guaranteed to have the power to change someone’s mind. As political scientist Brendan Nyhan remarks, ““it’s absolutely threatening to admit you’re wrong”” (Keohane); therefore, presenting the mis- or uninformed with the correct information has the potential to “backfire,” to strengthen their preconceived notions instead of productively altering their beliefs. This is extremely dangerous, as Waziyatawin explains: “when people are vehemently opposed to learning a truth, truth telling can simply leave oppressed people open, vulnerable, and hurting while those of us with privilege can walk away, more resolved in our ignorance” (Utt). This refusal to know, as Susan D. Dion explains, is comforting, as it “supports an understanding of racism as an act of individuals and not a system” and “creates a barrier allowing Canadians to resist confronting the country’s racist past and the extent to which that past lives inside its present deep in the national psyche” (58). Because settler Canadians are often profoundly opposed to recognizing the ways in which the (gendered) racism that fuelled colonialism continues to benefit them, empirical evidence, with its detachment from humanity, has the potential to reinforce this denial and therefore perpetuate the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples. In this way, then, solely appealing to human intelligence as a means through which to alter the national conscious and therefore accomplish justice for Indigenous peoples could only further the problem.

¹⁰ As Tuck and Yang note, “Indigenous peoples are rendered visible in mainstream [...] research in two main ways: as ‘at risk’ peoples and as asterisk peoples. This comprises a settler move to innocence because it erases and then conceals the erasure of Indigenous peoples within the settler colonial nation-state and moves Indigenous nations as ‘populations’ to the margins of public discourse” (22).

With its critical focus on breaking the silence surrounding intergenerational trauma within Indigenous communities and humanizing the experiences of Indigenous women and their families, Indigenous women's literature has the power to break through this voiceless and faceless empirical barrier, appealing instead to human affect and highlighting the ways in which Indigenous women continue to thrive despite centuries-long attempts to erase them. Indigenous storytelling practices act as important forms of knowledge transmission and political resistance, working to counter the dominant society's version of history while also (re)turning the focus to Indigenous women's strength and resilience, thereby defying the reductive emphasis on victimization and trauma that so often accompanies these accounts of violence. Indeed, while these texts often deal heavily with the effects of trauma, examining them through the lens of Western trauma theory risks a loss of subjecthood and, as Saulteaux mental health worker Renee Linklater points out, "implies that the individual is responsible for the response, rather than the broader systematic force caused by the state's abuse of power" (22). Western notions of trauma emphasize victimhood and pathology, viewing trauma as an individual experience rather than as a collective or multigenerational one stemming from external sources. Further, as Brown notes, "white supremacy controls the narrative of pain," not only allowing violence to be excused because "victims do not feel pain in the same way as white people," but also refusing to acknowledge Indigenous vulnerability. Thus, to read trauma in Indigenous literature from a white Western psychoanalytic perspective is to further dismiss the ongoing systemic nature of colonial violence.

While it is crucial for Indigenous women writers to detail the suffering within their communities, to do so exclusively is also to risk essentializing Indigenous women

and oblige readers to overlook the subjects' individualities, furthering the potential for erasure. As such, there is an urgency in many texts to "offer a more positive portrait of the ways in which Aboriginal women live: as victims of colonization and patriarchy, yet as activists and agents in their lives; as oppressed, yet as fighters and survivors; and as among the most stereotyped, dehumanized and objectified women, yet as the strong, gracious and determined women that they are" (LaRocque 53). In order to do so, these writers give the process of healing, as much as the experience of suffering, central significance as they underscore a crucial effort toward decolonization and "reconciliation": cultural renewal and the reparation of relationships.

The texts analyzed in this thesis work to demonstrate how violence against Indigenous women and girls has been misrepresented by political and public entities alike. Because settler Canadians often respond to stories of Indigenous women's trauma either by blaming victims for the violence they face, suggesting survivors "get over it," or outright denying truths "too horrific to be believed," Indigenous women writers have taken up the important yet challenging task of resisting erasure and (re)asserting Indigenous humanity. This thesis examines the ways in which these writers testify to ongoing colonial violence in order to heal Indigenous peoples and advance social justice in Canada.

Chapter 1 explores the ways in which white patriarchal ideologies have violated Indigenous communities and have severely damaged how Indigenous women are viewed by men and view themselves. Taking Yvonne Johnson's collaborative autobiography, *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998), as its focus, this chapter details the progressive sexualization of Indigenous women from contact to the present and identifies the degree to which this dehumanization has not only permitted men to

commit violence against Indigenous women without repercussion, but has also fostered a silence that has allowed this violence to thrive. By testifying to the lifelong abuse she has suffered, Johnson (along with co-author Rudy Wiebe) writes against this silence, both exposing that which has been done to her and affirming her own strength through survival and spiritual recovery.

Following in the footsteps of Indigenous women's life writing, the subject of chapter two, Katherena Vermette's *The Break* (2016), performs a fictionalization of fact, predominantly revealing the effects of contemporary colonial policies and practices. These include the profound disregard with which violence against Indigenous women and girls is met by police and health care professionals and how the child welfare system perpetuates the cycle of violence, creating a nearly invisible line between victim and abuser. By narrativizing these realities, Vermette's novel works to override the statistics and demonstrate how the victims of violence are mothers, daughters, aunts, sisters, and grandmothers: women and girls who are deeply loved by their families. As I argue, therefore, the novel strongly advocates for the humanization of Indigenous women and girls and the cultivation of strong families as a means of breaking the cycle of violence.

The goal of reconciliation is explored in the final chapter through Tracey Lindberg's *Birdie* (2015). Whereas the TRC calls for reconciliation through legislative changes, Lindberg's novel recognizes the importance of restoring "healthy" relationships at the individual and communal level. Emphasizing cultural conceptions of health wellness, and food, this chapter demonstrates how each and every one of us is responsible for healing the trauma of colonial violence and nurturing better future relationships.

As settler society slowly begins to recognize the systemic gendered racism used to found what is now known as Canada and the ways in which this state-sponsored violence is ongoing, Indigenous women's literature has crucial transformative power. By giving voice to the most heavily silenced, these texts work to humanize and validate those whom Canada has judged sexualized and disposable. In doing so, they not only have the capacity to positively alter how Indigenous women and their experiences are perceived by settlers, but also to heal Indigenous peoples by offering alternative representations to those circulate by the dominant culture. In these ways, Indigenous women's literature proves invaluable to fostering a better future for Indigenous peoples and settlers alike.

1 “It is also the pain of my people”: Colonial
Dispossessions in *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree
Woman*

Published nearly ten years after the conviction that sought to silence her for twenty-five years to life, Yvonne Johnson’s collaborative autobiography *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998) acts as a testimony to the intergenerational pain and resilience of Indigenous women in the face of sexual abuse, domestic violence, gendered racism, and cultural fragmentation. Her story, shared and compiled with white settler Canadian writer Rudy Wiebe out of letters and conversations between the two, her own handwritten journals, audiotapes, and statements to police and other official documents, begins as a personal journey of self and cultural rediscovery and becomes representative of the legacies of colonial violence in Canada and their impacts on Indigenous women from all nations. By disclosing what she “holds to be her own truths” (Wiebe and Johnson, Prefatory Note), Johnson works to expose a much larger issue: the historical and contemporary disenfranchisement and degrading sexualization of Indigenous women in Canada. In breaking her own silence and “hold[ing] history responsible” for the abuses she and other women continue to suffer (Wiebe and Johnson 5), Johnson writes against the silence that patriarchal, settler-Canadian society persistently attempts to impose upon Indigenous women. As much as it focuses on the horrors she has endured, her testimony also emphasizes healing. The utterance of her story only becomes possible by strengthening her spirituality through her engagement with Cree traditions. Johnson is given voice through and gives voice to a recovery of Indigenous ways of knowing that permit her to better understand herself, her experience, and the

experiences of other Indigenous women that are underrepresented, devalued, and even ignored by some non-Indigenous Canadians. In this way, Johnson's narrative ultimately bears witness to a personal and collective trauma and serves as both a "medium of historical transmission" and an "unsuspected medium of healing" (Felman, "Education" 9).

Stolen Life recounts the events of the first thirty years of Yvonne Johnson's life that culminate in her incarceration for first-degree murder for her involvement in the death of Leonard Charles Skwarok. The daughter of "a Cree from a residential school in Sask[atchewan]" and "a ex-U.S. Marine of the Norwegian race" (Wiebe and Johnson 5), Johnson's life story is marked by the effects of colonial violence, toxic masculinity, and profound silences. Raped repeatedly for years by her father, brother, community members, and peers, Johnson spent years in silence, unable to comprehend the horrors being committed against her body and mind. A story of unearthed trauma and recovered identity, her narrative is a testimonial text brought to light with the help of Rudy Wiebe, a self-proclaimed "aging, professional man, exactly the kind of 'powerful White' who's so often created problems for her" (41). Given this selection of collaborator and the inequality of power between the two, many critics of *Stolen Life* (who are predominantly non-Indigenous) have chosen to focus on Wiebe's role within the text rather than on the legacies of colonial history and violence to which Johnson bears witness. Susan Egan, for instance, accuses Wiebe of "becom[ing] a ventriloquist for Yvonne" (22) and of constructing the narrative in a way that is "too tidy for the mess of trauma" (23). Certainly, the textualization of Johnson's story was not without its challenges for both the subject and her editor. As they begin their work together, Wiebe struggles with Johnson's testimony, much of which is recorded on tapes too "interwoven and

intersnarled” to organize (11): “if she wants to tell her story,” he writes, “her words must be on paper” (22). This necessity, however, is problematic for Johnson, who notes: “I’ve learned so much about myself, I can’t write it all, or fast enough, I can’t write it the way it should be said. It is sometimes easier to say thoughts than to write them because saying something is living it, feeling it, connecting with it again. No writing can capture that fully. In a way, speaking is alive; writing makes it become dead” (19). In many ways, this preference for orality reflects Johnson’s cultural attachments, particularly as she explains the value of storytelling as the Elders have taught her: “If a person with a story can go deep, where people are angry, sad, where they’re hiding thoughts and emotions, raise the past they’ve maybe forgotten and can’t really recognize anymore, push them to spirit-walk into themselves – to do that with a story is a gift” (12).

Storytelling is therefore the most powerful means for Johnson to not only acknowledge that which has happened to her, but also to heal from it and to provide other women with similar stories a means of recovering their own stolen lives.

For Johnson, the most effective way to offer this gift, to “reclaim her history, to understand her pain, and to honour her responsibilities” (Methot), is by engaging in *testimonio*, a literary form from Latin America that is produced through “a collaboration between a witness who gives an oral statement and a compiler who solicits, edits, and gives shape to the account” (Rymhs 91). For Wiebe, however, the sheer number of memories Johnson recounts, with their intricate yet fragmentary details, proves extremely difficult as he attempts to bring “order to the chaos that has been her life” (Emberley, *Defamiliarizing* 216). As such, both must find a means through which to tell Johnson’s story without appropriating or obfuscating her voice. Yet for critics to focus almost exclusively on this very issue of authorship, with special emphasis on Wiebe, is

to commit this same offense. As Michael Jacklin argues, “in directing comment and criticism toward the non-Indigenous editor, the Aboriginal collaborators are in effect spoken over,” as “the critical dismissal of the book as being compromised by its perceived failure to overcome its colonial foundations, is precisely the sort of criticism that itself may occasion harm” (“Critical” 66-67; 68). Giving greater attention to the non-Indigenous co-author, Wiebe, is to fail to accord Yvonne Johnson full ownership of her story, thereby effacing her subjectivity and upholding the very colonial structures she is working to dismantle.¹¹

Perhaps the strongest, and most dangerous, condemnation against Wiebe is critic Julia Emberley’s contention that “in Wiebe’s account of Johnson’s stolen life, the trauma of her experience of sexual violence is displaced through another form of violence, the violence of writing and the law of narrative that Wiebe imposes on her fragments of memory to achieve a sequential and coherent narrative form” (“To Spirit Walk” 222). To suggest that Wiebe’s interventions and structuring of Johnson’s narrative are more salient and harmful than the chronic sexual abuse she has suffered is not only to diminish her trauma, but also to completely disregard the strength and courage Johnson required to relive and retell her experiences and the empowering quality of this retelling for other Indigenous women who understand her story, as “it’s so much their own” (Wiebe and Johnson 338). Emberley’s position imposes a further

¹¹ There is certainly much to be said about the power imbalance between Wiebe and Johnson and its impact upon Wiebe’s mediation, yet it is also crucial to acknowledge – as Johnson herself does – that this collaboration is based upon a mutual respect wherein “the end result is to make the world a better place. And not for one to feed off the pain and suffering of the other” (qtd. in Jacklin, “Interview” 51). For *all* critics of *Stolen Life* (with the exception of Jacklin) to focus exclusively on Wiebe’s role within the text is to commit the very erasure and elimination of Indigenous women that Johnson’s story speaks out against.

silence upon Johnson, one from which she has struggled to emerge from her earliest childhood.

Born with a cleft palate, as her grandmother before her and her daughter after, Johnson spent years unable to speak clearly or describe the abuse she suffered at the hands of family and community members. Her attempts to disclose her pain as a child were met with frustration and, in many instances, physical violence from her parents who were unable to understand the “few communicating sounds” she had (Wiebe and Johnson 78). Forced to live in “a world where [she] had no words,” Johnson was powerless to explain what was being done to her and to “defend [her]self,” “protect [her]self from the yellings and punishments of having always [...] done something wrong” (77). The effect of this silencing was a perpetuation of sexual abuse, beginning at the age of two or three, often occurring in Johnson’s childhood home where “there was usually no place to really run or hide; eventually a child has to surface in the home where it lives” (78). Never safe from the threat of violence, Johnson’s trauma manifested as shame and guilt, feelings that kept her silent even after the multiple surgeries she underwent to correct her cleft palate, to allow “the words with which [she] could explain or defend [her]self to be gradually, and with great pain, carved and sewn into [her] face” (78).

Of even greater consequence than physical challenges that limited her ability to speak for herself, however, was Johnson’s family’s refusal to acknowledge the horrors taking place between them: “Everyone in my family is suffering,” she writes,

but we’re never responsible, no, never us – somebody else did something horrible, but never us. If anything ever gets said, about what went on between us, it’s a slip of the lip when we’re drinking [...]. [W]e never

... speak about what happened, never. Pretend we don't know, never admit anything, never look into anyone's eyes more than a second – nothing happened. We just can't pull together to try to talk, about anything. My family has stayed together as much as it has by denial, shame, fear ... all the other good stuff like that. (23)

While this intrafamilial denial permits “a cycle of abuse in which individuals can become both victim and abuser” (Monchalin 172), it reflects, on a much larger scale, a similar reaction from some non-Indigenous Canadians upon being presented with evidence of contemporary colonial violence. Indeed, while the testimonies collected as part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's report on the legacies of residential schools largely indicate the ongoing trauma and systemic oppression faced by Indigenous peoples in Canada, many continue to relegate these injustices and brutality to the past, including CBC's Rex Murphy, who argues that, in Canada, “‘narratives’ of colonialism and racism and genocide are an abuse of reality.” Such denialist attitudes are enabled, as Lisa Monchalin explains, by some non-Indigenous Canadians' refusal “to acknowledge their privileged positions because doing so could necessitate learning a history they do not want to admit” (78). According to psychoanalyst and education scholar Deborah Britzman, the resistance with which non-Indigenous Canadians attend to Indigenous stories stems, in part, from the provocation of “a crisis with the self” whereby the knowledge offered “will be felt as interference or a critique of the self's coherence or view of itself in the world” (118). In other words, Indigenous stories such as Johnson's may force non-Indigenous Canadians to recognize the ways in which the settler-colonial systems from which they benefit continue to be fueled by the racism that maintains the domination of settler-Canadians over Indigenous peoples. What's more, as

Indigenous education scholar Susan D. Dion explains, “however distant Canadians argue that they are from the instance/site/relationship of violence/oppression/injustice, it is their very recognition of being implicated that motivates their denial” (61). As a result of the personal unease felt when prompted to reconsider their position in society and the means through which this position was acquired, Canadians continue to seek the comfort of ignorance, or what Shoshana Felman calls “an active refusal of information” (*Literature* 30). Such an attitude is incredibly dangerous: just as the Johnsons’ refusal to acknowledge the violence and abuse occurring within their household permitted the cycle of abuse to persist, Canadians who willingly disregard their privileged positions commit an equally harmful act. Indeed, as Thomas Couser writes: “not to remember is to accede to the erasure or distortion of collective experience; to repress memory is to reenact and perpetuate oppression” (107). In this way, then, ignorance of colonial violence and its ongoing effects is itself violent in its complicity, fostering a bias that allows the exploitation of Indigenous peoples to endure.

The realities disseminated by Indigenous stories may also prompt non-Indigenous Canadians to “reconsider their sense of belonging and reflect upon the moral anxiety that clings to race relations and to narratives of nationhood” (Jacklin, “Critical” 75). Indigenous stories may write back to Western authority, in part to dismantle what David Long calls Canada’s “international reputation as somewhat of a ‘peaceable and prosperous country of order and good government’” (xvi), as well as by encouraging non-Indigenous listeners and readers to recognize the resilience and strength that thrives in Indigenous communities. As Long explains, a primary concern of Indigenous storytellers is to “(re)claim and revitalize their Aboriginal identity in a manner that will positively transform their individual lives, families, communities, organizations, and

Nations as well as their relations with the rest of Canada” (xxiv). Ultimately, as Lee Maracle writes, “story becomes a means of intervention preventing humans from re-traversing dangerous and dehumanizing paths” (235). This is precisely Yvonne Johnson’s aim in recounting the pervasive abuse, poverty, and racially-motivated violence that marked not only her own daily life, but, familiarly, the lives of Indigenous women across Canada. Indeed, as much as the narrative is focused on Johnson’s personal experiences, it is also, as Jacklin points out, “a narrative of trauma whose victims are multiple” (“What” 23).

Johnson pointedly frames her narrative within the legacy of colonial dispossession. In her introductory letter to Wiebe, she identifies herself primarily as a descendant of Cree chief, Big Bear (*Mistahi-maskwa*), whose imprisonment in 1885 for his rejection of the terms of Treaty 6 and the subsequent starvation of his people led to her ancestors’ forced dispersal “all over this continent” (Wiebe and Johnson 4). As becomes evident over the course of Johnson’s narrative, through examples of familial incohesion, instability, and a lack of supportive attachments, the effects of the trauma of this original rupture are ongoing. Given the centrality of family in Indigenous cultures, as Sharon Perrault and Jocelyn Proulx explain, without “a clear knowledge of where individuals come from, to whom they are related, and to which community they belong,” Big Bear’s descendants lost an “essential to their concept of self and place in the universe” (14). Along with further colonial injuries, such as the prohibition of “traditional customs and spirituality, [...] abuse, exposure to poor parenting models, and pervasive racism” (Perrault and Proulx 14-16), generations of relationships were disrupted and damaged, leading eventually to the violence and neglect that marks the Johnson family. Johnson invites Wiebe, whose fictional biography *The Temptations of*

Big Bear she discovered in prison, to help her “clear [Big Bear’s] name and to recover his medicine bundle as I try to find my lost family, and only under our Bear Spirit will it ever be true. We have not guarded it as we should have, and now we have suffered long enough; now is the time to heal and to return to the land and reclaim our rightful place and to meet my family that has been sent all over the four winds” (9). By initiating her contact with Wiebe in this way, and by selecting (in collaboration with Wiebe) this letter to open the narrative, Johnson situates the events of her life within a greater historical context, suggesting that this loss of cultural foundations and attachments largely contributed to the breakdown within her own immediate family.

As *Stolen Life* demonstrates, the intergenerational consequences of this initial displacement are numerous: “my great-grandma was born when the Whites came west in Canada, my grandma was that first generation born on reserves, my mom was taken into residential school, and I was born into the in-between Indian-White world where you do year-around labouring jobs and the Indians leave their reserves for the slave labour the different seasons need” (Wiebe and Johnson 200). Here, Johnson draws attention to the cumulative strategies put forth by White settlers to subjugate Indigenous peoples. In doing so, she not only demonstrates the contemporaneity of colonialism in Canada, but also undermines “The Indian Problem” paradigm, which is described as the means through which Indigenous peoples continue to be problematized “by studying Indigenous poverty, the justice system, education, health, and a host of other complex issues as ‘Indian’ problems rather than as systemic problems inherent in a society that historically treats Indigenous peoples as outsiders or others” (Saskatchewan Indian Federated College; qtd. in Long xxi). As becomes evident over the course of Johnson’s narrative, nearly every symptom of oppression and suffering she and her family endure

stems from colonial structures, rather than from some poison that breeds exclusively within Indigenous life, as many stereotypes that are part of white settler culture present and perpetuate.

Johnson identifies a number of instances of family rupture, particularly in relation to her mother, Cecilia (née Bear) Johnson. In her first letter to Wiebe, she explains that her mother was “kicked out” of her reserve upon marrying Johnson’s father, a white man (3). Johnson does not attribute this expulsion to her mother’s family’s disapproval; rather, the law of the Indian Act would have dictated her removal. According to section 12(1)(b) of the *Indian Act* (prior to revisions made in 1985), First Nations women lost their Indian status if they were to marry non-Indian men. As such, First Nations women were forced to give up their cultural ties, land, and communities and their children were “not recognized as Indian and [were] therefore denied access to cultural and social amenities of the Indian community” (Jamieson, qtd. in Stirbys 31). For Cecilia, her marriage becomes her second forced loss of cultural and familial attachments, the first being “when the RCMP came on the reserves with the legal right to seize [children] from their parents and force them into residential schools” (Wiebe and Johnson 84). Johnson questions her mother’s choice in marrying her father at seventeen, suggesting that, while it could have been due to her pregnancy with their first child, Earl, just as likely “she was trying to escape being Indian” (32). While she rarely spoke of “the religious jail [she] grew up in” (200), Johnson recognizes that Cecilia was “pulled to pieces” and “reassembled into something else” over the course of the seven years she spent in a Roman Catholic residential school during the Depression (32).

There, as Wiebe recounts, “the Cree children prayed several times a day and worked long hours for their food. They learned the basics of reading and writing –

Cecilia said she was at a Grade Two level after seven years of school – and were drilled, often beaten, into good Catholic behaviour” (84). Not only was Cecilia placed into a severe program of cultural replacement that promoted a European ideology of authority over Indigenous values of “wholeness, balance, connection, [and] harmony” (Frideres 165), but she also learned to “be content with whatever happens; forget your pain, you have no pain only sins, pray, confess your dirtiness and sin of being pagan, when you’re dead heaven will be wonderful” (Wiebe and Johnson 84). The “conspiracy of silence” (Frideres 165) that marked the experiences of many residential school survivors largely informed how Cecilia reacted to the suffering of her own children – “She’s lived her life as if being tough and strong is the essence of all that’s needed. And despite everything that’s happened, she still has this childlike idea that if she tries to forget, if she hides something long enough, somehow everyone will forget it” (Wiebe and Johnson 84). As Charles Portney explains, this response to trauma is not uncommon and has significant effects on parenting: “parents who are reliving their own trauma, dealing with pain by emotional numbing or detaching themselves from reality cannot help a child develop a reasonable sense of safety” (qtd. in Frideres 166). In this way, then, it is perhaps no surprise that Cecilia often turned a blind eye to the (primarily sexual) violence being committed against her daughter(s) under her own roof. This does not, of course, condone her ignorance, but rather demonstrates the intergenerational effects of Canada’s racist project of forced assimilation.

Cecilia does break a silence after what was perhaps the most significant event to affect the Johnson family: the death of the eldest child, Earl, while in police custody. As Johnson writes to Wiebe:

My brother was killed by the cops [in Butte, Montana] when I was nine and my family, or what of it we had, went all to hell. My mom went on the AIM [American Indian Movement] march from Wounded Knee to Washington in 1972 to see if she could get anything done about my brother's death, but came back empty and soon filed for divorce and said she was going back to her people. (4-5)

The circumstances surrounding Earl's death "in the dead-end corner of Butte's city jail," as Wiebe admits while trying to piece them together, are "tangled even more than sudden death usually is" (58). Earl was found suspended by a garden hose from an overhead pipe in the basement of the jail, where he was staying after allegedly seeking police protection from someone he believed was trying to kill him. While the death was deemed a suicide, the Johnson family refused to accept such a conclusion.

Unable to afford a public inquiry or trial, Cecilia and her husband, Clarence undertook their own investigation, Cecilia going so far as to take the case to Washington with the American Indian Movement. Despite the trauma of losing her first child, Cecilia committed herself to saving her remaining children and to reconnecting with her cultural foundations. As Johnson recalls:

Even before this she'd hauled us to her family on the reserve in Saskatchewan when she thought we were too badly threatened in crooked Butte, and now she knew trying to be accepted in the White world of Montana was useless. There were only two things she wanted: to make her remaining kids more Indian so we'd stay alive, and to seek some form of justice against those who killed Earl. (86)

Despite the feelings of shame and self-hatred indoctrinated into Johnson's mother during her time in residential school, Cecilia has maintained some cultural ties to her Cree community, however tenuous. Unlike many survivors, she managed to reconnect with her family after escaping the school and was able to maintain her knowledge of the Cree language. Encouraged further by her time with AIM, one of the purposes of which was to "revive traditional Native ceremonies" (Wiebe and Johnson 107), Cecilia decided she was going to "return permanently to her people on the Red Pheasant Reserve in Canada, and she wanted to take her children with her"; in turn, "any hope or possibilities there might have been for her and her White husband were gone; she was returning to her people" (107). Unlike the Butte society, "created and controlled by Whites" who called her family "a dirty breed" (77; 16), the Red Pheasant Reserve functions as a refuge for Cecilia and her children where her relations, as Johnson writes, "would never turn us away" and where "our heritage was dug into the very ground, and there we never felt poor or displaced or useless freaks" (157). Despite the original forced removal from their sacred ancestral lands, whose burial ground continues to be marked by colonialism and from which Cecilia and her father were removed by the RCMP while visiting (201-202), the Bear family has managed to maintain a kinship that provides safety and a sense of identity in a world that continues to be dominated by White powers. While it is impossible to know the extent of the damage caused by residential schooling upon Cecilia without her own testimony, it is evident from her pride in her culture that the assimilation attempts she undoubtedly faced did not hold. This is not to say, however, that the Roman Catholic influences also failed to endure; indeed, while Cecilia may have eventually managed to resist the imposed shame of being Cree, the same cannot be said for her estimation of women.

Largely an underexamined consequence of colonialism and residential schooling is the imposition of patriarchy upon Indigenous communities. As Mi'kmaw scholar Bonita Lawrence explains, "a central aspect of the colonization process in Canada would be to break the power of Indigenous women within their nations" (286). Originally occupying positions of authority, autonomy, and high status, prior to colonization Indigenous women were at the center of their families and communities. With the arrival of European settlers, however, came a dismissal of women's powerful social and political positions and the establishment of a system based not upon equality, but rather upon principles of control, domination, and competition. Of significant consequence, this worldview endorsed violence against Indigenous women, a phenomenon that, according to Mi'kmaw social worker Cyndy Baskin, "rarely existed prior to the breakdown of traditional societies caused by colonization" (153). In large part, this violence, and especially sexual violence, became permissible with the European settlers' invention of negative images and representations of Indigenous women, including the "squaw." According to Cree/Métis scholar Emma LaRocque, "the portrayal of the squaw is one of the most degraded, most despised and most dehumanized anywhere in the world. The 'squaw' is the female counterpart to the Indian male 'savage' and as such she has no human face; she is lustful, immoral, unfeeling and dirty" (qtd. in AJIC). This representation of Indigenous women, according to Cree/Métis scholar Kim Anderson, "justified taking over Indian land, [...] excused those who removed children and paved the way for assimilation into mainstream culture, [and] allowed for the righteous position of those who participation in the eradication of Native culture, language, and tradition" ("Construction" 269). Worse still, as LaRocque adds, "such grotesque dehumanization has rendered all Native women and girls vulnerable to gross physical,

psychological and sexual violence ... I believe that there is a direct relationship between these horrible racist/sexist stereotypes and violence against Native women and girls” (qtd. in AJIC). Mi’kmaw film producer Catherine Martin echoes this view as she notes: “that myth or misperception about our women [being easy] is in the minds of the mainstream society, which is why our women end up being attacked and rape. The fact that we have been raped tends to make them think that we are easy. It is a way to excuse the rapist, or to ignore the race issue” (qtd. in Anderson, “Construction” 276). Indeed, the notion that Indigenous women are “inherently rapeable,” in Sherene Razack’s words (*Looking* 69), continues to be accepted by white men, particularly those in Johnson’s life who repeatedly sexually abuse her, including her own father: “you fucken whore, whoren around in the bed I give you in my own house! [...] Used fucken goods anyhow - you give it to him, you’ll give it to me. I’m a man too” (Wiebe and Johnson 139). Not only does Clarence classify his daughter using the same rhetoric as early colonizers, but he also justifies her subordination through an assertion of his own masculinity. By claiming the same ownership over his house as he does over Johnson’s body, he identifies the links between colonialism and misogyny, distinctly demonstrating their inextricability.

The displacement of women from positions of power to degraded sex objects acts as another form of colonial dispossession and the sexual violence with which it is marked becomes Johnson’s and her sisters’ experience of colonization. Not only are their bodies repeatedly exploited and dominated by white men, but they are also, as Johnson explains, “by example [...] shown how to drink and fight, but [are] never taught what it meant to be a woman – except what [they] understood to be the shame of it” (165). This shame, influenced primarily by Cecilia, is attached to both women’s bodies

and their sexuality. As Johnson writes: “Mom always told me my crotch was a bad place; when you bathe never, ever, look between your legs or feel there, wash quick and leave it alone. You hide your body from everyone, including yourself. Especially men, and particularly the men in your own family” (161). Johnson’s mother evidently recognized the threat men posed towards women’s bodies, yet, from her perspective, it is up to the girls to protect themselves. Indeed, on another occasion Johnson recounts:

I remember when I was no more than five her warning to us, over and over: ‘Girls, be on guard! Don’t hug your dad, never your brothers, your male cousins, or uncles, or grandpas. If you do you’re asking for it, it’s your own fault. Never hold hands with any male, stay away from all boys, protect yourself by crowding together, by hiding in corners, never pump yourself high on the swing because a man might see your panties; leap frog is too sexy, sitting with your legs uncrossed is just asking for it.’
(339)

In this way, Cecilia not only demonstrates the degree to which she has internalized the notion of women-as-sex-objects, but she also intimates a possible lesson learned during her time in residential school: that children, too, were sexual objects whose bodies must be controlled. Indeed, according to Johnson, her mother “considered her four daughters, Karen, Minnie, Kathy, Vonnie, nothing but bad problems” and “treated us not like the babies we were but as if she thought we could be naturally born whores” (339). Refusing to acknowledge “such torture of a small child” during Johnson’s early years and labeling her “a daughter who willingly lets her brother fuck her” years later, Cecilia “simply perpetuated the silence that allows abuse in the family to go on and on” (337; 222; 374). Her deliberate denial of the devastation being wrought against her daughters further

demonstrates the degree to which the imposition of patriarchal ideologies have not only had a profound impact on men's perceptions of women, but have also deeply affected the ways women perceive themselves.

While it is impossible to know for certain what Cecilia was taught in residential school, her impression of women, particularly in relation to their sexuality, appear to be heavily influenced by Christian doctrine. As Anderson explains, prior to colonization and the introduction of Christianity, there was an acceptance among all Indigenous nations that "sex was something natural for both men and women" (*Recognition* 85). Importantly, she notes:

According to many Native peoples, women's bodies, by virtue of their capacity to bring forth life, were powerful and celebrated through all their cycles. Respect for their bodies was related to the respect and responsibility they commanded in their families, villages, and nations. Because of this respect, women were not seen as 'sex objects,' and as well they had a great deal of individual control over their sexuality.

(Recognition 85)

This perspective shifted radically with the imposition of Christian ideology, which condemned women's sexuality. As Barbara-Helen Hill explains, puritanical dogma replaced traditional teachings that encourage healthy sexuality. As such, Indigenous girls were told that sex is "a man's thing; men enjoy it; it's a woman's duty" (Hill 70).

Johnson's narrative further highlights this lesson, as she relates: "Sex was something people did, I never got anything out of it and when men did it to me they felt so manly they usually wanted more. [...] The best I could say for sex was I got through it without too much pain; if I had the choice and felt I had to please a man, I'd let him do it" (140).

Evidently, the misogynistic attitudes toward sex that Cecilia likely learned as part of her Roman Catholic “education” were imparted upon her daughter, leading Johnson not only to “feel dirty all the time,” but also to carry an enormous amount of guilt for “get[ting] caught” by the men who abused her (308; 78). The patriarchal ideologies imposed upon Indigenous peoples from colonization continue to be bequeathed upon generations of women, normalizing abuse and shame and highlighting the degree to which colonial dispossession means not only the exploitation of land but also of bodies.

While the multigenerational trauma Yvonne Johnson’s narrative reveals cannot be diminished, it is of equal importance to recognize the hope and optimism evident in Johnson’s ability to survive and to share her testimony. Indeed, as much as *Stolen Life* is a narrative of trauma, it is also a narrative of healing. Likewise, it is as much a narrative of colonial dispossession as it is a narrative of cultural repossession. For Johnson, this renewal of spirituality and cultural connection begins in the Kingston Prison for Women, where, because “sometimes a quarter of the women here are Native,” there exists a “strong Native Sisterhood” (34).

As Johnson explains, the Sisterhood provides the incarcerated women with traditional ceremonies: ““They allow us to sing on the drum, and the Elders to come. We’ve even been able to built [sic] a sweat lodge in a corner of the grounds”” (35). The sweat lodge in particular becomes crucial to Johnson’s personal and spiritual recovery. On one occasion she recounts the power of the sweat in the release of her trauma: “I am burning up and I slap myself because I was told wherever I burn I’m sick and need healing, slapping it acknowledges my pain, slap it to let it go, give it to the Creator” (331). She continues: “I was warned: you’ve made yourself sick, so it’s up to you to heal yourself, do it, and in our circle all eyes are watching me [...] I know, and hear, the

sound within my silence is a rumbling growl, it grows larger and larger until my body can't hold it, it bursts into growl, roar after roar, a huge animal towering over me, roaring out of me" (331). In this moment, it is revealed to Johnson what she has been given: "things beyond pain and suffering and grief" (330).

At this pivotal juncture, Johnson recovers her spirit name, Medicine Bear Woman (*Muskeke Muskwa Iskwew*), and is finally able to begin to help herself and her family. Indeed, as she writes, "my spirit name, given me by the Spirit World People, now I have a place. Where I can stand to speak" (332):

I do this in a ceremonial way, and it is covered under the medicine, and I believe the spirits are here to help me. My sole purpose in doing this is to give it to the Creator, to give it to the spirits in the hope to get some sort of understanding, to put some sort of closure to all of it. To make a bad situation better if possible [...]. It's time for me to be as a medicine bear woman and to deal with these things [...]. (396)

Receiving her spirit name allows Johnson to set herself on the path to healing, first by being able to identify herself and then by identifying "what I have done, what was done to me" (24). Indeed, as an educational pamphlet provided by Anishnawbe Health Toronto explains: "Your spirit name is said to be fifty percent of your healing and balance because, with it, you know who you are, you know where you belong, you know where you are going and you know where you came from." The power her spirit name provides her is a kind she has never known, and it offers her a new beginning and protection against the pain her re-membering is sure to cause. By opening the door to reconnection and renewal, Johnson is finally able to honour herself and to recognize her

own capacity for forgiveness and self-love, enabling herself to begin to relinquish her trauma and to recover her stolen life.

Through her detailed account of the lifelong sexual violence she endured, Yvonne Johnson's narrative articulates both a personal and collective trauma stemming from the early days of European settlement and its subsequent degradation of Indigenous women. The abuses Johnson faces largely reflect those imposed by colonial forces; the intergenerational effects of which continue to be felt both inside and outside Indigenous communities. Her narrative demonstrates the profound impact colonial ideologies have had on the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being of Indigenous women, as the violence with which their lives are so often marked originated with and are maintained by the persistence of colonial dispossessions, particularly those that promote the subjugation of Indigenous women. Importantly, however, while these practices have largely functioned as a means of either silencing or even eradicating knowledge of the historical experiences of Indigenous women at the hands of European settlers, Johnson uncovers the means through which she can testify to that which has happened to her; namely, through cultural reconnection. By participating in ceremony and communicating with other Indigenous women and Elders, Johnson becomes able to provide a language for herself and for other abused women to utter their trauma and to begin to heal. Ultimately, she illustrates that, despite ongoing attempts to dispossess Indigenous women of their lands, cultures, and bodies, these women continue to hold the power to repossess themselves.

2 “We’re fucked up, but we’re not fucked”: The Lives of Indigenous Girls and Women in Katherena Vermette’s *The Break*

In an interview with *The Globe and Mail*, Katherena Vermette explains her objective in writing her first novel, *The Break* (2016): “What I was trying to do is tell the story of a family. I was trying to be very specific, and *very fictional*. I didn’t want to take from anyone’s story that I didn’t have permission to take” (Medley, emphasis added). In light of this assertion, it is perhaps irresponsible for critics to attempt to make any direct connections between the lives of Vermette’s Indigenous girls and women and those of Canada’s population. Nevertheless, Vermette enacts such a fictionalization of fact that it is nearly impossible not to address the experiences of her characters in relation to their real-life counterparts. Indeed, as Vermette adds: “I hope this story talks about these legacies that I think many people, many Indigenous women, can relate to” (Medley). The legacies to which she refers largely exemplify those events that Yvonne Johnson “can’t believe [...] women have to survive” (Wiebe and Johnson 161): sexual exploitation and violence, poverty, crime, and forced separation from their families and communities.

Attesting to intergenerational trauma and the cycle of violence committed against Indigenous women, Vermette’s novel is an act of truth telling, working not only to expose Canada’s ongoing colonization of Indigenous women and families and the apathy with which their trauma is met, but also to underscore the strength and resilience with which these girls and women meet the adversity they face. Indeed, rather than emphasizing victimhood, as is often seen in sympathetic and primarily White authored

media portrayals of Indigenous lives, Vermette instead dignifies her characters as fighters and survivors. Certainly, each character responds differently to the events that have marked them – from Stella, who chooses to isolate herself from her family, to Phoenix, who perpetuates the cycle of violence by committing it herself – yet Vermette refuses to allow her readers to pass judgement on upon them for the ways in which they cope with their circumstances. Without making excuses for their behaviour, Vermette encourages compassion and understanding for her girls and women, whose misfortunes and suffering are often met either with indifference or, worse, victim-blaming from those intended to protect them. In this way, Vermette’s novel shines a revolutionary light on the contemporary colonial experiences of Canada’s Indigenous women, including chronic sexual violence, the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls¹², and the consequences of family separation and the child welfare system. By giving special attention to the relationships between Indigenous women, Vermette identifies these connections as the most important means of survival in a country that continues to engage in practices that work towards the elimination of Indigenous bonds and communities. Ultimately, *The Break* works to restore what Vermette calls “the fundamental necessity of family” for Indigenous peoples and their capacity to resist gendered colonial violence (Medley).

Set in the North End of Winnipeg, a neighbourhood naively¹³ described by *Macleans* contributor Nancy Macdonald as the most impoverished and violent area in “Canada’s most racist city,” *The Break* offers a far more complex and nuanced examination of the neighbourhood in the aftermath of a violent attack in the dead of

¹² As well as twospirited/Indigiqueer peoples.

¹³ Racism in Canada is not limited to this urban centre.

winter in a barren field known as the Break, a piece of land four lots wide and bookended by Hydro towers. As the novel's only deceased narrator, Rain, explains, in the summer the Break is a space that brings those living in the area together: "Old people plant gardens there, big ones with tidy rows of corn and tomatoes, all nice and clean" (5). In this way, the Break becomes a reprieve from the city within which it is situated, a field where "if you just look down at the grass, you might think you were in the country" (5). From this perspective, the stretch appears to be a nearly pastoral landscape in which no harm could ever come to those surrounding it. In winter, however, the land is obstructed, as "no one clears the way" (5), making the separation between the "closely knit houses" even more pronounced (3). This divide becomes illustrative of that which the North End's Indigenous population faces in relation to their non-Indigenous neighbours. As Rain describes:

In the winter, the Break is just a lake of wind and white, a field of cold and biting snow that blows up with the slightest gust. And when snow touches those raw Hydro wires they make this intrusive buzzing sound. It's constant and just quiet enough that you can ignore it, like a whisper you know is a voice but you can't hear the words. [...] You can ignore it. It's just white noise, and some people can ignore things like that. Some people hear it but just get used to it. (5)

Here, the Break in winter comes to signify a profound rift in Canadian society. Not only is the space inhospitable for the life generated there in the summer, but the sound the snow creates in its contact with the Hydro wires also causes a disruption to daily life, one that for some can be easily disregarded, while for others becomes a constant presence. In this way, the Break largely parallels the distinction between the lives of

many Indigenous people in Canada and their White counterparts. Indeed, while the area is certainly home to “so many Indians [...], big families, good people” (Vermette 4), it is also home to “gangs, hookers, drugs houses;” where “all these big, beautiful houses [are] somehow sagging and tired like the old people who still live in them” (Vermette 4). Yet many of the North End’s inhabitants have as little control over their circumstances as they do over the weather. The cycle of colonialism that persists in Canada has created an environment in which Indigenous peoples are left to pick up the pieces that remain after broken treaties, land thefts, residential schooling, and all of the violence through which these conditions are created. Indeed, as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples concluded in 1996: “Repeated assaults on the culture and collective identity of Aboriginal people have weakened the foundations of Aboriginal society and contributed to the alienation that drives some to self-destruction and anti-social behaviour. Social problems among Aboriginal people are, in large measure, a legacy of history” (qtd. in Amnesty International 10). As such, the state of Winnipeg’s North End, and that of many other urban centres in Canada, is as much a response to the trauma induced by ongoing colonialism as it is a product of that very system. That which permits this process to continue is also reflected in this description of the Break: despite the sustained evidence that Canada’s Indigenous peoples face daily indignities and are given subhuman treatment by health care professionals, police, and other public services, not to mention their fellow citizens, the reality of Canadian racism continues to be treated like the white noise produced by the snow on the Hydro wires. Indeed, many White Canadians appear to have simply “gotten used to” the “intrusive buzzing sound” of Indigenous suffering, developing a sense of apathy that only exacerbates the problem. In

this way, then, winter is only but one white oppressor with which Indigenous people must contend.

Despite its impenetrability during the winter months, the Break is breached on one snowy night, setting the events of the novel in motion. As Stella, a young Métis mother, looks out her window, she witnesses what she perceives to be a sexual assault committed by four individuals against “a girl, a woman” (10), “so small and skinny” (9). Engaged in caring for her own two children, Stella is only able to call the police in hopes of helping the victim and apprehending her attackers. Yet her report and subsequent statement are treated with the same disregard as the sound made by the Hydro wires that hang over her home. As she alerts emergency services and informs them of the location in which the assault has taken place, she is greeted not with concern from the operator, but rather a “sigh” (10), a callous response to what has likely become a routine call: another act of violence in an area with a large Indigenous population. Unfortunately, the dispatcher’s detachment is only one apathetic reaction of many Stella faces in her – albeit passive – search for justice. She “waited for hours for the police to come” (15), a practice that, according to a report by the Standing Committee on the Status of Women (SCSW), is not uncommon: “Witnesses raised concerns of the non-response of police services to cases of violence against Aboriginal women. In domestic violence situations, police do not always respond in a timely manner to calls for assistance. Witnesses also stated that police sometimes dismiss claims of sexual assault if the woman is Aboriginal and leads a ‘high-risk’ lifestyle” (17). While Stella’s report is not one of domestic violence, nor are there any indications that the victim led a “high-risk lifestyle” (an issue to which this chapter will return), it is nevertheless received with a very similar disrespect. First, the officers challenge Stella’s assertion of the victim’s

gender: ““That’s a pretty long way, Mrs. McGregor. Are you sure it couldn’t have been a young man? You know a lot of these native boys wear their hair long”” (9). The naïve suggestion that the violence may not have been committed against a young woman not only demonstrates a lack of confidence placed in Stella as a witness, but also an eschewal of reality: Indigenous women continue to be the population the most heavily targeted for violence in Canada’s colonial state (Hargreaves x). In this way, as a *National Post* reviewer writes, the officer’s “dismissiveness is just one of many instances where Vermette’s characters must jump through hoops just to have their voices heard.” Rather than recognizing the attack for what it is – a rape against a thirteen-year-old Métis girl – the officers, particularly the white Officer Christie, who later refers to Stella as a “crazy bitch” (70), reject their witness’s conclusion and think only of ““the facts””: ““There was a broken beer bottle at the scene.’ Christie pauses, sighs. ‘Drinking often means fighting. Blood also means fighting. Sexual assaults don’t usually happen in the cold, outside in winter. It seems ... unlikely”” (13). In this way, Christie dismisses the attack as ““just some gang violence”” that he ““wouldn’t worry about”” (14). He puts the assault out of his mind as readily as the snow covers the crime scene. While there is no novelty in witnessing this violence for Stella either, unlike Christie she is unable to brush it off, to normalize it.

Stella does not have the luxury of ignorance. The attack has an intimate and directly personal affect upon her, not only because the victim turns out to be a member of her family – her cousin, Emily – but also because Stella has experienced a number of traumas resulting from violence against girls and women, albeit indirectly. With her own childhood, it is no surprise that Stella should find herself identifying with the victim of the attack she witnesses as an adult: as she describes the girl’s ““long black hair”” to the

police, she “reaches for her own” (9). This affinity stems not only from their physical resemblance, but also from a profound recognition that the young Indigenous girl who had to walk herself home in the middle of a cold winter night while bleeding profusely could just as easily have been Stella as a child. Indeed, it is “a past like hers” (84) that leads her husband, Jeff, a “white boy who grew up in the suburbs” (88), to suggest that she “‘could’ve just been dreaming,’” “‘could’ve just been confused” (15) and therefore could have misjudged the assault. As much as Stella resents the accusation, she is compelled to remember “each time, every instance” of the past that is

not even hers. Just stories that belong to other people but were somehow passed to her for safekeeping, for her to know, forever. Incidents.

Situations. [...] Things she’s seen, things her cousins told her, things her mom and Auntie Cher told her and her cousins, Lou[isa] and Paul[ina], when they were little kids. All those big and small half-stories that make up a life. (84)

Labeled a story keeper by her Kookom (grandmother), Stella has spent her entire life collecting stories from the girls and women in her family and recognizes in them “a *pattern*”: “all those little things, those warnings to be careful, those teachings of what not to do. She always knew to be careful, always knew to look out for men, strange men, men doing strange things. That’s how she was raised. On alert” (84, original emphasis). Such an upbringing highlights the degree to which violence against Indigenous women and girls has come to be viewed as inevitable rather than preventable. The high likelihood of experiencing sexual violence has prompted many Indigenous mothers to “talk to their daughters about what to do when they are sexually assaulted, not *if* they are sexually assaulted, but *when*” (Asetoyer, qtd. in Native American Women’s Health

Education Research Center 10, emphasis added). While “one by one the scenes echo in her head,” Stella recognizes that these lessons have not gone unwarranted: she and the women in her family have all been touched by men’s toxic actions.

The “scenes” to which Stella refers occurred primarily during her childhood and are shared with Lou and Paul. She recalls one occasion when, at the age of eight, Lou shared the first story Stella ever kept: “Lou put the light at her chin, so her skin was glowing red there. Her forehead was bright yellow. ‘I felt his thing. I was so, so gross,’ Lou told them. The extra *so* made all the difference. ‘And he was breathing deep like he was running. I would’ve punched him if I could’ve’” (85). Once Lou finishes her story, she “passed the flashlight to Stella, meaning it was her turn, her time to tell a story about being hurt. She needed something sinister, something dirty” (86). Here, a typical children’s slumber party, complete with ominous, flashlit faces primed for fictional ghost stories, becomes a setting for sharing experiences of sexual abuse and other harmful happenings, apparently common events for young Indigenous girls. In a similar vein, Stella recounts another incident where ““some old guy in a yellow car”” followed her and her cousins around their neighbourhood when they were thirteen (168). When Paul’s mom, Cheryl, reported the “pervert” to the police, she was told “she probably shouldn’t let the girls go to the store all by themselves, like that was the answer to everything” (169). This response highlights the degree to which Indigenous women and girls, rather than being attended, are made responsible for the behaviour of others and are expected to protect themselves from abuse. This conception in turn permits law enforcement to disregard calls such as Cheryl’s, placing Indigenous women and girls further in danger of assault by ostensibly approving of the violence they face.

These scenes largely reflect the realities of many Indigenous girls, as is evident from *National Post* journalist Sarah Boesveld's project "Silent No More," which documents the stories of twelve adolescent girls in Winnipeg. The project moves away from "horror stories and grim statistics" and focuses instead on "reach[ing] out to those most directly affected" by violence in their community. Boesveld is a settler mediating Indigenous trauma for a largely settler readership (a strategy that is similar to the journalistic approach MacDonald takes in her *Maclean's* article). And while her questions are arguably leading, her interactions with the girls do accord with what Vermette so powerfully depicts in *The Break*:

"Do you worry for your safety – whether you may end up like Tina [Fontaine] or Rinelle [Harper]?" A group of teenage girls – most of them strangers to one another – all raise their hands. "Do you trust the police?" Each girl shakes her head "No." "How many of you have had loved ones disappear or get killed?" They shoot quick glances at one another. Then, slowly, arms are raised: One, then two, finally about three-quarters of the room, signal to the others that they know this kind of pain. At least half say someone in their family has been sexually abused.

As this brief summary, as well as the interviewees' more detailed accounts, demonstrates, the lives of Indigenous girls are often marked with fear for their own safety and the safety of their loved ones. The prevalence of occurrences that have led these girls to constantly be on alert also prompted the launch of a 2014 social media campaign, #AmINext, to bring awareness to the high rate of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada. The campaign called upon the conservative government to acknowledge the very "pattern" of violence Stella recognizes in the

stories she keeps. Led by Holly Jarrett, an Inuk woman whose cousin Loretta Saunders was murdered by settlers and found dead two weeks after being reported missing, the initiative encouraged “women across Canada [to] post[] photos on social media with the hashtag #AmINext in an effort to convince Prime Minister Stephen Harper to hold a public inquiry into missing and murdered aboriginal women” (Thomson). The urgency of such an investigation is due to the overwhelming number of police-recorded incidents.

As D. Memee Lavell-Harvard and Jennifer Brant relate: “Noting that Indigenous women are eight times more likely to die as a result of violence, the most recent RCMP report documents 1,181 missing or murdered Aboriginal women and girls between 1980 and 2012. Another thirty-two were identified this year, 2016, with more distressing cases being reported every month” (2). These statistics exceed those originally reported by the Native Women’s Association of Canada’s *Sisters in Spirit* initiative, which in 2008 recorded the disappearance or death of more than 580 Indigenous women across Canada, indicating that “Aboriginal women are more likely than non-Aboriginal to be murdered—accounting for approximately 10% of the total number of female homicides in Canada, although Aboriginal women make up only 3% of the female population in Canada” (SWSC 14). According to NWAC’s then-president Beverly Jacobs, “if the same percentage of non-Aboriginal women were missing or murdered, the number would be a staggering 18,000” (SCSW 14). The question must then be posed: why are the lives Indigenous women and girls treated with such a deep-seated disrespect that the violence committed against them has become so normalized it led former Prime Minister Stephen Harper to comment “Um it, it isn't really high on our radar, to be honest” (Kappo)? Despite the importance of these statistical findings, the answer cannot be

found by “focusing on a moment in time or incidents of violence, abuse or racism, counting them” as doing so “disguises the utter totality of the experience of violence in Aboriginal women’s lives” (Monture-Angus 171). Indeed, it is crucial to be careful not to perceive these events as “repetitive cris[es]”, but rather by examining them in the context of “regular, ongoing outcomes of ‘colonial’ relations” (Million 53).

Because one of the ultimate aims of European colonialism through settlement in Canada was to eliminate the Indigenous populations already inhabiting the lands, women became the settlers’ primary targets. As Mary Ellen Turpel explains: “It is commonly known that the future of our nations depend upon the strength of our women. We know that, as the proverb suggests, a nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground” (180). In other words, Indigenous women, with their capacity to birth the next generation, to teach and nurture the children, and to maintain the cultures, are the greatest threat to the patriarchal colonial enterprise. It is therefore not surprising that most of the projects doctored by European settlers were committed to debilitating Indigenous women and their roles within their communities. From racist stereotyping that marked them as sexual objects, to the forced removal of their children, to the contemporary failure to protect them from violence, disappearance, and murder, Indigenous women have faced subjugation and oppression at the hands of the Canadian state since its very foundations. It is therefore impossible to extract the epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls from its historical legacy.

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that, as Allison Hargreaves remarks, “women are targeted for violence in ways that are *made possible* by the colonial state” (x, original emphasis), a violence carried out by white men who remain, according to Sarah Hunt, “unmarked by the violence they perpetrate, not at fault for carrying out a form of

violation that is as old as colonialism itself.” In addition, as Hunt argues, it is the “systemic neglect, racism and the violence of legal indifference within a society largely run by white men” that has “contributed to the normalization of violence against [Indigenous women].” Indeed, the number of unresolved cases involving violence and even murder against Indigenous women and girls readily demonstrates the disturbing ease with which perpetrators are able to escape justice. Therefore, the continued persecution of Indigenous women in Canada is only to be expected in a country where a societal indifference to their welfare and safety proliferates.

Vermette explores the dangers of these apathetic attitudes in her novel, particularly through Stella’s family’s most profound tragedy prior to Emily’s rape: the murder of Stella’s mother, Rain, when Stella was nine years old. After going to a bar and dancing with “the wrong fella,” a white man, Rain’s body was “found behind a dumpster. She had her pants around her ankles” (271). As Stella learns by gathering information from her Auntie, her Kookom, and newspapers, Rain was beaten “half to death” and raped by the man, who then abandoned her (271). She managed to make her way to the hospital, where “some nurse just saw her, drunk and bloody” and “rolled her eyes and told Stella’s mom to wait. That was what the file said. She was there long enough to make a file. They thought she was just drunk, had made her own head injury, and could wait” (271-72). Such a dismissal echoes a number of Indigenous peoples’ experiences, including Yvonne Johnson, who, after a suicide attempt, was treated by health professionals with disgust and ridicule: “‘Another Indian trying to kill herself?’ ‘Too drunk to do it right, she’s just a mess’” (Wiebe and Johnson 185).

Likewise, Macdonald recounts two instances in which Indigenous people were ignored in emergency rooms in Winnipeg. In one, a white man and his Indigenous friend

visited the ER after a painting had been dropped and the broken glass had cut the Indigenous person. A nurse greeted them by exclaiming “Aw! Have we been drinking and fighting again?” Racist assumptions such as this one also resulted in the 2008 death of Brian Sinclair, who was ignored by emergency staff for 34 hours and died of a preventable bladder infection. As Macdonald notes, “many staff [later] testified they’d believed Sinclair was homeless or intoxicated or ‘sleeping it off,’ and not in need of care.” As these cases indicate, therefore, the racist stereotypes that continue to permeate the public psyche have the potential to be fatal. This is certainly the case in Vermette’s novel where, unlike Brian Sinclair, Rain chose not to wait for someone to attend her: “They figured she got tired of waiting and was walking home when she went to take a pee in the alley. That’s when she lost consciousness altogether. Froze to death in the end. That’s all it took. Winter” (272). Of course, winter was not “all it took” for Rain to succumb to her injuries, as Vermette once again demonstrates that these hostile weather conditions are only one of many menaces Indigenous women encounter. If she hadn’t been beaten, if she hadn’t been ignored at the hospital, if she hadn’t been perceived as another “drunk Indian,” Rain likely would have survived and would have been allowed to fulfill her familial role as mother, sister, daughter, auntie. Instead, the authorities blame her for her own death: “The guy said [...] he had hit her but he was sorry. [...] She wouldn’t have died if she hadn’t been drinking. If it hadn’t been winter, if she would’ve waited, if she hadn’t been so stupid. The head injury was only part of it after all” (272). The irony with which Vermette infuses this retelling works not only to validate Rain and reclaim her worth as one of those “whom Canada has judged amoral, sexualized and discarded” (Million 35), but also to highlight the degree to which victim-blaming comes into play during cases of violence against Indigenous women.

The frequency with which Indigenous women are considered at fault for their own encounters with violence has led Hunt to ask a radical question: “Why are we so hesitant to name white male violence as the root cause, yet so comfortable naming all the ‘risk factors’ associated with the lives of Indigenous girls who have died?” Indeed, the emphasis placed upon women’s “high-risk behaviour” is generally much greater than the “‘risk factors’ that lead to violence in the lives of the perpetrators” (Hunt).

According to Hunt, this is due to reporters’ and politicians’ inability to “see the culture of whiteness that excuses violence against Indigenous women and girls by blaming native people for the violence they face,” a phenomenon that stems predominately from the legacies of colonialism. In this way, Canadian society remains capable of shirking responsibility for the deaths and disappearances of nearly 1200 members of its population.

Hargreaves, too, notes that “the hundreds of missing and murdered women across Canada [are not] responsible for their vulnerability to violence because of ‘poor lifestyle choices,’ as is so often argued” (2-3). Rather, she writes, “this violence occurs – can only occur – with the tacit collusion of the police and the justice system, and with the relative indifference of the Canadian public” (Hargreaves 3). Amnesty International’s *Stolen Sisters* report provides evidence for this argument, detailing how “some police spokespersons [said] that they believe that ‘lifestyle’ factors, such as engaging in the sex trade or illegal drug use are the most important factors, and that other factors such as race and gender are not significant enough to be considered in their work” (17). Similarly, Amber Dean, whose work focuses primarily on missing and murdered women from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, illustrates the existence of a “set of assumptions about a shared life narrative” for which the collective “Vancouver’s

Missing Women” has come to stand in (341). This “narrative” presumes that the lives of each missing woman follows the same trajectory: “troubled childhood, ‘broken’ family, abuse, children’s services, adolescent rebelliousness, and then a ‘fall from innocence’ brought about by drug experimentation, prostitution, addiction, mental illness, criminality, and so forth” (Dean 341). As Dean notes, however, “these assumptions about women’s lives are both true and not true, both over-determined and vastly oversimplified” (341). To focus exclusively on these factors is to disregard the humanity of the stolen women, an outcome Vermette is sure to avoid.

While Rain’s life was admittedly marked by some of these “risk factors” – she was an addict and had a criminal record – Vermette chooses instead to emphasize the positive qualities of her life, such as how much she loved dancing and old stories, how she would tell Stella her own versions of fairy tales by giving them an Indigenous feminist twist, and how she longed to be able to shape-shift into a wolf in order to assert power over men. Most importantly, Vermette is sure to highlight how much Rain meant to her family: “Whatever else I was,” she tells Stella from the Spirit World, “I loved you and you knew it. Your Kookoo knew it too. And you all loved me back. Whatever else you think or know, that is the most important thing about me. That I loved and was loved” (82). In this way, then, Vermette reminds her readers, just as Melanie Nimmo does, that regardless of their lifestyles, “these women ... were mothers, daughters, grandmothers, aunties, and cousins. Indeed, there exist two prominent connecting features amongst missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls: they were Aboriginal, and they were all loved and cherished by their families” (qtd. in SCWC 13).

Vermette pointedly refrains from explaining why Rain engaged in the behaviours that led many to put her at fault for her own death. But she does offer a possible

explanation for the devastating actions of another, ostensibly less sympathetic character, Emily's assaulter, Phoenix. Indeed, it is through Phoenix's detailed history and current plight that Vermette most effectively outlines the outcomes of intergenerational trauma in Indigenous communities and how "traumatized individuals often adopt high-risk behaviours as part of a continuum of maladaptive coping strategies" (Levenson, Willis and Prescott 263). Perhaps one of the most over-determined stereotypes in cases of violence within Indigenous communities, particularly when the violence is committed *by* Indigenous people, is that the perpetrators "'don't care about anyone. They're just thugs and criminals. [...] They're violent. End of story. They just want to hurt everybody 'cause they think they got it so hard'" (Vermette 222-23). Bald responses such as this one, given by Officer Tommy Scott's girlfriend, Hannah, oversimplify the harsh realities faced by Indigenous peoples that can lead some (but certainly not all) of them to reproduce the violence they themselves have encountered.

In an interview with Christine Fischer Guy, Vermette explains that acts of violence can rarely be detached from previous exposure to similar behaviour:

I don't know if I or anyone can ever really know what makes a person commit violence. What I do know is that the violence that happens in someone, anyone, isn't divorced from the violence that has happened to that person. When someone lives in violence, it becomes normalized, to some extent, and sometimes they respond to violence with violence. It's a tragedy that begets more tragedy.

As becomes evident through Phoenix's narrative, the circumstances that lead individuals into destructive cycles of brutality and criminality are much more complicated than is often perceived. Such a perspective becomes crucial to *The Break*. Vermette

demonstrates how some people cannot heal from their pasts, a fate treated with the same compassion and consideration as that of “innocent victims” such as Emily, whose only expectation of attending the party that led to her assault was to receive her first kiss.

Phoenix can be best understood as both a victim and an abuser. While Paul and Flora (Kookom) paint her as a monster, a reasonable response given the pain she caused their girl, she is also, in Carleigh Baker’s words, “a product of her environment – she cannot count on her mother, who is consumed by her own suffering.” “Like Louisa,” Baker adds, “Phoenix is also hardening herself to face the world, but without role models the results are destructive. She is left in the hands of the state, incarcerated.” This summary, while certainly not inaccurate, comes dangerously close to minimizing Phoenix’s story as yet another “shared life narrative” Dean cautions us against. It is important, therefore, to critically examine the events that ultimately lead Phoenix to commit sexual assault and to recognize their inextricability from the legacies of gendered and/or colonial violence. Significantly, the majority of the traumatic effects that weigh upon Phoenix come to her vicariously through her mother, Elsie.

Raised by her grandparents after an undisclosed estrangement from her own mother, Elsie was Stella’s childhood best friend. While Elsie was well cared for and loved by her grandparents, she nevertheless experienced a degree of emotional detachment from them, as is evident in her reaction to her grandfather’s death in grade six: when she told Stella he had died, she “didn’t even look sad. Stella should have known how weird Elsie was then. How easily her family could just cut themselves off” (201). Elsie likely learned this coping strategy after having been separated from her mother, who continued to live close by and had a new family of her own. Losing two of the people meant to nurture and support her well-being, one who loved her most and one

who should have, to circumstances out of her control had a profound effect on Elsie, who later neglected her own children, leaving eight-year-old Phoenix to look after her younger sisters, Cedar-Sage and Sparrow, for hours at a time, often at night.

The decisive event in Elsie's life that most strongly affects her ability to care for herself and her daughters derives not, however, from her family, but rather from the male violence Hunt so urgently calls to our attention. In grade nine, Elsie attended a party with Stella, Lou, and Paul, where she was gang raped, an attack resulting in her pregnancy with Phoenix. When the girls finally became aware of what was happening – they heard a partygoer exclaim, “Dude, you have to go upstairs. Some girl is just giving it away” (202) – they find Elsie with her “beautiful curly hair pressed to her face by a large hand. [...] She was on her stomach. Some guy on top of her. His hand keeping her head down” (202) while other boys watched, laughing, waiting for their turn. It takes Lou's actions to stop the brutal assault, and when the girls propped Elsie up, she “was just limp, like she was passed out but her eyes were open” (203). From this moment forward, Elsie becomes like so many violated girls before her, “not their real selves anymore, more like shadows, turned inside out” (183-84). Indeed, when Stella sees her on the street years later, she notes that “Elsie saw her but there was no recognition, her eyes were as blank as they had been that night. Still dead” (207). Hence, while Elsie physically survives the degrading violence committed against her, her emotional and psychological integrity do not share the same fate.

Despite Stella's perception of Elsie, Phoenix nevertheless remembers periods of her childhood where her mother was doing well; when her family of women – much like Emily's, Stella's, Rain's – was intact and thriving; when she loved and was loved. All of

this changed, however, when Phoenix and her sisters were taken into the child welfare system:

That was Phoenix's fault too. She had worn her mom's baggy sweater to school, and the sleeves were too big and came down off her arms. She shouldn't have done that. She knew there were bruises there. Big long finger bruises. Not that she gave a fuck about Sparrow's fucking dad. He could fucking go to hell, but she knew everyone would blame her mama. Elsie was real good back then, but when the girls left, she got real bad. Cedar-Sage and Sparrow went to a home but they didn't have a place for Phoenix so she was stuck in a hotel with older kids. (235)

As Vermette clearly recognizes, the effects of removing children from their families is devastating. From an Indigenous perspective, the removal of children from their families is the equivalent of ripping the heart “from the core” of the community (Anderson and Ball 74). This worldview largely prompted government-led colonial initiatives that specifically targeted Indigenous children, such as residential schools and the Sixties Scoop, where children were removed from their own families and placed into non-Indigenous homes. A contemporary version of this project can be found in the dramatic overrepresentation of children in the child welfare system in which, according to Lisa Monchalin, “there are three times the number of Indigenous children [...] than there were in residential schools at the height of their operation in the 1940s” (21). According to Randi Cull, for Indigenous children the consequences of these removals are “more severe because of the very tight knit nature of their communities and extended families and their unique culture” (146). As such, this strategy continues to be used to induce

family and cultural disintegration, perpetuating the cycle of violence social services claim to be committed to ending.

Because Phoenix's family has been ripped apart at the seams, largely due to government agencies' stereotypical view of her mother as an "unfit parent in need of state [...] intervention" (Cull 141), she is forced to seek another source of love and protection. With such a distorted understanding of a stable familial environment, Phoenix forges her own family by joining her uncle (and only remaining accessible relative) Alex's gang. It should come as no surprise, then, that Phoenix should succumb to criminal activity and violence: colonial operations have led her there. Indeed, as Nahanni Fontaine explains: "Aboriginal gangs are the product of our colonized and oppressed space within Canada – a space fraught with inequity, racism, dislocation, marginalization, and cultural and spiritual alienation" (116). Coupled with her status as an Indigenous girl and therefore a target of violence and victimization, these forms of oppression compel Phoenix to seek some semblance of protection through whatever means. In this way, her association and participation in gang activity, including the rape of Emily, become survival strategies in a society that consistently threatens the lives of Indigenous girls.

None of these experiences are to excuse Phoenix's actions and their traumatic consequences on Emily and her family, however. Indeed, as Lou attempts to find some sympathy for Phoenix – "She sounds like a pretty messed-up kid. I mean, you'd have to be..." – she is immediately interrupted by Paul, who places her own pain in focus: "I don't give a fuck about her story, Lou, so you can stop that right now" (346). This anger is Paul's survival strategy: she is responding to the victimization of her daughter in a way that prevents her from completely breaking. Yet that is not to say that

Phoenix's story does not matter. As Vermette's novel ultimately demonstrates, it is crucial to examine all of the multifarious and complex lives of Indigenous girls and women in order to avoid creating stock narratives that only serve to dehumanize them further. While the experiences she fictionalizes have their counterparts in reality, there is nevertheless such a profound strength to be found in Indigenous girls and women: a strength that has allowed them to survive despite centuries of persecution. *The Break* is wholly dedicated to highlighting this vitality, particularly by demonstrating the power of women-centered families and their potential to break the cycle of violence. Indeed, as Paul so astutely puts it, while these women may be "fucked up," they are certainly not "fucked" (349).

3 “All My Relations”: Health, Healing, and Reconciliation in Tracey Lindberg’s *Birdie*

Celebrated as “the novel Canada has been waiting for” by Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Cree academic Tracey Lindberg’s debut creative work, *Birdie* (2015), was published in the same month as another seminal Canadian document: the summary of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRCC). Established in conjunction with the parties of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, the Commission’s purpose was to record and preserve the experiences of residential school survivors in order to fully articulate the cultural genocide committed by the Canadian government against Indigenous peoples. Outlining the intergenerational legacies of the harmful practices perpetrated against Indigenous youth and their families and proposing several calls to action dedicated to “reconciliation” between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, the report challenges how Euro-Canadian society has typically understood the struggles of Indigenous communities and the ways in which they have been discussed in academic and political circles. Similarly, Lindberg’s novel presents readers with new (or perhaps familiar) ways of recognizing and honouring Indigenous communities, families, and cultures. While many Indigenous literary works, such as *Stolen Life* and *The Break*, are rightly concerned with the detrimental traumatic effects of colonial violence both past and present, *Birdie* instead emphasizes the strengths and resilience of Indigenous peoples in the face of this history and the ways in which they are working to build a better future. The novel not only shares a birthday with TRCC’s

report, but is also dedicated to a common goal: opening new healing pathways toward reconciliation.

Yet reconciliation in *Birdie* differs significantly from what has become the general understanding of the concept in Canadian discourse. Whereas the TRCC report calls for the development of stronger relationships between Indigenous peoples and Canada through governmental and institutional changes, Lindberg's novel acknowledges that these changes must also be made at the individual and communal level. Lindberg clearly recognizes that it is crucial to bridge the gaps between Indigenous peoples and Canada, but it is equally important for Indigenous peoples to be able to knit and heal the broken bones within themselves and their families. *Birdie* is as much about reconciling the effects of the continuum of colonial violence, particularly in terms of sexual abuse within Indigenous families, as it is also about reconciling relationships with self, land, and community. In order to articulate these regenerations, Lindberg relies heavily on food, both metaphorically and literally, as a means of demonstrating colonial consumption, exploitation, and deprivation as well as the crucial need to cultivate and nourish better relationships in order to "make a healthy family, a healthy self and a 'good life'" (Lindberg 265). Through food, *Birdie* ultimately foregrounds the potential for true, meaningful reconciliation by nurturing courage, respect, and love between individuals and their communities.

As a topic of national conversation, reconciliation has been met with a degree of conflict for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike. The word itself suggests a *restoration* of good relationships between parties, but for those who recognize the disrespectful origins of settler-colonial and Indigenous relations, it is difficult to come to terms with the notion that there was ever a good relationship to restore. Indeed, as

Lindberg notes in a lecture entitled “(W)rec(k)onciliation,” “I find the ‘re’ part of it really hard because I think perhaps this isn’t about going someplace we’ve been before, but perhaps this is about going someplace we’ve never been” (Kennedy). In this sense, then, reconciliation is largely a process of nation-building, of developing new interactions, conversations, and relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians that allow us all to “feel safe, feel kindly regarded, and feel respected in the world” (Lindberg, with Kennedy). In order to reach such an outcome, as the Commission explains, it is essential that we “com[e] to terms with events of the past in a manner that overcomes conflict and establishes a respectful and healthy relationship among people, going forward” (6). To do so, “there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behavior” (TRCC 6). As is evident from the previous two chapters, there are still enormous barriers to accomplishing these goals, particularly between Indigenous peoples and the federal government. While awareness has increased regarding the legacies of colonialism and the damage that has been wrought upon Indigenous communities, little has been done at the national level to rectify these structural and legal wrongs, despite official apologies and compensations to residential school survivors. Indigenous children are still vastly overrepresented in the child welfare system; women and girls continue to disappear; Indigenous peoples remain over-incarcerated; and traditional lands are being progressively destroyed. There continues to be a significant divide between Indigenous peoples and their non-Indigenous leaders, a divide that must be resolved before meaningful reconciliation can ever take place.

Reconciliation cannot, however, only be a political issue. While the TRC’s report works to outline the ways in which we can arrive at a place where the relationship

between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians is mutually respectful, it does so primarily by providing legislative recommendations by calling on the federal government to take action in order to improve its relationship with Indigenous peoples. Yet relationships are not mandated or implemented at the federal level. They are fostered in communities, in schools, in homes—through one-on-one or small group interactions. In order for Canada to truly heal from the damage it has caused – and healing must occur for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians – reconciliation also needs to happen at the personal and communal levels. Indeed, that which must most crucially be repaired (or, in many cases, founded) is trust, a highly personal and socioemotional concept. Trust largely involves relying on another’s actions to ensure one’s own well-being, a condition that has rarely existed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. For centuries, Indigenous peoples have been legally required to rely upon settler policy makers to determine where they may live, what education they receive, how they are legally categorized, and, perhaps most significantly, whether or not their health concerns are treated appropriately. In many instances, this reliance has not served Indigenous peoples well: not only have settler government forces marginalized, exploited, and deprived their communities, but without self-determination, Indigenous knowledge systems, laws, oral histories, and connections to the land have been severely damaged or else lost. Furthermore, the dependent quality of this relationship contradicts most Indigenous worldviews, which feature “living in harmony with nature, valuing the rights of the collective and living co-reliantly, as opposed to depending on others [, and] being self-caring and self-sufficient” in order to “be reciprocal, and thereby to help sustain a community of care that is the foundation of health, well-being and transmission of culture” (Mussell 189). By preventing Indigenous

communities from fully engaging and sharing their understandings and knowledge, the abuses and losses committed by Canada's colonial powers have had detrimental effects upon both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike: they have led to a profound civic mistrust, a lack of cultural foundations and understanding, and often violent internal and external racist attitudes. Given that these conditions first and foremost affect individuals and families, it is crucial to examine the ways in which trust, recognition, and health can be fostered at the micro level in order for reconciliation at the macro level to most meaningfully occur.

Seeing as the Commission's primary aim is to give voice to the experiences of residential school survivors in order to learn the degree to which Canadian colonial and assimilationist policies and practices have wounded Indigenous peoples and communities, the notion of health is of critical concern. Indeed, a significant portion of the report outlines the health crisis within residential schools, where children were chronically malnourished, sickness ran rampant, and many died. Largely missing, however, is the recognition that health in an Indigenous context involves much more than the biomedical models of disease with which contemporary Western ideologies of health are marked. As such, the health concerns outlined in the TRC, while crucial to acknowledge in order to understand the degree to which colonial forces have worked to exterminate Indigenous peoples, are largely limited to a biological framework focused on preventing disease and early mortality. In order to be fully aware of the contemporary consequences of these actions, it is also imperative to examine the emotional, mental, and spiritual health implications within Indigenous communities. Furthermore, if reconciliation implies developing "healthy" relationships, it is necessary to recognize

how health ideals are grounded in cultural norms and values and how they differently affect the ways in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples view each other.

As anthropologist Naomi Adelson explains, from a Cree perspective (and that which *Birdie* takes), “health has as much to do with social relations, land, and cultural identity as it does with individual physiology” (*Being* 3). Indeed, health in a Cree framework may be better described as “being alive well,” which is, Adelson adds, “less determined by bodily functions than by the practices of daily living and by the balance of human relationships intrinsic to Cree lifestyles” (*Being* 14-15). In this sense, whereas Western models of health focus primarily on the individual and define well-being with values of “self-discipline, self-denial, control and will power” (Adelson, *Being* 7), Indigenous health ideals are holistic, encouraging balance between the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual, and strongly emphasize the relational. Clinical psychologist Roma Heilig Morris succinctly articulates the difference between the two when she notes: “The models of health and disease embraced by contemporary medicine often directly mirror th[e] fractured and hierarchical vision of nature. The individual is viewed as a collection of potentially malfunctioning parts rather than as an integrated union of mind and body intricately embedded within a surrounding social and natural world” (105). From this perspective, Western concepts of health remove the subject from their contextual reality, pathologizing the individual rather than acknowledging the multiple social and environmental factors contributing to their wellness or illness. This becomes a dangerous practice for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, particularly because, as Adelson reminds us, “according to these [Western] standards, the state of being healthy constrains the individual to a proscribed biological and social morality, and this casts those who do not conform in strong relief against the chiselled

backdrop of a naturalized conceptualization of health” (*Being* 7). In other words, those who do not meet the rigid criteria laid out by the framework of Western biology are not only deemed “ill” by biomedical standards, but are morally and socially Othered. If one does not possess a “disease-free, fit, and youthful body,” to say nothing of their mind, heart, or spirit, they have not only failed themselves but have also failed to satisfy some “universally knowable standard of health” (Adelson, *Being* 4-5). Given the statistical indications that Indigenous peoples have a generally lower standard of physical and mental health (from a Western perspective) than non-Indigenous peoples (cf. Adelson, “Embodiment”), a recognition and acceptance of Indigenous models of health are essential to avoid incurring further division between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and to facilitate reconciliation.

As previously mentioned, Indigenous notions of health do not view the individual as a sum of its separate parts whereby the focus must only be placed on that entity which is impaired. Rather, they recognize that each aspect of ourselves is intricately linked to the others, and that we must try to maintain balance between them in order to function as human beings. An educational pamphlet on traditional healing provided by Anishnawbe Health Toronto describes it this way:

Just as in Creation all things are connected but have different functions, so our mind, body, spirit and emotions are part of the sacred circle of life and are interconnected. When one of them is out of balance, it affects the others. If you have a physical problem, it is connected to your spirit. If your mental state is out of balance, it will cause emotional turmoil.

This is not to say, however, that if one element is out of balance the individual is unhealthy and in need of a “cure,” but rather that it is important to recognize the

continuous interactions that exist between all aspects of ourselves and to engage in healing practices in order to restore that balance – to reconcile the self. Indeed, for many Indigenous cultures, the notion of poor health does not compute with its Western counterpart. As Saulteaux mental health worker Renee Linklater explains, “Indigenous healing philosophies are based on a wellness model, while the medical model is based on illness” (21). Sto:lo social worker Bill Mussell adds: “the terms ‘mental health’ and ‘mental illness’ [are] reflective of a Western paradigm characterized by dualism, negative labelling and a focus on deficits” whereas “wellness [...] is more readily identified with wholeness and the importance of building on strengths. Indigenous peoples see mental wellness as a continuum from minimal to optimal. A person’s place on the continuum at any given time is a result of many internal and external converging factors” (187-188). In this way, then, health from an Indigenous worldview is a model of wellness, one that encourages the development of the self and relationships rather than the prevention of disorder and disease.

The emphasis on mental wellness in discussions of Indigenous health reflects what Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episkenew calls the “psychological terrorism” wrought by Canada’s “Indian” policies and the violence with which they are inscribed (7). The psychological wounds inflicted by colonial powers, through attempts to eradicate Indigenous knowledges, languages, and stories, have had a lasting effect on generations of Indigenous peoples and communities, preventing them from fully articulating and understanding their experiences in ways that will permit them to heal and be well. Instead, many have turned to substance abuse, suicide, and lateral violence as a means of either anaesthetizing or expressing their pain. Perhaps most significantly, however, is the effect these mental wounds have had on relationships, both between Indigenous and

non-Indigenous Canadians and within Indigenous communities. As Mussell explains: “mental wellness is relational: strength and security are based in family and community. Mental wellness is cultivated in a social context [... where] individual well-being is strongly connected to the health and wellness of the family and community” (190). On the other hand, “mental unwellness is the outcome of a rupture in ‘right relations’ that may be due to forces that deprive or overwhelm or both. To the Western-trained eye, resulting disharmony can easily be attributed to the individual versus the contextual realities” (Mussell 190). From this perspective, then, the health and wellness of the individual fundamentally derive from the health and wellness of their social and physical environment and their relationships within them. In this way, much like the holistic vision of personal well-being, there must be harmony between peoples and lands in order for wellness to be fully realized.

Relationship health is at the core of *Birdie*, a novel that vividly details the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual unwellness that stems from damaged natural and social connections and traces the journey to wellness through reconciliation. For Bernice Meetoos and her family, the generational impacts of colonial policies, ideologies, and practices have produced a significant rift in their house just outside of Little Loon First Nation, Alberta. Prominently marked by violence and dysfunction, Bernice’s family environment has never been a safe or comfortable space conducive to her development. As a child, Bernice often fantasizes of living in an idyllic home like those of the white families she reads about in books and sees on television, where

there would be no cigarette burns in gaudy-coloured carpet, bottles or glasses half-drunk or spilled on the floor on weekends, and no visits without invitation from her parents’ friends. No one would bother her in

her room under the stairs, and she wouldn't be woken up by thundering feet up on the steps (a fight) or the thudding down the stairs (someone falling down). There would be happy shiny people who always hugged and smiled. They would never put each other down or make fun of one another to make other people laugh. (33)

Highly disruptive and disrespectful, Bernice's childhood home significantly reflects the family's loss of traditional Cree values and their internalization of the "uncivilized Indian" stereotypes promoted by settler colonialism. Indeed, Bernice recalls the "days on end" she spent hiding in her tiny bedroom while "drunken parties [...] went on endlessly overhead. Screaming. Yelling. [...] P]unching (a little of the old Indian lovin'), guzzling, dancing. Laughing, crying, screaming, wheedling, feeling, touching, kneeling, creeping. Like they were trying to get to white man's hell faster just to prove the point" (107). Here, the overpopulated home conforms to settler notions of Indigenous communities as disorderly, violent, and in need of intervention. Yet, as Lindberg makes clear, this dysfunction is not inherent to Indigenous communities, but rather stems from "a response to injurious events" related to "spiritual injury, soul sickness, soul wounding and ancestral hurt" (Linklater 33). While it is impossible to know what precise indignities the adults in Bernice's life are responding to with their behaviour, as Bernice herself is unaware of them and cannot therefore present them to readers, Lindberg does offer some insight to better elucidate the lack of harmonious stability in Bernice's life. For instance, the overcrowded nature of her home is largely due to the family's lack of legal recognition by the Canadian government under the Indian Act. As Bernice explains, her family's home is adjacent to the reserve, but not on it: "With only one of their family members entitled to a house on the tiny reserve (an uncle who lived in the

city), the Meetoos family made no complaints about the house or the land they were effectively squatting on until the only legal Indian in their family decided he wanted his house back” (83). This distinction produces a feeling of “belonging/alienation” (83) in Bernice that likely resonates with the adults in her life who have just cause to “doubt the validity of the existence of [their] people, and thus [them]selves” (Anderson 106). This identity crisis “results in the self-destructive behaviours, including addictions and involvement in violent relationships” with which Bernice’s home life is marked, further contributing to her environment’s lack of wellness (Anderson 106).

Most critically in the case of Bernice’s story is the way in which this crisis in identity manifests itself in the men in her family. European invasion not only wrought drastic physical displacement and disconnection on Indigenous communities but also produced grievous damage to the Indigenous male psyche, leading many men to forget their cultural roles within their families and to absorb the white male devaluation of women. Indeed, rather than maintaining the egalitarian quality of relations between men and women in Indigenous communities, many Indigenous men have embodied the patriarchal values of domination, competition, control, and superiority over women, which often manifest themselves through violence against Indigenous women. Whereas traditionally women held roles of power within Indigenous communities, the influence of patriarchy upon Indigenous men has caused a detrimental shift in gender relations within Indigenous families as men have internalized the oppression enacted against them through colonial policies and have turned this oppression inward. Yet, as Mi’kmaw social worker Cyndy Baskin explains, “Aboriginal male dominance is distinct from non-Aboriginal patterns of dominance as Aboriginal males do not have access to equitable opportunities and positions in Canadian society. Thus, although Aboriginal men have

power and control over their partners and children, once again due to racism, they have very little of it within Canadian society” (158). To this, Alan Johnson adds that, in a patriarchal system, “women’s place is to help contain men’s resentment over being controlled *by other men* [...]. In this way, men are allowed to dominate women as a kind of compensation for their being subordinated to other men because of social class, race, or other forms of inequality” (62, original emphasis). In this context, then, Indigenous men have adopted the white male ethic of domination in order to reassert some degree of power over their own identities.

Cree scholar Madeleine Dion Stout also attributes violence committed by Indigenous men against Indigenous women and children to the effects of cultural disconnection. She writes: “From my perspective, [...] Aboriginal men commit violence against women because their ‘spiritual compact’ with themselves, their communities and their heritage have not been fostered” (qtd. in Razack 65). In this sense, Indigenous men have not learned the moral values embedded within their cultures. This perspective also reflects Lindberg’s own, as she explains that reciprocity in particular is a central tenet to Cree law (Keeler), whereby we all have an obligation to take care of one another in order to “sustain a community of care” (Mussell 189). As Lindberg remarks, however, many families contain “those random ‘uncles,’ who are allowed to come and go as they please. But they have no reciprocal obligation to the people of the house, so they don’t have to be kind, and they don’t have to take care of or be responsible for people’s safety” (qtd. in Rogers). In this way, then, the white settler patriarchal mentalities to which Indigenous men have assimilated, as well as their lack of cultural knowledge, play a critical role in dismantling traditional Indigenous community and family structures.

Bernice's uncles readily fit into this mould, coming in and out of Bernice's life at will but consistently leaving a profound trace through the sexual abuse they commit against her. Importantly, Lindberg is strategic in her refusal to attribute any particular event(s) that may have led to their violent behaviour. In doing so, she demonstrates how "violence came into the home because it never left the home and that it was perpetuated in the home because it had somehow or to some degree become a normative understanding" (qtd. in Kennedy). In this sense, the violence the uncles commit against Bernice must be understood in terms of the breakdown of traditional social systems wrought by the devastation of colonialism. Crucially, however, by refraining from offering any direct justifications for their actions, Lindberg ensures that Bernice's uncles remain responsible for their behaviour.

The violence committed against Bernice in her home not only creates a profound distrust of and major divide between herself and the men in her family, but also drives a wedge between Bernice and the women: her mother, Maggie, aunt, Val, and cousin, Freda. Each of the women is aware to some degree of the abuse from which Bernice is suffering, yet none takes the steps necessary to end it. Indeed, on occasion, Freda even puts Bernice "in harm's way with their uncles" in order to avoid receiving the same treatment (162). As becomes evident, however, the women's inaction is largely a survival strategy. The most explicit account of abuse in the novel is Bernice's memory of arriving home early from a Christmas pageant in grade three. Having run away after being humiliated by her peers, Bernice leaves the women in her family back at the school and attempts to sneak into her house without being noticed by her uncle, Larry, who is a repeated perpetrator of sexual assault on the female members of the Meetoos family and beyond. Alone together, he corners her in her room and (presumably, as the

attack is not graphically detailed) rapes her. Upon recalling this event, what Bernice most acutely realizes is that, afterwards, “no one seemed to notice. No one mentioned that her underwear was bloodied, that there were bruises on her arms and neck. No one brought up her swollen lip or the cut above her eyebrow” (165). The silence with which her visible trauma is met alludes to the complex effects of violence from within. The women in Bernice’s family are only too familiar with “fighting for survival [...] from uncles” (183), and recognizing Bernice’s trauma likely triggers memories of their own. Indeed, they are largely paralysed from taking action: “Maggie was barely present in her body, let alone the house, by that time. Bernice was under siege and alone. Auntie Val sees her. Has always seen her. Notices the rigidity in Bernice’s face and her hands clutching the bedclothes in a vise. Deathvise. And. Starts to pray” (165). Bernice’s mother, for reasons unbeknownst to her daughter and therefore to the reader, has “checked out” (128), “exhausted by the mere effort of being alive” (16), and is thus incapable of fulfilling her role as her daughter’s protector. Auntie Val, on the other hand, is wholly aware of that which is taking place and the devastation it is inducing, yet all she can do is pray. This is not to say, however, that Val’s passivity is intentionally complicit; rather, it is the only means through which she can ensure her family’s survival. Because the family shares its heritage with both Cree and European ancestors, they have not been “‘Indian Acted’ to death,” and therefore “have no reserve, no treaty rights, no health care. No money” (125). These economic circumstances mean the women must rely on the men for both food – they are hunters – and financial support, as is demonstrated when Val requires money to purchase Bernice her school uniform: “‘Just send the fucking money, Larry. [...] You fuckers owe her that.’” (81-82). Importantly, this role was also taken up by the boys during Val’s youth, when the

family's poverty left them deprived of adequate food and they "used to take bannock and lard to school and that's all we had" (74). "Your uncle Larry," she tells Bernice, "used to skip his meal and give it to the younger ones" (74). Ironically, then, Bernice's primary assaulter once sacrificed himself for the betterment of his younger siblings, a burden that likely took a major toll. As such, chronic poverty caused by colonial policies have had an impact on *all* members of Bernice's family, yet their responses differ greatly, as the men appear to believe that their provisions entitle them to certain "rewards" – namely Bernice's body.

The uncles' interest in Bernice and her body potentially stems from its significance as material evidence of their (albeit unquantifiable) "gifts": she is a big girl. Yet, critically, the physical weight Bernice carries is tightly linked to the weight of her psychological trauma. Fat becomes a means of protection, as "she believed that if she got big enough there would be no room in [her bedroom] for anyone but her" (151). The pounds she puts on act as a form of body armour, a shield to prevent people from hurting her. Later, too, once she leaves her family home and is living on the streets in Edmonton, she recognizes that her size provides her with some degree of autonomy and safety: "It is easier to be big than little. Say what you want, but the flesh jacket did its job. She found that she could hide in a crowd and walk late at night" (146). Generally, though, Bernice's body is a source of torment, judgment, and abuse. Labeled a "fat bitch," "fat cow," and "buffalo" by her peers in foster care (140), as well as "Obese" by medical professionals (121), her weight is treated as shameful, evidence of the lack of control and self-discipline Western models of biological fitness ascribe to "unhealthiness." Indeed, these insults and pathologies largely reflect Western ideologies of a healthy body, one that differs from Indigenous perspectives.

As we have seen, Western notions of health tend to focus on individual physiology, whereas Indigenous models emphasize the larger socio-cultural context. Such an approach not only applies to mental wellness, but also to the physical. Nevertheless, there is concern about the biomedical causes and consequences of obesity among Indigenous populations, with rates 20 per cent higher than non-Indigenous Canadians. As Robert Allec notes, this can largely be attributed to the consequences of European contact, as, for example, “a rapid transition from hunting and gathering to sedentary, reserve-based lifestyles, as well as a switch from a high-fiber, low-fat diet to one based on low-fiber, high-calorie foods, has exacerbated the prevalence of obesity and diabetes among Canada’s Indigenous peoples” (12). Food scholar Elaine M. Power agrees, suggesting that colonial disruption continues to affect access to traditional/country food, which is “more nutritious and more nutrient-dense than market food, and remains important to the quality of the diets of many Aboriginal people” (96). In this way, much like the state of mental wellness within Indigenous communities, colonial policies and practices have had a significant influence on the physical well-being of Indigenous peoples.

Despite the higher rates of diet-related diseases among Indigenous populations, there is significantly less social stigma attached to larger body sizes, particularly from the perspective of Indigenous women. As Jennifer Poudrier and Janice Kennedy report in their study with First Nations women, “perceptions of healthy body weight and healthy body image were primarily connected to the health of the community and not simply defined through physical attributes” (18). Furthermore, they note:

most of the women also felt that individuals must respect their bodies and their culture in order to have a ‘healthy body.’ The women indicated that

‘people don’t have to be skinny to be happy’ [...] and that the ‘healthy body’ should not be related to a number on a scale; rather it should be based on feeling positive about one’s body, one’s broader role in the community, and one’s overall well-being. (20)

From this perspective, then, Bernice’s body is not “unhealthy” because she is fat, but rather because she does not have positive feelings about herself or her community. The abuse has poisoned her relationship with her body, and she likely shares the same philosophy as a rape survivor encountered by Indigenous healing scholar Rupert Ross, who wondered if “‘maybe that’s why [she] stay[s] so fat, take[s] such poor care of [her] body, because [she] can’t stand living in it’” (18). While such a statement appears to support Western notions of health as anti-fat, the difference lies in the woman’s acknowledgement that her physical health has been affected by trauma, rather than by some inability to discipline her body.

Bernice certainly cannot stand living in her body, frequently dissociating from it and “losing touch. Not with reality – a place where she was often a visitor – but [...] with] her sense of human feeling” (56). The disjointedness between her body, mind, and spirit is profound, and as she begins to recognize her pain and sense of illness, she starts to search for a source in order to understand wherefrom her feelings came and how she can go about initiating the healing process. To reconcile all aspects of her self, however, Bernice must stop overfeeding her body and start nourishing her spirit, forgoing “earth me” so that she can discover her sacred nature and learn to love herself. To do so, she engages in an informal ceremonial fast, a traditional practice whereby an individual denies themselves basic comforts such as food, water, and companionship in order to cleanse and heal. According to

Anishnawbe Health Toronto, “fasting has also been described as a healing way where the first person we face when we fast is ourselves.” In this way, while Bernice must also reconcile her relationships with the women in her family, to forgive them for their complicity in her abuse, she must first encounter herself and understand that she is not to blame for her pain. Fasting is an appropriate healing practice for Bernice, as “it is said that fasting brings you closer to the spirit world and that your spirit wakes up when you are on a fast. You may feel that the questions you were asking have been answered” (Anishnawbe Health Toronto). It is crucial for Bernice to reacquaint herself with her spirit in order to understand what has been done to her. “When the fury of her past began to race ahead of her future,” she made the “un/conscious decision [... to] lay down,” relinquishing herself from the physical world and all of its material needs and immersing herself in her dreams to learn the truth of her past (18). Her vision quest, however, is highly unconventional: it does not take place in nature, but in a studio apartment above a bakery; her spiritual guide is not a healer, but rather the Frugal Gourmet, a White male celebrity chef who has himself been accused of sexual assault by various male employees; and her Firekeeper (the person who looks after her while she is fasting) is not an Elder, but a white woman prone to making racist comments, Lola. By figuring Bernice’s journey in this way, Lindberg highlights the potential for healing under any circumstances, as it is in these conditions that Bernice is best able to not only reconcile her relationship with herself, but also with her family.

The relationship between Lola and Bernice’s family – herself, Val, and Freda, who come to her bedside once she has “sunk” – is the most significant in Lindberg’s vision of reconciliation. Lola, as Lindberg explains in an interview with

Cathy Alex, is “metaphorically Canada. She’s a little bit of a bigot at times, but she’s loving and kind and well-intentioned and she’s good.” Indeed, Lola’s racism – demonstrated by her “Happy Squaw Squares!” and her fascination with “that dying savage thing” (9) – stems not from hate but, as with many non-Indigenous Canadians, from ignorance. She had “never met an Indian before” Bernice and thus her knowledge of Indigenous peoples is extremely limited. Nevertheless, she offers Bernice a job, food, and shelter, feeling “tenderness for the girl because she suspects no one has been tender to her before” (111). Lola puts aside their ostensible differences in order to take care of Bernice, providing her with her first ever safe home. Most importantly, as she spends more and more time in the company of this Cree family, Lola begins to realize that they are not so different from her after all. She identifies with the women’s humanity, recognizing their pain and strength within herself, and even seeing Freda as “the Indian version of herself” (115). She makes these Indigenous women her family members, just as they do the same for her. As relatives, then, they have a shared obligation to one another, to care for each other and to ensure each other’s wellness. This, Lindberg ultimately argues, is precisely that which must happen in order for meaningful reconciliation to be achieved at the national level: Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians alike must begin to view one another as relatives, to develop a collective understanding that will allow us all to heal together.

Finally, yet equally important, Lindberg reminds us that healing and reconciliation cannot be entirely fulfilled if they only take place between human beings. As she explains in an author interview at the end of the novel, “[Bernice’s] commitment to personal health and the good life is important, but she cannot live the

good life by continuing to concentrate only on self” (265). Indeed, Lindberg adds, “our spirits and bodies [also] have an obligation to our natural environment to behave in reciprocal, healing and positive ways” (265). Such a perspective largely stems from the Indigenous worldview of land as a relative: its resources provide us all of our basic needs, including food and medicine, so we must therefore treat it with respect. Colonialism, however, has taken a major toll upon the health of the environment and Indigenous peoples’ ability to care for it. In *Birdie*, this is symbolized through *Pimatisewin*, a sacred tree “dying from pollution” (24). The tree shares Bernice’s sickness, its body and spirit assaulted by European ideologies and it, too, must be fed love in order to survive. As Lindberg explains, “the tree represents [Bernice’s] responsibility [...] to look outside of herself and take care of her relatives” (265). Only by doing so will she be fully able to “live a good life,” as wellness can only truly be achieved through reciprocity. Indeed, as Bernice makes a food offering to the tree, she is also restored, “feel[ing] some energy in her limbs, as if she has eaten the food herself” (250). In this way, as many Indigenous teaching inform us, Bernice’s health is deeply connected to the health of the land, and she has as much a responsibility to nurture the tree’s growth as she does to nurture her own. Indeed, as Cree scholar Neal McLeod¹⁴ elucidates: “a human being is like a tree. [...] If a person lives a life grounded in his [sic] own stories and experiences, he [sic] will be able to live in dignity and greet the day and all the things that happen to him [sic]” (69). In this way, then, in order for Bernice to truly reach a place of

¹⁴ It must be noted that Neal McLeod was charged with domestic violence in 2014 (Morin). He has since admitted his offense and taken full responsibility for his actions. Because, from an Indigenous perspective, reconciliation means offering forgiveness for those who have committed wrongs and promoting healing for offenders as well as victims, I have elected to keep his words in this chapter.

wellness, to “live a good life,” she must become aware of her responsibilities to herself – by acknowledging that which has happened to her – and to the “complex web of interconnections” within which she is embedded (Ross 229).

By documenting Bernice’s road to reconciliation, both personal and communal, *Birdie* demonstrates the potential for new, respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians. As Lindberg illustrates, such a project must begin at the individual level, with Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike listening to one another and recognizing each other as relatives. Only by doing so, Lindberg hopes, can we end the violence both within and without Indigenous communities, for “if you think of somebody as a relative or who is just like you, then they matter,” their wellness matters, and you will do all you can to ensure they are able to live to their fullest potential. Meaningful reconciliation in Canada can happen, but not if it only remains a political ambition: all of us are responsible for our collective well-being, and this means treating one another with respect, compassion, and love.

Conclusion: Ceremonial Stories

The purpose of my writing has always been to tell a better story than is being told about us. To give that to the people and to the next generations. The voices of the grandmothers and grandfathers compel me to speak of the worth of our people and the beauty all around us, to banish the profaning of ourselves, and to ease the pain. I carry the language of the voice of the land and the valour of the people and I will not be silenced by a language of tyranny.

- Jeannette Armstrong, *Native Poetry in Canada: A Contemporary Anthology* 106

Their evil is mighty
but it can't stand up to our stories.
So they try to destroy the stories
let the stories be confused or forgotten. [...]

He rubbed his belly.
I keep them here [...]
There is life here
for the people.

And in the belly of this story
the rituals and the ceremony
are still growing.

- Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* 2

On the first day of the 2017 Canada Reads competition, *The Break* was eliminated as a contender for “the title the whole country should read this year.” Despite its critical emphasis on the contemporary effects of violence against Indigenous women and girls, the panel determined that the book did not have the power to heal Canada’s damaged colonial relationships, since ““in order to heal a nation you have to include the whole nation, and this book decidedly discludes men... There is no redeemable male character in this entire book”” (Brueggergosman, qtd. in Elliott “Canada Reads”). Not

only is this criticism downright false – one need only look to Métis police officer Tommy Scott and his relentless efforts to seek justice for Emily and her family – but it also proves that which the novel is working against: the silencing of Indigenous women. By prioritizing the portrayal of male characters over the incredible pain and love demonstrated by Vermette’s women and girls, the majority of the Canada Reads panellists participated in the very erasure and oppression that has allowed for violence against Indigenous women and girls to occur and colonialism to succeed. Indeed, while “reconciliation” is on the lips of many Canadians, the ideologies that prompted such a response, Alicia Elliott points out, instead “encourag[e] Canada to become a more callous, less empathetic society” (“Canada Reads”). If we are truly committed to repairing relationships with Indigenous peoples, Elliott continues, “we all [...] need and deserve better. We need and deserve the history, humanity and hope” offered by Indigenous women’s literature.

This thesis began as an effort to elucidate Canada’s dominant Euro-Christian patriarchal worldview that leads good-intentioned people like the Canada Reads panellists to instinctively disregard Indigenous women. In order to do so, the project focused primarily on exposing the truth of cultural genocide against Indigenous peoples in Canada and the ways in which the Canadian government’s colonial project has profoundly impacted the health and safety of Indigenous women today. The texts analysed throughout make urgent evidentiary claims about the ongoing circumstances and ideologies that allow violence against Indigenous women and girls to go unrecognized, unreported, and unpunished. However, to represent gendered violence and cultural genocide as absolutes is to critically undervalue that which has not been

destroyed by colonial enterprises: Indigenous women and the artistry with which they are maintaining their cultural foundations.

By writing against continuous efforts to silence and dehumanize them, Indigenous women writers not only resist the eradication of their identities, but also protect and insure the continuity of their cultures. Indeed, each writer examined in this thesis is certain to emphasize, in tribe-specific ways, traditional Indigenous values and the importance of their recognition for the well-being of the entire community. Most notably, each text – fiction and nonfiction alike – concludes with a ceremony and an affirmation of cultural connection as invaluable to the healing of personal and collective trauma. As I highlighted in Chapter 1, the experience of receiving her spirit name during a sweat gives Yvonne Johnson the power to recognize that she is a part of something much greater than herself, which thereby provides her with the strength needed to begin to process the abuse she has suffered and to break the silence that has concealed the stories of many Indigenous women. Katherena Vermette, too, presents the sweat lodge as a means of initiating the healing process for the families of *The Break*. Travelling out of the city and into the bush shortly after the loss of their Kookom, the Traverses, Rita, and Ziggy take part in a sweat that allows them to all to begin to release the pain from “that night” and so many others; pain they have carried for generations. While each of the women acknowledges that such hurts run deep and will certainly not be healed overnight, the ceremony offers Cheryl, from whose perspective this section derives, the ability to breathe deeper than she has “for a long time” (Vermette 345). Finally, Tracey Lindberg sends Bernice on a fast in the closing pages of *Birdie*, placing her in a small lodge next to *Pimatisewin* where her aunt Val encourages her to “just lay there and make good medicine” (243). Here, Bernice forges a restored connection to herself,

which permits her to reintegrate her body and spirit, and to the natural world, through which she is nourished and begins to regain her physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual strength. Importantly, she leaves the fast and subsequent feast “‘feeling like [she] ha[s] a story to tell’” (250). Ceremony thus not only works to open healing pathways, but it also prompts storytelling, a medium with equally curative potential.

Much as these texts bear witness to the power of ceremony and cultural reconnection as critical vehicles to Indigenous healing, they hold a similar power themselves. Indigenous women’s literature largely functions ceremonially, engaging both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers in a practice that, while not necessarily spiritual, holds the same transformative powers as ceremony. Like the purpose of ceremony, these texts allow readers to “integrate: to fuse the individual with his or her fellows, the community of people with that of the other kingdoms, and this larger communal group with the worlds beyond this one” (Allen 62). By giving voice to the experiences of Indigenous women and foregrounding their humanity, these writers strive tirelessly to foster new understandings in their readers. This literature may potentially work to heal the wounds of colonialism by generating empathy in settler readers that can be converted into social justice efforts, though perhaps I am too optimistic. As Sherronda Brown pointedly argues, “[w]hite supremacy may never be dismantled through white empathy because it does not recognize the vulnerability of people of colour.” Far more importantly, these texts provide Indigenous readers with the ability to recognize their own stories in others and to begin to heal from them (Episknew 190-91). As Jo-Ann Episknew so aptly notes, Indigenous literature “‘treats’ the minds, bodies, spirits, and hearts of individuals and repairs the rifts in communities” (194),

thereby facilitating much the same outcome as ceremony: opening pathways to heal ourselves and our world.

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