

# Decolonizing Through Poetry in the Indigenous Prairie Context

By

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## ABSTRACT

Many important developments have followed from the distinction being made between post-colonial and settler-colonial situations. This distinction has had implications that reach across disciplines, but have especially impacted the emerging field of Indigenous studies in Canada, which had previously been drawing, and to a certain extent continue to draw, on theories from post-colonial studies. I write this at the intersection of Indigenous studies and English literature building on the theories of decolonization in settler-colonial situations. I show that English poetry written by people in the Indigenous prairie context is one particularly active site of decolonization, in the sense that scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith explain.

Through the poetry of Louise Halfe, Duncan Mercredi, Gregory Scofield, Marie Annharte (Née Baker) I show how important elements of Indigenous culture are being translated into printed poetry. Furthermore, these poets are Indigenizing aspects of settler-colonial culture. I use Halfe's poetry, especially her collection *Bear Bones & Feathers*, to show the ways in which Indigenous concepts of medicine can be translated into printed poetic form and bring healing for the injuries inflicted by colonialism. Scholars Jo-Ann Episkenew and Sam McKegney provide other examples of this practice and the theoretical underpinnings for literature operating as medicine. Mercredi's poetry reveals that some of the oral character of Indigenous stories can be translated into poetry. Indigenous scholars such as Neal McLeod argue that Indigenous cultures have long engaged in the use of wit and metaphor that is so prolific in poetry. Scofield translates ceremony into poetry. Drawing in part on J.L. Austin's notion of performativity, I show that Indigenous poetry is an active force within communities. I read Annharte's poetry as an example of Indigenization and activism in which she destabilizes the authority of the English language. Francis challenges artistic genres to assert his own Indigenous perspective in much the same way

many Indigenous people are choosing not to seek the recognition of the neo-liberal state in what Glenn Coulthard calls “the politics of recognition.” I explore the significant potential for decolonization in this writing by authors writing from Indigenous perspectives.

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This dissertation is dedicated to the victims and survivors of settler-colonialism in Canada.

Also, to the fond memory of Dr. Renate Eigenbrod.

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## Introduction

Many of the recent developments in Indigenous studies stem from the observation that countries like Canada, the United States, New Zealand, and Australia are not post-colonial. Descendants of European settlers are the majority in these countries. The discourse of decolonization in a settler-colonial situation does not mean the emigration of settlers back to Europe. Rather, it suggests a new way of living within existing demographic realities. The groundbreaking work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that decolonization presents the possibility of escaping colonialism. For Smith, and for other scholars of Indigenous studies, decolonization is primarily a task that can be carried out in the arena of writing and language. Smith writes,

Decolonization must offer a language of possibility, a way out of colonialism. The writing of Maori, of other indigenous peoples and of anti/post-colonial writers would suggest, quite clearly, that that language of possibility exists within our own alternative, oppositional ways of knowing. (Smith 204)

Smith's second sentence outlines the basic principle of decolonization that this thesis will be drawing on. The core of decolonization in a settler-colonial situation is that Indigenous peoples infuse their "own alternative, oppositional ways of knowing" into settler-colonial technologies, such as writing. This "way out of colonialism" redresses many of the deepest injuries inflicted on Indigenous peoples without forcing the descendants of European settlers back to Europe. This thesis demonstrates that decolonization is the practice of adapting elements of Indigenous cultures into European media so that Indigenous cultures can thrive in settler-colonial societies. Indigenous artistic adaptation is an important response to colonization.

Smith suggests that the main reason adapting Indigenous epistemologies into contemporary research methods is so effective is because it was these imperialistic research methods that allowed for widespread colonization in the first place. These European epistemologies continue to control Indigenous peoples. Smith argues that Indigenous peoples

must claim their own tools of research because, in the hands of settler society, “The mix of science, cultural arrogance and political power continues to present a serious threat to indigenous peoples” (102). Rather than a hostile takeover of these research technologies, Smith emphasizes that a shared strategy amongst Indigenous peoples should be adopted to counteract the dangers of imperialism. She writes, “What is more important than what alternatives indigenous peoples offer the world is what alternatives indigenous peoples offer each other” (109). Smith argues that to decolonize is to “create something through the process of sharing [...] to reconnect relationships and to recreate our humanness” (110). Decolonization is not a war-like process that seeks to replace one imperial power with another, but a process that re-establishes “humanness” through collaboration and connectedness.

This thesis takes this general phenomenon of decolonization and explores a more specific instance of decolonization through poetry in the Indigenous prairie context, which includes the Métis, Cree (Nêhiyaw), and Ojibway (Anishinaabe). Primarily, this thesis will examine the poetry of Louise Halfe, Duncan Mercredi, Gregory Scofield, Marie Annharte (née Baker), and Marvin Francis. I argue first that print-based poetry, a medium of european settler origins, decolonizes by acting as medicine, by telling stories, and by conducting ceremony. These three Indigenous values are translated into poetry by these artists. However, they also approach the non-Indigenous notions of activism and genre within artistic practices from an Indigenous perspective. Indigenous poetry becomes a meeting place where the Indigenous cultural practices of medicine, stories, and ceremony are connected with Indigenized approaches to activism and conceptualizations of genre. Indigenous people are finding many ways to adapt their traditional ways of life into the realities of settler-colonialism. As Vine Deloria, Jr. says in the introduction to his seminal work *Custer Died For Your Sins*, “we have seen the appearance of young people



who have found a way to blend the requirements of modern industrial consumer life with traditional beliefs and practices” (Deloria xii). As many influential Indigenous scholars have been arguing for decades, thriving within settler-colonial contexts necessitates an adaptation of traditional beliefs and practices into contemporary society. The poetry of Halfe, Mercredi, Scofield, Annharte, and Francis presents such a blending of lifeways that replace the gaze of the colonizers with affirmative Indigenous points of view.

The desire to replace the colonizing perspective with the point of view of the colonized is expressed by a number of critics within the specific context of Indigenous literature. The work of Jace Weaver, Craig Womack, and Robert Warrior promotes the critical school of thought that they call American Indian Literary Nationalism, also known as literary separatism. These critics, and this school of thought, are also careful to point out that they are not only attempting to tear down the structures of colonialism; their main objective is to build up Indigenous centered critical approaches to reading Indigenous literature. They say that they will not avoid confrontation with colonialism, but that they “would rather commit considerable energy to the explication of specific Native values, readings, and knowledges and their relevance to our contemporary lives” (*American Indian* 6). Although there is some dispute about the value of reading from within specific “national” contexts<sup>1</sup>, there can be little dispute that the basic notions of American Indian Literary Nationalism are tremendously valuable. Weaver summarizes these basic notions by saying that “in reading literature one should privilege internal cultural readings” (10). Overwhelmingly, the voices of Indigenous peoples have not been heard. Now that there is a substantial body of literature emerging, these literary separatists are simply saying that this

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<sup>1</sup> The article “Canadian Indian Literary Nationalism?: Critical Approaches In Canadian Indigenous Contexts - A Collaborative Interlogue” (Fagan et al.) discusses the challenges that face the adoption of literary nationalism within the Canadian context.

literature should be considered as a part of a broader Indigenous culture rather than western based literature. Too often the study and criticism of Indigenous literature works to isolate this literature from its Indigenous origins. Literary separatists argue in favour of asserting the autonomy of Indigenous voices and are thereby decolonizing. Admitting some significant geographical and political differences between settler-colonialism in the United States of America and Canada, I argue that asserting the sovereignty of Indigenous voices speaking from their own perspectives is one of the most important forms of decolonization.

This method of decolonization by writing and reading from Indigenous perspectives has become particularly valuable in the Canadian context. Many credit the volume *Looking at the Words of our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*, edited by Jeannette Armstrong and published in 1993, with opening up this line of study within the Canadian context. Indeed, this work responds directly to the dearth of Indigenous perspectives represented in academia.

Armstrong says that this volume comes from a panel she hosted in 1992 that seeks to find better critical methods for reading Indigenous literature. She explains the motivations of this panel and the subsequent book:

I suggest that First Nations cultures, in their various contemporary forms, whether an urban-modern, pan-Indian experience or clearly a tribal specific (traditional or contemporary), whether it is Eastern, Arctic, Plains, Southwest or West Coastal in region, have unique sensibilities which shape the voices coming forward into written English Literature. (*Looking at the Words* 7)

Like Armstrong's volume, this thesis seeks to study literature by prioritizing the "unique sensibilities" of Indigenous writers. Also like Armstrong, I will not adopt the colonial attitude that Indigenous cultures must be pure or seek to recreate an "authentic," pre-colonial state to be considered Indigenous. Rather, Nêhiyaw and Anishinaabe cultures have necessarily adapted to survive the genocidal impulses of settler-colonialism. Thomas King expresses this notion very

well when he says, “The fact of Native existence is that we live modern lives informed by traditional values and contemporary realities and that we wish to live those lives on our terms” (*Inconvenient Indian*). This thesis celebrates the survival of Indigenous values in a contemporary, settler-colonial reality.

This reality is particularly complex for the Indigenous artists in this study. Although many significant benefits have been reaped from studying Indigenous writing from within specific tribal contexts, these artists do not lend themselves particularly well to a study of that nature. They each negotiate their own specific identities between Métis, Nêhiyaw, and Anishinaabe cultures. As Smith helpfully points out, there is no single term that is entirely unproblematic when referring to diverse groups of Indigenous peoples. She says that the main source of the problem is that the term “Indigenous” “appears to collectivize many distinct populations whose experiences under imperialism have been vastly different” (Smith 6). Even though this group of five Indigenous artists have many strong connections, they each have their own experiences with settler-colonialism. I will adopt the term Indigenous here because, in this particular instance, specific tribal affiliations do not apply equally to each of the writers. Nevertheless, each artist does identify strongly with the Métis, Nêhiyaw, and Anishinaabe communities and recognize that these communities are themselves interconnected. I aim to resist pan-tribalism and instead adopt the position that the identities of these artists are plural and overlapping. As Stuart Christie argues: “contemporary indigenous sovereignty has become effectively pluralized” (Christie 1)<sup>2</sup>. This notion of plurality is quite helpful in the context of

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<sup>2</sup> Chadwick Allen’s books *Blood Narrative* and *Trans-Indigenous* also explore the challenges Indigenous writers face as they negotiate their identities between tribes and the influences of settler-colonialism. In *Trans-Indigenous* Allen explores many of the aspects of Indigenous experience that are not tribal-specific. As I strive to do in this thesis, Allen is addressing an

these particular artists. However, the term Indigenous remains problematic and I do not presume that this study will entirely resolve its problems.

The term “prairie” and these writers’ places within prairie literature is also complex. In one sense, Indigenous prairie literature is an oxymoron, because so much of prairie literature has been devoted to the disavowal of Indigenous presence on the prairies and so little attention has been paid to the role of Indigenous writers within this context. In their introduction to *History, Literature, and the Writing of The Canadian Prairies*, Calder and Wardhaugh note that one significant, albeit wrongheaded, conception of the prairies in Canada is that they had no history before European contact and settlement. In short, they summarize this position saying “Settlement gives meaning to this place” (Calder and Wardhaugh 7). However, they strongly advocate for a new understanding of prairie literature that redresses this exclusion of Indigenous writing: “If we seek to understand prairie writings in part to understand our regional culture, then as academics we need to look to Aboriginal writers and scholars and to examine why our field has become so narrow. Otherwise, we risk obsolescence” (10). The warning about obsolescence seems not have been heeded, as Calder notes in a brief article that was published five years after the introduction (Calder). She asks “What Happened to Regionalism?” “and, sadly, ‘what happened to my field?’” (Calder 113). Here she is wondering about the sharp decline in the role of place within studies of Canadian literature, the result being the near extinction of the study of prairie literature. Even more resoundingly, Calder notes in her article “The Importance of Place or, Why We’re Not Post-Prairie,” the profound lack of representation of Indigenous writers and scholarship within prairie literature. She says that this is partly due to the assumption of whiteness among prairie literary scholars (171). More challengingly, she writes “colonialism is

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important gap here because there has been a tendency in recent years to explore the tribal-specific aspects of Indigeneity.

built into the foundational terms of prairie literary studies, and that the scholarship itself, done unreflectingly, is a form of colonizing practice” (171). Ironically, the consideration of Indigenous writing from within the prairie context — which has often, and ridiculously, disavowed the very existence of Indigenous people on the prairies — could result in the resurgence of a new form of prairie literature. The main difference being that this time it will be on the terms of Indigenous writers who have often been excluded and often consider themselves separate from the first notions of prairie literature. The decolonizing efforts of these Indigenous writers provides a strong counterpoint to the colonizing practices that previous forms of writing have committed.

For some scholars, the decolonial work being done by Indigenous writers is among the most influential and exciting writing happening on the prairies. Warren Cariou argues that the motif of Indigenous haunting of the prairie is “a lurking sense that the places settlers call home are not really theirs” (“Haunted Prairie” 727). Hence, significant efforts are made by settler culture to disavow this uncanny Indigenous presence. This fundamentally racist and ignorant attitude towards Indigenous presence on the prairies is present in much early prairie literature, where significant Indigenous presence is in the form of haunting ghosts and spirits. However, from Indigenous perspectives, this haunting has a powerful decolonial effect: “These bones and spirits are not simply uncanny remnants of a wronged and vanquished people [...]. Instead they are signs of living, contemporary Aboriginal cultures on the prairies, ones which are [...] attempting to transform the region in the present, to re-indigenize it” (733). Although both of the terms Indigenous and prairie carry significant baggage and are far from unproblematic, they remain the best terms to frame this study that is, ironically enough, a critique of framing in the first place.

There are also significant challenges arising from my own position in relation to these texts and their creators. Despite my best intentions that this thesis represent and study Indigenous literature from Indigenous perspectives, I am not Indigenous, but a descendant of settlers from various countries in Northern Europe. It is very important that I make my position as an ally towards this literature clear from the outset of this project. Furthermore, it is appropriate to recognize that in many ways, it would have been impossible to do this project without the privilege and easy access to education that my position of being a descendant of white settlers has afforded me. Nevertheless, I would like to echo Renate Eigenbrod's sentiment that:

it is essential for my personal trajectory in Native Studies to emphasize that it was not Western but Aboriginal thought that made me rethink notions of truth, objectivity, and scholarship, especially as the influence of Aboriginal conceptualizations of knowledge on North America's intellectual climate has been hardly recognized. (*Travelling Knowledges* 4)

In the ten years that have passed since she wrote that, it seems that the "influence of Aboriginal conceptualizations" on North American academia has increased. This is in part due to the legacy that Eigenbrod, another non-Indigenous ally, has left. It is my hope that I will be able to approach the study of Indigenous literature with as much respect as Eigenbrod did, and in some small way, to further the acknowledgement of the debt that settlers, and descendants of settlers, owe to the people who belong to this place.

Eigenbrod is among the leaders in the field of Indigenous literature who, in the more than twenty years since Armstrong's volume was published, have been studying an ever-expanding body of Indigenous literature from Indigenous perspectives (Eigenbrod et al. 9-10). These scholars share in the belief that reading Indigenous literature in this way is an act of resistance against colonial authority. In their edited volume *Across Cultures Across Borders*, Renate Eigenbrod, Paul DePasquale, and Emma LaRocque establish a lineage of studying Indigenous

literature from Indigenous perspectives. However, they also point out the many borders and boundaries that this study still faces. These include the perception that there is very little Indigenous literature available and few Indigenous resources through which one can study it (10-11). Their volume seeks to challenge and understand the many borders and challenges that face the study of Aboriginal literature. The editors demonstrate this challenging tone when they write, “boundaries and borders exist both in reality and imagination, sometimes concurrently, possibly as a construction of a colonial or neocolonial apparatus” (13). Broadly speaking, the act of decolonization is an act of border crossing. Decolonization resists the colonial, European borders that continue to be guarded and proposes Indigenous approaches in their place.

An additional aspect of decolonization is Indigenization. When Indigenous writers approach their work from an Indigenous perspective and emphasize their connectedness to a broader Indigenous community, they displace the ideologies of colonialism. In an earlier work, *Creating Community*, Eigenbrod also addresses this issue. She writes “To ‘Indigenize’ the study of Indigenous literatures means to respect the connectedness that Indigenous artists and writers name as their source of inspiration in approaches which are in themselves connected — with different disciplines, languages and discourses and reaching out into Aboriginal communities” (83). This thesis seeks to approach Indigenous texts while being mindful of the deep and important connections that the writers have with their communities. Anishinaabe writer and scholar Waaseyaa’sin Christine Sy explains that “Decolonization, generally, may be understood as a process and event that includes both resistance against colonization and the reclamation of Indigenous lifeways” (Sy 185). Sy is suggesting that decolonization is not simply an act of resistance against settler-colonialism, but also an act of reclaiming Indigenous ways of life and knowing. Given that one of the most damaging elements of colonization is the separation of

Indigenous peoples from their cultures, reasserting the connections using contemporary media is an act of Indigenization and therefore an act of decolonization.

Another way of thinking about Indigenous communities is to consider an Indigenous way of living in the world as a worldview. S.E. Wilmer quotes Nêhiyawak art scholar Richard Hill saying:

‘Most Indian languages do not have words for ‘art’ or ‘culture.’ The idea that these concepts were separate from each other was unknown to people of this land. Art and culture were integrated into the daily life of the people, as were religion and economy. This holistic way of being has been called a world view.’ (Wilmer 4)

This concept of art being integrated into daily life is an important aspect of Indigenous worldviews. Simon Ortiz also summarizes this integration of art into other parts of culture when he says “art [is] a part of life and not separated. The act of living is art” (quoted in Anderson 41). The challenge that faces Nêhiyawak and Anishinaabe people is how to recenter their cultures in the hostile context of settler-colonialism. By adapting their holistic worldviews from primarily oral cultures into a print culture, Indigenous poets, such as Ortiz and the five that I focus on in this thesis, assert that they are a vital part of the place that has always been their home. Nêhiyawak and Anishinaabe world views can be understood as distinct from the settler-colonial way of being in the world because they emphasize connectedness and the integration of life and art.

The core value of connectedness in Indigenous contexts does not end with the connectedness between people and their culture. Another integral element of Indigenous worldviews is their deep connection with the land. Smith paraphrases scholar Jerry Mander saying that the “most fundamental clash between Western and indigenous belief systems, in Mander’s view, stems from a belief held by indigenous peoples that the earth is a living entity,



Mother Earth” (Smith 102). Thomas King is also emphatic about the importance of land and how the treatment of land distinguishes Indigenous cultures. He says, “Land. If you understand nothing else about the history of Indians in North America, you need to understand that the question that really matters is the question of land” (*Inconvenient Indian*). He goes on to discuss the ways in which introducing an ownership of land through the treaties creates a profound separation between Indigenous peoples and the land that makes up such an important part of their worldview. Decolonization is effective because it resists settler-colonial modes of enclosure and administration by emphasizing the connectedness of people to land and culture.

Okanagan poet and scholar Jeannette Armstrong establishes the specific way in which she considers language to be directly connected to land in her influential essay “Land Speaking.” She explains:

My own father told me that it was the land that changed language because there is special knowledge in each different place. All my elders say that it is land that holds all knowledge of life and death and is a constant teacher. It is said in Okanagan that the land constantly speaks. (“Land Speaking”175-6).

Armstrong is telling us that her own first language, N’silxchn, is taught to Okanagan people by the land itself and that their sense of who they are begins with their relationship to the land. She adds “N’silxchn emulates the land and sky in its unique flow around me” (180). She expresses that speaking N’silxchn is not only a part of the Okanagan people’s experience, but that their language is also spoken by the land. Furthermore, she reverses the notion of ownership over land that is commonly held in western epistemologies. She says “I am claimed and owned by this land” (176). It strikes me as very important and meaningful that when Armstrong translates as much as she can from the “completely vocally rooted” (187) N’silxchn to written english, she chooses to use poetry. Her essay is a combination of prose and poetry, but all of the examples of

the land speaking that she gives are in lineated verse. She says that the words the land speaks “are the Grandmother voices” (176) and that the poem “‘Grandmothers’ was written in N’silxchn and interpreted into English” (176). She also takes advantage of the freedom offered by poetic form in one of her “grandmother landscape poems,” “Winds.” She says of this sort of poem, which uses the whole page to make both columns and rows with the words: “I have given English voice to this sense of N’silxchn land presence in my grandmother landscape poems” (180). Armstrong does not consider her artistic practices to be in any way separate from the land she lives on or the ways in which her people live. Language, land, and people are inseparable.

The main challenge that Armstrong sees is one of translation. She is using her art to translate this deep sense of interconnectedness. She says, “My concern as a writer has been to find or construct bridges between the two realities” (192). Because of Armstrong’s background of deep connection to land, she is acutely aware of the ways that English is unable to achieve the specific connections to land of N’silxchn. She says that she has to engage in the “reinventions of the enemy’s language” (175). Furthermore, she adds that “In the use of English words, I attempt to construct a similar sense of movement and rhythm through sound patterns” (192). She is adapting English as best she can to be more like N’silxchn. She concludes her essay saying: “My writing in English is a continuous battle against the rigidity in English, and I revel in the discoveries I make in constructing new ways to circumvent such invasive imperialism upon my tongue” (194). Like the poets I am studying here, Armstrong’s worldview is deeply at odds with “the rigidity of English.” Nevertheless, she is overcoming the “invasive imperialism” of English by adapting it to her own purposes. Poetry is a key component in her innovations that allow her to elude the control that English has on her epistemologies and ontologies.

Although poetry is particularly apt, Indigenous poetry is but one of many forms of

decolonization being practiced. The question of why many Indigenous artists are using poetry is central to this project. The five poets I am focusing on provide compelling explanations for why they work with poetry that align nicely with what Armstrong says about her artistic practices being literally rooted in the land that is home to her and her people. None of the poets seem particularly adamant that the writing they do be called poetry, but they all seem to find something in poetic form that lets them express themselves as accurately as possible on the page. For example, it seems that poetry found Louise Halfe, rather than the other way around. In her Afterword to *Bear Bones & Feathers*, Halfe writes, “Writing was a natural process. The stories inside me demanded face. They became my medicine, creating themselves in the form of poetry” (128). Creating poetry was certainly not her primary goal, but it seemed to be the most natural literary form for her to use. Furthermore, there was something natural and healing about the process of turning the teachings she had grown up with into printed poetry.

For Gregory Scofield, poetry also plays this natural and healing role. In his piece “Poetry as Healing Bundles” he says that the sense of being silenced “is the reason why I was drawn into poetry, into the world of storytelling” (317). His inclination to write poetry comes from a “desire to be heard” (318). He also goes on at length in his memoir about the specific draw that poetry has for him. He says, “I wanted to be a writer, a poet, and speak from a voice that was truly reflective of not only my heritage, but my experience” (183). Once again, it is poetry that allows Scofield to be connected to his sense of who he is. Like Halfe, he also discusses the way that poetry came very naturally to him: “The poems seemed to come from a new place, almost as if I’d discovered a magical pool of words and feelings, a river that seemed to run through my veins and slip out my fingertips on to the paper” (*Thunder* 137). In a similar way to Halfe’s stories demanding face, Scofield gives the idea that poetry is a very natural form for intimate, personal

emotions to be expressed. Finally, Scofield discusses how his interest in poetry is based on the sound of the words. He had “to *hear* them before [he] wrote them down” (179). Poetry gives both of these writers the ability to express something of themselves and their culture quite naturally. This is not to say that they are somehow disregarding the painstaking craft of creating and publishing poetry. All of the poets discussed in this thesis are remarkable artists whose work has tremendous artistic and literary value within many cultural contexts. I bring up these poets’ comments about their motivation to write poetry because it points out that their primary inspiration comes from their Indigenous backgrounds.

Mercredi, Annharte, and Francis all seem to focus on the adaptability of poetic structure. Mercredi is not satisfied with how well poetic form represents oral stories, but he still seems to think that it does a better job than other forms. He says that something is lost in translating “rhythm and cadence” “when we translate from our Indigenous languages a poem we have written” (“Achimo” 21). Nevertheless, poetry can at least translate some of the elements of oral stories in Indigenous languages into English on the printed page. Similarly, Annharte is dissatisfied with leaving the English language unchallenged. She writes that “English has the strict idea that syntax is everything” (“Borrowing” 64). She responds to this strict regimentation of language through the use of innovative poetic form. She says she tries to “‘massacre’ English when I write. Of course, I need to explain that I am deliberate about poetic language in my writing” (60). Annharte is actually choosing poetry because it gives her a lot of freedom to play with language. Finally, Francis also has a strong affinity with poetry and feels that it is the genre that helps him to express himself most freely because of the potential to stray outside of strict generic lines. He talks about writing “feel-poetry” (“Interview” 250) and how poetry is “the closest to the writer [...] It’s sort of more you [...] than other forms of writing” (249). He also

appreciates how printed poetry allows a number of different art forms to come together: “The visual world and the written world meet somewhere” (250). For Francis, this meeting place is poetry. He has worked with film, theatre, radio drama, visual art and various other forms of artistic expression, but he specifically identifies poetry as the genre he is most connected to.

Another reason that Indigenous artists may be attracted to what is generally accepted as poetry is the close relationship that poetry has to the oral. In some senses, printed poetry is a place where the written and the oral can meet. This is the argument that those subscribing to the school of thought known as Ethnopoetics make. Scholars, coming from a primarily linguistic anthropological background, such as Jerome Rothenberg, Dennis Tedlock, and Dell Hymes, all contend that the form of written poetry is the best medium to document orally-based texts. Rothenberg is the first of these critics to articulate the specific value of lineated poetry and its potential to translate oral stories onto the page. Although his notion of “total translation” (Rothenberg xvii) goes too far in asserting the potential of a perfect translation between the oral and the written, later contributions to this field of inquiry provide some valuable insights. Dennis Tedlock notes an important feature of performance when he observes the possibility “of fixing *words* without making visible marks” (Tedlock 233). He further develops this notion into the idea that lineated poetry gets closest to what he calls the “ideal text” (5). Finally, Dell Hymes acknowledges that, even though poetry may not offer a “total translation” (Rothenberg xvii) or an “ideal text” (5), it is still the genre that gets closest to representing oral performance. He writes, “poetic purpose is to come as close as possible to the intended shape of the text in order to grasp as much as possible of the meanings embodied in this shape” (Hymes 7). While the approaches of these scholars could be seen to conflict with the way that most Indigenous writers approach their artistic practices, I want to consider them as part of a developing theory towards

the Indigenization of literature.

Although this discussion will retain the use of the term “poetry,” it is important to trouble the notion of poetry and recognize that the category of art and the division of art into genres is not an Indigenous idea. As discussed earlier, for Indigenous peoples, artistic practices are most often integrated into daily life. I contend that the writers I am focusing here are not, first and foremost, intending to write something that will easily fit into any significant genres like poetry, fiction, or even visual art. Their primary intentions, as discussed in previous paragraphs, are to express their own perspectives as Indigenous people. In his article “Situating American Indian Poetry: Place, Community, and the Question of Genre,” Eric Gary Anderson does the good work of explaining both the appeal and the disadvantages of using the term poetry to describe the work of Indigenous writers. Like the proponents of Ethnopoetics, Anderson recognizes that poetry and orally-based cultures have an affinity. However, Anderson looks at the combination of oral cultures and literature from the other way around, which presents a significant challenge to the work of the ethnopoets. Instead of fitting oral culture into poetry, Indigenous artists are incorporating poetry into their multiple forms of artistic expression. Anderson notes “the fluency with which Indian poets move between poetry and still other forms of expression” (Anderson 39). He also argues that understanding Indigenous poetry requires readers to “move outside and around and through received Western definitions of what poetry is and how it is best approached” (39). Indigenous poets are resisting the notion that poetry can be separated from life itself, let alone separated from other forms of artistic expression. Anderson quotes poet and scholar Simon Ortiz who says “art [is] a part of life and not separated. The act of living is art” (41). Instead of building up a strict definition of what poetry is within an Indigenous context, Anderson argues that all art is interconnected with life.

The issue that Anderson has with poetry as a literary genre is that the very notion of genre is not attractive to artists working from Indigenous understandings of connectedness. He notes that “The lure of genre [...] is mild at best for most Native writers” (37) and quotes Jace Weaver calling genre a “Eurocentric trap” (35). Ultimately, Anderson objects to the notion that art and life should be broken down into administrable segments. He says “genre *divides*; it encourages divisions of texts into categories and asserts that these categorical separations are in fact reliable as well as worthwhile” (40, his emphasis). The poets in this investigation challenge generic categorizations and even oppositional thinking that seeks to divide art into separate categories. They write in such a way that genre, in its strictly divisive sense, is strongly resisted. They seem to be writing so that categories are constantly expanding and being connected to each other. Therefore, it is more accurate to understand their choice to work with poetry as a result of poetry’s ability to be integrated into Indigenous worldviews about connectedness. The inspiration for this poetry comes from within Indigenous contexts. Anderson closes his article with this important assertion: “Native poetry *situates itself*, very much within the poet’s particular Native culture(s) *and* very much within a variety of intertribal places, precisely because it does not come from out of nowhere” (54, his emphasis). Although the work of Indigenous artists is often called poetry, it is inspired by the connectedness of Indigenous communities.

In his essay “Cree Poetic Discourse,” Neal McLeod gives the specific example of Nêhiyawak poetics attempting to re-establish the connection to ancient Cree stories. Like many of the thinkers mentioned so far, he believes that there is something specifically valuable about poetry’s capacity to represent Cree stories. He says, “Thinking poetically gives us a space to recreate, although imperfectly, the narrative thinking of the greatest of our kêtêayak (Old Ones)

and our storytellers” (“Cree Poetic Discourse” 89). He admits that contemporary poetic thought is still an imperfect recreation of the narrative thinking or the *kêhtêayak*; however, he is also quite clear on the fact that poetry does allow for a significant connection to ancient Nêhiyawak traditions. He says that “Our ancient poetic pathways are not a mimicry of colonial narrative structures but grounded in our own traditions and world views” (92). Like Anderson, McLeod is adamant that Indigenous poetic practice is deeply connected to Indigenous traditions. Moreover, these Indigenous traditions are the source from which this poetry is created. Poetry written from within an Indigenous worldview decolonizes by resisting the colonial impulse to assimilate Indigenous cultures into settler culture and maintaining a deep connection to Indigenous epistemologies.

This thesis explores three specific points of connection to Indigenous communities: medicine, stories, and ceremony. It also explores Indigenization as a form of activism and the Indigenization of genre. Of course, the aspects of Indigenous cultures that are translated into poetry and practices of Indigenization are connected. The categorization of this thesis into these chapters is not meant to suggest that a poem cannot simultaneously exemplify ceremony and storytelling, for instance. Rather, this categorization is a way of emphasizing the multiple angles from which Indigenous artists approach the challenge of decolonization. This thesis also wishes to resist the notion that any one of these aspects is more important than another. The poems and poets that will be paired with each of the aspects of Indigenous culture will be chosen because they offer particularly clear, specific examples within larger, interconnected practices of decolonization.

The first chapter, “Poetry as Medicine,” highlights the medicinal qualities in each of the poets’ work by drawing on close readings of their poetry as well as theories of how literature can



act as medicine for the sickness caused by settler-colonialism. Aboriginal peoples have been deeply hurt by the effects of settler-colonialism, but poetry has become a form of medicine to heal these hurts. Louise Halfe provides a very clear example of this mode in her poetry, but examples from the work of the other four poets will also be used. For Halfe, poetry is a way to reclaim the heritage that continues to be so deeply damaged by settler-colonial practices such as sending Aboriginal children to residential school. In the afterword to *Bear Bones & Feathers*, Halfe constructs her writing as a sort of medicine to heal the wounds inflicted by settler-colonialism and to recenter her traditional way of life. She says that stories “became my medicine, creating themselves in the form of poetry” (*Bones* 128). This medicinal mode of Indigenous literature is something that Indigenous scholars are taking note of as well. Jo-Ann Episknew calls this function scriptotherapy, and she notes that Indigenous literature “functions as ‘medicine’ to help cure the colonial contagion by healing the communities” (Episknew 2). As both Episknew and Halfe allude to, poetry can be an effective healing tool because it simultaneously counters the many negative effects of colonial violence and recenters traditional Indigenous lifeways.

The second chapter, “Poetry as Stories,” focuses on lineated poetry as an effective form for the translation of oral stories onto the printed page. The importance of stories is keenly felt in each of the five poets’ work; however, Duncan Mercredi provides a particularly clear example of how important stories and storytellers are to Indigenous communities. In an episode of CBC’s *Re-Vision Quest*, Mercredi is candid about how he was selected to fill the role of storyteller in his family (“Storytellers”). In his youth, Mercredi was trusted with knowledge that is not generally shared with young men in his community. This role is especially important in an Indigenous context because it is principally through oral stories that teachings are passed from generation to

generation. Among other things, Mercredi's poems take on the role of stories and serve as powerfully instructive teachings and mnemonic devices. He does tell oral stories in both Cree and English, but his printed poetry forms an important part of this storytelling as well. In his poetry, he has translated stories from an oral form into a written form. Mercredi has published four books of poetry and recorded various stories in both Cree and English. In recent years it seems that he has paid more attention to performing his work than publishing it. Nevertheless, his printed poetry is still rooted in the oral as he desires to return to a time when his language was a part of the land. In his most recent book, *The Duke of Windsor: Wolf Sings the Blues*, Mercredi expresses the feeling of maintaining the vitality of his people's traditions: "i am the son of muskeg and spruce / i still dance to the music of yesterday" (*Duke of Windsor* 57). His poetry, and indeed the poetry of all five of these poets, preserves many aspects of the oral character of stories in an Indigenous context. This work of preservation and remembering through stories comes up repeatedly in scholarly writing (Hymes *Now I Know* 35; Robinson 14; *Counselling Speeches* vii)<sup>3</sup>. The authors of *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies* assert that stories "teach us how to navigate the past, present, and future" (*Centering* xviii). Furthermore, the poetic form allows poets to transmit many elements of oral stories into their printed work. Dell Hymes argues that by organizing Indigenous stories into "patterned sequences of lines" (*Now I Know* viii) it is possible to "recapture something of the actual artistry and creativity of the originals" (11). Once again, lineated poetry cannot comprehensively translate all of the character of Indigenous language or orality, but numerous Indigenous poets and theorists observe the distinct affinity between poetry and the spoken word.

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<sup>3</sup> Ethnolinguistic texts such as those produced by Leonard Bloomfield, George W. Bauer, and Robert Brightman and ethno poetic texts such as those produced by Dell Hymes, Dennis Tedlock, and Jerome Rothenberg also cite preservation as one of their main goals.

Chapter three, “Poetry as Ceremony,” focuses on the way in which Scofield adapts ceremony into his printed poetry. Settler-colonialism continues to damage many aspects of Aboriginal life, and the right to practice Indigenous ceremony has been attacked with particular vehemence. For instance, the law against the potlatch on the west coast of Canada is a powerful example of the oppression of Indigenous people (Cole 1-2). Ceremony can be used to commune with a spiritual power, to enjoy the comfort of ritual, to find healing, or to seek guidance. Given the multiple uses of ceremony, the exact way in which a ceremony can be conducted varies with individual spiritual beliefs or practices. Gregory Scofield is particularly adept at integrating a variety of ceremonies into his writing. In his memoir he says that writing “comes from a sacred place, *our medicine place*, a place unmarred by convention or restriction” (*Thunder* 79, emphasis his). His poetry often becomes a prayer and the images in his poems are often of sacred objects. His poem “Kipocihkân”, which is a Nêhiyawêwin word for someone who cannot speak, outlines this process of finding his tongue again through a ceremony that the poem conducts. By the end of the poem, the speaker, with the help of his ancestors and the Great Spirit, has transformed his tongue from being mute into “the singer” (*Kipocihkân* 19). This sort of ceremonial practice cannot be completely separated from the role of medicine or stories in daily life, but it is distinct in its focus on making contact with spiritual forces and honouring ancestors. I emphasize that ceremonial poetry is performative in the sense that it *does* something. In an interview, Scofield comments on the fact that his poetry, especially when read in public, becomes a “public ceremony” (MacDonald and Scofield 292). Scofield says, “Each of the poems becomes a ceremony that involves others, including the readers, who are given the opportunity to bear witness to that ceremony and take it away into their own lives” (292). Although it is true that some ceremonies of a particularly sacred nature should not be reproduced or depicted in

literature, Scofield's comments allow for the sort of ceremony that happens spontaneously, such as is the case with eating a meal and giving thanks for the food. These poets provide many poems that successfully translate these ceremonies from their original contexts as parts of daily life, into their printed poetry.

Chapter four, "Indigenizing as Activism," highlights the activist mode of Indigenous poetry by using a medium that was brought over by European settlers to draw attention to the abuses inflicted upon Indigenous peoples. The very fact that these poets are practicing medicine, telling stories, and conducting ceremonies can be considered to be activism. Additionally, the poetry directly confronts the injustices of settler-colonialism, especially because it uses settler tools against the system of settler-colonialism. This direct confrontation is perhaps clearest in the poetry of "NDN word warrior" Marie Annharte. Her poem "help me I'm a poor indian who doesn't have enough books" is a good example of how Annharte uses her poetry as a form of activism and an inspiration for further activism. In this poem, the speaker is asking for books to build a barricade that even settler-colonial society will notice. For Annharte, reading and writing are the perfect response to the way that society attempts to "white out our efforts / by helping us not write / publish / edit / our own words culture history" (*Indigena Awry* 19). Annharte concludes that "they won't know we mean business / they must see the barricade / they will have to send in the army // to stop us from reading our books" (20). Here Annharte shows the power of using some of the tools of settler-colonialism (books) as a defense from the colonial violence waged against Indigenous peoples. Annharte considers herself to be a warrior, and she is in the good company of Indigenous writers who describe the act of writing in this way; Gerald Vizenor has written extensively about it<sup>4</sup>. The context and form of warfare has drastically changed for

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<sup>4</sup> For example, see *Manifest Manners* 4-5.

contemporary Indigenous word warriors, but the practice of activism and standing up for a way of life is integral to Indigenous worldviews.

Chapter five, “Indigenizing Genre,” which will focus on the work of Marvin Francis, shows that printed poetry is only part of a larger body of work that includes live and recorded performances, digital media, and visual art. Furthermore, the stability of the traditionally printed form is brought into question by the way that Francis infuses his poetry with performative elements. He incorporates these elements by drawing on his background in performance art forms such as theatre, film, and radio. Like the previous chapter, this one shows how Indigenous artists not only adapt Indigenous values into poetry, but also adapt poetry itself to fit with Indigenous worldviews. This chapter will explore the ways that the genre of poetry is broken down by Indigenous artists. Throughout Francis’ most acclaimed book, *city treaty*, there are elements of screenplay and theatrical script, showing that Francis is in no way limited by the genre of poetry. His poem “mcPemmican™” is an example of the interdisciplinarity that pervades Francis’ work. It seems that the poem even resists its printed form. It begins as a satirical set of instructions on how to make Pemmican and use it as a tool to economically oppress Aboriginal people. Once the process of making the mcPemmican™ is outlined, the speaker adopts the voice of fast food restaurant employee: “how about a / mcTreaty™ // would you like some lies with that?” (*city treaty* 6). These lines parody a slogan of contemporary corporate culture: “would you like fries with that?” The parody of this line as it appears in printed poetry performs a resistance to corporate culture. It creates an alliance between the exploitation of Indigenous peoples through broken treaty promises and the exploitation of the poor through low paying corporate fast-food jobs. These lines are also performed in the video “Marvin Francis in Whatever Trevor Pilot”, which shows that they are not limited to any single

genre. Given the lack of substantive historical print culture, it seems productive to consider print media within the context of multi-generic Indigenous artistic expression. This chapter shows how Indigenous poetry decolonizes by challenging generic boundaries and asserting Indigenous epistemologies that are unbounded.

The work of these five poets decolonizes by both adapting Indigenous worldviews into the European medium of printed poetry and adapting printed poetry to fit more easily within Indigenous worldviews. This is not a phenomenon specific to any single group of Indigenous peoples, but studying it from the loosely geographic context of Indigenous prairie literature allows for an emphasis and specificity that would not be possible if many more poets or regions were included. Still, interrogation of cultural classifications these poets share is necessary. Although Gregory Scofield uses Cree language in his poetry, he self-identifies as Métis. Furthermore, Annharte is the only one of these poets who identifies as Anishinaabe, so there is not a particularly large sample of poetry from within a specifically Anishinaabe context. Nevertheless, these cultures are deeply connected through both cultural and kinship ties. Furthermore, they are brought together by coming from the same region. To give a detailed exploration of the broad extra-literary contexts of Nêhiyaw, Anishinaabe, or Métis cultures is beyond the scope of this work. Instead, I am using the term “context” to refer to the cultural backgrounds that each of the poets self-identify. Where possible, I also use scholars from similar cultural backgrounds. What I emphasize over the challenges of classification that face this thesis, and many other lines of enquiry within Indigenous Studies, is that this poetry exemplifies the transmission of core aspects from orally-centered worldviews into a predominantly print-based contemporary culture. Whether the poets identify their cultural background as Nêhiyaw, Anishinaabe, or Métis, they are integrating central elements from these related cultures into

poetry.

As Glenn Coulthard brilliantly argues in *Red Skin, White Masks*, a non-colonial reality is only possible if Indigenous peoples reject the neo-liberal state's "politics of recognition" (Coulthard 151), which ensure that Indigenous groups are defined by and remain in the control of the nation state. Indigenous cultures cannot be free of the structures of settler-colonialism until they assert their identities from their own perspectives without the authority of the nation state. Coulthard quotes Anishinaabe scholar, writer, and activist Leanne Simpson, who provides a succinct and positive way forward that rejects this "politics of recognition:" "we need to decolonize on our own terms, without the sanction, permission or engagement of the state, western theory or the opinions of Canadians" (154). The poetry of Halfe, Mercredi, Scofield, Annharte, and Francis is written on their own terms. It acts as a powerful response to settler-colonialism and much of its power is a result of the use of Indigenization as a method of decolonization. These poets are part of a movement that assures Indigenous cultures will thrive in spite of the systems of settler-colonialism that continue to attempt to contain and destroy Indigenous cultures.

## Chapter One

### Poetry as Medicine

One form of decolonization that Indigenous poetry enacts is adapting Indigenous understandings of medicine into poetry. Duncan Mercredi, Gregory Scofield, Marie Annharte, and Marvin Francis each use poetry as a way of healing what has been lost through settler-colonialism. However, it is Louise Halfe who provides the clearest example of medicine being adapted into poetry. It seems that Halfe began writing poetry in search of healing and finding a voice. Louise Halfe's afterword to *Bear Bones & Feathers*, "Comfortable in My Bones," gives a candid look into the healing process that inspires this book and the way in which Indigenous medicine can be brought to bear within poetry. She speaks of walking to a creek near her home and processing her thoughts through writing. "Whatever travelled into my thoughts, I immediately wrote, no matter how absurd or obscure. At times, I did nothing but breathe, listen and sleep, comfortable in my bones" (*Bear Bones* 127). This short afterword is filled with Halfe's longing to reconnect with a way of life that was all but taken away from her by her experiences at residential school. Accordingly, before she is able to reconnect with her culture, she first needs to deal with the traumatic experiences of being an Indigenous woman who has been alienated from a land and culture that had always been Nêhiyaw.

Halfe makes it very clear that writing became an integral part of this process of learning to become "comfortable in [her] bones" (127) when she says that "Writing was a natural process. The stories inside me demanded face. They became my medicine, creating themselves in the form of poetry" (128). In this excerpt, Halfe does not claim authorship of the poetry, nor does she set out to write using poetic form. Instead, it is the stories that make themselves into poetry. Halfe emphasizes that she is not the sole creator of this poetry, but that this poetry is the result of



her culture demanding to be heard. Halfe, in search of healing and reconciliation, began journaling and meditating near a creek in Saskatchewan. This generically flexible form of writing became her medicine, which eventually took the form of poetry.

This chapter will focus on three modes of healing. The section “Restoring Language and Culture” discusses poems that heal by affirming the important place of Indigenous culture and language in contemporary Canadian culture. “Walking With Our Sisters” examines the poems that seek healing for wounds inflicted on Indigenous women. Finally, “Truth and Reconciliation” features readings of poems about residential school. The cultural genocide, the violence against women, and the abuse suffered by far too many as a result of attending residential schools serve as important examples of what Episkenew calls “the colonial contagion” (Episkenew 2). These three symptoms are all a result of something larger. Episkenew reminds us that “The myth of the colonization of the Americas is truly a dangerous story, which continues to have disastrous effects on the health and well-being of Indigenous people” (2-3). Poetry often acts as medicine for a very specific injury or disease caused by settler-colonialism, but taken as a body of work, poetry can also heal the broad effects of colonial violence.

Scholars such as Jo-Ann Episkenew and Sam McKegey establish that much Indigenous literature functions as a healing force. Episkenew frames her book, *Taking Back Our Spirits*, with the notion that literature functions as medicine for the injuries inflicted on Indigenous cultures by settler-colonialism. She writes in her introduction: “Not only does Indigenous literature respond to and critique the policies of the Government of Canada; it also functions as ‘medicine’ to help cure the colonial contagion by healing the communities that these policies have injured” (Episkenew 2). She goes on to define the effects that colonialism continues to have on Indigenous peoples in Canada: “Today, multiple generations of Indigenous people live with

intergenerational post-traumatic stress disorder, which is a direct result of multiple generations of colonial policies all focused on dealing with the ‘Indian problem’” (9). Episkenew does the important work of giving a precise definition of how settler-colonialism has effected Indigenous people. Additional to this diagnosis is the work that she does to show how literature can function as medicine. The false stories and destructive myths of settler-colonialism are a root cause of the post-traumatic stress Indigenous people face, but empowering Indigenous people to tell their own stories is an act of healing. Episkenew argues in favour of “the power of literature both to heal Indigenous people from postcolonial traumatic stress response and to cure the settlers from the delusions learned from their mythology” (15). Clearly Indigenous literature is not only directed towards Indigenous people, but to the descendants of settlers as well, who must unlearn a false mythology.

Sam McKegney has a slightly different focus in his book *Magic Weapons*. He more specifically addresses the damage done through residential schools and the literary survival narratives that have resulted from experiences at these schools. He takes his title from Tomson Highway’s novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. In Highway’s novel, a father on his death-bed suggests his two sons redress a world that has become “too evil” with “magic weapons” (227). These “magic weapons” are art. McKegney shows that literature, as well as the art forms practiced by the Okimasis brothers in the novel, is a tool that can “make a new world” (227). Art has the power to overcome the damage done by settler-colonialism, specifically through residential schools. McKegney argues that Indigenous writers, as well as the Okimasis brothers, “employ their magic weapons not simply to heal themselves but to provoke positive change in others — to ‘make a new world’ through art” (McKegney 8). There is a potential contradiction that McKegney opens up by adopting the metaphor of weapons. In the most basic sense, weapons are

used to inflict injuries, not to heal them. However, the “magic weapons” that McKegney is drawing on are a more complicated sort of tool. They are a definitive response to an evil world and if there is to be any healing, the evil must be fought off like a disease. They work as a medicine because they prevent any further harm from being inflicted, giving the injured people an opportunity to recover. While there are many “magic weapons” available to redress the evil of settler-colonialism, it is important to emphasize that one of the most prominent responses is to seek healing through literature. Indigenous writers are creating a body of literature that redresses the false myths and evil that created the injuries in the first place. Moreover, this literature also acts as medicine because it replaces these false myths with Indigenous teachings.

For the most part, the work of McKegney and Episkenew focuses on the many good examples of autobiographical prose texts in Canadian Aboriginal literature. However, it should be mentioned that the prevalence of authors using poetry to do the work of medicine is not merely a coincidence. We should consider the examples set by the likes of poets Tekahionwake (E. Pauline Johnson) and Rita Joe. Tekahionwake was writing and performing her poetry well over a century ago. Mohawk scholar Beth Brant comments on how “revolutionary” Tekahionwake is in Indigenous writing (Brant 6). Brant largely credits Tekahionwake with showing the way for other Indigenous people, enabling them to heal their injuries by reclaiming their culture through poetry. Brant writes, “Poetry seems to be the choice of telling for many Native women. In our capable hands, poetry is torn from the elitist enclave of intellectuals and white, male posturing, and returned to the lyrical singing of the drum, the turtle rattle, the continuation of the Good Red Road and the balance of Earth” (12). It is no surprise then, that there are many strong women that continue this work.

Rita Joe provides another example of how poetry can accommodate the many Indigenous

voices that must be heard. McKegney notes the powerful and effective use of prose interspersed with verse in Joe's autobiography *Song of Rita Joe* (McKegney 128-30). He also notes the advantages of having "A polyphony of Native voices raised" (134) because sounding these voices together resists "preordained categories" (135). Indigenous writers such as Tekahionwake, Joe, or Halfe may be categorized as poets, but their work also challenges this sort of categorization and draws its first inspiration from personal and cultural contexts rather than literary ones. Halfe asserts that her writing began as a method of healing a traumatic past and recentering her own background that was threatened by her negative experiences with settler-colonialism. Considering poetry as medicine is understanding that poetry is the means of this healing, not the end.

It is not enough to say that poetry can function as medicine without some understanding of the way that medicine exists in Indigenous cultures. One written source that deals with the role of medicine in traditional Nêhiyaw culture is the book âh-âyîta-w-isi ê-kî-kiskêyihthahkik maskihkiy / *They Knew Both Sides of Medicine*. This ambitious volume collects Alice Ahenakew's stories about curing and cursing and translates them from Cree into English. Besides being an important preservation of Cree language, this book also gives an understanding of how "medicine" functions in Nêhiyaw culture. As an example, the editor H.C. Wolfart describes "The curing powers of the bear [being] granted to an Anglican priest, and a young man [being] driven to madness and suicide by an old woman's curse" (Ahenakew 1). What is important about this example of "medicine" and the sense in which "medicine" is used in the title of the book is that they are both good and evil uses for medicine in Nêhiyaw culture. Furthermore, medicine often takes the form of language, such as a curse or a blessing. In this broad understanding of medicine, we see how language can have power over the physical and

spiritual worlds. Although this power can be both positive and negative, Halfe and the other Indigenous poets discussed in this chapter — like Ahenakew’s relations (25) — are using their powerful writing as good medicine. That is not to say that poetry and stories do not also possess the potential for bad medicine<sup>5</sup>, just that these poets use it in a positive way to bring healing.

Jud Sojourn makes a strong argument that both the Nêhiyaw and the Anishinaabe have always believed stories to have this sort of power that he translates as “narrative medicine.” His thesis stems from “the idea of stories possessing a power unique to story craft, what may be called narrative medicine” (Sojourn 5). In addition to his argument that stories can function as medicine, he is also aware that the traditional role of medicine in these cultures is more than something that brings healing. He says: “A medicine person does more than heal” (8). As many traditional accounts<sup>6</sup>, including those provided by Ahenakew, point out, medicine power can be used to injure and kill as well as to communicate over great distances and find out where animals can be found for hunting. Nevertheless, it seems that the power being used by these poets is not for these diverse purposes, but specifically for healing. Halfe certainly says this in her afterword to *Bear Bones & Feathers*, but she is not alone. Gregory Scofield also notes that “My writing has been really an exploration of the medicine of myself, ourselves” (“Poems as Healing Bundles” 318). He adds that this exploration of medicine, this opening of healing bundles that writing facilitates, is what allows us to move “to a place of eventual healing” (319). He is talking about healing for himself, but also healing in the broader context of the communities he is a part of.

Returning to the discussion of Rita Joe helps us to understand why poetry, specifically, is

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<sup>5</sup> The work of a poet such as Duncan Campbell Scott provides an example of how poetry could function as bad medicine. Gregory Scofield also mentions a poem “whose recitation of colonial brutality was a fist in my aunty’s face” (“Conversation” 14).

<sup>6</sup> Sojourn draws on the sacred stories recorded by Leonard Bloomfield, but complex depictions of the multi-faceted uses of medicine powers can also be read in Stevens, Bird, and Hallowell, to name just a few.

so often used as good medicine by Indigenous writers. For Joe, it seems that poetry is the easiest way to adapt her culture and language into contemporary media is to use poetry. Joe famously writes, “Let me find my talk / So I can teach you about me” (Joe 55). The sequence of events and the way these lines are laid out are both important. Joe is making the argument that she must heal the injury of losing her language at residential school before she will be able to communicate what it means to be an Aboriginal person in Canada. Furthermore, by using lineated poetry and placing each of these clauses on separate lines, Joe emphasizes the deliberate way in which these actions must be carried out and the importance of Indigenous peoples re-establishing their cultures as well as settlers and descendants of settlers learning about Indigenous cultures. Following the model of Rita Joe, it seems appropriate that this first chapter address the ways that poetry acts as good medicine to cure the injuries of settler-colonialism.

Although Rita Joe is Mi'kmaq and one could point out several differences between her culture and those of the five poets I focus on, she sets an example that these poets seem to follow. Her experiences of settler-colonialism, complete with time spent in a residential school, are very similar to what many Nêhiyaw (Cree) and Anishinaabe (Ojibway) people have faced and continue to bear the legacy of. In many ways, her poetry acts as a model for how Indigenous people can most effectively adapt the key, healing elements of their cultures into poetry. Early on in Joe's writing career she realized the power that writing has and she decided to use her writing to accentuate the strengths of the people in her community. In her autobiography she writes, “I learned to write in a loving and honourable way about my people [...] Most of the time I would write about someone who moved me” (Joe 108). Sam McKegney calls Joe's practice “affirmist methodology” (McKegney 126). He writes, “Joe affirms the positive potential of a particular colonial imposition in relation to healing and empowerment without trivializing the pain the

process of imposition has caused” (129). Halfe, Mercredi, Scofield, Annharte, and Francis also follow this methodology. They do not shy away from complicated issues and they certainly bear witness to the damage done by settler-colonialism. However, like Joe, they emphasize the regenerative capacity that their poetry can have for their cultures.

The work of Beth Brant is some of the earliest commentary on the positive impacts of Indigenous writing in Canada. Her collection of essays *Writing as Witness* was published in 1994, the same year as Louise Halfe’s first collection of poetry. Although Brant does not discuss Halfe’s work<sup>7</sup>, the two share the strong conviction that poetry can and does act as good medicine for injured Indigenous communities. In the essay that Brant draws her book title from, she writes: “The erosion of self that accompanies that malaise is another curse of colonialism. We have seen that curse at work in our communities — alcoholism, drug addiction, disrespect for women, incest, suicide, homophobia; these evils are the result of the self-loathing that imperialism has forced into our minds” (Brant 68-9). The terms may have changed slightly, but there is no mistaking these “evils” that “are the result of the self-loathing” created by settler-colonialism. They are symptoms of the systematic attempt at erasure of Indigenous cultures. Brant continues: “What we once *told* is now being *written*. The legacy of our community rape is being transformed into a new legacy of hope, truth and self-love” (73). Even a generation ago, we see agreement between writers on the potential for writing to heal the hurtful legacy of settler-colonialism. Halfe and Brant both do this by adapting orally-based cultures into a written context. Writing works as medicine by adapting cultural aspects such as language into a poetic form.

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<sup>7</sup>Brant does discuss Marie Annharte Baker’s poetry briefly (Brant 14)

From the example set by theorists and writers such as Brant, contemporary Indigenous poets also see that the healing potential of stories has been translated into poetry. Mohawk poet Janet Marie Rogers sees herself very much in the line of poets and storytellers who use their writing as a form of medicine. In an interview on CBC radio, she begins by discussing the very tangible connections between language and land. She is not a fluent Mohawk speaker, but every time she is in Mohawk territory she is struck by the importance of speaking at least a little bit of Mohawk. She says, “the language is attached to the land” (Rogers). Speaking in this way and through her poetry is a form of healing medicine. She says, “This is medicine. The words are medicine. The poetry is medicine [...] Whatever helps you to progress on this earth, in journey as a human being is medicine, and that can come in many different forms” (Rogers). As can be observed in Rogers’ comments, there is a growing tradition of poets who see their work as a direct form of healing medicine that has been adapted from older traditions.

### *Restoring Language and Culture*

One of the most powerful ways in which Halfe’s poetry functions as medicine is the way it reclaims Nêhiyawêân, Cree language. As Rita Joe points out, the loss of Indigenous languages is a deep wound for Indigenous peoples. In the poem “Sister,” Louise Halfe uses Nêhiyawêân to ease the suffering of those left to witness the effects of the brutal rape and murder of their sister. Halfe describes the body in the morgue using mostly English:

Scarred face  
crushed.  
Work boots  
trampled her in.

Her arm crooked  
limp by her side  
vagina raw, bleeding



stuffed with a beer bottle. (*Bear Bones* 93)

However, it is Nêhiyawêyan that begins to bring some solace and comfort to those who witness this brutalized body. The speaker of the poem considers this body to be a call to prayer and healing and says:

*Akosiwak ayisiyiniwāk*  
*Piko matotsānihk ta pimātisīyahk*  
*Kīpa kīwek.*  
Race with your spirits  
*Tā kākīsimoyāhk, to heal, to heal*  
*Iskwew atoskewin kimiyikonaw*  
*Kakweyāhok*  
*Ahaw. (94)*

Halfe includes a translation of the Nêhiyawêyan in a glossary. The first three lines are translated as “*the people are sick / we must go into the sweatlodge to be alive / hurry home*” (132). The words carry a message of healing, but this is not their only function. The very fact that these Cree words are written down in the poem without explanation or justification is an act of healing. Halfe introduces tradition, language, and teaching into a very modern setting of the morgue. Furthermore, Halfe subverts one major aspect of settler-colonialism: the attempt to control and assimilate Indigenous peoples by destroying Indigenous languages. Additionally, Halfe demonstrates that healing of this injury will happen when Nêhiyawak return to traditional ways of teaching and speaking. The final four lines are translated as “*let’s all pray [...] / a woman delegated work to us / hurry / it’s okay, amen*” (132). This is a prayer over the ravaged body of a murdered woman, but it is also a prayer to bring about healing for a still broader hurt that affects all Nêhiyawak. Halfe implies that the “Sister” featured in the poem is symptomatic of a much larger problem that is facing Nêhiyawak and the healing prayer is offered on behalf of “*ayisiyiniwāk — the people*” (94).

Halfe’s long poem *Blue Marrow* is one of the most well-rounded examples of how poetry

can decolonize by adapting medicine, stories, ceremony, activism, and performance into literature. It is Halfe’s second book of poetry and it seamlessly weaves many elements of Nêhiyaw and Métis culture into one book with many speakers. It is a reminder that each of the elements I focus on in this project are closely connected. Still, each of the elements should be given specific attention so as not to minimize the importance of any one element. Halfe gives an excellent metaphor to illustrate how elements of her culture can be simultaneously connected and distinct: “All Women. All Men. All Grandpas. All Great / Grandfathers. Great Grandmothers, the Eternal / Grandmothers. Their Voices form a tight braid” (*Blue Marrow* 37). The emphasis and importance of each of the “Voices” identified in this passage can be seen by the capitalization and punctuation. By including so many full stops in the lines, Halfe allows for the repeated capitalization of the word “All”. The effect of this punctuation and repetition is dramatic. Although each of these voices form only a strand in the “tight braid,” each strand is afforded a strong emphasis and importance to the whole. Just as this passage emphasizes each strand in the braid of polyphonic voices, so this poem emphasizes the medicinal aspect of Indigenous cultures and adapts this aspect, amid various other aspects, into poetry.

Keeping in mind that *Blue Marrow* is not only a poem which acts as good medicine, but one which is also conducting a ceremony and telling a story, I will continue by highlighting the way that this poem heals by using Nêhiyawêyân. Cree language is particularly prominent when the poem addresses the elders. One of the speakers in *Blue Marrow* invites the Grandmothers to join the conversation: *pê-nîhtaciwêk, nôhkomak. / Climb down, my Grandmothers*” (17). Once again the use of Nêhiyawêyân is a powerful reclamation of what has been threatened by the influences of settler-colonialism. She continues her address to the Grandmothers with a request: *“pê-nânapâcihinân. / Come heal us*” (17). There are certainly elements of storytelling and

ceremony, but the emphasis is on the healing capacity of traditional practices. Not only does the speaker reclaim the vibrancy of her language, but also the legitimacy of communication with her ancestors. She writes: “*ê-sôhkêpayik. kimaskihkîm. / Your medicine so powerful*” (17). The innovation that Halfe makes with these lines is that they are simultaneously a prayer to her ancestors and a part of a poem that gives many people access to the healing power.

The medicinal quality of weaving is connected to the lines from which Halfe draws her title.

My relatives wake.  
Fingers and toes winged,  
cord strung in our  
infant moccasins.  
We've gathered  
splintered bones,  
weave, mend  
the blue marrow. (46)

This section picks up a theme from the first lines of the poem: the umbilical cord being strung into a child's moccasins (1). The recurrence of this theme throughout the poem acts as a reminder of the connection between the generations and the kinship bond that is so powerful. In some ways, the notion of reconnecting to a system of kinship cherished by the Nêhiyawak and Métis is the central purpose of this long poem. The speaker acknowledges the damage done to her culture when she refers to the ancestral bones as “splintered” (46). Although the hard pieces of bone are able to endure, the marrow, especially of “splintered bones,” is less able to survive. The process of mending is to recreate the vital and life-giving “blue marrow” (46). This is the central metaphor for what Louise Halfe is doing in this book.

Gregory Scofield also adds his voice to those who seek healing through the revitalization of language and cultures. He identifies himself as Métis and he also has some Polish, Jewish, and German heritage. Much of his life has been characterized by searching for a sense of identity and

belonging amid an ever-fluctuating juxtaposition of settler-colonialism and Indigenous peoples. In his lecture “Update Your Status,” given as the writer-in-residence at the University of Winnipeg, he explored what it means for Métis people to be considered status Indians under a recent Supreme Court ruling. Scofield confronted many of the same issues that writers Thomas King and Eva Marie Garoutte discuss with regards to authenticity in a constantly changing cultural and political environment. Garoutte notes that one important reason that Indigenous people have trouble proving their authenticity “is that Indian cultures, and people’s practices and experiences within them, have changed a great deal over time” (Garoutte 67). King adds that “The fact of Native existence is that we live modern lives informed by traditional values and contemporary realities and that we wish to live those lives on our terms” (*Inconvenient Indian*). Scofield must constantly renegotiate his identity as an Indigenous person and one of the most important ways that he does that is through learning and using Nêhiyawêyan, Cree language.

Scofield’s poem “The Poet Leaves a Parting Thought,” explores this issue of authenticating one’s identity through language. Nêhiyawêyan is not Scofield’s first language and he continues to study it. This poem explores the connection between identity and language. Scofield begins his poem by using Nêhiyawêyan: “hâw ni-nêhiyawêyan” (*Kipocihkân* 54). As with every language other than English used in Scofield’s poetry he adds an italicized parallel gloss to the words: “*now, I speak Cree*” (54). He refers to this process by saying “Their English tags behind my every word” (54), referring to the way he defines each non-English word in his parallel gloss. Scofield notes that using Nêhiyawêyan in his readings garners “a bona fide *hmm* from the white audience” and how his “buffalo robe talk / can be darn sexy / when I flavour it up with some Cree spice” (54). Additionally, he mentions how vulnerable his hold on the language is and that he runs “the chance of becoming / totally anglicized” if he fails to give “a native

language mammogram / check it regularly / for English lumps and bumps” (54). It seems very much that the speaker in this poem authenticates his identity as “an Indigenous oral talker” (55) based on his ability to speak Cree. He also defines himself in opposition to a “multicultural professor / talker / bragger” (55), who cannot speak the language. Nevertheless, the poem ends on a note of humility and humour: “I might not be the best / Indigenous poet but hey, my English is lousy enough / to be honest” (55). Scofield suggests that the more basic English he uses in his writing is transparent and does not hide anything from his reader.

Marvin Francis also draws attention to the false myths that have been told about the settlement of the Americas. However, he approaches them from the opposite end of history. He reveals the un(der)valued role of Indigenous labour in contemporary economies. Although he does this in many places throughout his poetry, I will focus on a few instances from his long poem *bush camp*. The poem straddles the urban and rural existences of Indigenous people. In the rural existence there are many people that have been “working too long / too hard” (*bush camp* 34). However, there are few options other than to continue on: “*layoff means pogey, / quit means food bank ... I can't take it no more no more*” (35). Francis points out the dilemma that contemporary Aboriginal people find themselves in as a result of colonization. Instead of being considered people, or even workers, the Indigenous people of Francis’ *bush camp* are “*food bank animals*” and “children of cement” (75). For Francis, poetry is a place where he can expose the dehumanizing economic impacts of settler-colonialism on Indigenous people. He bears witness to the loss of traditional ways of life.

Duncan Mercredi uses his poetry to remember and restore elements of his culture that have been taken away by settler-colonialism. Like Halfe, he tends to write these healing poems earlier in his career. In his first book, *Spirit of the Wolf Raise Your Voice*, the poem “Searching”

bears witness to the damage done by forgetting traditional culture. However, it also asserts the healing potential of trying to remember. This poem deals with the damage done by the loss of traditional cultural practices due to the migration of Indigenous peoples to urban environments. Even though there is a profound sense of loss in this poem, there is also a persistent hope that some of what has been lost can be restored through the act of remembering facilitated through poetry.

“Searching” depicts moments from the lives of a father and daughter who were separated when the daughter was very young. Most of the poem is set on urban streets, where the father and daughter look for each other amid the squalor. The father, referred to as “Old man” throughout the poem, is found “sleeping in boxes by the river / Searching, remembering an airplane / Taking their life” (*Spirit of the Wolf* 40). Meanwhile, “Ska’ sis” (Nêhiyawêyân for daughter) also searches for her father and “remembers the sad smile, the familiar eyes / The pink ribbon on his wrist” (41). The family was separated when, at a very young age, “Ska’ sis” was taken away for medical treatment. She is not returned to the remote community and there is “never a letter to explain why / Plane took their life” (40). “Old man” remembers how the rest of the family unit disintegrated after his daughter was taken away: “Wife wandered away after kookum [grandmother] died” (40). Mercredi describes the breaking up of the family as a death when he uses the phrases “Taking their life” and “took their life” (40). This emphasis shows that the kinship connection this family shares is as important as physical life. The traumatic separation triggers a series of events that results in both the father and the daughter wandering the streets in search of each other.

Despite the damage done by the separation of the family, the persistent search of the two family members for each other indicates that the only way to find healing is through memory and

the reclamation of what has been lost. Accepting the difficulty of the search, the father approaches someone who could be his daughter:

Ska'sis, he says to a dark haired girl  
A small scar on her cheek  
Does she recognize him  
She walks on, eyes barely touched on him  
He stares after her, searching his memory for a clue (39).

Likewise, the daughter “wanders the streets looking at lost faces / Eyes haunted by some half familiar song” (41). Unfortunately, “all she finds is a discarded pink ribbon / Among the broken bottles” (41). Like too many instances of separated Indigenous families, this one does not have a happy ending. Nevertheless, it is clear that any consolation that these characters do experience is through remembering their traditional way of life. At least the daughter is able to hold onto her name in her own language, “Ska'sis”. She is able to remember comforting lullabies.

The Métis writer and academic, Tasha Beeds, provides another remarkable example of the healing power that reclaiming language and culture can have in her poem “maskihky words/medicine words.” Like both Halfe, Scofield, and Mercredi, Beeds uses Nêhiyawêyân in her poetry. Although the initiative to use written Nêhiyawêyân has various motivations, such as linguistic and cultural survival, this poem draws a direct link between the use of Nêhiyawêyân and healing. The poem traces the journey of the speaker from shame accompanied by substance abuse to healing via the use of language. The speaker expresses her desire for “white skin” (Beeds 58). Boys would bully her and call her “coloured mud” (58) telling her to “stay / *down*” (58). Despite the encouraging whispers of her ancestors telling her to “get up my girl” (58), she

just kept falling  
                                  *down*  
  *down*  
  *down*  
with each toke each purple flower  
each sip of rye and coke, until I lay there,

trying to will my heart to stop (59)

Finally, the maskihky words of her relations begin to have an effect. She “poured out the booze and flushed the drugs” (60). The poem concludes with the lines “ekwa nitati-imohtân, nitati-pimohtân, / following his footsteps and he, / he helped remember me into being” (60). Beeds provides the translation “I got up and I began to walk” (60). At last, the maskihky of her ancestors brings the healing that allows the speaker to be whole.

Jo-Ann Episkenew notes that the act of Indigenous people writing in English is “an act of healing” (Episkenew 12). Furthermore, she draws on a phrase coined by Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird: “Reinventing the enemy’s language” (12). The phrase depicts the principle way that Aboriginal poets can facilitate healing through their writing. These poets restore their cultures to a place of prominence by adapting it into printed poetry. The language they use is still predominantly English, but it is an English that is infused with aspects of Indigenous language and culture. This is an important act of Indigenization and decolonization because it transforms the language that was once a sign of oppression into a tool that can bring healing.

### *Walking With Our Sisters*

The ability to do more than one thing with any artistic project is not unique to Halfe’s poetry and the response to the many injuries to Indigenous women is certainly not limited to poetry. The art installation *Walking With Our Sisters* is one such project that uses contemporary media to bring healing for the many murdered and missing Aboriginal women. This project honours the Aboriginal women that are missing or murdered across Canada and the United States. Over thirteen-hundred artists have contributed to this project by creating beaded moccasin vamps (or uppers) to honour a missing or murdered Indigenous woman (*Walking*). By



disempowering Aboriginal women, colonial regimes are able to fundamentally disrupt traditional Indigenous forms of governance (Episkenew 174). As in Louise Halfe's poetry, projects like *Walking With Our Sisters* provide a powerful and healing counter narrative to the way settler-colonial societies represent Aboriginal women. While Canadian culture ignores violence against Indigenous women, many Indigenous artists are honouring their memories and restoring them to the important roles that they traditionally held. Necessarily, these poets also take up the task of honouring women who have been violated and restoring Aboriginal women to their important roles in their communities.

As an example of how Indigenous women stand out as exemplary leaders in their communities, Beth Brant argues that Indigenous women's writing, in particular, acts as powerful medicine: "Native women's writing is the Good Medicine that can heal us as a human people" (Brant 9). Once again she highlights the humanizing potential that writing presents. She also uses the word "medicine" in the traditional way, and is also careful to point out that this is "Good Medicine." Although Aboriginal women have certainly suffered as victims of violence, they also engage in the healing process. Brant calls women's writing "recovery writing" (11). This powerful message of healing is, to quote Brant once more, "the overwhelming message that Native women bring to writing." This is the message of "creating a balance in their protagonists' worlds, remembering what the elders taught, [and] recovering from the effects of colonialism" (Brant 11). Louise Halfe's poetry is an excellent example of this form of writing.

Halfe's poem "Hamilton's Graveyard" addresses the devastating effects that a still-colonized reality has on Indigenous women. This poem poignantly depicts the contrast between western modern medicine and traditional Aboriginal medicine. The speaker of the poem expresses profound dissatisfaction with and detachment from the modern medical system and

how it deals with miscarriage. The speaker depicts the conception of the baby girl with deep tenderness: “A seed was planted in the North Bay rain, cries, sweet cries” (*Bear Bones* 83). Nevertheless, this is clearly not a planned pregnancy because the speaker says she wanted a “refund for [her] ten dollar IUD” (83) and “Swore / at the man whose pleasure [she] carried” (83). The miscarriage begins “with liver sliding into the toilet” and continues at the hospital with “IV / vodka to still the belt around [her] waist” (83). Finally, the dying girl is placed in the speaker’s “frozen arms” (83). The images that Halfe uses to depict the modern, settler-colonial, medical system are exceptionally cold and clinical. The “IUD” is ultimately ineffective as a form of birth-control, and it is also made of copper, something not commonly allowed into our bodies, something that is intended to inhibit the conception of new life. Copper had and continues to have a very different use in both Anishinaabe and Cree cultures as a substance often used to create items for trade. It is still used as a gift during ceremonies, but not as a form of birth control. Likewise, the deeply unsettling juxtaposition of “liver sliding into the toilet” indicates the inadequacy of western technology (the toilet) to deal with the often painful realities of human life and death. Finally, the “IV / vodka” and “frozen arms” of the speaker reveal a profound disconnection between the speaker and the child that she has just lost. From the failure of modern medicine to prevent the pregnancy in the first place, to the painfully clinical experience of the miscarriage and C-section, this poem presents a strong critique of the medical system that was brought over and developed by settlers.

Furthermore, the speaker expresses a desire to experience healing through traditional medicine. While she is at home, before the miscarriage, she says: “I thought of my mother’s bitter root that would shred / my growing womb. I heard the voice of the sweetgrass braids” (83). The medicine depicted here is certainly not a pain-free treatment for nonviable pregnancies, but

it does allow for some form of connection between the natural, life-giving earth and the speaker of the poem. Rather than the frozen disconnectedness the speaker feels in the modern medical system, traditional medicine speaks to her with “the voice of the sweetgrass braids.” The loss of a child at birth is traumatic whether it is treated with modern or traditional medicine. Even so, this poem depicts a deepening of the trauma as a result of modern medicine. It also gestures towards the possibility of healing from the natural world. The rain sets the scene for new life in the beginning of the poem. At the end of the poem it also serves as a powerful reminder of the potential for regeneration, despite deep sorrow: “The rain fell down my drying breasts” (83). It is a sad truth that the child’s life was never fully realized and that she has no need for the nourishment her mother can provide. Nevertheless, the mother’s tears are not fruitless, bitter tears, but the rain that allows seeds to grow and life to continue. Halfe has, once again, adapted Indigenous teachings about healing into her poetry.

“Nôhkom, Medicine Bear” is a fine example of how Halfe connects the healing power of her female ancestors with printed poetry. Kimberly Blaeser writes that “As Native writers, we deliberately throw our languages into connection, into new realms of meaning. We throw our voices or words or images into a particular space. Into what is certainly an already occupied space. Perhaps a colonial space” (“Nexus” 335). In “Nôhkom, Medicine Bear” Halfe places Nôhkom, her grandmother, into what Blaeser might call “new realms of meaning.” In this case, this refers to the occupied space of poetry. What is important about this representation of Nôhkom in a poetic setting is that she is not placed there to co-opt poetry for her own uses, but rather to establish a connection with it. Nôhkom is a representation of how medicine and healing should be carried out in an Indigenous worldview. By representing her grandmother through poetry, Halfe carries out an act of Indigenization, creating a connection between her grandmother

and print media. Halfe translates teachings about traditional medicine, and the prominent role that women have in it, into a printed form.

The central metaphor of the poem, Nôhkom being a bear, connects Nôhkom to the natural world. While the notion of connectedness within the poem is readily observed, there is also a connection made between traditional medicine and a literary context. The second stanza of the poem reads,

In her den  
covered wall to wall  
herbs hang...carrot roots, yarrow,  
camomile, rat-root,  
and câcâmosikan (*Bear Bones* 13)

Through metaphorical language, Halfe likens her grandmother's house to a bear's den lined with the ingredients that allow her to be a "healer of troubled spirits" (14). By retransmitting these images, the influence of the grandmother's healing is broadened. We know that at the end of the "long day's work" (14) she "drapes her paws on the stair rails / leaves her dark den and its medicine powers / to work in silence" (14). Without Halfe to transmit the "medicine powers," the effect of them would remain silent. The grandmother is content to act as she always has and go silently about her important work, but by translating this work into a poetic form, Halfe broadens the reach of her culture's healing potential. Furthermore, by articulating a form of Indigenous medicine into a more easily identified form of media, poetry, the poem itself brings Indigenous and settler worldviews into dialogue with one another. The poem acts as a form of healing for the damage done by settler-colonial attempts to destroy traditional medicine practices of Indigenous peoples.

In a more direct fashion, Halfe's poems operate to offer healing on a personal level and process more intimate traumas that are symptomatic of settler-colonialism. This sort of personal

scale seems to be what Maria Campbell is referring to when she says that a piece of literature can function as “One small medicine” (*Maria Campbell* 15) contributing more broadly to the healing of Aboriginal peoples. Campbell is so invested in the healing potential of literature that she has trouble even thinking of herself as a writer. Instead, she says “My work is in the community...as an organizer” (qtd. in Miner 321). The way that Campbell positions herself shows how important the personal healing function of writing is to her and to her community. This positioning also demonstrates the multiplicity of roles that writing has within Indigenous contexts. Rather than defining who she is, writing is one of multiple things that Campbell does as a community worker. Jo-Ann Episkenew gives a more detailed analysis of how writing personal accounts can work therapeutically. Although telling the story of traumatic events can cause the opening of old wounds, Episkenew argues that “by re-experiencing these emotions in a safe environment and by expressing them in language, we are often able to come to terms with emotional injuries and then move our emotional lives forward to a place of health and contentment” (Episkenew 70). Episkenew is not the only critic to notice this important healing function of women’s writing.

Halfe is following in the footsteps of other Indigenous women writers who have used writing as therapy. Rita Joe also speaks directly to the therapeutic value that writing has, especially for women. She writes, “Almost all my married life, I used writing as therapy” (Joe 164). Although Joe speaks very lovingly and respectfully of her husband throughout her autobiography, she also bears witness to his violent, abusive behaviour that seemed to well up out of a feeling of helplessness. Joe explains how she made it through some very difficult years of abuse and neglect by writing about it. She notes how the practice of writing as therapy is something that she has passed on to her daughters. For both Halfe and Joe, writing is a safe place away from the sometimes violent and abusive behaviour of men. This is not to say that writing as

therapy is an exclusively female domain, but rather that there is a maternal link between generations of women that use writing as a therapeutic tool. Halfe's poem "Valentine Dialogue" allows for this sort of therapy. The victims of violence can explore their trauma from the safer distance of writing. "Valentine Dialogue" articulates the shame and anger of a woman who has been sexually abused and manipulated. It takes the form of a colloquial conversation. The speaker begins by saying that she "got bit" (*Bear Bones* 52) and explains how men have "Snake in dair mouth / snake in dair pants. / Guess dat's a forked dongue" (52). Although she discloses to her parents, she is blamed for what happened to her and feels "Shame, shame / Da pain in my heart hurts, hurts" (52). She also confesses to a priest, but the "Durdy priest / Jest wants da durdy story" (53). As the conversation continues, the speaker realizes that the shame she feels is not her fault:

It's mudder's fault  
never told me right from wrong  
Fadder's fault  
always say mudder a slut.  
Guess I must be one too.  
Guess I showed dem. (54)

The speaker is unable to find people in her life who do not place the blame on her, but in the "safe environment" (Episkenew 70) of writing she is able to understand and process her injuries. The speaker concludes that in the future she "Won't tell / 'bout the snake bite" (*Bear Bones* 54). Nevertheless, she has already reaped the benefits of processing her experience through writing.

Even though Gregory Scofield is male, he has a vested interest in drawing attention to the effects that settler-colonialism has had on Indigenous women. He has dedicated his Twitter account to individually Tweeting the names of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. For example, Scofield Tweets: "Name A Day: Nicki Roulette. Find our missing sister." There are brief interludes of different conversations, but the vast majority of Scofield's Tweets highlight a

stolen, missing, or murdered “sister.” It comes as no surprise then, that Scofield’s poetry also bears witness to the particular violence that is done to Indigenous women. His poem “She’s Lived” gives voice to someone who would otherwise go unheard. Once again Scofield turns to repetition as he echoes song and adds rhetorical effect. He repeats the line “She’s lived” (*Kipocihkân* 81) to emphasize her significance, even though few pay attention to her life “in Safeway parking lot [...] in old meat trucks [...] in town, rented shacks” (81). The poem lists many of the hardships that the protagonist experiences and honours her “ten lives, ten beat-up lives, / ten thousand years” (81). Scofield writes that “she wasn’t supposed to say, / bitch or complain about when she got evicted” (82). When “her forty-eight-year-old bones / simply gave up [...] no one batted an eye” (83). These final lines convey a sad truth. The epidemic of murdered and missing Aboriginal women and the way that Canadian society seems to be allowing these disappearances to continue and go uninvestigated, is deeply tragic. Yet poems such as this and artist/activists like Scofield continue to stand up for these almost forgotten sisters. Scofield allows her life to stand in for the many lives that have been all but forgotten: “The truth was // she lived // ten lives, ten thousand years” (82). To add weight and importance to each of these lines, he has set them apart, on their own. This woman’s life cannot be restored to her, but her memory can be honored, even though she has died.

Scofield also discusses the very personal impact that the issue of murdered or missing Indigenous women has had on his life in his article “Conversation with the Poet: Who didn’t know my aunty.” In this article Scofield explains that “my aunty is one of almost 1,200 missing or murdered Indigenous women in Canada whose death in 1997 remains unsolved. She is one of almost 1,200 missing or murdered Indigenous women in Canada” (8). To add to the pain of missing his aunty, Scofield and many others close to these women “were never told [...] who

was to blame or where the road to justice began or ended. Therefore, I suppose it could be said their [the government and legal authorities] words or lack thereof cut out our tongues and in turn we were given a feast of silence” (9). Scofield breaks this silence through his poetry and comments, “great poetry gives our unearthed bones new movement; it gives us reason to dance. It gives us reason to dialogue. It should give us reason to be concerned” (11). Furthermore, breaking this silence by telling his stories through poetry leads Scofield to a place of healing: “when I’m quiet and I allow the wind to take the ugliness from my being, sometimes I’m given a song that connects me to the river and to my own broken and healing bones” (15). Like other Indigenous poets Scofield is consciously using poetry as a form of medicine for both himself, the unresolved death of this “Little Mother” (8), and the far too many murdered or missing Indigenous women in Canada.

Annharte is another poet who is outspoken about the damage done when Indigenous women are devalued and taken away from their traditional roles. She shows that violence against women is only a partial consequence of breaking what Paula Gunn Allen calls the “sacred hoop.” Annharte’s poem “Mother Rite” depicts violence against women, but shows that it is a direct result of performing a non-traditional role: “She had to go out and do a man’s job” (*Being on the Moon* 22). Annharte writes, “She / must’ve been bored looking after me so she / wanted to work with my dad” (22). Although the daughter finishes her sewing “proudly,” the mother “cut her / foot with the axe that day” (22). This is certainly not any direct form of abuse against the mother; however, it does show what damage can be done by severing the tie between Aboriginal women and their honoured positions in traditional Indigenous societies. Annharte raises the important questions of why the mother “had to go out and do a man’s job” and why the mother became “bored” by fulfilling her role as a mother instructing her daughter.



Annharte also uses poetry as medicine for a number of hurts she has suffered personally. In a deeply personal interview with Pauline Butling, Annharte discusses the aftermath of a sexual assault she suffered as a young woman: “I felt the wound wasn’t even the rape; it was when I burnt the diaries. In a recent poem I tried to take the images that I had in the diary [...] I wish I could find that poem now” (*Poets Talk* 94). For Annharte, the process of writing is such an effective form of healing medicine that the sense of being cut off from that medicine and losing that diary was more hurtful than the traumatic events themselves. She also used poetry as medicine when she had a difficult time going through menopause: “I turned to the idea of a grandmother moon who, for some reason, has arranged for us to be fertile, even when we don’t want to be. Writing that poem was like making my own medicine. I was curing myself because the poem remained with me” (98-99). Annharte repeatedly draws on the notion that poetry is a safe place from which to process deep hurts: “I learned to associate poetry with this place of protection, a place of safety” (99). The damage done, especially to Indigenous women through settler-colonialism, has been surrounded by denial and silence. For Annharte, poetry seems to be one of the best places to safely contain this violence and break the silence. She says that poetry is “certainly healing in the sense of being able to contain something for a while, give it a voice, and therefore face your fears about it” (109).

The effects of settler-colonialism are wide-ranging, but they articulate a particularly poignant confrontation that has occurred between Indigenous peoples and settler-society. The traditional role of women in Indigenous cultures has been devalued by settler-society. While a surface look at the domestic lives of women in each culture may produce some similarities, many Indigenous cultures also imbue their women with equal political power to men. By removing women from these positions of power, settler-colonialism destabilizes Indigenous political

structures. The poetry of Louise Halfe, Gregory Scofield, and Annharte works to heal this profound injury by once again valuing Indigenous women for their strength and many contributions to their communities, despite the many violations of settler-colonial society.

### *Truth and Reconciliation*

Although there are many examples of injuries from the “colonial contagion” (Episkenew 2), the practice of removing Indigenous children from their home communities and cultures remains one of the worst. It is now also one of the most public. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, from which I am drawing the title of this section, has had the mandate of facilitating healing of the injuries suffered at residential schools. They write: “The truth telling and reconciliation process as part of an overall holistic and comprehensive response to the Indian Residential School legacy is a sincere indication and acknowledgement of the injustices and harms experienced by Aboriginal people and the need for continued healing” (Truth). Unlike the violence against Indigenous women or other methods of cultural genocide, such as the ‘60s scoop, the Canadian government has had to face the cultural genocide that occurred as a result of Indian Residential Schools. Perhaps this is an indication of just how significant an impact the residential school system has had on Aboriginal peoples and communities across Canada. While Weber is critical of the commission for a lack of tangible outcomes and for failing to uncover some of the crucial documents regarding practices at residential schools (Weber), it is commendable that they emphasize “the need for continued healing.” The abuses that occurred at residential schools and the lasting impacts of generations of children being taken away from their families is one of the most far reaching and poignant injuries of settler-colonialism in Canada.

John Milloy’s *A National Crime* is effective in laying out the various injuries that

residential schools have inflicted on Indigenous peoples. He also makes it very clear that residential schools are not an inconsequential part of our history, but a glaring shame that cannot be ignored. In his introduction he writes,

The system is not someone else's history, nor is it just a footnote or a paragraph, a preface or a chapter in Canadian history. It is *our* history, *our* shaping of the 'new world'; it is *our* swallowing of the land and its First Nations peoples and spitting them out as cities and farms and hydroelectric projects and as strangers in their own land and communities. (Milloy xviii, emphasis his)

The fact that Milloy must state the impact of residential schools so emphatically illustrates how well Canada's myth-making machine is working. As Episkenew writes, "The myth of the colonization of the Americas is truly a dangerous story" (Episkenew 2-3). Telling the counter story of residential schools is one of the most powerful medicines to confront the danger of the false myths spread by colonial powers. Milloy positions the residential school system as the most hurtful tool used by the Canadian government to disconnect Indigenous people from their culture and the land that they are deeply and spiritually connected to.

Milloy is very clear in his portrayal of the motives behind the residential school system. He says that "despite the discourse of civil and spiritual duty that framed the school system, there never was invested in this project the financial or human resources required to ensure that the system achieved its 'civilizing' ends or that children were cared for properly" (Milloy xiv). The terrible irony that Milloy alludes to with the quotation marks surrounding "civilizing" is that the unfiltered motive of the residential school system is not civilization, but genocide: the system sought to "'kill the Indian' in the child for the sake of Christian civilization" (xv). The erasure of Indigenous cultures in Canada has long been the official policy of the Canadian government. For the most part, this cultural genocide was carried out covertly and the best way to begin the reconciliation process is to raise awareness of what has happened and continues to effect

Indigenous communities. The publicizing of what happened in residential schools is probably the most successful example of resistance against these genocidal policies. It is no surprise, then, that poems about residential schools are an important method of healing for Louise Halfe and other poets who have experienced the devastating effects of the residential school system. Halfe was forced to attend Blue Quills Residential School.

Louise Halfe's "The Residential School Bus" identifies the alienation of Indigenous peoples from their cultures as a particular nexus of trauma. Rather than focusing on one of many possible sites of trauma for families being separated by the residential school system, this poem focuses on the separation itself. Although the poem does depict instances of physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse, the unifying symbol of the poem is the seemingly innocuous "yellow school bus" (*Bear Bones* 69). The poem opens with the lines "A yellow caterpillar, / it swallows them up" (65). This image effectively depicts the sense of alienation that the families experiencing this separation are going through. A school bus is a common sight to many people living in contemporary North American communities, so common that Halfe needs to defamiliarize us from it. The apt, but defamiliarizing metaphor of the school bus being a caterpillar allows readers to understand the school bus in new ways. Rather than safely transporting children to and from school, this school bus is a giant creature that curiously swallows the children. Parents do not know if or when they will see their children again.

The form and point of view of this five-page poem also conveys disconnection. Most of the lines are short and the various scenes portrayed are separated by three asterisks. Even more than in many of Halfe's poems, "The Residential School Bus" is evidently autobiographical. Halfe mentions her brothers Ivan and Charlie by name. Nevertheless, this poem is written from the third person point of view. "Hamilton's Graveyard", in contrast, does not include any names

that show the poem to be autobiographical, but it has a much more intimate first person point of view. The choice to use third person has quite a powerful effect, because it shows, at the most fundamental level of the poem, a sense of detachment: the families are broken apart and the children are disconnected from their cultures. The speaker of “The Residential School Bus” has had to cope with the trauma by detaching herself from the experience. The stanza

The smell of Lysol  
and floor wax  
overwhelms the memory of wood smoke  
and dirt floors (65)

also contributes to the sense of disconnection in the poem. The smells and surroundings that the children encounter when they first step into the residential school are so potent and foreign that they overpower the memories of the homes that they have just come from.

Halfe has gone to great lengths to emphasize the devastating impact that alienation has had on Indigenous peoples through the residential school system, but she does not omit the discussion of other traumatic abuses that occurred there. She also depicts instances of neglect, physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse. Although the speaker “loves porridge” (66) and associates it with her mother’s care for her, she is unable to enjoy it in these new surroundings: it “is stuck in her / throat” (67). Although malnourishment was a chronic problem in residential schools (Milloy 115-16), the emotional neglect that the speaker experiences here seems to be the more debilitating form of abuse. Halfe also alludes to physical abuse: “The girl / with the mean stick” (*Bear Bones* 68). Another prominent instance of abuse depicted in the poem is the cutting of Ivan’s hair: “Ivan’s ears look like / two gliding hawks. / They’ve given him a crew cut” (66). Like Tomson Highway’s memorable depiction of Champion Okimasis getting his hair cut when he arrives at residential school (Highway 51-55), this act of cutting the hair changes much more than the appearance of Ivan. It severs a link between Ivan, his culture, and his sister. Finally, the

protagonist is presented with a new spiritual system that seems to be solely based on retribution. It seems that “Geezus / is always mad” (*Bear Bones* 67). Rather than giving her a philosophical lens through which to reconcile herself to the world, Christianity becomes another stern and abusive influence on her life. Halfe writes, “She kneels too often / in front of geesuz” (67). Although these other traumas are prominently featured in this poem, the final word is given to the ominous symbol of alienation: “The yellow school bus / waits” (69).

Duncan Mercredi also emphasizes one of the wounds left on Indigenous peoples by the residential school system in his poem “Forgotten Words.” This poem depicts an old man trying to speak Cree in public although he has lost most of the words. Mercredi writes,

As a child he spent time in a boarding school  
losing what little he had gained  
Strapped for speaking his tongue  
he grew up with foreign words (*Spirit of the Wolf* 14).

This man’s life has been deeply affected by the loss he experienced at an early age. He is called “A stranger in his land” (14). The loneliness of being a stranger in a strange land is not uncommon, but here Mercredi depicts the deep psychological and spiritual wound of being a stranger in one’s homeland. This man turns to alcohol to cope with this deep sense of alienation. Eventually “the cry of the fiddle and the beat of a drum” bring “him into the circle / filled with many faces like his” (14). The loss of language at residential school is much more than the inability to communicate with other people. The loss of language precipitates into a loss of being and a loss of completeness for many Indigenous people. Even though it is difficult, one of the best ways to heal this incompleteness is to reclaim the language. Mercredi’s poem concludes with the man persevering in his attempts to speak Cree and finding healing in the process: “Painfully he tells his story / as the circle makes him one” (14).

Even though Gregory Scofield did not go to residential school, it is still an important

topic in his poetry. He bears witness to the damage that the lies taught and the shame instilled by residential schools have brought in his poem “They Taught Her.” He dedicates it to “*Louise, Skydancer*” (*Kipocihkân* 84), who as we know, did go to residential school and uses writing as a form of medicine to heal the hurts that were inflicted there. This poem expresses solidarity with survivors and identifies what was taught in residential schools as lies. The refrain, “They taught her” (84, 85) introduces five short scenes from “her” time at residential school. All of the lessons, from how to pray to how to be a good wife, bear witness to the ways in which residential schools devastated Indigenous cultures. Scofield writes, “French was civilized / and even holy things in Cree / didn’t compare” (84). This poem moves beyond a historically-based truth telling and begins the difficult work of healing and reconciliation.

Sam McKegney discusses the shift from “disclosure” to “imaginative visions for plausible futures of First Nations” (McKegney 6) in the introduction of *Magic Weapons*. He begins by accounting for the motivation of those who wish to disclose the traumatic experiences at residential schools: “By speaking of the traumatic past, [Phil] Fontaine and others sought to drag into public view the violent and oppressive aspects of residential schooling that had previously been obscured by official history” (5-6). McKegney goes on to argue that literature can go further and do more than disclose the truth about what happened at residential schools:

Although [Indigenous residential school survival narratives] depict historical disparities in power and often traumatic personal events, they render these imaginatively, affording the Indigenous author interpretive autonomy and discursive agency while transcending the structural imperatives of proof and evidence embedded in historical paradigms. (7)

In a similar argument to Episkenew (70), McKegney maintains that a specifically literary space is crucial if there is to be potential for healing and reconciliation. Literature has the power to move historical events into an imaginative sphere and to give Indigenous people “autonomy”

(McKegney 7) over these traumatic pasts. So it is that Scofield's poem allows the protagonist to move past being a victim and into other "imaginative visions for plausible futures" (6). The final lesson that the protagonist of the poem is taught is how to "take it / on the chin, [...] even if the bun was half-baked" (*Kipocihkân* 85). As a result of this abuse while she is pregnant, the baby is miscarried. The priest continues the lesson by saying that "it was meant to be" (85). This poem certainly bears witness to traumatic historical events, but it ends with at least the possibility of a more autonomous future. Scofield's final stanza reads, "The other babies, well — / she didn't say. / That's another story" (85). Scofield does not tell the other story here. It remains in the realm of the imaginative. Nevertheless, redressing the story of colonization and unmasking the residential school system for exactly what it was (an act of cultural genocide) is one of the most powerful forms of decolonization possible.

The assault of settler-colonialism has resulted in many deep injuries to Indigenous peoples in Canada. To quote Jo-Ann Episkenew once again, "The myth of the colonization of the Americas is truly a dangerous story, which continues to have disastrous effects on the health and well-being of Indigenous people" (Episkenew 2-3). This myth of the benevolent motivations for colonizing the Americas is consciously subverted by the work of poets like Halfe, Mercredi, Scofield, Annharte, and Francis. Their poetry acts as medicine to heal these "disastrous effects." Their poetry restores both Indigenous language and culture to a place of honour within Indigenous communities. Additionally, this literature redresses the biological genocide that seems to be focused against Indigenous women. Finally, Indigenous poetry decolonizes by acting as a form of medicine to heal the lasting effects of the cultural genocide that was the Indian Residential school system. For these Nêhiyaw and Anishinaabe writers, poetry is a powerful form of decolonial medicine.



## Chapter Two

### Poetry as Stories

The process of decolonization is centered on the act of Indigenous peoples reconnecting with their cultures amid the influences of settler-colonialism. The influence of settler-colonialism is not going to disappear from North America and the connections that Nêhiyaw and Anishinaabe people make to their cultures will be mediated by a long and traumatic history of settler-colonialism. Thomas King says this nicely in *The Inconvenient Indian*: “The fact of Native existence is that we live modern lives informed by traditional values and contemporary realities and that we wish to live those lives on our terms” (King). “Poetry as Stories” argues that the “contemporary reality” of printed poetry is an excellent medium to transmit some of the energy of “traditional” Nêhiyaw and Anishinaabe oral storytelling. Many artists and academics dedicate their work to reasserting the central position of stories within Indigenous cultures. This translation of oral stories into printed poetry is one way that Indigenous poets are decolonizing and living “on [their] terms” (King).

This chapter argues that Indigenous storytellers are translating their oral stories into written poetry because of the natural affinity that poetry shares with oral forms. I have already explored some of the ways in which Nêhiyaw and Anishinaabe notions of medicine have been adapted into poetry. Adding to the idea that Indigenous poets use poetry as a form of medicine, “Poetry as Stories” argues that Nêhiyaw and Anishinaabe stories are being adapted into settler forms of media. Poetry is one of the most significant media where Indigenous storytellers have ensured the survival of their stories. This chapter will not try to distinguish whether a given poem is operating as medicine or as story. Instead I will show that as well as being rooted in the desire to bring healing, Indigenous poetry also fills the role that traditional stories once played —

and in many cases still play — in Nêhiyaw and Anishinaabe cultures. Correspondingly, this chapter will focus on other functions of storytelling in Indigenous contexts. Key among these functions of storytelling is the idea that stories and myths about Indigenous people have historically been used as weapons of colonization (Episkenew 2-3). Indigenous people telling their own stories in writing, but doing so on their own terms, is made more powerful because of this fact. I begin with a reminder that stories do not exist in isolation within Indigenous contexts. This will be followed by the section “From Orality to Print Culture,” a discussion of the various theorists who explain the ways that stories act as a framework to connect Indigenous peoples to each other, the land, and their histories. Then, with examples drawn from Mercredi, Scofield, Annharte, and Francis, “Poetry as an Ally of Indigenous Oral Stories” will show why poetry is a particularly apt medium for the adaptation of traditional oral stories. Finally, with emphasis on Duncan Mercredi and a reading of Louise Halfe’s *The Crooked Good*, “Practicing Poetry as Stories” concludes with examples of stories that have been translated into poetry.

This chapter builds on the substantial scholarly discussions that already exist about the specific role that stories play in Indigenous cultures<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, it is important to be reminded that stories do not exist in isolation. In his opening remarks for *Love Medicine and One Song*, Gregory Scofield shows how inextricably connected story, medicine, and ceremony are within his own Cree and Métis background. He begins his remarks by recounting a story that his aunt Georgina (Houle) Young once told him (*Love Medicine* 1). It is the story of Ôhowkôt, an older woman with powerful medicine who convinces a medicine man renowned for his prowess with love medicine to cause a young man to fall in love with her. The story teaches about Ôhowkôt’s greed and warns the audience about the power of medicine. This greed coupled with the

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<sup>8</sup> This chapter will specifically discuss *The Truth About Stories* and *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies Understanding the World through Stories*.

medicine Ôhowkôt uses is the cause of the young man's death. Scofield asserts that stories, such as this one, are just as important and just as powerful as they were years ago, before they were written down. He says:

Today, such stories carry as much power as they did long ago. Among many First Nations people, love and the old-time medicines are very much a part of our spiritual reality and existence. Though they are seldom known or heard of in non-First Nations circles, they continue to be practiced or used by those who possess knowledge. (2)

The power of this story to teach about love medicine and continue the spiritual practices and ceremonies of Indigenous people is real whether the story is being told in this contemporary print setting or in a traditional oral setting. Like all of the poets that this thesis focuses on, Scofield's primary responsibility in the writing of poetry is towards his own community. He is translating this story into poetry so that healing and spiritual power can be preserved and experienced in contemporary settings.

Scofield positions his work as an offering to "honour these gifts which come from Kisê-manitow, the Creator" (2). He says that he offered tobacco to "The Grandmothers and Grandfathers [...] as well as my Dream-Love, to whom this book is dedicated" (3). This is how he asks permission to present his Dream-Love in "the most honourable, honest and sacred way I know: to sing my experience of love in both my languages, Cree and English" (3). These statements illustrate different elements of Indigenous culture finding a meeting place through printed poetry. Scofield also alludes to the fact that traditional First Nations stories are not well known outside of First Nations cultural circles; nevertheless, he is finding a way to make these stories better known. However, the stories are not adapted as isolated aspects of Indigenous culture. Along with them, Scofield adapts elements of medicine and ceremony. Similarly, this

chapter will show that stories are an integrated part of multifaceted Indigenous worldviews that are translated into poetry.

### *From Orality to Print Culture*

Although this section is not explicitly about poetry, it does discuss the important theoretical ideas surrounding orality and storytelling within Indigenous contexts. For many Indigenous cultures, oral storytelling has been and continues to be a significant mode of passing cultural knowledge down through generations. In our contemporary setting a number of storytellers have found that they are some of the last people who can tell these stories and are seeking different methods to preserve these teachings. Okanagan storyteller Harry Robinson and Omushkego Cree storyteller Louis Bird provide two important examples of how oral stories can be preserved in a written form. This section begins with a discussion of the role that poetry has played in transmitting some of the oral character of their stories into printed texts. The section then shifts the discussion to the work of scholars such as Neal McLeod, Thomas King, and Leanne Simpson who emphasize that the preservation of stories is central to the work of decolonization. Translating Indigenous stories into written poetry is one part of a much larger movement of decolonization

Okanagan storyteller Harry Robinson's book *Write it on Your Heart* is a good example of the challenges presented when attempting to turn oral stories into print published texts. One technique that he and his editor Wendy Wickwire adopted to transmit some of the oral character of his stories was to break their stories into lines. Robinson tells his stories in English, so the main challenge presented is translating the oral to the written. Wickwire writes in the introduction: "Almost from the beginning, Harry and I both realized the importance of recording

his stories” (Robinson 14). She also notes that “In Harry’s view, he is one of the last of the old storytellers” (15). The goal of this book, then, is quite clearly one of accurate preservation, given that Harry is approaching the end of his life when he and Wickwire are recording and editing the textual versions of the stories. Wickwire also raises a concern central to the best editors of oral stories: “Most published native stories are English translations done by someone other than the storyteller. Often these are not even direct translations, but rather extensively edited English summaries” (15). The stories in *Write it on Your Heart* are different than these texts which are deeply influenced by editors without the storyteller’s involvement. These stories are not editorialized summaries of Robinson’s stories but his own words recorded as accurately as possible. Additionally, Wickwire attempts to transfer some of the cadences and rhythms of Robinson’s speech into written form. She “set the stories in lines which mirror as closely as possible Harry’s rhythms of speech” (16). This is not a replacement of Harry Robinson sitting in front of us telling the stories, but it is an invaluable record, especially now that Robinson has passed away.

In a more recent example of the written textualization of traditional oral stories, Louis Bird’s stories recorded in *The Spirit Lives in the Mind* preserve many important elements of his culture for generations to come. Accordingly, these stories use a number of techniques to transmit orality. Most notably, Bird has used audio recordings in tandem with the books he has published. Bird’s stories vary widely between recent stories of interactions between Omushkego Cree people and the Hudson’s Bay Company, to traditional folktales and sacred stories. Additionally, Bird does all of the translating of these stories himself. Like Harry Robinson, Louis Bird tells these stories in English. Unlike Robinson they are mostly laid out in prose form, without any line breaks. Nevertheless, great care has been taken to transmit the oral nature of

these stories. Firstly, they are transcribed as closely as possible to how he tells them. Susan Gray, the editor of the book, points out that she and others who have worked on the text have gone to great lengths to preserve the oral character of Bird's skillful performances and to limit any textual interventions such as footnotes: "Louis has an almost musical rhythm when he speaks, and those who know his voice can hear his cadence as they read his words in print. I have made every effort to preserve this quality" (Bird xvii). She also affirms that Louis is quite pleased with the results. He even says that the work Gray and her transcript contributors have done has brought "it alive on the page" (xviii). This example goes to show that lineation is not the only way to transmit the energy of the oral to the written form.

In some respects, Louis Bird never thought about collecting stories in a book. His first impulse was to record the actual sound of the stories. In Louis Bird's first book, *Telling Our Stories: Omushkego Legends Histories from Hudson Bay*, originally published in 2005, he explains his desire to record the voices of the storytellers. Bird talks about the impetus to begin documenting the stories he had grown up with:

In 1965, I listened to the elders, different elders, after my grandmother died that year. I begin to be aware that we were losing the elders that know the stories, and I begin to notice that recording the elders would be important. But at that time, I had no machine that could be used to record their voices, until very late in 1975. That is when I actually began recording them, from that time on, a little bit at a time. (*Telling Our Stories* 33)

It seems very much that Bird recognizes the value of the way in which the stories are told as well as the actual words. His desire is to record the stories as they were told, complete with the sound of the teller's voice, not simply to record the words that were said. Bird's practice was to record stories on tape for nearly thirty years before they were ever written down in a book. He says, "But I never yet thought to write those things down, I just wanted to record them. And it was

only in 1975, when I began to recognize that these things should be recorded and be written down” (34). He also adds, “I did not organize anything. I did not plot, like the writers do, because I am not a writer. I am only a collector of stories. I was not even trained to be a storyteller!” (34). It seems like it was his curiosity and love for the stories and storytellers who preceded him that inspired him to record the stories in the way that he did. This curiosity began with the simple question of how best to document the stories before the elders that know they are lost.

There is one important example of Louis Bird stories that are lineated in the anthology *Algonquian Spirit*. There are two “Wiissaakechaahk” stories and one titled, “Anwe and the Cannibal Exterminators” (Algonquian 279). These stories can also be heard in the recordings available at *ourvoices.ca* and most of the content has also been transcribed in either *Telling Our Stories* or *The Spirit Lives in the Mind*. Yet, these stories have been transcribed into lines that mimic Bird’s phrasings. The most logical explanation for why these stories are lineated, but the stories in his books are not, seems to be in Bird’s own description of his creative process, where he admits that he is not a writer (*Telling Our Stories* 34). Most of the decisions made about the textual representation of Bird’s stories are made by his editors. Once again, Bird’s first impulse to record these stories was not in text, but as audio recordings. The Louis Bird stories in this anthology do not have any editor credits, but amongst the contributors are both Paul DePasquale and Jennifer Brown along with a mention of their forthcoming *Telling Our Stories*, which along with *Algonquian Spirit* was published in 2005. In this context of an anthology that contains “a certain diversity of styles and approaches” (*Algonquian* xx), and bears almost no mention of the availability of Bird’s recordings online, it is quite interesting that DePasquale and Brown chose to lineate Bird’s stories.

This lineation certainly contributes to the oral character of the stories by allowing the rhythms of Bird's delivery to be somewhat represented on the page. For instance, the poem called "Wiisaakechaahk and the Geese" is able to transmit some of Bird's cadence in the first few lines: "The story picks up again, only later. / That once again, he was himself. / And this time he was hungry" (264). The lineation reinforces the pause before the word "And." It is true that these lineated stories are an exception, but they show that poetic lineation is one well accepted method of representing orality in the absence of recordings. Louis Bird's work, both written and recorded, remains a remarkable resource and presents an alternative method of documenting oral stories if technological and financial restrictions were not such a barrier. If Indigenous authors are to rely on the printed word alone, it seems that lineated poetry remains one of the best ways to transmit the energy of oral stories.

Up to this point, I have been examining possible explanations for why Indigenous storytellers are using lineated poetry to translate oral stories. Poetry is certainly not the only way to translate oral stories. However, lineated verse allows some important aspects of orality such as rhythm and tone to be more accurately transcribed than prose. The discussion will now turn to the central role that stories play within Indigenous worldviews and why reclaiming stories is such a powerful act of decolonization. Although stories can never be separated from the broader Indigenous cultures they are a part of, they are important nodes around which many thinkers understand the process of decolonization.

One such thinker is Thomas King. King is one of the path-breakers for Indigenous literature. Perhaps even more important than his own fine, award-winning works of literature are his comments about why literature matters. Each of his popular Massey Lectures begin with this phrase: "The truth about stories is that that's all we are" (*The Truth About Stories* 2, 32, 62, 92,



122, 153). He is not talking exclusively about Indigenous cultures when he repeats this sentence. However, the sentence does reveal the importance that stories have within Indigenous worldviews. Before he makes this statement in each of his lectures, he gives an account of a brief conversation between a storyteller and a member of the audience. Each time King begins one of the five lectures there is a different audience member asking the storyteller what is beneath the turtle that supports the earth. The basic facts of this brief exchange remain the same throughout the lectures; however, slight changes such as the setting of the storyteller and the description of the audience member change. This conversation is powerful because it reveals that stories, passed on between people and generations, are important tools of connection that are subject to some change. Nevertheless, the underlying content of these stories is a powerful tool of connection that grounds us. King says, “in all the tellings of all the tellers, the world never leaves the turtle’s back. And the turtle never swims away” (1, 31,61,91,121). Details and contexts of stories change all the time and there is no way to prevent this from happening, whether stories are written down or not. Throughout his lectures, King goes on to argue that stories are at the center of all things.

Both King and the editors of *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies* quote Anishinaabe writer and theorist Gerald Vizenor from an interview in which he makes the centrality of stories clear: “There isn’t any center to the world but a story” (32; *Centering* xvii). Indigenous scholars of various backgrounds affirm Vizenor’s assessment that stories are at the center of the world. The editors of *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies* base their entire volume on the notion that stories are primarily about relationships. They believe that “A story can be an offering” (“Making an Offering” xv). In their way of thinking, offerings are an integral form of relationality that signify the connection between all things. They are a form of communication that can be conducted

without words. The editors say “offerings are the currency of life” (xv). They also add, “We noticed that stories — in their broadest sense — were being used as theoretical frameworks guiding questions in law, history, anthropology, environmental studies, and other fields” (xvi). Stories provide the structure for their edited volume that brings together twenty-five scholars from many backgrounds. The work that these scholars do, like the work of the poets studied here, is interdisciplinary. This interdisciplinarity and resistance to the restrictions of genre is an example of how Indigenous worldviews are being translated into contemporary media that will be explored at length in Chapter 5. It is also evidence of the capacity of stories to form connections between people and the places they come from.

For example, Nêhiyaw scholar Neal McLeod asserts that Cree poetry stems from Cree worldviews rather than the influence of settler-colonialism: “Our ancient poetic pathways are not a mimicry of colonial narrative structures but grounded in our own traditions and world views” (“Cree Poetic Discourse” 92). Nêhiyawak poetry is not separate from other aspects of daily life or culture. It is a contemporary expression of who the Nêhiyawak are that is rooted in the places they come from and their ways of being in the world. Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Simpson expresses the same idea about Nishnaabeg worldviews. She lives near the Otonabee River and she uses the word “Otonabee” as a reminder of who she is and where she comes from. Every time she encounters this word, she is “pulled into an Nishnaabeg presence, a decolonized and decolonizing space where my cultural understandings flourish. I am connected to Nishnaabeg philosophy and our vast body of oral storytelling” (Simpson 108). Simpson emphasizes how connectedness to land and culture is central to Indigenous worldviews. She also notes that this interconnectedness is an important distinction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous world views. She adds that “Western literary traditions and theories don’t always fit our work because

so many of us are operating from a different core way of being in the world” (114). Simpson carefully negotiates a definition of her worldview that is not necessarily in opposition to western literary traditions. Instead, she points out that western notions of literature are usually incongruous with Indigenous world views.

Although Neal McLeod shows that stories and language are an important point of connection within the Nêhiyaw worldview, he also suggests that this element of Nêhiyaw culture has been, and continues to be, threatened. He is explicit about the effect that revitalizing Cree narrative memory will have: “Part of decolonizing Cree consciousness is for collective narrative memory to be awakened” (*Cree Narrative Memory* 9). By adapting and revitalizing traditional Indigenous values that are threatened by colonialism, Indigenous poets are decolonizing. McLeod credits the “grandmothers and grandfathers” (10) with preserving the knowledge of the Cree people and dedicates his book to them (10). However, he also points out that the dramatic changes of the last century and a half have made it necessary to find other ways of documenting Cree narrative memory. He positions his book as a beginning of this documentation that ensures the continued health of Cree storytelling traditions within a settler-colonial context.

Ultimately, McLeod realizes that the colonial experience has changed Cree culture irrevocably, but parts of Cree culture have been preserved and will play an important part in the future. His book’s final section is called “Dialogue and Poetry: A Paradigm for Indigenous Theory.” Although it does not offer a direct discussion of poetry’s role in decolonization, it does clearly state that contemporary iterations of traditional Cree culture must be rooted in tradition to succeed.

It is through drawing on the best of our past traditions and the embodiment of contemporary experiences that we can move toward a dynamic future. This has organically happened in the past — the horse, syllabics, Christianity, farming —

but the adaptation of new elements has always been in relation to older ones.  
(100)

The concept of “adaptation” that McLeod brings up in this passage is the main way that decolonization is occurring in Indigenous communities. He draws our attention to the ways in which “the horse, syllabics, Christianity, farming” have been adapted into Indigenous ways of life. Based on the title that McLeod gives this section, referring to poetry, it seems that poetry is also one of the “contemporary experiences” that allow older traditions to live on.

For many Indigenous writers and scholars, it is difficult to overstate the importance that stories have in building relationships and drawing many elements of Indigenous culture together. However, as with all powerful things, the power does not move in only one way. In the introductory remarks of *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies*, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair comments that “Stories imagine, construct, and unify communities, but they can also deconstruct, destroy, and divide them” (“Making an Offering” xix). Sinclair usefully points out that stories can be used for both positive and negative purposes. He is speaking very broadly of stories at this point and is talking about the role that stories have beyond Indigenous contexts. He is also discussing the ways that stories, in their broadest sense, have been used to destroy Indigenous cultures. Thomas King says a similar thing: “Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous” (*The Truth About Stories* 9). Stories are especially loaded with significance in Indigenous contexts because not only are they powerful tools for decolonization, but they were once and continue to be used as tools of colonization. Thomas King further reflects on the way that manipulating the stories about Indigenous people has been harmful: “Somewhere along the way, we ceased being people and somehow became performers in an Aboriginal minstrel show for White North America” (68). Indigenous peoples use stories not only to reaffirm the strength of their cultures, but also to rectify the false stories that have been told about them. It is both

fitting and beautiful that Indigenous peoples are using stories to decolonize when much of the damage done to them was through different sorts of stories in the first place. Poetry is just one of the ways that these stories are being passed to future generations using contemporary media. Nevertheless, poetry seems to be a particularly apt form to transmit the orality that is so important to Indigenous stories.

### *Poetry as an Ally of Indigenous Oral Stories*

One of the questions at the heart of this thesis is why Indigenous artists use poetry, specifically, as the medium to translate their stories into. I suggest that poetry is an important method of transferring the unique energy of the oral to the written form. Neal McLeod is one Indigenous poet who also thinks that poetry offers an effective method of transmitting some of the energy of oral stories into written form. In *Cree Narrative Memory*, McLeod argues that rather than offering some sort of perfect translation from oral to written, poetry is an excellent medium in which the oral and the written can interact. He is freeing the work done by Indigenous writers from the binary opposition of written/oral and seeking a space in which they can intersect. In his closing thought on “Indigenous Theory” he explains that understanding Cree culture using Cree methods, in this case “Cree narrative imagination” (*Cree Narrative Memory* 98), is one way to develop a concept of “Indigenous theory” (98). This being said, he does admit that some may think that “‘theory’ is an inherently Western idea” (98). McLeod is resisting the oppositional relationship between European and Indigenous ways of thinking and “seeking a different possibility, trying to conceive of a different way in which people might live together” (98). He is seeking common ground where Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews can

coexist. The particular flexibilities and historical relationship of written poetry to oral forms of allow both written and oral to “live together” in printed poetry.

Poetry acts as an ally to Indigenous worldviews because it does not depend on either/or forms of understanding. In an essay written more recently than *Cree Narrative Memory*, McLeod calls this form of understanding, which evades the power of empirical reasoning, “thinking poetically” (“Cree Poetic Discourse” 89). This way of thinking is extremely useful when adapting Indigenous epistemologies into contemporary discourse. In reference to the damage done by forcing Indigenous studies into the models offered by the social sciences, McLeod affirms that “Thinking poetically involves moving away from the epistemological straitjacket and the colonial box that the social sciences have often placed on Indigenous narratives” (89). For McLeod, poetic thinking is a good way to decolonize research methodologies and create a connection with the living world. McLeod continues: “Cree poetics link human beings to the rest of the world through the process of *mamâhtâwisiwin*, the process of tapping into the Great Mystery” (89). Like many commentators on Indigenous literature, McLeod is emphasizing that connectedness to community and to a living world is the source from which Indigenous writing most often flows. McLeod is adamant that Cree poetics “are not a mimicry of colonial narrative structures but grounded in our own traditions and world views” (92). This is yet another iteration of the central principle of decolonization that prioritizes the agency and point of view of Indigenous peoples.

Although poetic thinking may facilitate a meeting place between settler and Indigenous worldviews, the paths that lead Indigenous poets to writing poetry originate in their own cultures. Throughout his work McLeod emphasizes that rather than copying western literary traditions, Indigenous poetry actually has its roots in oral storytelling. Duncan Mercredi provides a living

example of an Indigenous poet basing his work on the teachings of his ancestors. In a radio episode of *Revision Quest*, Mercredi says that stories, at least in the tradition that he learned, are to teach younger generations “how to go through life in a good way” (“Storytellers”). He traces his own practices as a poet and storyteller through a long line of storytellers. He says “My Kookum [grandmother] had chosen me to be the storyteller or, if you prefer, the keeper of the fire, and I still struggle with that task or gift she bestowed upon me” (“Achimo” 18). The metaphor of storyteller and fire keeper reinforces the life-giving, central role that stories play in Mercredi’s culture. In addition, it establishes how fragile and valuable stories are. If stories, like fires, are not carefully maintained and fed fuel, they will not survive.

Mercredi is firmly rooted in traditional practices. Even so, he illustrates the necessity of some form of adaptation within these practices if the stories are going to be preserved. He points out how different the circumstances are now from when he learned to be a storyteller: “My teachings came from the mouths of people whose ability to read was basic at best” (“Achimo” 18). Mercredi grew up in a storytelling environment that was almost entirely oral. He is among the few Indigenous storytellers in Canada who were trained in this way. He says that he “was held spellbound by these storytellers” (18) and their ability to master the spoken word. The challenge then remains of recreating the power that these ancestral storytellers maintained in a drastically different cultural context. Much has changed from the time that Mercredi learned to tell stories in Cree. Nevertheless, the importance of storytellers has not diminished and it is necessary to find a way to keep these stories, this fire, alive. Mercredi implies that poetry has a close relationship with storytelling, and that this may be the best medium for stories in contemporary times. He writes, “They were poets, these storytellers, whether they were aware of it or not. Each story they told had its own rhythm, rising and falling, melodic when required,

monotonic if it made the story more interesting” (20). Mercredi notes that stories are more than words collected in a certain order; their ability to teach and to entertain comes equally from the way that the story is told as it does from the words and content of the story. Poetry is able to transfer some of these important rhythms and melodies of oral stories into a literary culture that can preserve stories in printed form even if there is a generational disruption in the passing on of stories. Furthermore, poetry can be a space of adaptation where Indigenous stories that were once passed on through word of mouth can now be passed on through the written word.

The physical setting of Mercredi’s stories may change, but they are kept alive by retelling in new circumstances. As Mercredi recalls the life he once shared with his family, he remembers it based on the seasons:

Spring, the river breaks free  
loud, ice cracking like rifle fire  
we lie awake at nights listening  
imagination caught up in the story I tell  
about the war raging on the river  
all laugh when I am done (*Spirit of the Wolf* 3).

The stories that Mercredi told in his youth brought his family together and connected them to their natural surroundings. In the urban surroundings that make up the present setting of this poem it is a “concrete forest that surrounds” (3) the speaker and not a natural setting completed by the affection of family. Furthermore, the final stanza describes the speaker riding “the escalator with a remembering smile / while others watch me curiously / with fear” (3). The speaker resists this fear with his smile and “an almost forgotten tune” that says “good-bye, good-bye, we shall never forget” (3). Even though the natural surroundings are a memory in this poem, Mercredi is able to use the resonant cadences and vibrant images of poetry to recreate this natural world. He uses onomatopoeic words to describe the sounds of the natural world: “breaks” and “cracking like” (3). Furthermore, he echoes this hard “k” sound in “awake” (3) to gesture



towards the connection between the people listening and the effect the sounds on these listeners. By writing lineated poetry, Mercredi is encouraging his readers/listeners to pay close attention to more than the content of his poem. In a sense, we are asked to remember the “tune” of the poem as well. Even in the fearful, uncaring urban environment of this poem’s foreground, the speaker is able to transpose his memories using poetic form to bring comfort. Mercredi keeps the stories of his youth alive and vibrant in this hostile contemporary setting.

Although Mercredi is often able to transport his speakers to surroundings that are less impacted by the harm brought by settler-colonialism, he is under no illusions about settler-colonialism’s permanent effects on traditional Indigenous ways of life. “Immigrant born on this land” accurately bears witness to the painfully ironic situation of Indigenous people being made to feel like strangers in the place that has always been their home. The speaker gives a number of concrete examples of how Indigenous people feel as a result of settler-colonial structures being built up around them and once again he is using the inclusive “we.” He says “after all these years in this city / and in this country / we are the strangers and the aliens” (*Dreams of Wolf in the City* 58). Once again Mercredi reveals the shameful treatment Indigenous people receive for simply existing. He has “learned to anticipate trouble / that can strike anywhere, unexpectedly” (58). On the street, the speaker has abuse hurled at him “from passing cars about drunken indians / and easy squaws costing five bucks” (58). When the speaker goes into a “white bar” “searching for friendship,” he has bottles thrown at him (58). Mercredi once again uses the poem’s form to enumerate the indignities the speaker is suffering. He separates each lobbed insult onto its own line and the reader can see the impact created. The speaker is resigned to these experiences and has learned “to expect this treatment / more often than not / this is Canada / this is reality” (58). Although the speaker is in a position of surrender, his experiences are still being witnessed by

the reader. The bottles and insults being hurled in passing may not provide any openings for dialog, but poetry affords the speaker some opportunity to be heard.

The speaker of “scraps of paper” is also at odds with his surroundings as he attempts to keep the memories of people from a different time and place alive. Mercredi reveals the difficulty of translating real life into written form. The poem gets its title from the way the speaker documents “his memories” as he travels through an unfamiliar and unfriendly “towns and villages / dying under the prairie sky” (34). The memories that the speaker conjures up seem vivid enough: “pieces of lives etched in the headings of his mind” (*Spirit of the Wolf* 34). However, there is a problem transmitting these memories from the mind into the written form. Mercredi indicates that something important is lost in the change in medium from the real to the written occurring as the speaker writes down his memories. Mercredi writes, “he hears the same voices every where / only the faces have changed / but they all look alike on the scraps of paper” (35). For Mercredi there is a distinction between the faces the speaker sees. However, the act of writing homogenizes these memories. This is one of the first times that Mercredi expresses his distrust of the written word to accurately represent the spoken word. The words on the scraps of paper “scattered among his clothes” (35) are poor substitutes for the memories of people that these written words represent.

In “broken pen” Mercredi goes further in expressing his frustration with writing’s inability to express and honour the spiritual self. He begins: “can’t dream like this / drawing my path with broken pen” (*duke of windsor* 53). Although the pen is broken, it still seems to be the best option in the attempts to express his dreams. Mercredi adds, “you learn to adapt not assimilate / because to assimilate is to die spiritually” (53). The pen is something that has been adapted from settler culture as a tool of survival. Nevertheless, Mercredi looks back with

nostalgia at the connection he once shared with others: “we were connected you and i / though the word and glance were but an instant universe time” (53). Here Mercredi examines the fascinating way that the spoken word can only last for an instant. The question that he seems to be continually asking in this poem, and in his artistic practice in general, is whether something as priceless and intangible as the spoken word can be translated into a tangible form like printed poetry? Ultimately, the speaker’s decision to travel “that forbidden path” of settler practices leaves him “unable to flee / the door closing behind me” (53). There is no return to his traditional ways of dreaming and storytelling. The “broken pen,” at present, is as good as it gets.

Duncan Mercredi is clearly thinking about how to convey oral stories through printed poetry and some of the challenges that come along with this translation. Adding weight to the example Mercredi sets, Gregory Scofield, Annharte, and Marvin Francis are also thinking about printed poetry as a method of translating oral stories. Poetry has become a place where many of the important values of Indigenous cultures can, to a certain extent, be revitalized. Furthermore, in some of their poems it seems that this revitalization is a central, thematic concern. Gregory Scofield takes on the important issue of poetry’s form and its relationship to oral rhythms in his poem “Conversation with the Poet.” Annharte argues that writing poetry is an important method of re-energizing the oral tradition in “One Way to Keep Track of Who Is Talking.” In “Word Drummers,” Marvin Francis shows that Indigenous writers are rooted in their own traditions.

Scofield’s poem is a good example of how to conscientiously translate a Cree oral form into a written English form. He includes a note before the poem begins that explains some of the challenges of accurately representing Cree oral stories on the page. He mentions that the poem is in a voice much older than his own, “a voice whose thought process and first language is Cree” (*Kipocihkân* 104). Yet there are certainly some autobiographical facts included about his beloved

Aunty Georgina and his Mother Dorothy. What Scofield is also interested in with this poem is finding a way to honour the way that Cree elders speak through his writing. He concludes his note saying of the “old people,” “I am immediately drawn into their rhythms, the poetry of their voices” (104). This gravitation towards “the poetry” in the voices of storytellers is born out in the poem itself.

The poem switches between two different registers, marked by a line on the page. The first is a telling and retelling of hearing a poem “about a toothless Eskimo woman / in a bar” “at a reading/ of erotic poetry” (104). In his article “Conversation with the Poet: Who didn’t know my aunty,” Scofield describes the frustration he felt when he heard this poem being read just as he was beginning his career as a writer:

I felt like the dumb Metis kid with his pitiful collection of Indian love poems suddenly looking from the outside in, helplessly watching the Eskimo woman in the middle of the room being jabbed by their sticks of laughter, stripped naked by the long-ago verse of some self-important poet whose name is left to speculation and likely to the anonymity of colonial voyeurism. (“Conversation” 8)

Scofield outlines the long and poignant history of both real and literary abuse against Indigenous women in settler-colonial nations. Furthermore, he expresses his feelings of helplessness to redress this history. This first register of the poem expresses the history that is shared by far too many Indigenous women in settler-colonial contexts. However, Scofield is able to overcome these feelings of helplessness by telling the much more personal history of his Aunty and Mother.

The second register in the poem “Conversations with a Poet” is not lineated, but laid out like prose. It tells the story of the speaker’s “aunty” (104) and how the relationship between them was formed. Although it may first appear that these two registers are not connected, the connection becomes clearer as the poem progresses. It seems that the “Eskimo woman” is

symbolic of many different women and the traumas she faces are those faced by all of these women. Scofield writes that this woman “could be” “ni-châpan” (*my great-great-grandmother*), “ni-mâmâ” (*my mother*), “a kaskitewiyas-iskwew” (*a black woman*), “sekipatwâw-iskwew” (*a Chinese woman*), or “moniyâw-iskwew” (*a white woman*), “running from a white man, / any man” (105). Meanwhile the narrator recalls the abuse that aunty suffered at the hands of “a white man” (104). As the poem continues, it becomes clear that the stories are, in a broad sense, reflections of each other. They are each told carefully and the parts that are retold emphasize the importance of oral rhythms in this poem. Throughout, the speaker is open to various interpretations of the stories being recalled. It is with an attitude of humility and respect that this speaker concludes the poem:

This is as much as I am able to tell about my aunty. But there is another thing, one more thing you should know: I loved her very much and I still think of her whenever I am lonesome. ekosi, I am done. (109)

Here the speaker shows that stories cannot be contained by beginnings and endings. He contradicts himself, first saying that there is nothing else to say about his aunty and immediately afterwards telling us “one more thing” (109). When the speaker thanks his listener (“ekosi”), he says that he is done, not that the story is done. The story and the medium exist in different places. Although the speaking and the writing have stopped, the story can continue. The fluid disruptions and alterations to the story as the poem progresses allude to this oral character and honour the “poetry” (104) in the voices of Cree elders. Like Mercredi, Scofield’s poetry is clearly rooted in a traditional Indigenous worldview and he formulates the words on the page in such a way as to recreate some of the rhythms of Indigenous language and storytelling. Scofield’s poem is not drawing on settler forms of literature. Instead, it is based on the voices of Indigenous elders.

Annharte's poem "One Way to Keep Track of Who is Talking," from her path-setting first book *Being on the Moon*, addresses the privileged position that writing occupies and the way that Indigenous voices have been silenced. Annharte writes, "Counting hostile Indians is made easier because they / don't talk much" (*Being on the Moon* 78). She continues, "Frozen Indians and frozen conversations predominate" (78). Speaking of traditions and those lost at Wounded Knee, she concludes "Our frozen circles of silence / do no honor to them. We talk to keep our / conversations from getting too dead" (78). She uses line-breaks effectively to add weight to her content. There is a highly appropriate pause after the word "silence" and the line break at the word "our" creates suspense which maintains the listener's attention. What is also intriguing about these lines is that she is not advocating for some sort of thawing of these "frozen," "buried" traditions. She does not see these as elements that must be preserved in some sort of untouched form, but aspects of Indigenous culture that should inform current artistic practices. She is countering this silence with her writing and revitalizing oral traditions through her work. She draws this link directly, saying "Writing is / oral tradition. You have to practice the words on someone before writing it down" (78). Of course there are differences between the written and the oral, but it seems that Annharte is arguing that Indigenous writing is itself grounded in "oral tradition."

In his discussion of Annharte's poem, Peter Dickinson says that "The conversations echoing throughout *Being on the Moon* are necessarily hybrid, reflecting the uneasy entry of Indigenous oral storytelling traditions into print culture over the past one hundred years or so" (Dickinson 329). Although the postcolonial notion of hybridity has been questioned by decolonial criticism, Dickinson rightly points out that the "entry of Indigenous oral storytelling traditions into print culture" has been "uneasy" (329). Nevertheless, these traditions can, quite

organically, be adapted into a literary tradition. Like Mercredi, Halfe, and Scofield, Annharte uses her poetry to continue the traditions of oral storytelling. In fact, writing gains much of its strength from the oral tradition. In Annharte's thinking, oral storytelling is the place where a writer can "practice" the words before writing them down.

Marvin Francis' "**word drummers**" is a section of his long poem *city treaty* that I will return to in the final chapter. It is a passionate depiction of the work done by Indigenous writers. The reason it is important here is that it makes the convincing argument that Indigenous writers are not working within the boundaries of literature or settler-colonialism. Like the other poets, he shows that poetry is an extension of an already vibrant tradition of oral stories within Indigenous worldviews. He shows that Indigenous poets are producing texts in the sense that Walter Ong defines the word, as a weaving together of many cultural elements (Ong 13). The various binary oppositions created by settler culture are broken down by Francis:

walk in the bush narrative: upthen down around a tree  
sink in the muskeg heave frost splinters dodge a bear  
so there are no linear no  
straight lines in the bush  
the city only thinks so  
follow the word drummers to the city treaty (69).

Throughout Francis' work the city is symbolic of the control settler-colonialism has over Indigenous people. Francis proposes that the "word drummers," who are a group of Indigenous writers, are showing the way out of these enclosing structures by creating a "bush narrative" that refuses "straight lines." This is mirrored in Francis' intentional evasion of normative structures in his poetry. He includes larger than usual spaces between some words for added effect. He also refuses the justification of either left or right and often uses center alignment. This choice of alignment is very suitable for this poem because it seems make a fitting pun on the lack of "straight lines in the bush" (69). Far from working from within what Leanne Simpson calls

“Western Literary Traditions” (Simpson 114) and Neal McLeod calls “colonial narrative structures” (“Cree Poetic Discourse” 92), Francis returns to “the muskeg” and is one of many writers creating a “bush narrative” (*city treaty* 69). The “word drummers” are working from within Indigenous models of narrative to restore Indigenous cultures through contemporary media.

Indigenous poets are acutely aware of the various challenges facing storytellers who wish to write down their stories. On the one hand, the speaking of Nêhiyawewin and Anishinaabemowin has decreased drastically as a result of residential schools and other forms of institutionalized racism. Furthermore, Indigenous languages have had to adapt from orally-based to literary-based while direct assaults on the very existence of Indigenous languages were underway. Nishnaabeg<sup>9</sup> writer Leanne Simpson explains that there are significant challenges translating sacred Nishnaabeg oral stories into writing:

the textualized versions of these stories were often riddled with problems. I found it difficult to see Michi Saagiik Nishnaabeg values embedded in them—gentleness, the demonstration of non-authoritarian power, respect for individual difference, and non-interference. Instead they were laden with Judeo-Christian moralistic teachings, punitive acts, objective truth, and, and violence—a layer I had not experienced in the presence of Elders and oral storytellers. (Simpson 110)

Nevertheless, it seems like a certain amount of textualization is still necessary. Mercredi is among those who see potential in poetry to transmit as much of the energy of the oral as possible into written form.

A group of non-Indigenous scholars, known as the ethno-poets, have been working on this transition from orally-based Indigenous languages to a written form. Like Mercredi and McLeod, they argue that this translation best accomplished with the use of lineated poetry. Dell Hymes provides the most helpful understanding of what ethno-poetics is trying to accomplish. His

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<sup>9</sup> I adopt Simpson’s spelling in this instance



influential book *"In vain I tried to tell you"* derives its title from a warning given by daughter to her mother who cannot properly interpret a story. Hymes says, "If we refuse to consider and interpret the surprising facts of device, design, and performance inherent in the words of the texts, the Indians [sic] who made the texts, and those who preserved what they made, will have worked in vain" (*"In vain"* 5). Hymes is making the observation that a story does not consist of words alone, but also of the way in which the words are delivered. Ethnopoetics is primarily about translating as much of the oral character as possible from the story into written form. Hymes says, "poetic purpose is to come as close as possible to the intended shape of the text in order to grasp as much as possible of the meanings embodied in this shape" (*"In vain"* 7). In his later book *Now I Know So Far*, Hymes is more precise about what he means by "poetic purpose." He writes, "oral narratives are organized in terms of lines, of patterned sequences of lines" (*Now I Know* vii). He also adds in his preface that by understanding Indigenous stories as a series of lines rather than paragraphs "we can recapture something of the actual artistry and creativity of the originals" (11).

In his article from the early 1990's, "Orality in Literacy: Listening to Indigenous Writing," Peter Dickinson provides a number of helpful observations for reading Indigenous texts that are based in oral traditions. He says, many Indigenous texts "at once give voice to Indigenous memory systems long silenced by the history of imperialism, and transform the usually solitary reading experience into a more cooperative and responsive act of listening" (Dickinson 320). Dickinson's notion of listening to Indigenous texts rather than reading them in solitude relieves some of the pressure on Indigenous writers to translate the oral to the written. He also adds that "the call for 'responsive listening' requires White critics like myself to shift the ontology of meaning in literary criticism from its location in a fixed written text to a larger social

space that includes the text but also the discursive context” (332). Rather than relying entirely on the complete translation from the oral to the written, Dickinson is suggesting that critics need to respond to the broader oral context that Indigenous texts exist within.

Margery Fee also challenges some of the notions that are taken for granted in the work of the ethnopoets, especially the assumption of the oppositional relationship between the written and the oral. Fee writes that Indigenous “texts destabilize the conventional Western distinction between oral and written” (Fee 25). Fee argues that there can never be a complete translation from the oral to the written and that “textual markers of orality substitute for the near-extinct Aboriginal language and the writer takes on the mantle of the oral story-teller” (24). She expands on this notion saying,

Indigenous writers face the uphill battle of having to identify, as usual, with the stigmatized half of the opposition; not only are their cultures Other, but so are those means of cultural production most closely allied with these cultures in both popular and scholarly thought. Finally, they are required to disseminate their words in print, rather than speech, and in English, rather than in a native language (Fee 26).

So, the opposition against Indigenous writers being able to accurately express themselves through their writing is daunting. However, this formidable opposition does not stop Indigenous writers from using everything at their disposal to ensure their survival. Fee concludes that “What unites Indigenous writers across cultures is a common desire to preserve Indigenous cultures against the totalizing monoculture of capitalist development, to valorize their cultures and to thus promote the struggle for Indigenous political control of their institutions, traditional territories and social practices” (33). Indigenous poetry is at the forefront of this struggle and has a number of advantages over prose in representing the oral source from which most Indigenous stories come.

As mentioned in my introduction, there are some stark limitations to this movement of representing North American Indigenous language oral texts in written form<sup>10</sup>. However, both Dickinson and Fee provide some moderation to the rather raw and wrongheaded ambition of the ethnopoets to create a perfect translation. Dickinson places significant responsibility on the reader to recognize that there can never be a perfect translation of the oral to the written and read from within that context. Fee argues that Indigenous writers are fighting against significant odds by having to doubly translate their work, both in language and from oral to written. Nevertheless, the work of Jerome Rothenberg, Dennis Tedlock, and Dell Hymes seems to have some fitting methods of producing texts that more effectively represent their oral beginnings. Dennis Tedlock helps to conceptualize the shift from oral to written by pointing out that there is a possibility “of fixing *words* without making visible marks” (Tedlock 233, emphasis his). It is possible to memorize stories without the aid of writing them down. Memorization, technically speaking, is not a form of documentation, but it has the same effect of preserving a story for a long time. In his short piece “Achimo,” Duncan Mercredi confirms this when he speaks of his Kookum (grandmother) teaching him to be a storyteller and making him do chores for each mistake he would make while telling a story (“Achimo” 19). His Kookum would say “How you remember the story and how you tell it has consequences that could last a lifetime — remember that” (19). Mercredi was part of a process of what Tedlock calls “fixing *words* without making visible marks” (Tedlock 233, emphasis his) and the importance of doing this was certainly not lost on him. The fixation that the practitioners of ethnopoetics have with originals, authenticity, and total

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<sup>10</sup> Jerome Rothenberg in particular suggests that it is possible to achieve “total translation” (Rothenberg xvii) from the oral to the written. While Indigenous storytellers, such as Mercredi, do seem to think that poetry is one of the better written forms to represent oral stories, they are still deeply dissatisfied with what is left out when stories are translated from oral to written. The notion of “total translation” simply goes too far in stating the effectiveness of written poetry as it attempts to represent oral stories on the page.

translation seems to be based in European epistemologies, but they do convincingly point out that arranging oral stories into lines is an effective way to transmit some of the character of oral stories.

As much as the thinking of Mercredi and the ethnopoets may seem to align, it is important to note that Mercredi is still very hesitant to embrace the notion that writing can express the same nuance as the spoken word. Mercredi clearly expresses his concern about writing down oral stories in his piece “Achimo” from *Indigenous Poetics in Canada*. With reference to stories collected by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Mercredi says “They were poetic, with a rhythm that would rise and fall, depending on the emotion in which the story was told” (“Achimo” 21). However, he questions how effectively these emotions can be transmitted onto the page: “Will that same emotion, that same rhythm, be captured on the written page? I’m not sure unless you happened to be there to hear the story first hand” (21). He further warns against “too much interference from those who will be editing the stories” (21). Mercredi’s own experiences with attempts at translating Nêhiyawaywin to English and the oral to the written have led him to the conclusion that there cannot be a complete translation. The best that can be hoped for is a gesture towards the emotional and rhythmic signs that are so obviously present in oral stories when these stories are written down. Based on Mercredi’s own practices as a poet, it seems that using line breaks gives him a significant link to the oral.

This link to the oral is a good place to conclude the discussion of Mercredi’s poetry. Despite the suspicions and frustrations with the written word’s ability to convey the energy and sense of the spoken word, Mercredi is able to honour orality in his writing. Furthermore, he looks to a time beyond the here and now when Indigenous ways will survive and the systems of settler-colonialism will not. His poem “racing across the land” is one of his transposed stories. It is structured around the repeated line “long after you are gone” (*duke of windsor* 40). This line

works very well to establish the rhythms of an oral story through repetition and the contextualization of time. The sense that this poem conveys is that the environments that Indigenous people seek to honour in their ways of life will remember them. On the other hand, this same land will not remember the settlers who attempted to shape and change the environment. Mercredi writes:

long after you are gone  
the cities you have built  
hoping to leave as your legacy  
will crumble and fall  
becoming dust on the land  
scattered in the four directions  
and the prairie grass will bend  
to the wind once more  
and my spirit will join  
the buffalo  
racing across the land  
our dance pounding across the land  
long after you are gone (40)

Here Mercredi uses the mnemonic device of repetition to assert the connection between Indigenous people and the land they live on. By repeating the phrase “long after you are gone,” Mercredi is fixing the phrase in the mind of the reader. Repetition is not as commonly used in written texts as it is in oral texts, because the act of writing in and of itself is a mnemonic device. This technique of repetition decreases the reliance on the physical existence of the text and is much more likely to gain the permanence that comes with a phrase being fixed in the mind of reader rather than on the page of a book. This sort of repeated phrase is like “the prairie grass,” the speaker’s “spirit,” and “the buffalo / racing across the land” because its permanence is not dependent on the survival of something physical, like a book. On the other hand, “the cities [settlers] have built / hoping to leave as [their] legacy / will crumble and fall” (40). Mercredi is privileging an Indigenous worldview that acknowledges the permanence of cyclicity in the

natural world over the false permanence of human constructions. He is writing down these words, but they are only a representation of their truer, oral form.

### *Practicing Poetry as Stories*

So far the discussion has focused on the most effective methods of translating oral stories into written form and the role that storytelling has played and continues to play within Indigenous worldviews. Both Nêhiyaw and Anishinaabe thinkers place storytelling and conceptualizing the world through story at the center of their worldviews. As with traditional understandings of the role of medicine in Indigenous cultures, colonization has meant significant changes to the way that stories are shared among Indigenous peoples. Nevertheless, Indigenous poets have wholeheartedly embraced the challenge of adapting storytelling from their traditional cultures into new media. The remainder of this chapter will focus on direct examples of oral stories being adapted into printed poetry. Mercredi's Wolf poems provide a powerful metaphor that illuminates the precarious position of Indigenous people in contemporary urban environments. He also asserts that Cree worldviews may have been attacked by systems of settler-colonialism, but they survive as long as the land and its people are here to tell their stories. Finally, the chapter concludes with some brief examples from Halfe, Scofield, Annharte, and Francis of the different ways in which it is possible to decolonize by translating oral stories into written poetry.

Neal McLeod has already established the precedent of Indigenous peoples' adaptability and willingness to incorporate new elements into their worldviews (*Cree Narrative Memory* 100). Duncan Mercredi gives further evidence of the adaptability and collaboration present in his storytelling traditions. In the episode of *Revision Quest* featuring Mercredi, he admits that the

legends suffer in translation and that some of the meaning is lost when they are not told in Cree. However, he also notes that new technologies do not necessarily kill the oral character of Indigenous storytelling and that many key elements of storytelling live on in music such as rap and hip-hop (“Storytellers”). Furthermore, Mercredi gives us an understanding of the collaborative nature of storytelling within a Métis context. He describes the tradition of Rougarou stories as an adaptation of werewolf stories from European, especially French, traditions into Métis cultural practices (“Oral Stories”). There is no aversion to combining elements from both European and Indigenous stories. In fact, Métis storytelling values variation<sup>11</sup>, and many of the stories Mercredi tells have multiple endings. In each of the Rougarou stories that Mercredi told during his visit to a first year university class, he asked the students to guess different ways that the story could end. He explains that this practice of ending stories in a variety of different ways comes from the Métis tradition of sitting in a semicircle and having each person in the group add or change the details of the story as it comes to them. Remarkably, the idea of authenticity and even authorship is discarded in favour of a collaborative form of storytelling where there is little distinction between audience and author. Given this account of how some Indigenous stories are told collaboratively, it makes good sense that storytellers would have little hesitation when it comes to adapting some stories into printed poetic form. Mercredi is an important example of a storyteller who chooses poetry as the written form to best represent his oral stories.

Mercredi’s fascination with wolves could very well stem from the Rougarou stories that he was told in his youth and in turn passes along to other generations. Throughout his four books

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<sup>11</sup>Note that certain stories, especially sacred stories that Mercredi was taught by his Kookum, had to be remembered with perfect accuracy. Mercredi discussed both the idea that certain stories had to be fixed and that others could be altered depending on the type of story and the occasion in his guest lecture of Warren Cariou’s ENGL 1300 class (“Oral Stories”).

of poetry “wolf” is an omnipresent character. Each collection title includes “wolf”: *Spirit of the Wolf Raise Your Voice*, *Dreams of Wolf in the City*, *Wolf and Shadows*, and *the duke of windsor wolf sings the blues*. Much like an oral story being translated into written form, “wolf” is always a character at odds with his surroundings. In the title poem “dreams of wolf in the city,” wolf is “disturbed by passing cars and sirens” (*Dreams* 3). He witnesses the “dangers hidden under manicured lawns” from safety and does not go out until “midnight” (3). Wolf is in the precarious position of being both fearful of and feared by those who encounter him on the streets. Furthermore, he stands in as a powerful metaphor for Indigenous people and the position that they occupy between their traditional cultures and the cultural constructions of settler-colonialism.

Wolf’s position of being caught in-between traditional and contemporary ways of life is a constant threat. Wolf is dreaming and “he watches a casket lowered into the earth / full of needle marks and stripped bare of trees / earth mother trembles beneath wolf’s feet / and he feels anguish” (3). The casket being lowered effectively symbolizes the death of Indigenous people and their ways of life. These images begin to explain why this death has come about: the “earth mother” is being plundered for her resources, which leaves Indigenous peoples with no way to live. This poem illustrates that the wolf, like Indigenous people, must survive in drastically altered, unfriendly surroundings: “the forest turns to concrete under his feet / and trails turn to back alleys” (3). For a moment, wolf is able to believe that all of these terrifying images are “but a dream” (4). However, “the fears of the strangers in daylight’s brightness / are magnified in newspaper headlines / dreams of the wolf in the city are real” (4). The fear of strangers encountering the speaker of this poem and the treatment of Indigenous people in the media are all too real. Settler-colonial society may try its best to ignore the presence of Indigenous peoples,



especially in urban settings, but through the establishment of the wolf as a metaphor for Indigenous people, Mercredi compels his reader to understand how painfully displaced Indigenous people are.

Mercredi is even more explicit in his comparison of the wolf and Indigenous people in his poem “we are wolf.” He adopts the plural first person saying “we are wolf / hunted to near extinction / driven deeper into our past” (*Duke of Windsor* 28). Mercredi expresses the sadness of having rich Indigenous cultures being repressed. Indigenous people are “forced to dance in secret / to a silent drum” and “unable to shape ourselves / in our past image” (28). Mercredi’s tone is full of irony when he explains the Indigenous position of being forced to assimilate:

white on brown or death  
our reward  
for being here  
when others arrived (28).

Just as wolves are forced out of their habitats for simply being, Mercredi points out that Indigenous people have been on the receiving end of a legacy of injustice brought over by settlers:

judged by old world laws  
by strangers with tainted gifts  
who fled the injustice  
and persecution  
to pass it down on us (28).

Mercredi comes back to this metaphor repeatedly because it so effectively transmits the sense of helplessness present in the face of settler-colonialism. The short, matter-of-fact lines of this poem seem to point out the exasperation of voicelessness as settler-colonialism continues to dehumanize Indigenous people despite their hospitality and willingness, at least initially, to share this land. As the unifying “we” of this poem watches the city rising “to the sky / we looked and

howled / in anger” (28). There is nothing left to say to settlers because the settlers have displaced the Indigenous people and do not treat them with human dignity.

As Mercredi notes in the poem that precedes “we are wolf,” the howl is all that remains to accurately convey a frustrated Indigenous person’s position. He confides in his audience that “i have nothing left to say / to them / that came suddenly / silently flying on water” (27). The settlers came “with shiny gifts and pretty beads / full of promises” (27). These promises along with the “rule of their god” (27) are broken. God, who is to a certain extent constructed as an ally in this poem, is ultimately “abandoned” (27) by this settler culture. The infuriating situation has left nothing to say because settler-society is unable to hear it. The story of colonization in Canada is not being listened to and the voices are reduced to a howl.

In “the sun rises red”, the connection between wolves and displaced Indigenous peoples is further expanded upon. In this poem it is “wolves’ songs” that are “calling me from the past / to tell our stories to the world / but the world has closed their minds” (14). Here the wolves are actually calling the speaker to share his stories. However, the speaker in this poem, like the wolf of “Dreams of Wolf in the City,” is at odds with his surroundings and doing all he can merely to survive. The speaker is furious that the situation has come so far and that earlier Indigenous people were welcoming to settlers.

i curse the ones that gave them help  
to let them live among us  
as we watched them push us to the brink  
and let us straddle the edge of death  
then blame us for their sins (14).

This is one of Mercredi’s bleakest and most hopeless poems. Not only are Indigenous people pushed to the very edge of survival, but they are blamed for the situation that they find themselves in. Although the red sunrise is a harbinger of doom for Indigenous peoples and “the

wolves' songs have gotten weaker" (15), the instructions of these songs are unequivocal: the stories from the past offer solutions to present problems brought on by settler-colonialism. The reason this poem seems to be without hope is that these stories are not being attended to and are even actively resisted. Mercredi writes, "they hunt us down / to silence our truths" (14). This poem is yet another depiction of Indigenous peoples being forced from their home and way of life. Poetry has become one of the last spaces where Mercredi can express the value of telling traditional stories.

Mercredi also uses poetry to transmit the energy of the natural world without the painful intrusion of urban realities. His poem "Ma-he-can (Wolf)," paints a picture of an animal that is free and unaware of being watched. Mercredi shows us his brother while he is hunting a rabbit. Mercredi says "ma-he-can never misses the rabbit's turns / he could lunge and snap the rabbit's neck / but he waits" (*Spirit of the Wolf* 13). Mercredi transmits some of the sounds and rhythms of the natural world through his lines. Once again he uses onomatopoeia in his phrase "snap the rabbit's neck". He also uses his lines to mimic the movements he describes. In the above lines Mercredi is describing the sudden turns and movements of both the rabbit and the wolf.

Appropriately, each line redirects the readers' attention. First we have the two longer lines which fluidly describe the animals' rapid movements. The pace of the poem is redirected and abruptly halted by the three measured monosyllables "but he waits" (13). Ma-he-can's "mournful cry" comes in place of the expected kill as "he trots away, glancing back only once / he is not hungry tonight / the run was only for the joy of life" (13). Here is another reminder that the traditions Mercredi is referring to are deeply connected to the natural world. Mercredi is able to echo not only the cadences of storytelling through lineated verse, but also the rhythms and sounds of the natural world.

The tragedy in Mercredi's poetry can be measured by the magnitude of the fall that wolf and Aboriginal people have suffered as a result of being forced into the city. The title poem from Mercredi's third book, *Wolf and Shadows*, is another poem that documents this painful, unnatural space that wolf inhabits. "Wolf and Shadows" begins with a question: "what are you becoming brown warrior?" (*Wolf and Shadows* 3). The sense of loss in this poem is profound and once again the powerful metaphor of wolf standing in for Indigenous people is at work in the background:

after you lost the trail  
on city streets and back alleys  
full of shadows and blues  
oh how they tempted you with that back  
alley song and neon lights (3).

There are no wolves walking along the back alleys of Winnipeg, but Mercredi continues to use this metaphor of wolf being an Indigenous person to drive home the notion of just how unwelcome Indigenous people are made to feel in the city and indeed in a settler-colonial society. This is one of the major contributions that Mercredi makes to help people understand the all too common combination of fear and hatred that Indigenous people feel in Canada. Mercredi wonders if wolf saw "this vision as a child / through spruce boughs and shadows" (3). There is a sense of the inevitable here. Although it is clear that wolf has suffered an invasion of his natural territory ("spruce boughs") and is in that sense a victim, he is also feared because he is "brown warrior" (3). It is inevitable that wolf will be hunted for no other reason than that he exists. Wolf must learn to adapt, just as Indigenous people learn to adapt to new surroundings. A part of this adaptation and survival is finding an effective way to tell both traditional stories and the stories of how things have changed. For Mercredi, poetry is an important element in this adaptation.

Another of Mercredi's poems that deals with the deep-seated fear settlers have for Indigenous people is "A Remembering Smile". Once again, this poem features a speaker who longs for a past, traditional way of life amid a hostile urban environment. Mercredi writes, "I walk the streets / full of strangers with eyes distant / unseeing" (*Spirit of the Wolf* 2). These strangers watch Mercredi "curiously / with fear" (3). Nevertheless, the narrator is smiling

a remembering smile

Recalling happier times  
long time ago  
distant  
still hearing the river  
the river wild and free  
alive (2)

Although the fearful settler reacts negatively to the spectral history that an Aboriginal person walking the streets can conjure up, Mercredi responds to this fear with his own "secret" (2), positive memories. He knows that the time of his *nokum* skinning rabbits and squirrels is gone (2). He knows that the rivers of Manitoba are only shadows of what they used to be, but the spirit of what once was, is still alive in his mind. In a sense, Mercredi is retelling the story of his origins as a method of coping with the fear and hatred of those who surround him. Even though he is in a vastly altered environment from the one he grew up in, the speaker is able to adapt the story to keep it alive.

Mercredi's poetry has the ability reclaim stories and images from the past. "Hope" and "in moccasins" are poems from Mercredi's first collections that allude to the maintenance of traditional ways. These are poems full of the joy that is expressed through dancing. "Hope" is a poem recalling a dream: "I dreamt of dark haired people / dancing to the beat of one heart" (*Spirit of the Wolf* 70). It conveys the joy of connectedness between generations and animal brothers and sisters. Mercredi writes, "babies clutched at *kookum*'s hands / as they moved slowly

slowly around / touching hugging kissing everyone” (70). The lack of punctuation further emphasizes the lack of inhibition and the joy in connectedness that this scene portrays. Additionally, the rhythm created by the repetition of words and the division of these phrases into lines echoes the rhythm of a dance. It is not only the people who are dancing in this circle: “Wolves danced among the people / one with them” (70). Once again Mercredi is emphasizing the deep connection that his people share with wolves, but this time they are connected by their celebration rather than commiseration. It could also be a very timely counterpoint to the problematic representations of Indigenous people offered by the film *Dances with Wolves*, which was released in the same year as this book of poetry. When this dream is over the speaker “woke with hope” (70). This dream may not come to pass outside of the dream world, but to a certain extent it is realized through the poem.

“in moccasins” does not incorporate dancing with wolves, but it does once again transmit the energy and joy of connectedness that the dancers feel. This time the poem expresses Indigenous culture’s ability to survive as the speaker looks at a man and a woman dancing “in moccasins” (26). Mercredi writes, “he dances in the old way” and “she dances in the old way” (26). Both of these figures are dignified with their heads “held high” (26). They are vibrant with “teeth flashing” and an “ankle length dress colorful” (26). Although this poem does not explicitly convey the hope that is felt in the previously discussed poem, the sense of hope is conveyed in the bearing of the dancers. They are honouring tradition in contemporary times and there is no shame in what they do. They are literally grounded, dancing “in moccasins” (26).

Mercredi seeks to be transported to a previous time and place and expresses this through his poetry. “yesterday’s song” expresses this longing quite succinctly, saying “i wish i could slip into muskeg and spruce” (*duke of windsor* 57). The speaker’s “feet are concrete hardened” and

his “spirit tells stories of neon and blues” (57). Despite the urban influences of Mercredi’s poetry, the presence of the traditional ways of life is always at its core. The speaker concludes by saying “i am the son of muskeg and spruce / i still dance to the music of yesterday” (57). Once again Mercredi is bearing witness to the difficult position that Indigenous people find themselves in. However, unlike many of his “wolf” poems, the subject here is not specifically the alienation that the speaker feels by being at odds with his surroundings. Instead this poem seems to focus more on the way in which the speaker has been able to adapt traditional ways of life so that they can survive in contemporary times.

An even more striking example of the adaptation of traditional Indigenous cultures into poetry is the poem that begins *the duke of windsor*, “street poetry.” To a certain extent the entire collection is dedicated to the creation of alliances between different musical forms, especially the blues. The title is referring to a bar in Winnipeg that was often a blues venue. However, “street poetry” refers to an even more contemporary musical form: hip-hop. In the CBC radio program *Revision Quest*, Mercredi comments that he thinks the younger generation is keeping traditional stories alive through rap and hip-hop (“Storytellers”). This poem seems to be an homage to the work being done by this younger generation. It begins, “red style rez style / indian territory / inner city red terror / as portrayed on city evening news” (*duke of windsor* 3). Mercredi is employing both slang and rhythms that are not typical of his poetry. He is portraying an urban Indigenous setting that is contemporary and very much rooted in present Indigenous culture. He is writing “street poetry” (4). However, this poetry is also a continuance of traditional Indigenous cultures:

even rez time blues lovers  
can understand my story  
while trying to analyse written thoughts  
with european assimilated english use

i dream in cree and north  
smelling of muskeg, spruce and cedar  
my fire burns into this land i stand on  
from birth to death  
to death to life  
a circle never ending (4).

Here we clearly see Mercredi's willingness to adapt his stories into written English. He certainly acknowledges the violence done to his Cree dreaming by translating it into written English, but he is working to overcome this barrier. He is translating his stories so that current generations will be able to access the power of the land that has always been the life source for Indigenous people. Colonization attempted to destroy Indigenous worldviews that hold the connection to the land they control. Duncan Mercredi's poetry resists this colonization by reasserting that his existence in this place and the existence of all Indigenous peoples is a cycle independent of colonial influence.

Louise Halfe is also concerned about how stories are passed down through younger generations. As Neal McLeod notes, Halfe's *The Crooked Good* "links a contemporary understanding to a past understanding" ("Cree Poetic Discourse" 98). McLeod emphasizes that bridging the past into the future is an important part of "mamâhtâwisiwin, tapping into the Great Mystery" (101). Halfe's most recent book of poetry is perhaps the most complex, with an ability to connect the oral past to a literary present and future through several generations of Nêhiyaw women. At its core, *The Crooked Good* is a retelling of the traditional Cree narrative of *cihcipistikwân* (Rolling Head). The bare elements of this story are told in a mother's voice to her children in the relatively short section "Listen: To The Story" (*Crooked Good* 22-29). In this section the origins of *cihcipistikwân* are explained; a jealous husband kills his wife by severing her head once he learns that she has been unfaithful to him. Yet *cihcipistikwân* follows her sons and calls for them to return to her, even when all she can do is roll along the ground collecting



burs in her hair. Halfe's retelling of this story is multi-faceted and relates this traditional story from a number of distinct points of view. The words of the mother telling the tale are in italics, while the description of the children listening to this story are interspersed with the story itself. As McLeod accurately describes, "Halfe radically questions the way in which *cihcipistikwân* (Rolling Head) has been told and urges us to recover the hidden female voice, which has been shattered and altered by colonialism and Christianity" ("Cree Poetic Discourse" 95). Although Halfe is deeply grounded in Cree narrative tradition, she is not presenting it statically. Instead, she decolonizes this story by showing that it is very much alive within contemporary Cree culture by putting her own inflections on the story and framing it with a number of poetic devices.

The main framing device that we encounter in *The Crooked Good* is "the story-sharer" (40), *ê-kwêskît*. She is conscious of the translations going on and comments on the writing process, including the challenges that face her as she attempts to translate this oral Cree narrative into a written form. Near the beginning of the work she sets the scene of her writings space with "three binders, / bellies ink-filled" (5). She also expresses her "terror" about how to represent the stories accurately: "I am hungry for voice, though I live in terror. Unsure what shape will arrive" (5). Later on, in her writing space once again, she conveys the difficulty of representing the real world through writing:

At dawn in the warmth of my office  
I attempt to breath this straw, give pine form, a  
shape to thought. Too often I think it will not  
materialize. (18)

Halfe is aware that it is not only the difficulties of writing that challenge her story, but also the difficulty of translation from the oral to the written as well as *Nêhiyawewin* to English. Halfe notes that "Ears witnessed this story my mother, *aspin*, / unfurled" (22). There is no trace but

memory to account for this story and these experiences. It seems that this retelling is also resistant to its own form. The speaker writes, “My room is filled with unruly books” (97). Books are a cumbersome way of documenting what “ears witness.” Even so, much of this book has necessarily been translated into English. ê-kwêskî’s mother aspin observes that “English doesn’t name these pains” (42). There is no way to completely translate languages and media. Nevertheless, Halfe finds a way to honour traditional stories and to keep them vital in contemporary times.

Halfe is certainly not flippant about these translations she makes. At a few points in *The Crooked Good* she recognizes that a significant departure from tradition has been made. One such departure is telling sacred stories in the wrong season. When looking back with regret on the devastating effects residential school has had on her family, aspin comforts herself saying, “*At least I gave them winter stories*” (41). Towards the end of the book ê-kwêskî comments on the reasoning for stories being told in the winter. In other seasons, she says, “I don’t have / time to tell you a story. To have you listen” (111). Only in the winter is there enough spare time to pay the close attention needed for storytelling. Nevertheless, these stories are written down and thus, beyond the control of the teller. They can be read at any time. Even so, it seems that there is something much more powerful than the desire for an accurate depiction of a story driving Halfe to write this book. Exasperated, ê-kwêskî says, “I never said I was sane. / I share the story as I witnessed it. / Listen for Chrissake” (79). There is no sense that the story is clinically preserved so that it can be deemed pure or authentic. Like the teller, the story has been deeply effected by settler contact. ê-kwêskî confesses, “I am Bernadette. Christianized. Colonized. / Confirmed. Bernadette. Don’t tell / anybody. I like *ê-kwêskî* better” (83). The “story-sharer” is reclaiming her identity, but also acknowledging a history of colonialism. ê-kwêskî means “Turn-around

Woman” (3). At the start of the narrative ê-kwêskît invites the reader to “tell me / after you hear this story / if my name suits me” (3). In the sense that ê-kwêskît has reclaimed a story from her past and a new identity, her name suits her very well. Both she and her story have turned around.

Walter Ong helps us to understand why a book like *The Crooked Good*, which is so deeply indebted to piecing together the oral and the written, can be helpfully described as a text.

He writes,

‘Text’, from a root meaning ‘to weave’, is in absolute terms, more compatible etymologically with oral utterance than is ‘literature’, which refers to letters etymologically / (*litterae*) of the alphabet. Oral discourse has commonly been thought of even in oral milieus as weaving or stitching — [...] to ‘rhapsodize’, basically means in Greek ‘to stitch songs together’. (Ong 13)

As Halfe translates this story from its many disparate parts into a single text, she is aware that the book can never be complete. It seems that there is always more to add to the text. She writes, “The Old Man said the universe, / the day, was the story. So, / every day I am born” (*Crooked Good* 4). Things as expansive as the universe and as fleeting as a daily new birth cannot be captured or tamed in the form of a book. Halfe conveys this sense of building a story one small piece at a time when she talks about building the sweat lodge, which is referred to as “Rib Woman” throughout the text. Halfe writes, “I learned how to build Rib Woman / one willow at a time, one skin at a time. / I am only half done. This is part of the story” (4). Halfe adds, “I build this story like my lair. One willow, / a rib at a time. Bent it into my hip, grounded into earth” (6). The notions of the story being incomplete and “grounded into the earth” are central to the work that Halfe is doing. She is resisting the colonial imposition stating that Indigenous tradition is something immutable from the past. Jud Sojourn’s doctoral thesis argues that “*The Crooked Good* reinvigorates the old ways, meanwhile both forwarding and foretelling the continued restoration and empowerment of the people” (Sojourn 165). Halfe shows that oral stories are not

frozen in the past, but are still a part of the present and moving into the future. This is especially clear as she concludes her book with a reminder that each day is a beginning: “*I’m earth / born each moon*” (124). She has adapted the story of *cihcipistikwân* into poetry so that it will stay vital and continue with each lunar cycle.

One important aspect of decolonizing is the adaptation of traditional Indigenous worldviews into contemporary media. Mercredi, Halfe, Scofield, Annharte, and Francis are not trying to recreate a pre-colonial state of being for Indigenous peoples. Instead, they are revitalizing the stories of their rich cultures by translating them into poetry. Along with Indigenous notions of medicine and ceremony, stories are extremely powerful. To access this power and use it to bring about changes in our settler-colonial society, stories must not be static and frozen artifacts from the past, but living entities that inform our daily lives. Poetry seems to be one of the best methods for translating stories into contemporary culture. Both medium (the insistence of many Indigenous writers on using poetry to tell their stories) and message (an overwhelming number of speakers placed in opposition to their urban surroundings) indicate that traditional oral stories can have a home in printed poetry.

## Chapter Three

### Poetry as Ceremony

An integral aspect of being Indigenous in a settler society is to maintain the connectedness among all things. Along with medicine and stories, ceremony is an important aspect of Indigenous culture that helps maintain and reassert these connections to ensure that Indigenous cultures move beyond survival and into a state of thriving. This chapter argues that Indigenous poets are using printed poetry as a form of ceremony that creates a spiritual connection between the people who take part in the ceremony and the spaces they live in. This translation of ceremony into a printed poetic form is yet another example of the various ways that Indigenous poets are expressing a broader sense of who they are through their work and resisting the notion that art is something separate from daily life. The reality is that there is no separate category for art in most Indigenous worldviews. As is the case with medicine and stories, settler-colonialism has given rise to attacks on the rights of Indigenous peoples to practice their ceremonies. However, Indigenous poets have found remarkable methods for adapting ceremony into their poetry and maintaining a strong connection to their traditional values. This chapter will explore the ways that ceremony has been adapted into contemporary society through the work of Indigenous poets. I focus on the poetry of Gregory Scofield because he most clearly considers his work to be ceremony. “Writing as Ceremony” discusses a number of theoretical texts that consider writing to be a type of ceremony. The section “Performance and Ceremony” begins by discussing Scofield’s claims about the ceremonial nature of his poetry and an examination of the performative aspects of ceremonies. Following this will be concrete examples from Scofield and the other four writers that both describes and performs ceremony. Finally, “Practicing Ceremonial Poetry” discusses a number of Scofield’s other poems that are

about and perform ceremonies, including an in depth discussion of Scofield's most directly ceremonial poem, "Kipocihkân." It seems that Indigenous poets, in particular, are aware that their work is not only a part of literature, or art, but that it is also a ceremony that expresses who they are in relationship to their kin and the land they live on.

### *Writing as Ceremony*

This chapter argues that poems of most Indigenous writers are not only stating facts; they are also doing something, usually on a spiritual level. While literature can and does often exist on this performative level outside of Indigenous contexts, it seems as if there is a particularly strong impulse within Indigenous literature to perform ceremonies that assert an Indigenous identity through poetry. In the Introduction to *Speak to Me Words: Essays on Contemporary American Indian Poetry*, Janice Gould explains the importance to Indigenous poets of their work *doing* something beyond merely stating or describing:

Writing, to mean anything, must have an end, a meaning. I would say that for many Indian poets that end is to reclaim and rebuild the identities that the Euro-Americans wanted to annihilate; it is to bring balance back to a place that has been tipped by selfishness, greed, and bigotry, so that we all (human, animal, and nature) can have a chance at fulfilling our destinies and potentials; it is to re-balance ourselves; it is to remind us that, as Harjo says, this is not the first world or the last. (*Speak to Me Words* 11)

As discussed in my introduction, this collection of essays makes a convincing argument for the studying of Indigenous poetry from Indigenous perspectives. These perspectives have little interest in writing that merely entertains or describes. For Indigenous poets, their work is performative because it restores Indigenous identities that have come under such vehement attack by settler-colonialism. Ceremony is a key element of these identities.

Gould also identifies the specific role ceremony plays in Indigenous poetry. She says

that:

Language is a vehicle of ceremony. But it is not through poetry — or ceremony — that healing takes place. These are only forms and languages that aid in setting the conditions for healing. Healing takes place through the spirit, through love and compassion, which are qualities of the spirit. The American Indian poets I admire most are those whose work seems infused with — informed by — this spirit. (11)

Like other writers in the volume, Gould makes it very clear that poetry, or form more generally in Indigenous writing, is secondary to what the writing does. She claims that it may be interesting to literary scholars and anthropologists that many Indigenous writers choose to use lineated poetry<sup>12</sup>, but more important to the writers is what their writing does. Their writing is only a “vehicle” to a greater goal of operating on a spiritual level. The poetry is a means to a greater end. Gould emphasizes this once more, later on in her introduction:

Language [...] is a sensitive tool for naming how we perceive the world and our relationship to it; it is a way [...] to help us to perceive and know ourselves more intimately. Words function as expression or perception when we feel in our bodies their significance, their meaning, and understand, too, the context that gives them form, whether that context is material or spiritual or both. (17)

In Indigenous contexts especially, the affect of the words, how they make an audience feel, is more important than the form of the writing. Language is a “tool” (17) to help create connections on both the “material” and “physical” (17) worlds.

The translation of ceremony into written poetry is certainly not the only way that contemporary Indigenous people are decolonizing. They also decolonize by more broadly resisting settler-colonial control on their lives and asserting their own Indigenous ways of living. As with the Ghost Dance performed in the late nineteenth century (Andersson 27), decolonization is the creation of a new world where the negative influences of European colonization do not exist and Indigenous peoples are free to live according to their cultures.

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<sup>12</sup> see discussion of ethnopoetics in the Introduction and Chapter 2

Translating Indigenous ceremony into a written form is a particularly fitting form of decolonization because this ceremony has come under attack by systems of settler-colonialism.

Ceremonies were correctly identified as a place where Indigenous people expressed their identities and one effective way to eliminate these identities was to make different forms of ceremony illegal. For example, the laws imposed against potlatches deeply undermined Indigenous values and challenged their sovereignty (Cole 1-2). Elder Harry Bone also comments on the way in which the legal sanctions against Indigenous ceremonies have deeply injured Indigenous communities. At a meeting discussing the honouring of treaties held at the University of Manitoba he discussed how the lifting of sanctions against the sundance, and even ceremonies as commonplace as smudging or the use of a drum, only took effect in the early 1950s. He was one of the first members of his family to be born in a time when practicing Indigenous ceremonies was allowed. He considers the elimination of ceremony to be an attack against Indigenous ways of living. Furthermore, the revitalization of ceremony is one of the most important methods of reclaiming Indigenous identities (Bone). Ceremonies such as the potlatch and even ceremonies such as smudging, which have become quite common and are sometimes accepted in institutional frameworks, have had prohibitionist laws against them for much of Canada's existence as a nation. Writing is one way to reclaim important elements of these ceremonies and deepen connectedness of the communities that share them, but it is part of a larger process of decolonization.

In his fruitful piece titled and inspired by the bumper sticker axiom, "Think Indian," Anishinaubae<sup>13</sup> thinker Basil Johnston affirms Scofield's notion that ceremony fits integrally into a broader concept of being Indigenous in a settler-colonial context. As Johnston describes what it

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<sup>13</sup> I have adopted Johnston's own spelling for Anishinaabe in this instance.



means to “Think Indian,” he says that more than being a “mode of thought,” “it is an understanding of one’s duties and fulfilling those duties. To ‘Think Indian’ is to care about family and tribe, to look after the elderly and the poor and the weak and the children” (Johnston 185). “Think Indian” is another way of expressing the value of approaching daily life from within an Indigenous worldview. The simple fact of Indigenous people reclaiming their identity within an adversarial settler-colonial context is a form of decolonization. Reclaiming ceremony through poetry is certainly a part of this larger process. Although the writing itself may not be intentionally confined by the form of poetry, or intentionally decolonial, it is an intentional expression of an Indigenous identity through the performance of ceremony.

For Johnston, ceremony plays a central role in Indigenous ways of understanding and being in the world. He writes,

In The Sun Dance, The Hah-Mah-Tsa, The Pipe of Peace, and the Feast of the Dead and other great public ceremonies are embodied what the Natives of whatever tribe understood of Kitchi-manitou, life, death, good and evil. To take part in these ceremonies was to affirm the understandings of the tribe. There was almost, among all, a reverence for the mystery of life, Manitou, not only as it animated human-kind, but also as it vitalized animal-kind and plant-kind, and the earth itself. (186)

Johnston places the connectedness between all living things that ceremony embodies in the very center of what it means to be Indigenous. Furthermore, he is aware that before colonial contact, Indigenous people “needed no reminder to ‘Think Indian’ or ‘Be Indian.’ They were” (184). As a result of the loss of many traditional ways of life, Indigenous peoples have to be much more intentional about being themselves. Writing ceremonial poetry is one way to intentionally “Think Indian” and move towards the thriving of Indigenous peoples. As with medicine and storytelling, I argue that asserting this important aspect of an Indigenous worldview is a form of decolonization. The poets involved are not necessarily setting out to achieve some political goal

of decolonizing themselves. Primarily, it seems that the poets are expressing their identities on their own terms. Gregory Scofield's poetry performs this sort of decolonization.

As we will see later in the chapter, Gregory Scofield is a good and clear example of a writer using his work to restore ceremonial elements of Indigenous culture. However, he is not the only one. Scofield is one of several Indigenous people who explicitly consider ceremony as something that can be translated into written forms. Nêhiyaw scholar Shawn Wilson, in the title of his 2008 book, contends that *Research is Ceremony*. He demonstrates and defends this position when he says that ceremony "is the voice from our ancestors that tells us when it is right and when it is not. Indigenous research *is* a life changing ceremony" (Wilson 61, emphasis his). This chapter will show how this cogent and powerful definition seems to compliment Scofield's view of ceremony in a number of important ways. First of all, like Scofield, Wilson considers ceremony to be an act that connects Indigenous people to their ancestors to give guidance in both spiritual and physical contexts. Wilson and Scofield are also in agreement that ceremony can take on different appearances in accordance with contemporary needs. Ceremony can adapt from an orally based practice to one that also occurs on the page. The most important aspect of ceremony, and indeed the vitality of Indigenous cultures, is the emphasis on connectedness. Ceremonies perform the important role of relating people to each other and to both the physical and spiritual worlds. Wilson states this very nicely when he says,

The purpose of any ceremony is to build stronger relationships or bridge the distance between our cosmos and us. The research that we do as Indigenous people is a ceremony that allows us a raised level of consciousness and insight into our world. (137)

Wilson exemplifies this point of view in the way that he writes his book. In a note on his writing style he says "I felt that the dominant style of writing to an anonymous reader did not live up to the standards of relational accountability I was proposing" (8). As a result, he frequently

switches between an academic register and what he calls “personal narrative sections” (8), where he writes directly to his own young sons.

As discussed in previous chapters, connectedness is the main defining principle of Indigenous worldviews. Shawn Wilson gives this notion further clarification through the words of his friend Peter, who defines Indigeneity:

It’s collective, it’s a group, it’s a community. And I think that’s the basis for relationality. That is, it’s built upon the interconnections, the interrelationships, and that binds the group...but it’s more than human relationships. And maybe the basis of that relationship among Indigenous people is the land. It’s our relationship to the land. There’s a spiritual connection to the land. So it’s all of those things. (Wilson 80)

Not only does this passage confirm the importance of connectedness and relationality to Indigenous peoples in its content, but it also does so in its form. Instead of deferring to the authority of academia or some form of authoritative publication, Wilson cites his friend for a definition of Indigeneity. Peter may have all sorts of qualifications as an authority figure within academia on Indigenous identity, but this is not important to Wilson. What seems to be most important is that Peter has a relationship with Wilson, not that Peter has authority that is granted by some institution to discuss Indigenous identity. Peter’s last name is not even mentioned in this passage. On the one hand, this may allow critics to dispute the academic legitimacy of Wilson’s work. Nevertheless, this is a necessary risk if Wilson is going to show that there are alternatives to settler-colonial models of research.

Wilson provides a valuable example of a researcher who considers his academic writing to be a form of performative ceremony that does something more than inform a readership of his work, by creating spiritual connections with people and spirits. As is obvious from an example like Wilson, poetry is not the only way to translate ceremony into writing, but Indigenous writers

often use verse when they want to establish a spiritual connection and perform a ceremony on the page. Leslie Marmon Silko demonstrates that lineated verse is an excellent literary form for conducting a ceremony in her novel *Ceremony*. Although the vast majority of her novel is in prose, a few key, ceremonial passages are in lineated verse. This is especially clear in the poem called “Ceremony” that begins the novel. Silko writes:

I will tell you something about stories,  
[he said]  
They aren't just entertainment.  
Don't be fooled.  
They are all we have, you see,  
all we have to fight off  
illness and death. (Silko 2)

Silko uses poetry to describe the central role that ceremony plays in the health of Indigenous people. Silko is pointing out that, in Indigenous contexts, language (“stories” (2)) has an actual function beyond entertainment and that language is the only weapon Indigenous people have to survive. Put slightly differently: within Indigenous contexts, language performs a ceremony. Language has a function.

It is no mistake that Silko chooses poetry as the form to deliver this message, just as the poets I am studying do. The short lines and division of these lines into stanzas slows the reader down and gives extra emphasis on what the words are doing. Like Scofield, Silko not only describes ceremony in her novel, she also considers it to be the actual performance of a ceremony. Her opening poem continues:

He rubbed his belly.  
I keep them here  
[he said]  
Here put your hand on it  
See, it is moving.  
There is life here  
for the people

And in the belly of this story  
the rituals and the ceremony  
are still growing. (2)

The first stanza of this passage may be the description of a ceremony that the reader is only witness to, but the final stanza invites the reader to take part in the story. Silko is arguing that the story is performing a ceremony. These words do more than simply state, they are *doing* something on a spiritual level with language. The words become a ceremony that can be used to defend against “illness and death” (2). Furthermore, it is not a static ceremony. It is one which continues and grows.

### *Performance and Ceremony*

In his interview with Tanis MacDonald, “Sitting Down to Ceremony,” Scofield says, “Each of the poems becomes a ceremony that involves others, including the readers, who are given the opportunity to bear witness to that ceremony and take it away into their own lives” (292). Here, Scofield implies a few important aspects of ceremony. First and foremost, Scofield is emphasizing that ceremonies are necessarily a shared event that must be witnessed. Ceremonies “involve” all of those who take part in and witness them. Scofield also implies that ceremonies mark and make change in people’s lives. Scofield hopes that his readers and those who listen to him reading poetry will be affected by the ceremony. Understanding Scofield’s poetry as ceremony is one of the most important ways to read it. His poetry extends into the lives of those who witness it and transcends the boundaries often imposed upon art. One important boundary that he overcomes in his ceremonial writing is the boundary of physicality. Scofield’s writing engages with the spiritual as well as the physical world.

Scofield clearly points out that this ceremonial aspect is only a part of what he is doing.

His poetry, like medicine, stories, and ceremony, operates as a part of his daily life that cannot be isolated from any other part of his worldview. He believes that the foundation of his work is found in maintaining a spiritual connection to his ancestors. He says

Being able to honour and know your ancestors is first about honouring yourself and knowing more about yourself, as well as being able to maintain and carry on connections to history, culture, language, stories: all the things that are integral to making a nation of people. (“Sitting Down” 290)

Clearly, oral histories and stories are an important part of Scofield’s practice of participating in nationhood. His goal is not to write poetry for its own sake, but rather to use it as a tool to reconnect with his past and bring healing to some of the injuries inflicted through settler-colonialism. However, one important aspect of ceremony is that ceremony is focused on the spiritual world. As he closes the interview, Scofield says that poems “are about honouring your spiritual home, to sing those bones into a place within the universe that is magical, that is healing, that is profound” (296). Scofield does not think of his poetry in terms of art or the fact that it is the way he makes his living. His first understanding of the nature of poetry and its role in his life is that poetry is a way to claim a spiritual home in the universe that is rooted in his ancestors. Poetry is an expression that takes the form of a ceremony that can also bring healing and tell stories. This ceremony returns the bones of Scofield’s ancestors.

Establishing a spiritual connection seems to be at the heart of Scofield’s poetics. In the same interview with Scofield, Tanis MacDonald comments on the experience of hearing him read: “As an audience member, I could feel a shift in the room, as though, at that moment you asked us to change the way we were listening, and we did” (“Sitting Down” 289). MacDonald provides evidence that Scofield’s repeated requests for his audience to listen are affecting beyond an individual level. Not only was MacDonald affected on a personal level, but she could sense that the general feeling in the room was influenced by the way Scofield presented his

poetry. Scofield's poetry readings produce a palpable emotional response from a group.

Scofield is also clear about his intent that his poetry operates on an emotional and spiritual level:

I write a great deal about loss. I eulogize people who have passed on: the ancestors, my mom, my aunt. Putting out that vulnerability in a certain respectful way allows people to engage not only with the story but also with the emotions. I'll even take it a step further—it allows people to engage in what I believe is a spiritual process. (290)

A ceremony such as a funeral is certainly meant to have an emotional impact on the people who share in that ceremony. A funeral does not bring the dead back to us, but it performs a spiritual healing for the living and helps to send the spirits of our ancestors on their journey in a peaceful way. Scofield's desire to perform these ceremonies for his ancestors is partly due to the injustices they suffered in their deaths under settler-colonialism. Based on MacDonald's comments, it certainly seems that the audiences who hear Scofield read are engaged emotionally by the reading. The audience for the poem is not merely the reader or the people listening to the poem, but "the ancestors" (290) as well. This wide audience that extends beyond the physical world is central to understanding Scofield's poetry as ceremonial.

This ceremonial aspect of Scofield's poetry that incorporates the spiritual as well as the physical is especially prevalent in *Singing Home the Bones*. This is the collection in which "Prayer Song for the Returning of Names and Sons" is found, and the collection Tanis MacDonald and Scofield are focusing on in their interview. Nearing the end of the interview, MacDonald defines the act of singing home the bones as "the ability to find a home within oneself" (296). This concept of finding a home is a helpful way of understanding the process of ceremony in Scofield's poems.

In one sense, the poems discussed in this chapter are "ceremonial" because they *do*

something. However, this “performative” aspect of the poems may seem obscure because it is very often enacted on the spiritual level. This enactment that occurs in so many of Scofield’s poems is an example of language being “performative” in sense J.L Austin discusses. For Austin words are “performative” when they do more than “‘describe’ some state of affairs” (Austin 1). Austin’s most famous example of words being performative is the wedding ceremony. Austin writes “‘When I say[...] ‘I do’, I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it” (6). Austin is careful to point out that this speech act is neither true nor false and that rather than describing something or stating a fact, it is actually *doing* something rather than “just saying something” (7). The same is true for the ceremonial poems that Scofield writes. His poems are doing something, generally speaking, on a spiritual level.

Scofield’s *Singing Home the Bones* includes several poems that perform ceremonies. The poem that gives rise to the title of the collection, “Prayer Song for the Returning of Names and Songs,” is a poem that is also a performative prayer song. The poem delivers exactly what the title promises: the speaker gives back the European names that were given to his grandmothers and reinstates the sons of these women in their rightful places. Addressing his great-grandmothers and using their Christian names, Scofield says “I’ve thrown back / your names” (*Singing* 32). More than simply describing a ceremony, Scofield is actually performing it. Furthermore, the poem begins with a transcription of a prayer song. He begins the poem, even in printed form, with a “prayer song taught to me by my adopted brother Dale Awasis from Thunderchild First Nation, Saskatchewan” (28). So, there are several ways in which this poem is performing a ceremony. First, the poem is doing something. Secondly, part of its text is the documentation of this prayer song that in and of itself is a form of ceremony.

The first word following the prayer song is “â-haw” (28), which Scofield tells us is “an



*invocation*” (95). Scofield wants it to be clear that he is not only addressing his reader but also the spirit of “ni-châpanak Charlotte, / Sarah, Mary ekwa Christiana” (28) who are the speaker’s grandmothers. He invites these grandmothers, along with the implied reader, to “natohta

*listen / my song, nikamowin*” (28). The poem may be a printed text, but it is not limited to the common “statement role of many printed texts. It is also invoking the spirits of the speaker’s ancestors. Throughout the poem, the speaker invokes a world beyond the physical by addressing this world directly. He does not translate “âw” (28-30), despite the fact that it appears throughout the poem. It seems to be another form of the invocation “â-haw.” The Cree Dictionary Online translates both “âw” and “â-haw” as vocalizations of agreement, like saying “ok” in English (Nehiyaw Masinahikan). Each time Scofield uses this invocation he is widening the circle of his audience beyond those who are reading his poem and into a spiritual sphere. Even though the physical bodies of these grandmothers will never hear their names being given back, the speaker of this poem performs a ceremony that ensures that their spirits will be properly named.

Scofield’s “Prayer Song for the Returning of Names and Sons” has two audiences: the readers and the ceremonial participants of the spiritual world. The spirits of Scofield’s ancestors are participating in the performative aspects of the ceremony, while the readers seem only to be observing. Scofield is returning the names given to his ancestral grandmothers “Charlotte, Sarah, Mary ekwa Christiana” (28), but these names are not strictly of the physical world. These are names “from their manitowimasinahikan, *bible / âw, their great naming book*” (29). The Nêhiyawaywin word for bible, manitowimasinahikan, can also be translated as spirit book, manitow meaning spirit and masinahikan meaning book. Scofield is well aware that his grandmothers’ names have great significance on a spiritual level and so it is that the speaker says

of the names: “I’ve thrown back across the water, / I’ve given back // to their God” (29). He continues:

I give you back ni-châpanak	
the names to name the names of bones, oskana	<i>the bones</i>
you laid down to build them a house, âw	
the blood, mihko and warm skin	<i>blood</i>
earth, askîy that built them an empire. (31)	<i>earth</i>

When the speaker throws back the European names of his Grandmothers, the Indigenous names remain for both the Grandmothers and the elements that make up this new world. Like the Ghost Dance, this ceremony seeks to remake the world in an idealized form without the hateful influence of settler-colonialism (Andersson 27). His audience is included as observers of this ceremony. So, he translates most of the Cree words so that the audience can understand, and directs us to “natohta.” Yet, the invocation, “aw” is not translated.

The performative, ceremonial aspects of the poem are reinforced throughout and the speaker makes it clear what the role of the audience is throughout this ceremony. One significant structural aspect of the poem is that the stanzas are extremely short. This results in a slower pace of reading that suggests a speaker who is allowing space in between each of the statements for the audience to reflect on the effects that the words are having. Most stanzas are only two lines long with some of the lines consisting only of a word or two that also adds to the methodical pace of the poem. However, Scofield also adds some aids for his reader. The parallel translations

may contribute to the reflective pace of the poem, but it is also a form of editorializing. The use of translation to control the pacing of the poem is particularly effective with the word “natohta,” which is used five times and is translated as “*listen*” (28-33). The speaker of the poem is giving directions to readers on how we are to partake in this ceremony. By the end of the poem it is very likely that the reader will remember what “natohta” means; nevertheless, Scofield places “*listen*” in italics on the right hand margin. For the sense of the poem to come across, he only needs to translate the word once, but by placing it in the margin every time it functions as an echo, or even an english response to the Nêhiyawaywin call. Scofield does not translate every Nêhiyawaywin word each time he uses it. The first time he uses “ekwa,” “Sarah, Mary, ekwa Christina” (28), he offers no translation. However, when he uses it again, “ekwa Christ-i-ana” (29), he gives the translation as “*and*” (29). Scofield is deliberate about how and when he uses his translations and being told repeatedly “natohta” and “*listen*” gives uncommon weight to each word for the reader.

Scofield asserts Indigenous perspectives by conducting a ceremony that simultaneously resists colonization and reclaims Indigenous culture. Furthermore, he enlists the help of his readers as witnesses to this decolonial ceremony. Scofield provides many excellent instances of how adapting ceremony into poetry can allow ceremony to exist in his poetry that will be discussed later in the chapter. Similarly, Louise Halfe, Duncan Mercredi, Annharte, and Marvin Francis also give clear examples of how poetry can be a form of ceremony. This process of decolonization is not the translation of a single, enclosed aspect of Indigenous culture into poetry, but the translation of interconnected aspects of Indigenous culture into poetry, of which ceremony is one. These poems can act as healing medicine, revitalized storytelling, and sacred ceremonies simultaneously.

Marvin Francis shows us how this is possible in his long poem *city treaty*. In this poem he is writing a treaty that will include Indigenous worldviews and urban Indigenous peoples. The process can be understood through the lenses of ceremony, medicine, and storytelling. He describes the collaborative process of writing the city treaty in this way:

**those word drummers pound away and hurtle  
words into that english landscape like brown beer  
bottles tossed from the back seat on a country  
road shattering the air    turtle words crawl slowly from  
the broken glass (*city treaty* 69).**

Francis shows that writing from an Indigenous perspective is not an isolationist activity. Writing is a collaborative process that involves more than putting ink on paper. It is also a ceremony in the sense that the words are performative. The word drummers are doing the important work, just like the turtle in Anishinaabe and Nêhiyaw creation stories, of providing a foundation upon which a new world can be built. The “words” in this passage are fascinating because they are personified as crawling. This is a very precise example of the potential for language to be performative in the sense that Austin uses the term. Furthermore, the work being done these words is not easy: they “crawl slowly from / the broken glass.” Nevertheless, this performative use of language does show that there is progress being made and that progress can be made through this sort of language use. The metaphor of the writers, including authors as diverse as D’Arcy McNickle and Duncan Mercredi, gathered around the drum defies the logic of time and space. Physically, this meeting would be impossible. Only in the sacred space of ceremony or dream is this meeting possible and the work that is being done here is on this metaphysical level.

Annharte’s poem “Smudge” from *Being on the Moon* is another example of how traditional aspects of Indigenous culture can be translated into poetry and can transform that poetry into a ceremony. The poem describes the purifying work done by a smudge ceremony.

She writes:

Fume of sweetgrass strikes  
coiling in my brain  
connecting me between ears

Burning braid stays lit  
carried in an abalone shell  
making us all tidy & neat (*Being on the Moon* 10)

The poem begins by describing the very tangible effects of a smudge ceremony. Although the smoke does not literally enter the skull to “coil” the brain or actually “connect” someone between the ears, these metaphors allow the reader to understand the deep connection between the spiritual and physical worlds. These vivid images allow the reader to understand how a ceremony of wafting smoke over one’s body can make someone “tidy & neat” (10). As Annharte enumerates the various spiritual tidying that occur in this ceremony it seems that the poem is not only describing a ceremony, but also performing a smudge ceremony that can purify the speaker from a troubled past. It is as if she is instructing the smoke to “Pull out all my fears” and “let out all my pretend laughs” (10). By naming the things the speaker wants to be purified, she conducts a ceremony that brings a sort of “cure.” The poem concludes: “Where were we, you & me / once on a braided rug / rattling my cage for a cure” (10). The nostalgia of these lines points to the many ways the speaker has tried to find this cure. The lines remember past relationships and attempting to re-establish connections to a friend from long ago. This poem becomes a smudge ceremony that cleanses and purifies the spirits of all who participate in it. This performativity of the poem is very much in line with what Annharte says about poetry’s engagement with the spiritual and natural worlds: “Poetic narratives are prayers that engage the spirits of both audience and environment” (“Borrowing” 62). This sense of engagement is at the heart of what it means for poetry to be performative and ceremonial.

Duncan Mercredi's "stand in circle" from *Dreams of Wolf in the City* also adopts the directive stance that allows the poem to be both a depiction of ceremony and a ceremony itself. Each of the four short stanzas begin with the line "stand in circle" (*Dreams of Wolf* 60). In the first stanza there could be an implied "I" before this line because it ends with the lines "song i sing / is my heart's song" (60). Additionally, the poem is a set of instructions for how to conduct this ceremony. The third stanza reads "stand in circle / feel the spirit / of eagle in the sky" (60). In a book of poems characterized by the painful displacement of Indigenous people by urbanization, this poem stands out as a more constructive way of dealing with the disaster that is settler-colonialism. It is a ceremony to bring about a resurgence of Indigenous culture in the face of disaster. Mercredi's final stanza says "stand in circle / face the east / new sun rises red" (60). An earlier poem in this same collection, "the sun rises red," shows that this red sunrise is a product of the physical and spiritual devastation brought by settlers. Mercredi writes, "the sun rises red each morning / and the air is not fit to breath" (15). On the physical level, the pollution in the air caused by the industry — which is an integral part of settler-colonialism — is having a very tangible negative effect on Indigenous people and their ability to draw life from the land. This devastation of the land also has a formidable effect on the spiritual lives of Indigenous people. It seems that the directive "stand in circle" (60) provides some protection from this devastation. There is also some hope in the idea that the red sun is "new" (60). The effects of settler-colonialism cannot be undone, but through ceremonial poems such as "stand in circle," some defense against the forces of devastation can be mustered.

Louise Halfe also uses her writing as a form of ceremony. Her long poem *Blue Marrow* is the literary representation of a ceremony she conducted with her relations, both living and dead. As she explained in her lecture when we discussed *Blue Marrow* as a part of the course

“Indigenous Women’s Stories,” the book was inspired by a dream that told her to perform a ceremony to communicate with both her ancestors both living and dead. This is alluded to in her text when she describes a dream at the start of her long poem and at this description’s conclusion says “I’m awake now” (*Blue Marrow* 2). Furthermore, this poem is performative throughout, because it is constantly addressing a spiritual audience and asking for their help to correctly teach her living audience. The first major section of the poem concludes:

Grandmothers hold me.  
I must pass all that I possess,  
every morsel to my children  
These small gifts. (7)

Halfe is conducting a ceremony with her ancestors that will have real benefits for her “children” (7). She is looking to the spirits of her ancestors to revitalize the traditions that are under threat by settler-colonialism. As Azalea Barriesses and Susan Gingell convincingly argue in their article, “*Blue Marrow* shows the legacy of the Ghost Dance at work. Halfe simultaneously evokes the ceremony, invites her ghosted ancestors to the page, and conjures the specters of the violations and violence at Wounded Knee” (Barriesses 74). I agree with the way they characterize the performative nature of what Halfe’s writing does. The spirits of Halfe’s ancestors are included in the ceremony along with the readers of the poem. Halfe’s long poem is performing a Ghost Dance in which a new world without the influence of european colonizers is realized.

Although this poem does in fact perform a ceremony, it is a ceremony that has been adapted and translated into printed poetry. Like Mercredi and Scofield, Halfe resists the destruction of her Indigenous culture by conducting a ceremony through her poetry that honours her ancestors and preserves her culture. In a similar way to a number of Gregory Scofield’s poems, she begins her long poem with a prayer that invokes the spiritual world. One difference is that she is also Indigenizing a christian prayer by addressing it to female spirits rather than a

male patriarch:

*Glory be to okâwîmâwaskiy  
To the nôhkom âtayôhkan  
To pawâkan  
As it was in the Beginning,  
Is now,  
and ever shall be,  
World without end.  
Amen. Amen. (Blue Marrow 1)*

The spiritual forces that Halfe petitions as she begins her ceremony are certainly not “the Father,” to whom this prayer is usually addressed. She is bringing glory to okâwîmâwaskiy, nôhkom âtayôhkan, and pawâkan, which she translates as Mother Earth, Grandmother Keeper of the Sacred Legends, and Dream Spirit. Halfe is conducting a ceremony that can easily be recognized by people familiar with both Indigenous and christian traditions; however, she has adapted the prayer for current challenges. She resists the patriarchal domination of the christian “Father” and replaces it with a multiplicity of Indigenous women. She has clearly been influenced by the particularly christian mode of settler-colonialism and she does not deny that this influence has changed her culture. Instead of denying this influence, she returns the favour by influencing a patriarchal christian prayer with her own matriarchal worldview.

### *Practicing Ceremonial Poetry*

Scofield says that “My writing has been really an exploration of the medicine of myself, ourselves” (“Poems as Healing Bundles” 318). He also says “In order to create a new space for ourselves and our rhythms, and for the rattle, we need to be tattletales. We need to speak and tell our stories” (318). Scofield’s discussion is focused on the necessary and often painful work of opening healing bundles performed through poetry. He further specifies his meaning when



argues that this work is a ceremony and that ceremonies “don’t need to be in a sacred lodge, and we don’t need to have our traditional medicines laid out” (319). He states that the sessions held at the poetics symposium he is addressing have been “ceremonies in which we have opened bundles in front of each other” (319). For Scofield, poetry in the Indigenous context is not only poetry. It functions both in and beyond the strictly literary spheres. Indigenous poetry decolonizes because it both heals the hurts of colonization and restores elements of Indigenous culture to become a place where many different types of ceremonies can actually be performed.

Scofield’s writing seems to come from a desire to express his identity as an Indigenous person in any way possible. In his memoir, *Thunder Through My Veins*, he emphasizes that the relatively new role of Indigenous writers such as Beatrice Culleton, Tomson Highway, and Maria Campbell, is “telling our stories” (*Thunder* 178). Two things stand out as particularly important in Scofield’s description of the role of Indigenous writing within community. The first is that Scofield uses the pronoun “our,” to indicate the deep community connection he feels, even with people that are not related through conventionally understood family ties. Secondly, he emphasizes the fact that contemporary practices of Indigenous writing are firmly rooted in past traditions of storytelling. He says that role of contemporary Indigenous writers is “telling” stories rather than “writing” stories. Scofield expands upon this performative aspect of writing when he describes his first writing experiences that produced good results:

I sat in cafés until all hours of the morning, scribbling down poems as fast as I could write them. Only now it was different. I mumbled the poems into my hand having to *hear* them before I wrote them down. I am sure people thought that I was crazy, but I didn’t care. (178-179 emphasis his)

For Scofield, good poems begin as song and oral story. The actual writing, “scribbling down poems as fast as I could write them,” follows the vocalization of the poems. Scofield is speaking these poems for the benefit of himself and whatever spirits are listening. This seems to be a

performance of ceremony and storytelling that eventually becomes a poem.

The poems that Scofield describes writing in this section of *Thunder Through My Veins* are from his first collection *The Gathering: Stones for the Medicine Wheel*. This collection is full of poems that explore and claim Scofield's identity as an Indigenous person. Ceremony plays a significant role in this exploration. The poems "Good Sweating," "Smudge Ceremony," and "The Spirits Have Begun Working" all point towards the restorative power that ceremony has for Indigenous people reclaiming their identities. "Good Sweating" is the first person description of participating in a sweat lodge divided into four "rounds" (*The Gathering* 85). However, there are no first person pronouns, which gives the sense that this poem could also function as a set of instructions. Scofield writes:

Round One: enter womb sun-wise minding prayers  
offer my tobacco to heated stones  
remember to be grateful fix my eyes to  
darkness when the door flap closes  
water on stones hissing (85)

Scofield does offer possessive pronouns, but it seems that the phrases "my tobacco" and "my eyes" emphasize the speaker's relationship to his surroundings and sense of connection to the ceremony. The lack of the first-person pronoun allows the reader to be included in this ceremony because the focus is not on the individual, but the ceremony itself. This is very much a ceremony that seeks to bring healing and unity to a wider community than the speaker as an individual. In "Round Three" the speaker instructs: "take in grandmothers / grandfathers singing join voices / become one" (85). The final round of the sweat further emphasizes the connection that the speaker is making: "exit womb sun-wise hiy-hiy / all my relations reborn" (85). The result of the ceremony is a deepening of the connection the speaker shares with his relations, the spiritual world, and the physical world. By limiting the focus on the individual, Scofield is able to

translate crucial community focused aspects of this ceremony into poetry.

“The Spirits Have Begun Working” also shows that poetry can allow the power of ceremony in the written format. Like “Good Sweating,” “The Spirits Have Begun Working” depicts a healing and cleansing ceremony that benefits the troubled spirit of the speaker of the poem. It depicts a troubling dream: “the spirits have begun working in dreams” (88). Once again, the poem emphasizes how the spiritual world can be operative. In this case, “the spirits” (88), are *doing* something. Unlike some of Scofield’s other poems, this poem does not actually become a ceremony itself. It remains a description of the performative powers ceremony has. The speaker informs us that his “steel bones have been replaced with glass” (88) and he is in pain. For relief from this pain and fragility, he turns to the performative powers of language in the ceremonial contexts. He says that he is comforted by “an old woman [...] soothing me in Cree” and “an old man gave me four eagle feathers” (88). The acts of comfort and healing that these old ones offer are a ceremony depicted within the poem. This ceremony is a part of a long process of healing for the speaker. The poem ends with the stanza: “This morning comes cloudy, / Reminds me I’m fragile, healing, / Too human” (88). The ceremony depicted does not complete the process of healing, but it does offer some tangible relief. By recalling and documenting the events of his nightmare through poetry, the speaker shows the performative power that language and ceremony possess. The speaker is given “four eagle feathers four / songs four stories” (88). These dream gifts from the elder will help the speaker to find the balance he needs to relieve the pain he feels.

The poems “Nothing Sacred” and “Instant Power,” also from *The Gathering: Stones for the Medicine Wheel*, provide important comments on the particular attacks that Indigenous ceremony have been subject to, both directly and indirectly. Additionally, they show that there

are no short-cuts to accessing the real, performative power that ceremonies have. “Nothing Sacred” depicts the deep disrespect that Indigenous cultures and ceremonies have suffered, so that interested parties such as museums, the tourism industry, and fashion can profit. For example, Scofield reveals the cynicism of an ancestor receiving “a new resting place pay / five bucks to view her in a / plexiglass tomb” (32). “Granny” has been deeply disrespected and turned into little more than a curiosity and commodity. Scofield shows his readers how the capitalist aspects of settler-colonialism have defiled even the most sacred parts of Indigenous culture such as the remains of their ancestors. He also shows us further fetishization of Indigenous women: “Pocahontas makes Vogue” (32). It is bad enough that Pocahontas has already been coopted by popular culture, but she is also turned into a sex symbol by being placed in a fashion magazine. Furthermore, sacred cultural objects have been commodified to benefit the tourism industries. Tourists can buy “a genuine / Wong & Sons totem pole” (32). There is no profit for the Indigenous people being taken advantage of and Scofield shows how the sacred aspects of Indigenous culture have been robbed of their spiritual and ceremonial performative powers. The poem concludes with the sad statement of the status of many Indigenous people forced to live in a settler-colonial society that has robbed them of their sacred ceremonial objects. Scofield writes: “For Now: steal our spotlight his high / profile mixing promises / and Lysol” (32). Here, an Indigenous person tries to forget the deep hurts of having his culture pillaged by settler-colonial greed through substance abuse, drinking Lysol.

“Instant Power” tells the brief story of a woman who bought a sacred pipe at a powwow: “a real steal for two bucks” (79). The poem opens with the sound of “a grandmother in crow guise / Laughing” (79) and the speaker explains to the woman that “Acquiring instant power will end up worthless / Take my advice sister / That grandmother will keep you rolling nights” (79).

The speaker seems to be warning the purchaser that the crow will keep her up at night with uneasy dreams because she has taken a shortcut to accessing the power of this sacred pipe. It is as if the crow will hold her accountable for her greediness and the “instant power” will not be worth anything in the end. Even so, the speaker does not seem to be criticizing the lady who has bought the pipe, he is merely trying to teach her about it and its power. This poem provides a good example of how, even within Indigenous contexts, settler-colonialism has been able to spread false information about ceremonies and sacred objects. Sacred objects, such as pipes, should not be reduced to bargains at a craft table. Just as is the case with “Nothing Sacred,” the commodification of sacred objects is a defilement and a result of the damage done by settler-colonialism.

One other early poem that affirms the central role of ceremony within Indigenous resurgence is “*ayamihâwina / Rituals*,” from Scofield’s second collection *Native Canadiana: Songs from the Urban Rez*. This poem shows that ceremony is a part of common daily tasks and that the power of ceremony must be maintained by passing it down through generations. The poem opens with a speaker preparing food: “Their *wiyâs* I smash, / grind alongside my sister-wives” (84). In the same stanza we see this group “listen to coyote tales / knowing / we are not the first or last” (84). These two contrasting activities, preparing food and listening to stories, are joined. Both activities become ceremonial and emphasize the connection to ancestors. The stone they are using to grind the meat is “Our *nôhkom*’s stone” (84). As they “listen to coyote tales,” they are reminded that they are part of an ancient community based on kinship. They are reminded that there are many ancestors that came before them and that there will be many after them. Although the actions in this poem may not seem to be ceremonial, Scofield presents these daily activities in such a way that they are connected to the spiritual world. The people in this

poem may be performing acts of “labour;” however, they do this work “all the while / believing / our medicines potent” (84). This is a poem that shows the resilience of Indigenous ceremony to be incorporated into common daily activities.

As Scofield’s writing matures throughout his career, it seems that his understanding of ceremony and the role that it plays in his writing also develops in its complexity. The poem “Prayer for the House” from the more recent *Singing Home the Bones*, demonstrates how finding and honouring home through ceremony involves both the physical and spiritual worlds. In a substantial note on the poem, Scofield explains that the small house in Edmonton that he writes about was a place of safety and that “it came to symbolize a healing lodge” (*Singing Home the Bones* 109). He continues, saying that prior to he and his partner’s time in the house “few if any ceremonies had taken place there” (109). As a result, Scofield and his partner sought to reclaim the “good bones” (109) of the house; they “began the process of unwrapping the house’s sacred bundle” (109-10). Scofield discusses the important work of opening healing bundles in his reflection “Poems as Healing Bundles.” Here he is emphatic that poems are performative on the ceremonial level and in this line, he is certainly operating on a spiritual level that has a palpable effect on the house. The ceremony of living and loving in the house leads Scofield to hope that “perhaps [the house] will say in a new language, âya, kotak mîna niwî-âtotên, sâkihan ê-wî-acîmak; *Now, I will also tell another story. I am going to tell about love*” (110). These words reveal Scofield hopes that the spiritual impact of living in the house will have some sort of lasting presence, even without the physical presence of him and his partner. The poem itself is set on the morning of the last day that the couple spend in the house and it is prayer remembering the many good ceremonies that have occurred in the house.

As with many other prayers, “Prayer for the House” begins with giving thanks to the

spirit world: â-haw, kinanâskomitin good house     *an invocation, I give thanks*” (72). The speaker repeats, “we are leaving” four times throughout the poem (72-3) and besides thanking the house, he is also asking the house to return many of the things the occupants have experienced in the house. He says, “but now the walls, the rooms / must give back our lovemaking” and “the floors / must give back our dancing” (72). The speaker also asks for the house to bring (petâ) “the poems from the cupboards, // petâ the songs, âw nikamowina

*the songs / we’ve simmered in the soup pot*” (72). Scofield notes the ways in which daily activities such as working and cooking can be transformed into healing ceremonies. In the note on the poem, he mentions that the “energy” of the owners of the house “had been relegated to the attic” (109). In a sense, this prayer takes back some of the energy that he and his partner spent in the house and allows the energy of the original owners to be felt once again.

Although ceremony plays a particularly strong role in *Singing Home the Bones*, ceremony is performed in most of Scofield’s poems. Through ceremony, Scofield is able to return the spirit of his ancestors to their proper places. Through ceremony, he heals past hurts and tells the stories of his Indigenous roots on his own terms. What arises from looking at Scofield’s poetry more broadly is that Ceremonies are not only an expression of loss or a method to bring healing for past injuries. Scofield maintains that ceremony can be a part of many different daily activities, but the common thread in Scofield’s ceremonial poetry is that it creates and deepens connection. The poem “Ceremonies” from his book of erotic love poetry *Love Medicine and One Song*, is an excellent example of how ceremony can be incorporated into daily life. “Ceremonies” presents love and lovemaking as a sacred ceremony that brings people closer to each other physically and spiritually. The speaker’s mouth is transformed into “the lodge where you come / to sweat” (*Love Medicine* 69). The interconnectedness of lovers, both

physically and spiritually, and also of the earth is foregrounded in the stanza

I dance with sun,  
float with clouds  
your earth smell  
deep in my nostrils,  
wetting  
the tip of my tongue. (69)

Through deep eroticism, the poem unifies both spirit and body of the lovers with the earth. This poem makes “the medicine [...] sweet, / the love, sacred” (69). Like other Scofield poems that are ceremonies, this poem is creating connections.

In his introduction to the second edition of *Love Medicine and One Song*, Warren Cariou illuminates the importance of connection in erotic poetry: “Erotics is about connection, about what binds people together” (ii). Cariou points out that the eroticism in Indigenous culture has been all but erased by the influences of settler-colonialism: “indigenous erotics [...] has been rendered nearly invisible in colonial culture” (ii). The erasure of this important method of deepest connection has effectively perpetuated the colonialist agenda of dividing and conquering Indigenous cultures. By treating eroticism as a taboo and limiting exposure to it, the “centuries-long history of dehumanization that has been directed toward the Native people of the Americas by their colonizers” (ii) is further entrenched. Scofield’s poetry, more specifically a poem like “Ceremonies,” honours the same eroticism that settler culture has deemed subhuman. It is love medicine in the sense that Cariou means: “not simply a potion or a particular ritual; [love medicine] is an entire way of thinking about people’s relations with each other and with the world” (iv). Settler-colonial culture has attempted to hide the erotic elements of Indigenous culture, but Scofield uses his erotic poetry as a force for decolonization by placing the erotic back in a sacred space of ceremony. Eroticism is perhaps the deepest expression of connectedness, which is at the center of most Indigenous worldviews.



Nevertheless, the sense of taboo around sexuality is so prevalent in society that even Scofield thought twice about writing an erotic ceremonial poem. In a conversation with Sam McKegney, Scofield outlines his thought process as he was writing “Ceremonies.” He says:

I can't write that because that's taking a sacred ceremony and sexualizing it. And then I started to think... the sweat is a sacred purification. It's the womb. It's the womb of Mother Earth. You're being born and you come out. And what I'm describing is just as much a ceremony, is just as sacred. (McKegney “A Liberation Through Claiming” 219-20)

Once again, Scofield is illuminating key aspects of Indigenous worldviews. He is refusing to look at sexuality as something that should be separated from spirituality. He expands on the theme of connectedness in this poem by saying, “land,” “ceremonies,” and “things that come from the land” are “all interconnected. The muskeg, the reeds, the rocks, the smell of the earth, the bogs, all of these things are medicines from the earth, and those are the things that we possess within our own bodies” (220). Scofield’s poetry provides an alternative way of thinking about ourselves and the world beyond ourselves. Rather than speaking from a system of binaries where the self is opposed to that which is not the self, Scofield is showing that the self, the world, and other people are connected.

Scofield has perhaps changed some of his views, especially regarding Two-Spiritedness, since his second collection came out in 1996. Nevertheless, *Native Canadiana: Songs from the Urban Rez* presents early evidence of Scofield’s continued belief that poetry can be a form of ceremony that unifies people. “*Áyahkwêw’s Lodge*” is a naming ceremony for a Two-Spirited person. It tells the story of a baby being born in a camp. The woman who attends the birth is “instructed / to make offerings, / bring water and blood / from the sacred woman’s belly” (*Native Canadiana* 66). When this offering is taken to *Áyahkwêw*, “a twinning spirit was seen” (66). Scofield notes that *Áyahkwêw* is “loosely translated as a person who has both male and female

spirits; also known as Two-Spirited” (67). The existence of a Two-Spirited person, who is accepted as neither exclusively male nor female, in this community is substantial evidence that this newly born baby is part of an inclusive society. The naming ceremony that takes place in the final stanza provides even further evidence of this inclusivity:

At dawn, the time of prayer  
they brought the child  
to our lodge to be named  
and so we named him twice,  
*mistatim-awâsis* /  
He Who Calls *Piyêsîwak-iskwêw*. (67)

Both spirits of the child are welcomed and even named. This poem describes the important spiritual work that is done through ceremony of creating relationships and honouring the spiritual world. The naming ceremony in this poem, like those of many other of Scofield’s poems, is an invitation. It welcomes the new child without any prescriptive judgment. This is a ceremony that does not simplify gender into just two categories.

“Owls In The City,” also from *Native Canadiana*, is another example of a ceremony that seeks to honour Two-Spiritedness and the Two-Spirited people that Scofield has known. Scofield makes this clear in his dedication: “*for my Âyahkwêw relations*” (71). The poem is a ceremony of remembrance that both mourns the losses of the Âyahkwêw community he knew and expresses thanks for having survived the “plague” (72). He begins by remembering “Donny, Ray, / Felicia and Queenie,” and says that they “are all sick or dead / or just about” (71). Despite being near death, he credits them with being “the coyote ones” and says how he used to observe “their *mâhkêsis* [fox] ways / from across the bar” (71). However, these memories of this group’s liveliness are overshadowed by the fact that “our *iyiniwak* [people] are dropping / like rotten chokecherries / in back alleys or hospitals” (72). Scofield seems to be drawing a comparison between colonial diseases such as TB and Smallpox that infected and killed many *iyiniwak* with

AIDS that was prevalent in gay communities at the time of the poem's writing. In both cases, these diseases became a way for dominant cultures to make minorities even more powerless.

The poem draws its title from the ominous observation that "Even owls have migrated to the city" (72). Owls are particularly secluded animals that are rarely seen in their own habitats, let alone in an urban environment. Scofield writes this poem to mark the changes that are coming about as a result of the "plague" (72). Furthermore, the poem is a ceremony to honour the fallen "*iyiniwak*":

Tonight at the darkened window  
tapping softly my drum, I think  
how fortunate I am  
saved to pull up these *Āyahkwêw* songs  
from my still beating heart. (72)

The invocation of the drum and its juxtaposition to the beating heart reinforce the speaker's connection to and respect for a hurting Two-Spirited community. Nevertheless, he resists applying this term to himself and insists on expressing his sense of self on his own terms.

One of the most important reasons for Scofield's rejection of simple binary systems of definition is that he has worked exceptionally hard to define himself on his own terms. His first goal in decolonization seems to have been decolonizing himself. Warren Cariou says that Scofield "has repeatedly flouted the attempts of critics and reviewers to place hard boundaries around his identity" (*Love Medicine* vii). What should be emphasized here is that, as a poet who is both gay and Métis, there have been many attempts to corner Scofield into such a system of binary oppositions. June Scudeler's article "'The Song I am Singing: Gregory Scofield's Interweavings of Métis, Gay and Jewish Selfhoods'" documents Scofield's significant resistance to facile labels and his bravery in making himself vulnerable by presenting himself as he is. Scudeler writes:

Scofield's identities range from the hard-fought security of his Métis identity to the process of coming out as a gay man, especially in the Native community where homophobia is an unfortunate reality, to his unexpected discovery of his Jewish ancestry with its attendant anxieties over being accepted by the Jewish community. However, Scofield asserts that he does not want to be seen as a gay poet, a Métis poet or a Jewish poet but rather "as myself" and also that "boxes are too convenient." (Scudeler 130)

Scudeler does a good job of foregrounding the complexity of Scofield's position and also the hard work that Scofield has had to do to negotiate the pressure from various communities that surround him. Scofield does not simply resist the ways in which a heteronormative society tries to view him, but also the ways in which different cultural groups choose to view him. For instance, he has thought deeply about the term Two-Spirited, and upon this reflection he strongly rejects it as a term that he could apply to himself (McKegney "A Liberation Through Claiming" 218). Scofield is careful in his writing and in interviews to be clear that his identity cannot be simplified into labels. The work of decolonization that he does begins with a rejection of the many labels that have been placed on him.

The conversation with Sam McKegney provides further evidence of Scofield's assertion of his own identity is an act of decolonization. McKegney makes the productive observation that one way of thinking about colonization is as the "alienation from the body" (214) and argues that an important way of escaping colonial control is to claim ownership of one's own body. Scofield responds to this with two steps towards claiming ownership of himself. The first is "just being loved for your whole, individual self" and the second is "to find self-confidence" (214). In this conversation, Scofield is drawing on a significant career of struggling to follow this advice and be confident in his own identity. There may be elements of cliché in what Scofield is saying, but he has not arrived at his conclusions easily. For example, Scofield speaks of some of the struggles he had accepting himself and where he came from. "Finding my dad, finding who he

was, finding what type of person he was, being able to forgive him and all of the other men — the terrible ones, if you will — enabled me to put them in a place of powerlessness” (214). The forgiveness that Scofield discusses here is costly, but facing these aspects of himself was the best way to cope with the fallout from having an absent father and abusive father figures in his life. Much of Scofield’s poetry comes from these intensely vulnerable places, which only makes his offerings more precious. This preciousness is foregrounded because Scofield faces the fear of exposing intimate details about himself to provide a model for how healing through stories and ceremony can be realized.

Scofield’s poem “Kipocihkân” is a powerful example of how he uses poetry as a ceremony that restores both culture and health to a speaker who has had his connection to his ancestors taken away. It is also a deeply intimate poem, as Scofield mentions in his piece “Poems as Healing Bundles.” Scofield’s own discussion of “Kipocihkân” shares some of the questions I have about what this poem is doing. In the piece that was originally presented orally, Scofield begins by reading “Kipocihkân” and then offers comments on how he does not often read the poem in public. He says this could be because the poem deals with painful and personal issues, or more simply that it is a long poem (“Poems as Healing Bundles” 317). He continues with even further questioning: “I don’t necessarily consider this a poem. I don’t know what I consider it” (317). Ultimately, “Kipocihkân” was written out of “the need and desire to be heard” (318). Scofield himself suggests that this poem could be one of the “ceremonies in which we have opened bundles in front of each other” (319). This ceremony may be painful, but it does the deep healing work of communicating with the spirit world and reclaiming an identity that has been repressed by the shame Indigenous people are made to feel through systems of settler-colonialism.

As Scofield has developed as a poet and learned to accept his complex Indigenous identity, his poetry has developed along with him. This development can be readily observed in “Kipocihkân” because it is not only a poetic representation of a ceremony, as some of Scofield’s earlier works are. Instead, it actually performs a ceremony to bring spiritual healing to for the shame the speaker has been made to feel about his own identity. The word “kipocihkân” is a Nêhiyawaywin “slang word for someone who is unable to talk; a mute” (*Kipocihkân* 7). This title nicely reflects the collection that it is found in, because it bears witness to the damage that was done to the Cree language and people by settler-colonialism. The ceremony performed through this poem traces the speaker’s reclamation of identity and ability to speak. One other important aspect of this poem is its intimate nature. As I have already mentioned, Scofield does not often perform this poem and cites one of the possible reasons for doing this as its painfully intimate subject. The subject seems even more intimate, because he is directly addressing the spirit world.

Scofield tells the autobiographical story that traces his roots back to his ancestors who spoke Nêhiyawaywin. After the speaker introduces himself as “the boy / whose tongue at birth, kiphahikan *an obstruction / hungered its blood root*” (11), he explains the way in which this ceremony will be conducted:

hâw, êkwa nistam	<i>but first</i>
a count of the names	
whose tongues	
I now call to prayer (11)	

The speaker will be conducting a form of roll call to prayer of the people he needs to address to find his “blood root” (11). Additionally, the speaker is addressing kisê-manitow, the Great Spirit, and repeating the word “kinanâskomitin” that he translates the right side of the page, “*I give thanks*” (11,12,13,14,16,17). He invites his ancestors to join him in prayer to kisê-manitow. He begins with a series of ancestors who experienced early contact with settlers as well as the

decline of their language and culture.

The first ancestor in Scofield's ceremony is "nicâpan Mary, My great-great grandmother" (12). Mary's "tongue was made homeless / [...] / the day Riel slipped through the gallows" (12). Scofield goes back four generations to Louis Riel's execution to mark a significant turning point in Métis and his own history. This is the point where the hopes for Métis nationhood and the use of the "tongues" of Nêhiyawaywin and Michif in a prominent capacity are dashed. Scofield accompanies each of these points—which turn away from the maintenance of Métis language and culture—with the admonition of "shame" (12-17). It is not always clear who should feel the "shame" but, it seems that each of these ancestors who lose a part of their language and culture are associated with shame in some way. Scofield's "grandmother Avis, at ninety-three, / whose tongue, a chorus of etiquette / kept the secret / she hid in the barn" (13). This shameful secret, which could be a child born out of marriage, is another link to Scofield's heritage that is associated with the call of "Shame-shame" (13). The shame is directed in multiple directions. Avis certainly hides the secret as a result of her shame, but it seems that there is also shame associated with the fact that she hides this secret at all. Her "chorus of etiquette" seems to be criticized by Scofield's speaker.

As Scofield narrows in on more closely related family members, the emotional reaction to the ceremony intensifies. When he speaks of his mother, "nimâma Dorothy," the reaction goes beyond shame. He speaks of his mother's experiences in a psychiatric hospital and her untimely death (13). He writes, "Whose tongue, / at forty-eight / she gave back to God. Fuck you!" (13). Once again, it is not entirely clear whether this burst of anger is addressed to God or to his mother, likely a combination of both. It seems that this outburst is directed towards the deep pain of losing his mother prematurely as well as the pain of seeing his mother suffer for so many

years. In Scofield's memoir, *Thunder Through My Veins*, he says that "Death is a very private experience, and I cannot attempt to describe the fear, panic, and anguish of her death" (*Thunder* 185). "Fuck you!" is a phrase that encapsulates many of the conflicting emotions surrounding this time in Scofield's life. Furthermore, this is only one of many strong emotional reactions that Scofield has to the disappointments he has faced. He uses Yiddish to express his disappointment in his Jewish father Ron's inability to "keep all of his children" (Kipocihkân 14). He also uses the ceremony to bear witness to the shame of "Gary [...] whose tongue, shame-shame / made her heart a morgue" (15) and Gerry "whose fists / left her a pile of broken bones" (15). This first part of the ceremony calls on the spirits of various ancestors and brings them into the discourse together. It acts as a spiritual purge and a disclosure of many of the painful experiences that lurk in the speaker's past.

As the ceremony progresses, the speaker begins to introduce the different healing experiences he has experienced. He addresses various people who influenced him to learn Nêhiyawaywin and claim his identity. He writes of his cherished Aunty, Georgina Houle Young:

nimâmasis Georgie, my little mother  
whose tongue, nehiyawaywin        *the Cree language*  
no shame, no shame  
I clung to life on. (16)

Nimâmasis Georgie is honoured in this ceremony. It is through the influence of people like her, that the speaker is able to reclaim his identity. The speaker says that "she made medicine, her stories / no shame, no shame" (17). This is another moment where Scofield shows the interconnection between medicine, stories, and ceremony. He speaks of brewing "maskihkîwâpoy        *liquid medicine, tea*" (17), which is simultaneously an example of making medicine, storytelling, and ceremony.

The speaker also addresses "niwicewâkan, the one I go around with" (17). This is another



person who helps the speaker reclaim his ability to speak through this ceremony. He writes that  
the one he loves

is the rope  
I climb back to myself, my lips  
the lodge door  
he calls me into ceremony, the one  
I go around with whose tongue, in the dark,  
is a rattle, a frog-song  
chasing out kipocihkân. (17)

This is the point in the ceremony where the speaker overcomes the speechlessness and repression of his sexuality that have plagued him all his life. Although this ceremony does not take place in an actual sweatlodge — it is taking place in language, on a page — it is still performative. It *does* the important work of banishing the speechlessness that has affected the speaker for so long.

Through this ceremony, the speaker is able to reclaim his identity through the encouragement of his lover. The speaker and his lover's body parts become important elements of ceremony such a rattle and the sweat lodge. It has been a difficult and painful process to relive many of the traumatic experiences in the speaker's past, but the ceremony has been effective in "chasing out kipocihkân" (17), the one "who is unable to talk" (7). For the first time in his life, the speaker is able find his "root" (11) and speak.

Despite the difficulty and intimacy of this process, this ceremony remains focused on its audience in the spiritual world. One of the key, repeated phrases throughout the poem is "kinâskomitin *I give thanks*" (11 - 14; 16 - 19). Although much of the poem is spent recounting traumatic experiences from the past, this phrase "kinâskomitin" keeps the poem grounded in its true purpose, which is to connect with the creator and creation, to connect with the speaker's "blood root" (11). This is a ceremony that continually asks for a renewal of life from the Great Spirit, kisê-manitow. The final words of the poem are a repetition of yet another

refrain: “pîmatisiwin nipetamawîna. hâw!      *Bring me life. Amen*” (19). At its core, “Kipocihkân” is a ceremony that brings life to Cree people who have had their cultures bombarded by the assaults of settler-colonialism. Repeatedly, Scofield and other Indigenous poets, translate key aspects of their cultures into printed poetry. Scofield says that he does not “know what I consider” (“Poems as Healing Bundles” 317) “Kipocihkân.” If he is not sure that it is a poem, then it seems entirely reasonable to suggest that it is a ceremony. For Scofield and for many other Indigenous, “writing must have an ends” (*Speak to Me Words* 11). In this instance poetry becomes a space where elements of Indigenous culture can be revitalized.

Cree poet and scholar Neal McLeod reminds us that “Part of decolonizing Cree consciousness is for collective narrative memory to be awakened” (McLeod 9). Decolonization is not only a matter of removing the negative impacts of settler-colonization, but also reclaiming or awakening the elements of Indigenous culture that have been threatened. These poets not only resist settler-colonialism, they also restore and awaken “collective narrative memory” through their ceremonial poems. Awakening the rich narrative memory of the past through writing is an act of decolonization through translation. It bears mentioning again that Scofield’s writing, as well as the writing of the other four poets, is not only conducting a ceremony, but reclaiming various integrated aspects of Indigenous culture. Indigenous cultures emphasize the connectedness of ceremony to healing, storytelling, and many other aspects of daily life. “Cree narrative memory is ongoing, and is sustained through relationships, respect, and responsibility” (McLeod 18), writes McLeod. Furthermore, Cree narrative memory encompasses much more than what one might consider merely ceremony, storytelling, or medicine: “The stories are reflected upon and critically examined, and they are brought to life by being integrated into the experience of the storyteller and the audience” (8). Scofield echoes these remarks in his

interview with Tanis MacDonald: “I hope that the way I present poetry — whether it’s through song or the use of language — that I’m engaging people in the storytelling process, that I’m taking them to another place” (“Sitting Down” 289). Scofield’s poetry is not only a text, medicine, story, or ceremony. First and foremost, his poetry is about “engaging people” (289). In this sense, it is deeply and powerfully performative. Scofield is reconnecting people to each other and the land from which they draw their strength.

Returning to Basil Johnston’s axiom “Think Indian,” it seems that the work of these five poets is firmly rooted from within this Indigenous worldview. For these poets, it is more important that they are grounded in the traditions of their ancestors than the genre of poetry. Johnston strongly affirms that being Indigenous and understanding the world from that perspective is primarily about being connected to each other and the land. He writes,

All that [Indigenous people] were came from the land and the sea. They drew their sustenance and strength from it; they derived their sense of direction and their place in the order of nature from it; they sought their visions and gave them meaning in their lives; they invoked Kitchi-manitou and performed their ceremonies upon Mother Earth; and through the exercise of their potential upon the earth and sea, reaped their sense of worth and freedom. They were masters of their destinies. (Johnston 184)

Before colonial contact there was an inherent sense of connection between all living things on Turtle Island. However, in our current state of settler-colonialism, it becomes necessary to consciously and actively remember these grounding principles of connectedness. As Johnston puts it, “Native people of today [...] must live out those ancient principles and make them a part of their lives insofar as circumstances allow. To do so is to ‘Think Indian.’ (189). I would add that to do so is also to decolonize.

## Chapter Four

### Indigenizing as Activism

The first three chapters focus on the adaptation of key aspects of Nêhiyaw and Anishinaabe cultures into a poetic setting. This chapter, along with the final chapter, shows a different aspect of this adaptation. Decolonization is not a unidirectional process of translating Indigenous cultures into European media. It is also the use of European concepts and language to resist systems of settler-colonialism. These final two chapters will consider this process of Indigenization, a specific form of decolonization, which faces the realities of living within a settler-colonial context through Indigenous principles<sup>14</sup>. “Indigenizing as Activism” shows how transforming these tools to fit within Indigenous worldviews is a powerful form of activism. Drawing primarily on the poetry of Marie Annharte (née Baker), along with examples from the other poets, this chapter argues that one important aspect of decolonial writing is understanding that print literature has been a powerful tool of oppression against Indigenous peoples. By Indigenizing poetry, Annharte is using what she calls “enemy language” against itself. Annharte Indigenizes different aspects of poetry in each of her books. In *Being on the Moon* she resists settler notions of linearity in time and literary structure by focusing on cyclical Indigenous time structure. *Coyote Columbus Cafe* retells the story of Columbus getting lost by introducing a particularly Indigenous sense of humour. *Exercises in Lip Pointing* bears witness to and corrects damaging, commodified images of Indigenous people. *Indigena Awry*, more clearly than the other three books, consciously takes Indigenous approaches to the settler tools of writing and publishing to reveal the hypocrisies of settler-colonialism. It is not possible to return to a pre-colonial existence in Canada. However, it is possible to resist the master narrative that

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<sup>14</sup> As will be discussed later in the chapter, this notion of Indigenization is drawn from the work of such Canadian scholars as Len Findlay and Renate Eigenbrod.

dehumanizes Indigenous peoples by asserting Indigeneity in poetry as a form of activism.

As Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird discuss in the introduction to their 1997 edited volume *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*, there is tremendous potential in retasking English for Indigenous purposes. Harjo says:

These colonizers' languages, which often usurped our own tribal languages or diminished them, now hand back emblems of our cultures, our own designs: beadwork, quills if you will. We've transformed these enemy languages. (*Reinventing* 22)

As Harjo points out, language is hardly the first of the many tools employed by colonizers to be "reinvented" by Indigenous people. Due to the fact that colonial languages have displaced Indigenous languages, just as beads have largely displaced quills, the transformation and Indigenousization of this language is all the more powerful. Bird also says some strong words to the same effect:

"Reinventing" in the colonizer's tongue and turning those images around to mirror an image of the colonized to the colonizers as a process of decolonization indicates that something is happening, something is emerging and coming into focus that will politicize as well as transform literary expression. (22)

Bird highlights how political even seemingly apolitical acts such as writing become in Indigenous contexts. She further notes "That we are still here as native women in itself is a political statement. Our physical presence denies the American myth of the vanishing red man" (30). Bird insists that the Indigenous women's "intellectual, creative, and emotional genius has always been alive, only our access to it has been limited" (31). Asserting this living presence is the important work of redress accomplished by, to use Annharte's phrase, "Borrowing Enemy Language."

Annharte is adamant that her writing is not based in a history of "settler lit(ter)," ("Borrowing Enemy Language" 66) but that her choice to use English is an act of subversion and

deconstruction. She demonstrates this subversion when she says, “I glibly mention that I ‘massacre’ English when I write” (60). Additionally, she has adopted her middle name Annharte as her pen name that comes from the movie *How Green Is My Valley*. She explains that she has done so “because the character in the movie offers hope for poor people” (*Poets Talk* 89). From the subversive use of her own name to the use of “Enemy Language” in her writing, Annharte adapts English so that she can use it on her own terms as a form of resistance against established power structures. She shows that English can be transformed to continue the long traditions of writing and storytelling within Indigenous cultures. Furthermore, she is adamant that these transformations are firmly rooted in Indigenous culture. In response to a Métis man’s disparaging remarks about the quality of Indigenous literature, Annharte replies: “‘Well, to me, a pictograph is a novel’” (“Borrowing Enemy Language” 62). She positions herself in relationship to the long line of Indigenous forms of writing rather than in relationship to settler literature. Annharte is adapting English so that it fits into Indigenous modes of writing:

As an Ojibway writer who stands in awe of the pictographs and petroglyphs of the Great Lakes region, the mysterious meanings of our ancestors’ writings are still a mystery to be deciphered. I believe prophecies for our coming age have been left for us. Even for those of us who speak or write in a borrowed language — we have been left with symbols many of us “educated” Natives would be limited to understand. Our “whiteman’s education” doesn’t have a contingency plan for understanding the complexity of our own tribal teachings. (62)

Annharte argues that, far from being a “civilizing” force, English, at least as it has been used by settlers, is not sufficient for understanding the prophecies held within the rich cultural traditions of the Anishinaabeg. English must be adapted and diversified to meet the needs of Indigenous culture, not the other way around.

Annharte considers this willingness to “borrow enemy language” as a tremendous strength and a hallmark of Anishinaabe culture. She even demonstrates this as she uses the

English word for her people: “Ojibway.” It is possible that Annharte switches the spelling of “Ojibway” (62, 63) and “Ojibwe” (62, 63) unintentionally, but given that each spelling is repeated a number of times on each page, it seems that Annharte is emphasizing her point about the “adaptability” (63) of her language and culture. She claims both “Ojibway” and “Ojibwe” as terms placed upon Anishinaabeg, while simultaneously undercutting them by subtly pointing out their instability, especially in written form. Writing in the early 1990s, Annharte challenges the projection that only four Indigenous languages will be spoken “by the year 2000” (63). She has, of course, been proven correct. Furthermore, Annharte states that “The Ojibwe language will survive because of our flexibility” (63). She highlights the long traditions of travel and trade that made the Anishinaabeg so resilient and argues that this same spirit of adaptability will ensure the survival of Indigenous language and culture. She proposes the creation of Canadian literature that accommodates the “inclusion of Native writings” (65). According to Annharte this would be a form of “non-settler literature, or a decolonized approach to Indigenous literature, especially when people are writing about their history and their relationship to land” (65). Annharte is rejecting “settler lit” that was produced “When the colonizers or settlers approached everything Native, natural, or necessary for North American survival as an enemy” (60). As a result, “English became an ‘Enemy Language.’ To ‘civilize’ or ‘educate’ was to take over a people’s unique communication system” (60). Annharte takes on the task of repairing the damage done by “Enemy Language” and “settler lit.” She says, “I find now that all writers have a responsibility for cleaning up language use [...], we might even have 500 years left to do the job of cleaning up the pollution of thought it has wrought” (66). Enemy language is characterized as a polluting force. This pollution is not the result of the language itself, but the way in which it is used to dominate and control Indigenous people and their ways of thinking. Annharte is proposing that

this language is “cleaned” so that “word warriors” (61) can use it as a weapon against settler-colonial domination.

The poem “Help me I’m a poor Indian who doesn’t have enough books,” from Annharte’s most recent collection *Indigena Awry*, is a good example of Indigenization because it uses enemy language, and technologies such as bound and printed books, in Indigenous ways as acts of resistance. “I’m building a barricade,” writes Annharte. “You can help me. / Indigenous people all across the country blocked roads / railways dams” (*Indigena Awry* 16). Although Annharte is drawing her inspiration from historical blockades and occupations in “Kanesatake/Kahnawake” (16), she is proposing a dramatically different form of protest that includes both physical and imaginative worlds. The speaker is asking for books to build a barricade that even settler-colonial society will notice. The speaker insists “I am seriously building a barricade” (16) and she is enlisting the help of the reader, and readers more generally, to “send me your used Kinsellas” and asks if they “have any Anne Camerons to spare?” (17). Annharte is not randomly choosing popular fiction to help her in this barricade, but books that are already thematically linked to First nations people in Canada. Both Cameron and Kinsella are Canadian authors who are notorious for stealing Indigenous stories and publishing them in their novels. The “poor Indian” asking for all of these books is not planning to use them for the conventional purpose of studying them. Nor is she asking for books solely based on any content. She is instead asking for books so that they can be retasked to the goal of “building a barricade” (16). She tells us to “be creative / use your imagination the way they don’t” (18) and assures us that “sometimes stolen is as good as used” (17). Here she is very likely referring to the cultural theft of Cameron and Kinsella. She wants to make “buffalo jump off the page” (18). This is an example of Indigenization, because the speaker is considering the physical world and the



world of the imagination to be connected. The speaker is connecting these two worlds so that the buffalo, a powerful symbol of the attempted genocide against Indigenous people, can be made real by using imagination.

The barricade that Annharte proposes is in line with the barricades built to defend against the destruction of the land by the government and corporations. Repeatedly, Annharte is emphasizing the importance of the book as a physical object and bridging the gap between the world of the imagination and the world of the real. Like the barricades built to prevent the destruction caused by dams that Annharte references earlier in the poem, her barricade will protect Indigenous land from being destroyed by the greed of capitalism and settler-colonialism. Additionally, it will create a sovereign space where Indigenous peoples can celebrate their culture through literature without the impositions of colonial destruction. Thus, this barricade is also a metaphor. Annharte shows us that books are important as both physical objects and metaphors. For her, writing becomes a place where the physical and imagined can meet.

On the metaphorical level, Annharte is calling for Indigenous writers to get credit for the important work that they do. She is tired of settler processes that “undermine Indigenous writings / rip off talents” and “white privilege footnotes”<sup>15</sup>(19). Once again she seems to be referring to the sort of exploitation that writers such as Kinsella and Cameron are guilty of. She also asks, “how much commentary does it take to build a career on our backs?” (19). For Annharte, reading and writing are the perfect responses to the way that society attempts to “white out our efforts / by helping us not write / publish / edit / our own words culture history” (19). She is upset about the lies being told about Aboriginal writing, especially “the big one // ‘not many Indians write, edit or / publish their own books in Canada’” (19). She says that there is “enough

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<sup>15</sup>See Introduction for notes on my own positionality with regards to the texts I am studying.

written enough to / disgrace disrespect / displace / replace / deface” the lie that ““not many Indians write”” (19). The very fact of Annharte writing and publishing is also a strong rebuttal to that lie. Furthermore, Annharte is producing these poems on her own terms and refusing to take part in settler society. Annharte concludes that

they won't know we mean business  
they must see the barricade  
they will have to send in the army

to stop us from reading our books. (20)

Here she shows the power of using the very tools of settler-colonialism to establish a system of Aboriginal rights that are distinct from the rules of settler society. On both the physical and metaphorical level, Annharte is Indigenizing the book. She adapts it for Indigenous purposes and follows in the footsteps of many Indigenous groups that have built barricades to protect their rights to land. Furthermore, she is protecting Indigenous ways of knowing. She communicates these epistemologies through Indigenous writing that is produced and understood on Indigenous terms.

The activism that Annharte accomplishes through her work is not the only goal she works towards or intention that she is writing with. In some regards, the political challenge to settler-colonialism that Annharte offers through her poetry is an unintentional benefit of writing from her own point of view. The other poets also offer some remarkable examples of this phenomenon, though perhaps not to the same extent. In a remarkably similar fashion to Annharte, Louise Halfe shows that she is writing from an Indigenous point of view to counteract the inaccurate representations of Indigenous people by settler-colonial institutions such as the church. Her poem “Der Poop” adopts the satirical voice of an Indigenous person responding to the pope saying he is “sorry” (*Bear Bones* 102) for residential school abuses, while in the

outhouse. In a fittingly ironic move, Halfe juxtaposes the authority of an official newspaper report about a powerful religious and political figure with someone speaking in the vernacular while in an outhouse. Although the speaker apologizes for the humble setting of her letter to the “poop”—“forgive me for writing on dis newspaper / i found it in da outhouse” (102) — this setting is what makes the poem such an effective form of activism through Indigenization. The speaker of the poem is opening a discourse and teasing the “poop,” completely ignoring the fact that the pope will very likely never read her letter. She says, “so i was sitting here dinking dat we / maybe dalk” (102). The speaker is interested in a conversation, not an authoritarian, top down sort of monologue where she reads what the pope has to say in the newspaper. She also uses humour, which as Annharte has said, is an important part of Indigenous conversations and relationships: “i always want to dell you stay / out of my pissness” (102). The pun on “pissness” works well because it makes the speaker appear humble and brings the conversation down to the earthy level one would expect of a conversation held in the outhouse. The speaker of this poem denies the authority of the catholic church. She says “sorry mean dat i don’t need your church / and your priest telling me what to do” (102). Not only is the speaker unintimidated by the authority of the catholic church, but she is also proud to practice Indigenous spirituality: “sorry mean dat i free to dalk to *Manitou* / the spirits and plant *Iyiniwak*” (102). Here, the speaker is exposing the disingenuousness of the pope’s statement by giving this same sort of falsely modest apology. The speaker begins in this tone when she says “forgive me for writing on dis newspaper” (102). She isn’t really asking for forgiveness, but simply opening her letter with the acknowledgement that it may seem unconventional to somebody else reading it. The speaker is Indigenizing writing by incorporating Nêhiyawêyan and literally writing over the lines of standard english in the newspaper. In this poem, medium and message work together to assert

the speaker's rights to claim her Indigeneity.

Duncan Mercredi also takes on racism by using the so-called "master's tools." His poem "little towns" describes the cruel racism experienced by an Indigenous man walking into a small town restaurant and that man's adaptation of white religion to counteract this hatred. The scene described is rife with the same racist hatred that is depicted in much of Mercredi's poetry:

as women move children away from me  
clutching their purses closer to them  
while men in suits and ties  
stare with hate filled eyes (*Dreams* 62)

The speaker would "like to think it's my dusty blue jeans / faded by wind and sun / and the cuffed work boots that revolt" (62) the people of the restaurant but he knows that it is "the brown man among them" (62) that truly brings about these reactions. The man does not even get what he orders and then is "short changed at the till" (63), showing that even the apparently colourblind marketplace has been infected with racism. Nevertheless, the speaker seems willing to let "a white god" (63) deal with the hypocrisies of this racist place that sees nothing more than a "buck" (63) when an Indigenous man walks into a restaurant. The speaker concludes, "i pray to a white god / take what is left of these small towns / and bury their remains beneath the dust" (63). The speaker of this poem does not apologize for who he is and quietly bears witness to the injustices he is presented with. Correspondingly, the speaker does not confront these people in the restaurant. He simply calls on nature to take its course because he sees that justice is already at work without his interference. These small towns are already under the threat of disappearing altogether and even the white god is punishing this racism. He is reversing the myth of the vanishing Indian with a new story in which the racists in small towns are the ones buried. Additionally, it is Mercredi who controls the history and documentation of this event through the writing of this poem while this town is buried.

Gregory Scofield also shows how history can be Indigenized in his poem “Making New History.” Like Annharte, he responds to the easy, essentialist categorizations of Indigenous people by speaking from his own experience and point of view. He is rejecting Settler accounts of history and committing to creating his own. His poem is an unconventional way to respond to historical writings. Yet it seems that this unconventionality is very much a part of the critique Scofield is offering. The poem offers no stanza breaks and little punctuation. The lines of the poem are all declarative statements. His second stanza declares that “Columbus bashing is passe” (*The Gathering* 84). It seems, then, that Scofield is offering an alternative to this sort of direct response to the official histories about Columbus and the civilizing mission of colonization. He writes, “Uncle Tomahawk working hard to cut off those / In between Indians / Don’t fit the blood criteria” (84). Scofield is Métis and he speaks from this perspective to develop a more inclusive understanding of who qualifies as Indigenous. He does not mince words here. He does not dignify the official histories with a wordy legalistic response. Instead he responds with defiant declarations about the injustice of the way Métis people have been treated. He says that Métis people are expected to live “In limbo” and that “We’re still homeless” (84). He gives clear and affecting statements that immediately make the position of the Métis clear. Nevertheless, Scofield does not accept this fate. Like Mercredi and many other indigenous poets, he chooses to be part of the resistance against institutional racism. A major part of the success of this resistance is that Scofield uses print poetry to affect his audience. Furthermore, he rejects the emotionless terms used by the government such as “criteria” and “constitutional demands” (84) and replaces them with strong, easily understood phrases that clearly explain, from an Indigenous perspective, what colonization really meant. For example, he says, “We all got screwed” (84). He is not ashamed of his background: “we all grew up on bannock & baloney / No shame here” (84). Yet,

he shows, in part by appealing to the raw emotion of being hurt by colonization, that he can adapt aspects of settler culture to fit within his world view. He uses poetry to be part of “a new Half-breed rebellion / Brewing” (84).

Marvin Francis is also using poetry to simultaneously raise awareness about unjust economic circumstances and to assert his own Indigenous position. The political implications of Francis’ poetry are the main focus of Warren Cariou’s article on *city treaty*. Cariou argues that “Francis uses postmodern irony and verbal excess to show how the lives of contemporary Aboriginal people are implicated in complex patterns of symbol, contract and stereotype that work to keep them in marginal positions” (Cariou 149). Throughout the long poem, Francis repeatedly draws attention to the “marginal positions” that Indigenous people continue to occupy and repeatedly exposes the ways in which Indigenous people are exploited within the settler economy. Sections of *city treaty* such as “mcPemmican<sup>TM</sup>” and “first job poem” make clear arguments for the ways that the settler economy keeps Indigenous people in a position of subservience. In the case of “mcPemmican<sup>TM</sup>” the pemmican itself is usurped from Indigenous peoples and then turned into something unhealthy and sold back to them. Francis writes “let the poor intake their money take their health” (*city treaty* 6). Francis is drawing attention to the fact that selling commodified, fast-food elements of Indigenous culture back to Indigenous people is keeping them poor and unhealthy. “first job poem” focuses on the similar theme of how low paying labour jobs pay just enough to allow the Indigenous poor to purchase things that will make them sick. Francis writes “the first pay job / one that paid regular basis / one that bought smokes new friends trouble” (41). Furthermore, he adds that the jobs working in the bush often saw “guys quitting enough for a 6 pak” (41). The jobs offered by the settler-colonial economy only serve to enable addiction and keep Indigenous people

marginalized.

For Francis settler-colonialism is to blame for the difficult situations Indigenous peoples are often put in. Francis protests the type of thinking that reduces Indigenous identity to what Gerald Vizenor calls “simulations of manifest manners” (*Manifest* 12). Francis’ piece “White Settlers,” strongly protests the simulations of Indigenous identity that seem to be omnipresent in white settler society. Francis says that “WHITE SETTLERS” are “Two words all powerful” that make “red blood boil and hiss” (*city treaty* 45). However, the effect of white settlers that Francis is most critical of is not the actual history of colonization, but the simulated history depicted in popular culture. Francis is most attentive to “that john ford land scape,” (46) and he does not speak out against such infamous political leaders in North American politics such as Andrew Jackson or Duncan Campbell Scott, but he confronts hollywood western movie stars: “Fuk u john wane / Clint westwood” (46). Finally, he saves particular vehemence for the names of sports teams that highlight how simulation can be a tool of dominance:

Fuck mohawk gas  
Atlanta braves  
Cleveland indians  
Washington redskins  
THE KANSAS CITY CHIEFS (47).

Francis is rejecting these simulations and becomes a “postindian warrior” (*Manifest* 5). He Indigenizes settler forms of literature so that he can speak from his own point of view as an Indigenous person to decolonize.

### *Adapting Enemy Language*

I will return to several more examples of how Annharte Indigenizes poetry as a direct form of activism and deconstruction later in the chapter. In the meantime, there are a number of

scholars working on the concept of Indigenization that corroborate the effectiveness of Annharte's methods of "borrowing enemy language." Drawing on the strengths of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Len Findlay asserts the imperative role Indigenous ways of thinking play in creating an alternative to settler-colonial realities. He would likely be in favour of the techniques that Annharte employs to transform settler tools so that they can be used to remedy damages done by settler-colonialism. Findlay intends his exhortation "Always Indigenize" to be "a strategically indeterminate provocation to thought and action on the grounds that there is no *hors-Indigene*, no geopolitical or psychic setting, no real or imagined *terra nullius* free from the satisfactions and unsettlements of Indigenous (pre)occupation" ("Always Indigenize!" 309). Findlay is asserting that the so-called new world is not in fact new in either the physical or metaphysical sphere. For Findlay, Indigenization is a conscious foregrounding of the fact that the Americas are not and never have been an unoccupied place. Therefore, all people living here have a responsibility to honour these first peoples and the land they have always called home.

Findlay further defines the process of Indigenization by saying, "Smith identifies Indigenizing with the processes of 'decolonization, healing, transformation, and mobilization' (116) and with 'Twenty-Five Indigenous Projects'" (310). As Findlay is pointing out, Smith's "Twenty-Five Indigenous Projects" are good examples of Indigenous people living their lives on their own terms. At its core, Indigenization is the process of approaching daily life from the foundation of Indigenous principles. It is not a dismantling of society in the Americas, but rather, a re-orienting of society to be governed by Indigenous principles. For scholars such as Findlay and Smith, this re-orientation occurs first and foremost within the academy. Renate Eigenbrod points out in her article "Not Just a Text" that "Findlay argues not only for the inclusion of



Indigenous knowledges into the curricula of our post-secondary institutions but also for a ‘radical’ transformation of our academic disciplines” (Eigenbrod 70). Findlay is arguing that some of the institutions that have been used to control Indigenous peoples can be adapted to uses that will aid Indigenous causes. In this case, both Eigenbrod and Findlay are thinking specifically of academic institutions. Appropriately, Findlay concludes his short, but energetic, section on Indigenization by referencing and adapting the words of Audre Lorde: “some of the master’s most important tools [...] can be used ‘to dismantle the master’s house,’ though not if they are the only tools used and if they remain within dominant patterns of ownership of the means of production” (“Always Indigenize!” 310). Indigenization is the process of using settler tools, such as research within the institution, in Indigenous ways. However, these tools need to be adapted and recontextualized. Furthermore, these tools cannot be the only tools used. Settler-colonialism has long been a system of domination and it will not be dismantled with good intentions alone. It will require a lot of hard work, of the sort that Annharte is doing, if the system can be transformed into one that honours Indigenous people and the lands they have always called home.

Anishinaabe writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor provides another important set of vocabulary that adds to the discourse of Indigenization. Vizenor’s work can be seen as a precursor for other scholars of Indigenous studies. He theorizes the damage done by false representations of Indigenous people in literature. In his seminal work *Manifest Manners*, he explains his alliterative title:

The simulations of manifest manners are the continuance of the surveillance and domination of the tribes in literature. Simulations are the absence of the tribal real; the postindian conversions are in the new stories of survivance over dominance. (*Manifest* 4)

Vizenor’s language can be a bit obtuse, but he importantly places blame for much of the damage

done by settler-colonialism on the “simulations” of Indigenous people in literature and popular culture. “Manifest manners” are the attitudes of superiority that settlers brought with them to Turtle Island that gave them the sense of entitlement and desire to dominate Indigenous peoples. These attitudes are rooted in the concept of manifest destiny; many Europeans considered it their god-given right to control, dominate, and civilize the Americas. Vizenor also provides the theoretical underpinnings for the political resistance of these “simulations of manifest manners” in the form of “the postindian” (4). Vizenor says that one of settler-colonialism’s most powerful weapons of domination is “the invention of the Indian” (5). In opposition to this invention, “The postindian ousts the inventions with humor, new stories, and the simulations of survivance” (5). “The postindian warriors” are contemporary Indigenous artists and storytellers who provide political resistance to the simulated images that keep Indigenous people in positions of subservience. These “warriors” are maintaining Indigenous lifeways by Indigenous non-Indigenous realities.

In yet another formulation, Peter Kulchyski also affirms this important work of Indigenousization, specifically of settler systems of governance and institutions. He is adamant that the tools used by Indigenous peoples seeking to undo and repair some of the damage done by settler-colonialism must be adapted for Indigenous use. One of the root causes of the damage done by settler-colonialism is that Indigenous peoples are forced into a system of rules that are incongruent with their own worldviews. This is possible because of the huge disparity in power between settlers and First Nations and because of the master narrative that depicts Indigenous peoples as subhuman (LaRoque 37) and “savage” (*Manifest* 6). Peter Kulchyski writes that “Indigenous cultures have become threatened as colonialism left many Indigenous peoples in the position of being a minority in their homelands” (*Aboriginal Rights* 21). Besides the painful

irony of Indigenous people being displaced in their own home and Indigenous peoples suffering as a result of this, it seems that Canada as a nation is also suffering. The devastating, but largely unacknowledged, processes of colonization have left a huge number of Indigenous people dislocated from their own homes. Meanwhile, the Canadian government has introduced the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which seems to conflict with some Indigenous rights. In essence, Canada is a nation divided at its core. kulchyski makes it clear that the removal of this conflict can only be accomplished if the system of colonization is removed entirely. Even Indigenous self-governance using settler methodologies will not work because “Culture will be separate from everyday life, something to be stored in museum boxes” (*Like the Sound of the Drum* 16). kulchyski, like many decolonial thinkers, is acutely aware of the need to incorporate culture into everyday life if there is to be hope of allowing Indigenous peoples to move beyond survival into a state of thriving. This means that settler society and methodologies must be Indigenized.

Anishinaabe poet and academic Waaseyaa’sin Christine Sy is still another voice advocating for Indigenization. Like many other scholars she sees a particularly strong potential in poetry, and other literary forms, as a method of decolonization. In her article “Through Iskigamizigan (The Sugar Bush)” she tells “a story of decolonization through the reclamation of Anishinaabeg language, erotica, and ways of knowing, told through story, poetry, and prose” (Sy 187). Sy translates her worldview into her writing. She reclaims her Anishinaabeg heritage and epistemology through her poetry. In her case, she is exploring the “possibility for personal decolonization” (195). By no means does she suggest that writing is the only decolonial process available to Indigenous peoples. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that so many Indigenous people are Indigenizing poetry to bring about their own decolonization. As Sy concludes her article, she

thoroughly explains why writing and poetry can be so effective:

The point is to inscribe contemporary Indigenous poetics with the work of decolonization so that we may reduce cultural voyeurism or tokenism and even prompt critical praxis in a non-Indigenous audience; prevent the recreation of a new kind of romantic Indian, the romantic Indigenous person (in this case the one who has either been untouched by colonization or hasn't had to do any decolonizing process in generating an Indigenous literature); and nurture the personal in decolonizing practice. (195)

Sy is asserting the important work of Indigenous people speaking for themselves. By telling their own stories from their own points of view, Indigenous people are resisting essentialization as a mode of control through colonial literature. Instead of tolerating the potential “romantic” representations of Indigenous people, Indigenous writers are representing themselves honestly and including the traumatic effects that colonization has had on them both personally and as a people. The sort of decolonial literature that Sy is advocating for is a form of cure for writing that is complicit with the narratives of settler-colonialism and an example of the Indigenization of poetry as a type of decolonial activism.

Given the amount of thought that she and many others have given to the effect of using English in Indigenous contexts, Annharte is quite conscious and emphatic about her intentions when it comes to writing poetry in English. She intends to use her poetry as a form of activism that redresses the many false myths proliferated about Indigenous peoples. In one particularly candid interview with Reg Johanson, Annharte expands on the ideas she brings up in her article “Borrowing Enemy Language.” Here she develops the notion of “bad writing.” Annharte uses this term in a number of different ways and as a result, it can be difficult to pin down.

Nevertheless, the clearest and most important definition of “bad writing” is writing that does not challenge or destabilize the history of settler-colonialism in the Americas. This is the sort of writing that accepts colonial accounts of who Indigenous people are and how the Americas were

colonized. However, when Johanson first brings it up, Annharte replies that “bad writing” is “informant writing” (Johanson 63). She does qualify that there is also a need to “inform a readership” (63), so it is not entirely clear in which way “informant writing” is necessarily “bad.” She seems to be making a pun on the notion of an informant. Writing that informs a readership may not be bad, but “informant writing” that operates as a double agent and gives colonial forces sensitive information to use against Indigenous people, is bad. It also seems that “bad writing” is a type of subversion of the English language, or as Annharte also calls English, the “Enemy Language” (63). This subversive quality of “bad writing” is something that she demonstrates by saying: “Conversational style is my preference when I am being playful. Or want to be very serious! Luv the vernacular” (63-64). Once again, in this understanding of “bad writing,” the term “bad” is somewhat unstable and likely ironic. Annharte comments many times on how much she likes to play with language and use wordplay. In one sense, her term “bad writing” is simply this sort of subversive wordplay.

In what is the most significant understanding of “bad writing,” Annharte says: “One of the myths is that we ndns don’t have a written language so therefore we are inferior. [...] My complicated argument here is that if an Indigenous writer agrees to this falsehood then he or she may be complicit in ‘bad writing’” (64). Basically, Annharte is saying that if an Indigenous writer agrees with the disparaging histories of Native people as told by settler-colonial society, then that Indigenous writer is guilty of “bad writing.” Of course, she resists this still-colonized posture, but she feels as if she is being prevented from speaking out against “bad writing” because there is too much vested interest in proliferating false myths about Indigenous peoples. Enforcing the silence around “bad writing” aids the colonial aims of “divide and conquer.”

In an interview with Pauline Butling, Annharte’s frustrations with the misrepresentations

present in “bad writing” (*Poets Talk* 112) are also addressed. Here, Annharte suggests that another reason that misrepresentations of Indigenous people continue is that “it’s difficult to allow yourself to feel, to feel the rage about genocide” (112). She continues, “It’s difficult to feel that it’s worth writing about, or that art or writing can contain some of that” (112). Part of the challenge facing Indigenous writers is the rawness of emotions about the “genocide” waged against them. Annharte’s comments convey her frustration with how difficult it is to write against a well-orchestrated denial of the impacts of settler-colonialism. The fact that “bad writing” is allowed to continue un-critiqued is a result of the colonial borders that are all too well policed. Annharte writes: “Maybe I need to rage and rant on this but to no avail as the white liberal snot fest presides” (Johanson 69). Annharte wonders if this output of painful emotion is worth all the difficulty. She feels that her anger cannot get her very far, as long as the assumptions of our still-colonized reality remain settled.

Although Annharte’s views may be expressed with a unique sense of style, she is certainly not the only one critical of the strategies used by systemic authorities in Canada. In *White Civility* Daniel Coleman confirms that white Canadian culture, what Annharte might call “the white liberal snot fest” (69), is deeply invested in maintaining its boundedness within the false myths it proliferates. Coleman writes: “White Canadian culture is obsessed, and organized by its obsession, with the problem of its own civility” (Coleman 5). He proposes a treatment for this obsession and calls it “wry civility” (41), which “demands that we refuse to forget the suppressed brutalities that are not just part of the nation’s past but are also ongoing elements of the structure of civility upon which the nation as an entity is founded” (44). This act of refusing to forget is where the tenacity of Annharte is helpful. She overcomes the difficulties of facing her feelings of rage about her experiences as an Indigenous woman so that she is able to write

poetry. This poetry forces readers to confront the myths that lie at the heart of Canada's sense of itself as a nation. Reading her poetry, it is all but impossible "to forget the suppressed brutalities" of settler-colonialism. She consciously practices "wry civility" by overcoming the sort of writing that attempts to suppress Canada's abuse and misrepresents Indigenous peoples. This sense of "wry civility" is obviously very close to the surface in her most recent collection, *Indigena Awry*. Readers should not be surprised by this satiric tone because Annharte has been exposing the myth of Canadian origins through the Indigenization of poetry for her entire career.

Beginning with her ground-breaking book *Being on the Moon*, Annharte has made it clear that she is writing from a distinctly Indigenous perspective and that adopting this point of view is an intentional form of activism. In Annharte's interview with Pauline Butling, she discusses the very concept behind constructing the book based on the "thirteen moon" (98) calendar:

The idea of a book struck me as an interesting challenge and so I decided to try to make a calendar, which represented something of myself, but also related to other Native people's calendars. I looked at several: Haida, Cree, Ojibway. I looked at these calendars and thought, okay this fits here, and that's how I came up with my arrangement. (98)

Annharte makes it clear that the thirteen moon "calendar became very important as a symbol of my own body" as well as bodies of other women (98). Moreover, she is aware that the way she has organized her first collection is highly symbolic for many groups of Indigenous peoples. She sees the concept of writing a book "as an interesting challenge" and to overcome that challenge she looks to her own and other Indigenous structures. Annharte is Indigenizing the structure of her book.

### *Indigenous Concepts of Time*

Anishinaabe scholar and activist Winona LaDuke provides yet another iteration of the

Indigenous worldview as both land-based and cyclical. LaDuke puts forward the Anishinaabe concept of “Minobimaatisiwin,” which can be translated as both “the good life” and “continuous rebirth” (LaDuke 128). One of the important tenets of this concept is what LaDuke calls “cyclical thinking” that “is an understanding that the world (time, and all parts of the natural order-including the moon, the tides, women, lives, seasons, or age) flows in cycles” (128). Annharte provides an excellent example of this cyclical understanding, but it should be noted that she is not the only one of these five poets drawing significant inspiration from the cycles of the moon and cyclicity within Indigenous ways of knowing. Gregory Scofield’s *Love Medicine and One Song* also has a series of moon poems: “Twelve Moons and The Dream” (*Love Medicine* 40). In this section of thirteen poems, Scofield draws on the traditional Cree names for the different moons throughout the year. The entire collection *Being on the Moon* is structured around the year’s thirteen moons. Furthermore, Annharte presents the cyclicity of a woman’s body and Indigenous concepts of time in direct contrast to the linearity of capitalist settler-colonialism.

Annharte wastes no time foregrounding the difference in worldviews between settlers and Indigenous people in her first collection of poetry. The first poem, and the first of the thirteen “moons” that give title to and structure the collection, makes it very clear that settlers are trying to cover up the inner workings of settler-colonialism. “Lacey Moon” points out that this cover up is a feeble attempt and that it cannot last long. “The immigrants brought all their finery / They put it on their couch arms or back” begins the poem (9). Furthermore, Annharte points out her lack of trust for “Their doilies” that “guard against / Beer bottle rings or ashtrays of butts” (9). Despite the intents of the “immigrants” to cover up their vices of drinking and smoking with handicrafts, the doilies can be easily seen through. The truth about the character of the



immigrants can also be easily observed despite the doilies that attempt to cover it up. Annharte writes: “It’s strange to wear a doily on your face / It doesn’t look charming like a veil” (9). She also adds, “Something’s cooking when you do that / I’m not about to trust your monias ways” (9). With no Indigenous experience of doilies to draw from, Annharte plays with different notions of what they could be used for and seems to conclude that they are a deceitful barrier between perception and reality. She concludes her poem with a metaphor:

Not much snow this winter on the ground  
The dark patchwork latticed white spots  
Cover up goings on even yellow piss  
Won’t last long until spring laundry time (9)

In these lines the snow becomes the doily and the inevitable, cyclical spring thaw will reveal the “goings on” that the doily/snow is covering up. Annharte understands the world cyclically and knows that covering something up is a temporary solution to dealing with the waste of our society. She realizes that these attempted cover-ups will soon be revealed and that her way of understanding the world has lasted much longer than settler epistemologies.

Annharte also draws on an Indigenous worldview in her discussion of a unique approach to the writing process that is connected to nature and traditional modes of Indigenous writing in her poem “Scribble Moon.” Returning to Waaseyaa’s in Christine Sy’s definition of decolonization, “Scribble Moon” is a poem “that includes both resistance against colonization and the reclamation of Indigenous lifeways” (Sy 185). The poem accomplishes this by resisting the settler notions of what writing is and embracing Indigenous methods of writing. Annharte begins by establishing a link between traditional Indigenous methods of writing, in the form of pictographs, and European modes of using a typewriter. The speaker is struggling to make her writing more like Indigenous methods of writing. Annharte writes, “Picky words dictated in a hypnotic state / Each mouthful must imitate pictographs” (58). Here Annharte is showing

struggle of the writing process, especially when this writing process is drawing on the traditions of Anishinaabeg styles of writing and using European technologies that do not properly function.

One of the central conceits of the poem is a malfunctioning typewriter: “a grandfather made a joke on her / Messing with the striker of her typing machine” (58). These lines depict the interaction of Indigenous and non-Indigenous modes of writing. Once again, Annharte displays her vibrant sense of humour by portraying the “grandfather,” a figure who can be understood as a keeper of tradition, as a mischievous character. Rather than sabotaging the typewriter, he is merely “Messing” with it, playing “a joke” (58). This “grandfather” is not trying to destroy the influence of contemporary society on the speaker of the poem, but to resist it and question the assumption that a typewriter can easily replace the traditions of oral culture and pictographs. As a result of this joke, the writer in this poem questions the value of “her typing machine” (58). She ends up “hitting all the keys hard” (58). Obviously, the jumbled keys do not provide a legible text, at least not the way that typewriters are intended to produce legible texts. The writer “stashes the scraps” (58) and moves on to considering other documents she has produced: “Many cross-out arrows in her scribbler record” (58). Finally, “Puttering around looking outside she notices / The moon’s scarred face has vanished” (58). It is not entirely clear what the moon represents in this context; however, there is a strong connection between the scarred moon face and the “cross-out arrows in her scribbler record” (58). As a result of the tampering with the typewriter, the writer’s work has begun to be a more accurate representation of the natural world. Annharte certainly uses settler technology to produce her poetry, but she has not abandoned her Indigenous worldview. She uses colonial tools such as the typewriter so that they can more accurately depict cyclical Indigenous traditions such as storytelling and pictographs. Annharte focuses on the process of writing rather than the end product.

The final “moon” poem in *Being on the Moon* emphasizes this theme of cyclical thinking. “Throwback Moon” draws on archaeological metaphors for the potential to recreate societies from the past. In particular, it focuses on the evidence of women’s labour and describes how the earth’s resources should be best used. The poem begins “A singular bump in the Earth gives blessings / over time. Copper gorgets and amulets might / be hammered from the pennies in a piggy bank” (74). This poem discusses the life cycle of the Earth’s resources and a consideration of how they should be used. Annharte does not consider the penny to be an immutable object and rather than immediately associating it with currency, she prefers a sacred usage of this resource. The copper can be changed into “gorgets and amulets.” Furthermore, there is a sense that this work is cyclical, rather than linear. Even the structure of the poem resists linearity by enjambling the lines and using periods in the middle of lines. The line breaks encourage the reader to rush through the space and begin the next line as quickly as possible. Of course, the nature of a page in a book necessitates the use of some lines; however, Annharte has resisted this linearity by breaking the line in the middle of the thought. She asserts an Indigenous use of copper and expresses this in an Indigenous way.

Not only can the Earth’s raw materials be remade, but they can be remade into objects integral to women’s daily lives in Indigenous cultures. Annharte encourages us to look for the evidence of earlier life and still considers it vital: “Maroon women peeled plantains even in caves” (74). By using the example of “Maroon women,” Caribbean Indigenous people from long ago, the speaker reminds us that some things do not change as much as we might expect. Annharte seems to think that nothing is ever completely lost or unrecoverable. She writes “each midden holds / the answer to how that Early Woman became a / fossil. A throwback chances to emerge from / our untidiness” (74). Even in the middens, ancient disposal areas especially for

kitchen waste, Annharte is able to see the cycle of life repeating itself. She sees potential in these old garbage pits to recreate the lives of the women who came before. Annharte does not look at “Early Woman” as something separate from herself that she studies as a curiosity. Instead, she sees herself as a continuation of the cycle of life that “Early Woman” was also a part of thousands of years ago.

In addition to cyclical thinking, Winona LaDuke posits “reciprocal relations” (LaDuke 128) as one of the most important aspects of an Indigenous worldview. LaDuke says that “reciprocal relations, defines responsibilities and ways of relating between humans and the ecosystem. Simply stated, the resources of the economic system, whether they be wild rice or deer, are recognized as animate and, as such, gifts from the Creator” (128). Annharte puts these teachings into practice in a number of her poems from *Being on the Moon*. For example, “Stay Out of the Woods” depicts “resources [...] as animate” (128). In this poem Annharte asserts a sense of agency to the violated rock cuts: “rock faces scream leave us alone” (*Being on the Moon* 11). In an Indigenous worldview where the difference between the imaginative, metaphorical world, and the physical, literal world is very thin, it is not much of a leap to believe that the speaker can actually hear the “rock faces scream” (11). The rocks are alive, just as the trees are: “skinny jack pine holding a rock / his cone blown far from memory” (11). Here the “jack pine” is personified as a “he” capable of holding a rock. In the world created by Annharte’s poem, the rocks, trees, eagles, and the presumably human speaker are all connected and all alive.

Furthermore, Annharte is asserting the dispossession and violation that all of these interconnected beings have suffered. The speaker begins: “These woods I know are mine” (11). Unlike Frost’s poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” the woods in Annharte’s poem belong to the speaker because of the relationship the speaker has with them. Frost’s poem begins

“Whose woods these are I think I know. / His house is in the village though” (Frost 52). The form of ownership Frost alludes to is not based on any actual relationship between the woods and the owner, but only on some form of legal title. Presumably the owner is too busy to enjoy the woods and spends all his time away from them. On the other hand, Annharte’s poem does not depict any sort of legalistic ownership. Instead, a sense of kinship unites the speaker of this poem and her woods. The speaker objects to the defacement of her kin. She compares the rock cuts to a “temple” and a “church” (*Being on the Moon* 11). However, this sacred space has been defaced: “graffiti’s hit them smack dab / the way priest sermons marked / words to grow up dwelling on” (11). Rather than the pictographs and petroglyphs that Annharte discusses throughout her poetry, the “graffiti” is something that is at odds with its surroundings rather than something that compliments and grows out of a natural world. Annharte depicts the graffiti’s presence as something both violent and long-lasting. The graffiti has “hit” the rock cuts and its impact lasts as long as words remembered from sermons long ago. Annharte presents the natural world as a place that should be honoured as sacred and interconnected with people. In short, our relationship with resources should be reciprocal. However, settler intervention has corrupted this relationship, just as the imposition of christianity was at odds with Indigenous teachings about being in close relationship with the natural world.

“Hudson Bay Bill” is another of Annharte’s poems that highlights the importance of “reciprocal relations” (LaDuke 128). Annharte mentions that this is the first poem she got published. It is about losing her credit card at the Hudson’s Bay department store (*Poets Talk* 98). She says “I wrote the poem about what they owed me. That was fun, I was learning then to deal with some of the injustices in written form” (98). Annharte highlights the injustices of the fur trade in this poem by reminding her readers that a significant aspect of Indigenous

worldviews is a system of reciprocity. Annharte has not forgotten about the deals done in bad faith that put Indigenous people at such a disadvantage during the fur trade. Furthermore, she expects to be paid back, but she also points out the irony of the modern manifestation of the Hudson's Bay Company asking for the speaker of the poem to pay a bill.

The poem begins, "after so many years / Rupert wants me to pay / a bill but he owes me" (33). With characteristic wordplay and good humour, Annharte puns on the name "Rupert." Although Prince Rupert, the first Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, has been dead for centuries, the company has been drastically reformatted from its original incarnation, and we have not referred to the land the HBC controlled as Rupert's land for many years, Annharte still considers her dealings at the department store to be dealings done directly with Rupert. She ignores the settler notion of the corporation and speaks as if her business transaction with The Bay is still a part of this imagined reciprocal relationship that Indigenous people have with Rupert. Annharte reveals that the situation of Indigenous people has not changed all that much. Even though she knows that settlers and their corporations owe a tremendous debt to Indigenous people, she points out that these settler structures are still taking advantage of them. Annharte writes, "my credit is no good / my fur is gone before I get it" (33). Once again she is projecting a common experience of contemporary shoppers onto the backdrop of Canadian history. She has lost her credit card, but none of the Hudson's Bay Company's dealings with Indigenous people have ever been honest. Indigenous dealing with the Hudson's Bay Company were based on a system of usurious credit, where Indigenous trappers were seldom given what their furs were worth and were forced to pay large amounts of interest on the goods given to them on credit. As a result, the speaker resorts to stealing from the store to settle this historical inequality. She says stealing is her "way of being honest" and that she wants "a fair share not / what I end up

begging” (33). By marrying the contemporary incarnation of the Hudson’s Bay Company with the historical, Annharte reveals that she still expects a reciprocal relationship with everyone and everything she deals with. Although many cultures expect to get a “fair share” in their business dealings, the concept of “reciprocal relations” (LaDuke 128) seems to extend into all relationships within the Indigenous context. Annharte is not governed by any statute of limitations when it comes to dealing with historical injustices.

### *Humour and Indigeneity*

One might be tempted to give too much emphasis to the position of the angry Indigenous speaker in many of Annharte’s poems. It is certainly true that Annharte does not mince words and she knows her readers may be “ticked [...] off” by her characterization of colonization and Columbus’s conquest as an act of “genocide” (*Poets* 105). Even if Annharte does not approach the topic of colonization lightly, she certainly approaches it with a good sense of humour and feels that she is often misunderstood. Earlier in her interview with Butling she says “I feel a lot of people don’t understand my jokes” and that she does not “hear the ruckus [she’d] like to hear” (97). When asked to comment on the appeal of humour she begins her reply by talking about anger: “anger is a tag that’s always put on First Nations’ writing” (97). Annharte considers this emphasis on the anger in some First Nations’ writing as a way of discounting the value of her writing. Annharte sees humour as the more important, even essential aspect of Indigenous writing. She says “If you listen from the perspective of a First Nations person, you may hear anger but you definitely go for the humour” (97). Annharte feels that she is a misunderstood poet largely because people are not reading her work from an Indigenous point of view and as a result, they do not understand the humour she is employing in her work. Humour is certainly at

the core of her chapbook *Coyote Columbus Cafe*. Even though she does characterize Columbus's conquest as a genocide in this book, she is continually reframing this history through a comic lens. Some may consider this an inappropriate vein of humour, but Annharte insists that this form of humour is distinctly Indigenous and is the most appealing part of her project to set the story of Columbus on its head.

Annharte discusses humour in *Coyote Columbus Cafe* as an important tool for decolonization. Once again it is the sort of decolonization that resists the present realities of settler-colonialism while asserting an Indigenous point of view. Annharte says that joking is "an Indian conversational device. To joke about words is a way to deprogram ourselves" (101). She compares her use of words to an artist's palette of colours and tries to use "impolite" words in her poetry as often as possible (101). As mentioned earlier, Annharte feels that her motivation to use this sort of edgy humour is not always understood. Furthermore, she emphasizes that wordplay and teasing are integral modes of Indigenous storytelling and social interaction and that readers need to remember that she is writing for an Indigenous audience. She shows this saying, "But with Native people when you're joking with them or teasing them, this is a way to start a dialogue, as opposed to putting on a pompous air. Humour introduces an informality" (103). This humour and informality is what makes Annharte's poem a form dialogue and such an effective piece of decolonial activism. The title poem of the chapbook is a fine example of this activism. It uses multiple voices and often takes the form of dialogue to trouble the linear narrative of Columbus finding the "new" world:

Colon would get comforted  
by a kindly Native who'd say

*Don't feel bad bro.  
You're lost like the rest of us. (Coyote 14)*

In a typically strategic move of irreverent humour, Annharte refers to Columbus by his Spanish



name, *Colon*. The pun on the English word “colon” acts as a clear indication of how the speaker of the poem feels about Columbus and further points out that Columbus is deeply inculcated in the processes of colonization. In the Butling interview, Annharte also expresses her desire to implicate Colon in colonization. She says “this guy’s name ‘Colon’ is part of that actual word colonized” (*Poets* 105). One could simply dismiss Annharte’s indictment of colonization as a joke based on wordplay, but it is also a valid critique of colonialism and the literal waste that it has spread across Turtle Island. Colonization has turned many parts of the Americas into wasteland, a concept that is completely at odds with Indigenous understandings of how people should be in relationship with the land. In response to this violation, Annharte effectively disarms the dangerous myth of settlement as a civilizing force through her Indigenous storytelling technique of teasing as well as her use of puns and wordplay. She portrays the greatest hero in the myth of colonization, Cristobal Colon, as a pathetic character who has lost his way and turned this land he discovered into a wasteland, rather than the brave explorer that most official histories make him out to be. Furthermore, she is retelling this story as a dialog and reimagining time as something cyclical rather than linear.

Annharte is careful to position the speakers of the poem series “Coyote Columbus Cafe,” both temporally and culturally. The title of the first section is “once more it’s Indian time” and it features a number of puns on phrases including the word “time” (*Coyote* 11). She makes it clear that this poem is inspired by the quincentennial of Columbus getting lost in the Americas. In her playful tone, she writes “quincentennial dawn / time worth waiting for / never a dull moment” (11). Given the horrific history of colonialism, it is remarkable that Annharte is able to recontextualize the previous five hundred years with so much good humour. It seems that “never a dull moment” is nearly the only thing that one could say to put a bit of a positive spin on

colonialism. Annharte continues with more observations about cyclicity: “time circles / how a weasel pops / in & out of old tunes” (11). Both Butling’s interview and Lally Grauer’s collaborative piece comment on the importance of these lines of poetry. They are an excellent example of Annharte’s frequent practice of Indigenizing settler culture. As with other of Annharte’s “moon” poems, she is using the Indigenous concept of time as cyclical rather than linear. In this case Annharte Indigenizes the nursery song “Pop Goes the Weasel.” In Annharte’s version of the song the “weasel pops / in & out of old tunes.” She is commenting on the idea that Indigenous cultures, like the weasel circling the mulberry bush in the nursery song, understand time to be travelling in circles.

In a comment on her use of dialogue in her poetry, Annharte asserts “I know the proper approach” (11). Immediately following this line appears the other half of the dialog in the right hand column: “*Boozho Dude. Hey I’m talking / to you, Bozo Dude. My name is / Conquesta. Come on adore me*” (11). Based on what Annharte says about the importance of both humility and humour in Indigenous storytelling, this sort of banter and teasing is exactly “the proper approach” to decolonial activism. This activism is not only a tipping of the scales so that Indigenous storytellers now have the same type of authority as settler historians; Annharte also troubles the very nature of authority through the word play in her writing. In her interview with Butling she says “My work has some strange ideas in it[.] I guess that’s the value in it, not to take everything so literally. I try to get away from the authoritarian aspect of being the author” (*Poets* 104). Annharte welcomes the reader’s interaction with the multiple voices and the playfulness of her work. She is resisting the sense that a story must be linear and told or understood from only one perspective. The central form of activism in Annharte’s chapbook is that it resists its own form by telling stories simultaneously from different points of view. She

comments on the deep irony that “there would probably be a Native person — even though this horrendous history has happened — who would comfort a mass murderer like Columbus” (105). Annharte provides multiple perspectives that resist the sense that there is one authoritative version of events.

### *Bearing Witness to Commodification*

*Exercises in Lip Pointing* is not as satirical as Annharte’s other books. Perhaps some of the motivation for this change in tone is because this collection deals with the serious issues of representation of Indigenous people. Annharte’s own reaction to first reading through the book shows how difficult many of the themes in this book are for her to read and write about: “I was surprised at the depth of despair in it and also the struggle to come back up. To actually experience some of those painful feelings, you have to face them, or just feel the pain for a while” (108). Throughout the collection Annharte insists on writing from her own cultural and gendered perspective and invites the reader to feel some of the hurtful things that Indigenous women suffer. She resists damaging essentialist stances and replaces them with voices that speak for themselves. One of the clearest, and perhaps most contentious, examples of Annharte re-orienting the image of Indigenous women is her poem “Squaw Pussy.” The poem is divided into four stanzas, each of which is introduced with an italicized line that gives an image of an Indigenous woman that challenges previous essentializing gazes. This poem allows Indigenous women to be defined on their own terms and introduces us to such powerful characters as: “*Jaguar women in black Jaguar car*”, “*Cool strong positive Anishinabekwe*”, “*Our Cinderella born Native*”, and “*Our First Nations business woman*” (*Exercises* 72-73). Throughout her poetry and her various critical comments, Annharte resists the notion of the Indigenous person as

someone who should be pitied: the “poor indian” (*Poets* 95). Annharte provides her audience with images of Indigenous women from their own perspectives. These women “replace primitive outlooks” (*Exercises* 72) and “dispel typical ‘squaw’ image / Hollywood Indian princesses / with braids & dowdy looks” (72). Annharte is flushing out the stereotypes that are so prevalent in the media and replacing them with images of actual Indigenous women. These “primitive outlooks” on Indigenous women are replaced by a woman who “knows her place is workplace” (72). However, this is not a rejection of her “historic route” (73). She wears “moccasins to fit / her stroll on a cement prairie / glass slippers are too fragile” (73). This actual Indigenous woman has not turned her back on Indigenous culture. Instead, she is adapting her culture so that she can live on her own terms within settler-colonial realities. Neither Indigenous nor settler culture is static in this poem. Annharte shows that she can maintain her Indigenous identity, even in the contemporary urban environment. Moreover, she needs to Indigenize the settler world to survive. Annharte concludes that this new sort of Indigenous woman “won’t follow a white lady’s / long haul behind man or plow” (73). This sort of woman is not only surviving in the contemporary world, but she is improving upon it. She is not willing to be subservient to men or capitalist systems that demand her labour like the “white lady.” Ultimately, Annharte’s images of Indigenous women are able to make their own paths and choose their own identities on their own terms.

Another poem that gives agency to Indigenous characters to choose their own identities is “Call Me Grey Wolf.” The poem seems to be from the perspective of a mother recalling her son’s precocious early years: “He asks me to help him remember the little kid / he was” (78). The speaker recalls one incident on the train when mother and son are going to Regina and the son hears the announcement while the mother is asleep: “he woke me saying ‘Hey Mom, that

guy said vagina” (78). This line is one of the more satirical moments in the book. It incorporates two of Annharte’s favourite modes: undercutting the authority of settler-colonial naming and claiming ownership of Indigenous people by making a bawdy pun. However, the crux of the poem is about how this precocious young man chooses his own name, despite the fact that he already has his “bear clan name Day Seeker” (78). Annharte writes “But he liked the name Grey Wolf better. / He read it in a book at the daycare” (78). Instead of admonishing the boy for dismissing his clan name, the mother is open to this adaptation of the naming process. She admits that she has a lot to learn from this young person: “He asks tough questions. I still give weak answers” (78). The speaker concludes by discussing the advantages that coyotes have over wolves because they bred with domesticated dogs. In the end she decides to embrace several names for her son: “I call him part coyote, part puppy and wolf too” (78). Once again, Annharte shows that Indigenous cultures survive because they are willing and able to adapt. She resists the settler-colonial impressions of Indigenous peoples that relegate them to so-called authentic figures that can only exist in the past. Finally, she is allowing the traditional practice of naming to be adapted into a contemporary setting.

Annharte is also particularly critical of writing that is usually considered to be sympathetic to Indigenous peoples, but which is not actually from Indigenous perspectives. “Turtle Island Woman” expresses Annharte’s displeasure with how much recognition non-Indigenous writers receive for taking on Indigenous subjects. She seems to call out Gary Snyder for his success and the way he has profited from his use of Indigenous concepts: “Gary Snyder / wrote about Turtle Island / won a Pulitzer prize” (34). Annharte’s critique is that Snyder has taken something from the Indigenous perspectives without properly honouring the gift he has received. She writes, “Turtle Island woman gave heart / away to his ecological zone” (34). In

repayment for this gift of the “heart,” the speaker claims that “he must give offerings / to a woman spirit” (34). According to Annharte’s poem, Snyder is not writing from an Indigenous point of view. He tells the speaker of the poem that “white boys / claim to be artists first” (34). This claim detaches Snyder from any responsibility to the communities that he represents. Furthermore, it is not an option that is available to Indigenous people. The speaker reasons this point out by saying “if we are artists first / then we don’t need to be Original People / first is a first for first nations” (35). For Annharte, the role of being an artist is integrated into who Indigenous people are. Indigenous writers working from within their own cultures cannot decontextualize the teachings they draw on. She writes of First Nations people that “we have to imagine Turtle Island Woman / with her borrowed green heart / not taken as outright steal” (35). Unlike Snyder, First Nations writers can only borrow Turtle Island Woman. The first priority in Annharte’s work is her responsibility to her community. She maintains, in both her comments and her poetry that Indigenous people are not voiceless, but that a basic understanding of their cultural priorities is necessary if one wishes to hear them. Their voices come from within Indigenous cultural contexts and when that context is removed, there is potential for misrepresentation. Annharte points out that Turtle Island woman was not complicit in Snyder’s characterization of her, but that “she bitched / I heard it too” (35).

Annharte refuses to accept the identities placed upon Indigenous people in the poem “In the Picture I Don’t See.” This poem is a surreal depiction of a woman looking around at the furnishings “in the home of a pink lady” (12). Among these furnishings are a “mexican blanket,” “a chinese ceramic vase,” and “painted Indian babies,” that the “pink husband assures [...] are real” (12-13). All of these items are linked because of their apparent claim to authenticity, but their actual basis is in nothing more than simulated notions of what certain cultures are. It is

unclear how the speaker knows that the blanket is mexican, the vase is chinese, or the babies are indian. Furthermore, it is unclear what the speaker means by any of these broad signifiers. We only have the husband's assurance that they "are real" (13). Annharte is revealing that signifiers such as "mexican," "chinese," and "indian" are too nonspecific to be of any use. Annharte says that "the identity problem / is 100,000 Indians do not know / tribes of origin" (14-15). She is also aware that "the pretended past does distract" (15), and that even if these signifiers are ultimately empty, they still have real effects on Indigenous people today. They are, at least, distractions. The speaker in this poem has to go to great lengths to "defend status regained / a right to being Indian / is not a pretty picture" (15). Some elements of this fight include tattooing "the verification / of Indian status on my big toe" (15). Here we see that the speaker is not allowed to identify herself on her own terms, but resorts to accepting the colonial definition of status. Ultimately, this poem is a rejection of "the easy Indian life" (15) that allows the lies proliferated by pop-culture to go unchallenged. Annharte is doing her best to speak for herself and speak against the commodification of the images of Indigenous people, despite the proliferation of empty, essentialist signifiers.

One final example of Annharte bearing witness to and correcting the commodification of Indigenous people in *Exercises in Lip Pointing* is found in the poems "How to Stop Writing About Indians" and "How to Write About White People." These poems work effectively together as a pair to simultaneously speak out against "bad writing" (55) and to offer an alternative to it. "How to Stop Writing About Indians" bears witness to the ways that Indigenous subjects are often commodified to be used by non-Indigenous authors, much the same way that Gary Snyder is characterized as doing in "Turtle Island Woman." "How to Stop Writing About Indians" apparently draws on Annharte's own experience with being fetishized in a "writing

union” (55), where the other writers did not value Annharte’s writing so much as her contribution of “me // my story” (55). She describes this theft of personal stories of Indigenous people as a form of poison. Annharte recognizes that “Given enough poison / Indians will die out” (55). By usurping personal stories, settler culture finds a way to continue to control the idea of who Indigenous people are. It is a form of poison that kills off the sovereignty of Indigenous people to speak for and about themselves. This writing about Indigenous people by non-Indigenous people, along with Indigenous writing that is complicit in the production of such literature, is what Annharte means by the term “bad writing” (55), as discussed earlier in the chapter. She wants to know “who will give us / the secret remedy or cure for bad writing?” (55). One way of providing a remedy to this poison is to expose its existence in the first place.

Beyond this act of bearing witness, Annharte also gives clear advice on how to replace this “poisonous” writing with writing from Indigenous points of view. “How to Write About White People” instructs Indigenous writers to keep their distance from settler culture. Her first piece of advice is to write about white people “From a distance & keep them outside / even if it seems cruel to do that” (56). Additionally, Annharte warns against the seemingly good intentions of settler writers and draws attention to the particularly cerebral elements of settler-colonial warfare in Canada: “Psychology was what they called the war” (56). She is warning Indigenous writers not to be fooled by the new faces of settler colonialism, saying “Laboratory used to be his first name. / He changed his address after the millennium” (56). By encouraging her comrade Indigenous writers not to trust the many guises of settler-colonialism, Annharte is also advocating for writing within Indigenous contexts. The clearest form of activism against “bad writing” is Indigenization. Indigenous writers need to tell their own stories from their own diverse points of view. As Annharte tells Reg Johanson in an interview, “From colonial times up



to present times, we have been warned not to be divided against one another. Yet, we had incredible diversity prior to the colonial invasion and we still have many alternative views and positions” (Johanson 65). “Bad writing” is the sort of writing that accepts simplistic and essentializing colonial portrayals of Indigenous people. A key aspect of Indigenization is to show that Indigenous people are diverse. To show this diversity, it is often necessary to first Indigenize European media such as printed poetry.

### *Indigenizing Poetry*

In a number of ways, *Indigena Awry* is a return to Annharte’s earlier, more satirical modes of writing. She is very much aware of the work that she must do to overcome the civilizing myths so prevalent in the history of Canada, but she is armed with the wry wit she needs to respond to these false myths. “Succinct Savage Subtext” employs “wry civility” (Coleman 41) to transgress the boundaries of white Canadian liberalism and centers the uncomfortable discussion of our still colonized present. “Sublime sin is subversive sloth” (*Indigena Awry* 37), Annharte begins with heavy, snake-like sibilance. She suggests that there is potential for resistance in transgressing the lines prescribed by white civility. She continues, “Search for superlative transgression / is a waste of superb time and silly putty” (37). Annharte admits the uselessness of perfecting her transgression and subversion of the myths pertaining to Indigenous peoples. She is more concerned with calling out instances of “bad writing” practiced by her fellow Indigenous writers than painstakingly perfecting her own critique of settler-colonialism. She writes: “Size of head dress indicates sad sly / sell our stance or chief Lies In His Face” (37). Here, she identifies the problem of Indigenous people playing along with the image of “the Indian” created by settler society. Furthermore, she is identifying particularly damaging

instances of “bad writing.” Yet she is aware of the backlash she is vulnerable to and the expectation that she avoid critiquing her own people, even if they are playing into civilizing strategies: “Stay mum and numb first nations. / Stoic whisper campaigns sneak up. / Say it again. Shut up if you speak out” (37). Annharte continues by questioning the motives of government apologies for colonial abuses. She depicts the interactions around these apologies as a disingenuous political formality: “we get advice to cry after apology / given for government genocide / sponsored residential schools” (37). Nevertheless, she continues to push through the “bad writing” to find some way to transgress the myths established by settler-colonialism. In her own words, she encourages us to “Read between the lines for signs” (38). She concludes that Indigenous peoples must reclaim their culture and decolonize. “Defiant war cries must re-echo / memories not that easy to forgive. / Shake the loose warbonnet loose” (38). It seems that “war cries” have ceased to echo and that contemporary Indigenous warriors must once again take up the cry against a difficult colonial history. She also seems to be arguing that the “warbonnet” has become a stock signifier of Indigeneity. As a result, it should be shaken “loose.” As damaged as “war cries” and “warbonnets” are as signs of Indigeneity, Annharte demands that the cry be made to echo once again, against settler society.

“Granny Ear Rot Tick” also sets the record straight about which sort of sexual practices are truly “savage” (53). The woman featured in this poem “did not attend a residential school run by the Grey Nuns. / They had dirty habits that shocked even her mind set” (53). Annharte wryly juxtaposes the sexual abuses carried out in residential schools with the protagonist’s own shameless sexual proclivities: “Her confidence was lucky even with grey snatch hairs / and a 90 year old vagina she would still be sensitive to touch” (53). The protagonist is transparent when it comes to her own sexual desire, even if a woman—let alone an old woman—is supposed to treat

sexuality with the tight lipped, hypocritical denial of residential school nuns. “End of the trail drama did not disturb her one bit. She did / listen just once to a great horny owl that called her names. / ‘You old fat bitch.’ She was not fazed out by that talk” (53). A candid discussion of nonagenarian pubic hair has great potential to unsettle notions of “white civility” and this unsettling nature is exactly why this poem is so productively transgressive. The truly damaging, perverse behaviour depicted in this poem is not that “Granny” is sexually active, it is the “habits” of the nuns at residential schools. Annharte is reclaiming and re-Indigenizing sexuality while simultaneously bearing witness to the damage done to both the sexual and psychological assaults waged on Indigenous children in residential schools.

“Squaw Guide” does the important work of reclaiming the identity of a proud Aboriginal woman in contemporary society. The poem transgresses the old boundaries of settler society and constructs ones that protect the rights of Indigenous people to express their own cultures. She begins, “You Audience / Me Squaw / need to practice those lines” (12). In a sense, Annharte is saying these lines directly to her audience. She is performing the role of the female Indigenous poet and drawing attention to the fact that this role does not come naturally to her, but that it must be constructed. From this satiric beginning to the four-page poem, Annharte continues to draw attention to the roles that Indigenous women are expected to perform, even though this role has been prescribed by settler society. She goes on to reclaim elements of Indigenous culture that have been co-opted by settler society. Primarily, she is reclaiming the name “squaw.” In response to the racist heckles of white men she says: “hey bud you lost a right to get laid / in the westend or northend by a squaw” (13). Nevertheless, the reclamation of the word is not easily done. Despite “taking women studies” the speaker doesn’t “have a closet / that’s empty enough for me to get inside / think about it I got too many skeletons” (13). She must still take into

account the many losses in her past. She also mentions the ongoing challenges: “it was hard to be a big squaw / big public squaw” (13). She continues, “it’s hard to be a political correct squaw / my secret: don’t ever open mouth” (14). In the face of these historical and ongoing challenges to the reclamation of the term<sup>16</sup>, the speaker exhibits bravery and a desire for openness. Annharte concludes “I’m serious / know all inside / intimate me squaw” (15). She is opting for a difficult and lonely sort of honesty, which reclaims an Indigenous word. Annharte advocates for a distinct variety of Aboriginal rights so that, painful as it may be, she can deal with the many skeletons still in the closet.

The important and pressing work of decolonization will not be completed only by transgressing the borders of settler-colonialism. There also must be a re-assertion of Indigenous rights and worldviews so that Indigenous people can live on their own terms and Indigenize European modes of expression. To use the words of Thomas King yet again, “The fact of Native existence is that we live modern lives informed by traditional values and contemporary realities and that we wish to live those lives on our terms” (*Inconvenient Indian*). As Annharte boldly takes on “the white liberal snot fest” (Johanson 69) through the challenges of “bad writing,” she shows how one can live a modern life “informed by traditional values and contemporary realities.” Not only does she cross the borders of settler society, but she also uses the very tools of this society, such as books, to create new borders that assert Aboriginal rights. Annharte does this in the way she does all things: on her own terms.

Annharte focuses on the task of “Borrowing enemy language” (“Borrowing”) and using

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<sup>16</sup> The most common origin of “squaw” is believed to be from Algonquin language group words for woman (Cree: *iskwew*, Ojibwe: *ikwe*, etc.) (“Squaw”). However, there is also an argument to be made that the word has its origins in the Mohawk word for female genitalia: *otsiskwa* (“Squaw”). In both cases, the word has become pejorative towards Indigenous women and has its roots in a non-pejorative, Indigenous word.

this language from her own Indigenous perspective. Furthermore, she sees great potential in adapting settler-colonial language to meet her own needs as an “ndn word warrior” (*Indigena* back jacket). In some respects, it is valuable to see this process of “Indigenization as activism” as a specific form of decolonization because it is clear that Indigenous poets are intentionally using their work this way. Moreover, it must be seen as a part of broader movements of decolonization. Mohawk writer and academic Taiaiake Alfred offers some very powerful words to this effect as he concludes his book *Wasàse*:

We need to heal and strengthen our bodies through discipline, hard work, and rejection of the junk food and trash culture of the mainstream society. And we need to reconnect with our indigenous spirituality, the foundations of our cultures and guarantors of psychological health. If we can work together toward accomplishing these things — liberation from domination, freedom from fear, a decolonized diet, a warrior ethic, and reconnection to indigenous cultures — then we will be freed from the cage of colonialism and know once again what it is to be Onkwehonwe [original people] on this land. (*Wasàse* 282)

Viewing the Indigenization of poetry as activism is one of several important ways that contemporary Indigenous artists are working with a wide range of people to bring about the decolonization of Turtle Island. Annharte, along with Halfe, Mercredi, Scofield, and Francis, is using her poetry to be much more than art for art’s sake. It is also a powerful form of decolonization.

## Chapter Five

### Indigenizing Genre

This chapter shows how Indigenous poetry decolonizes by resisting the division of art into genres and integrating many forms of art into Indigenous worldviews. Indigenous poetry works as a decolonial force because it challenges generic boundaries, constructs writing in new ways that reject the politics of recognition, and uses this writing as both documentation of and script for performance. I have been examining different aspects of Indigenous culture that have been translated into poetry and the way in which poetry can act as a form of activism. This chapter will show that the genre of poetry can become a part of an Indigenous worldview. Indigenized printed poetry forms only a part of a larger field of artistic expression that includes live and recorded performances, digital media, and visual art. Marvin Francis' work is especially important here because it is a clear example of how an artistic practice can take the form of printed poetry and still integrate various other genres. Through three sections ("Challenging Genre, Asserting Indigeneity"; "Genre and the Politics of Recognition"; "Performing the Written"), this chapter argues that Indigenous poets are decolonizing the western notion of genre that often seeks to contain artistic expression within specific spheres. It seems that poetry is a good and natural fit for Indigenous artists because it allows them multiple options for expressing their cultures on their own terms.

This chapter argues that what is commonly called Indigenous poetry does not specifically start as poetry, but is rather an expression of Indigenous worldviews grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being. S.E. Wilmer argues that rather than making distinctions between different art forms, most Indigenous peoples incorporate arts and culture into "a holistic way of being [...] called a world view" (4). The category of art is quite unstable or even non-existent within Indigenous contexts because it is integrated into Indigenous epistemologies and

ontologies. Wilmer says that “Traditional Native artistic expression has always been an integral part of Native life. Dance, music, costumes, masks, face painting, and storytelling are all part of the ceremonial practices of Native cultures” (4). Wilmer’s work focuses on performance in Indigenous contexts; however, many of the issues he raises are applicable across all forms of Indigenous artistic expression. He is one of several scholars who point out that Indigenous artistic expression, which certainly includes poetry, is not separate from “Native life” (4). Maintaining this integration of art and life is at the very center of the issue of Indigenous sovereignty. Wilmer also notes that by insisting on breaking down barriers between genres and creating art from their own worldviews, “Native peoples have reclaimed control over their heritage and sought to belie the stereotypes of non-Native image makers” (16). For Indigenous poets to reclaim sovereignty over themselves and the cultures they belong to, it is imperative that we understand that they are writing from within their own world views that integrate all genres of art into life.

Adding to this notion that Indigenous poets are not attracted to the bounded sense in which genre can be understood as a division between categories such as poetry, prose, fiction and non-fiction, Eric Gary Anderson is careful to point out that there is a difference in how Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers conceive of artistic genres. He asks, “does genre matter as much to American Indian writers and writings as it appears to do to many of their critics, particularly the non-Native critics?” (Anderson 34). Overwhelmingly, Anderson, and the Indigenous thinkers that he cites, consider genre — at least in the compartmentalized sense that many non-Indigenous critics think of genre — to have very little usefulness for Indigenous writers. He quotes the Acoma Pueblo writer Simon Ortiz, who says that genre is a “Eurocentric trap” (35) and ascribes to the idea that Indigenous peoples incorporate art and poetry into their

worldviews (38-39). Ultimately, he states that “The lure of genre [...] is mild at best for most Native writers” (37). The challenge to genre that Anderson makes, like the challenge of Francis, is not based on genre being particularly damaging. Instead, it seems that western notions of genre are simply incommensurate with Indigenous notions of how art is integrated into life. For genre to be useful to Indigenous writers, it must first be Indigenized and adapted to align with Indigenous worldviews. Francis does this important decolonial work of Indigenizing genre and evades the “eurocentric trap” (35) that it can set.

In the introduction to *Indigenous Poetics in Canada*, Neal McLeod also raises the issue of distinguishing between settler notions of what poetry is and how poetry is integrated into Indigenous lifeways. He argues that “By shifting the nomenclature [of poetry] slightly, one is able to engage the topic from an Indigenous theoretical and cultural framework” (“Introduction” 3-4). McLeod helpfully notes that it is a *slight* conceptual shift of the meaning of poetics. He also observes a tendency of non-Indigenous critics “to not consider Indigenous poetry as ‘poetry’” (4) because it is so closely linked to key aspects of Indigenous culture such as storytelling. Instead of becoming defensive about this critique of Indigenous literature, McLeod seems almost to agree with it by arguing that one of the principle strengths of what is being called Indigenous poetry is that it is not rooted in eurocentric notions of what poetry should be, but in Indigenous cultures. He argues that the deep connection to all aspects of Indigenous cultures that can be readily observed in Indigenous literatures is integral to this literature and that this literature is in no way an attempt to copy european “poetry.” He quotes Duncan Mercredi saying, “Let’s not lose our voices [...] Because once that happens, we are no longer seeing the universe from our perspective and our stories become indistinguishable from all of the other stories out there” (4). What seems to make Indigenous voices, to use Mercredi’s word, “distinguishable” from other voices is that



these voices come from a place of connectedness to their cultures. It may be true that the literature often gets labelled as poetry, but what is more important about this writing, at least for Mercredi and others who choose to emphasize its Indigenous origins, is that it is part of an Indigenous worldview.

Coming from a non-literary perspective, Peter Kulchyski also brings up the importance of distinguishing between Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts as an act of decolonization. One of the root causes of the damage done by settler-colonialism is that Indigenous peoples are forced into a system of rules that are incommensurate with their own worldviews. This is possible because of the huge disparity in power between settlers and Indigenous peoples. Kulchyski writes, “Indigenous cultures have become threatened as colonialism left many Indigenous peoples in the position of being a minority in their homelands” (*Aboriginal Rights* 21). Kulchyski is emphatic that the removal of this threat can only be accomplished if the system of colonization is removed entirely. Even Indigenous self-governance using settler methodologies will not work because “Culture will be separate from everyday life, something to be stored in museum boxes” (*Like the Sound of a Drum* 16). Although Kulchyski is looking at specific cases of Indigenous disenfranchisement in Canada’s north, the concept of integrating culture and everyday life seems to be repeated in many different Indigenous contexts. The Indigenization of the genre of poetry is one these contexts in which powerful and important acts of decolonization are occurring. Kulchyski is looking at alternatives for political structures, but his ideas resonate very well with what scholars looking at Indigenous literature are saying: Indigenous poetry is “Indigenous” because it is integrally connected to Indigenous worldviews. Furthermore, these worldviews are distinct because of their focus on the integration of different modes of art into life rather than the separation of art and culture into eurocentric genres. By

Indigenizing the genre of poetry and integrating it with other forms of art as well as “everyday life” (16), poets such as Marvin Francis are decolonizing.

### *Challenging Genre, Asserting Indigeneity*

Marvin Francis provides a fascinating case study of an Indigenous artist who avoids the trap of genre and instead understands the world from his own point of view that challenges the boundaries between genres and can work in several genres simultaneously. As discussed in the Introduction, each of the five poets I focus on make comments about the reasons they use poetry and the freedoms they have by working with, and at times outside of poetry. Francis, in particular, chooses to work with poetry because of its ability to incorporate other genres and assert his connection to Indigenous communities. Originally from Heart Lake Cree Nation, Alberta, Francis settled in Winnipeg in the 1980s and became a central figure in a number of Indigenous artistic initiatives. Even as he approached his untimely death from cancer in 2005, he developed a reputation for performing his writing and integrating many different forms into his artistic practices. He did this through a number of Indigenous groups that he was a part of, especially the Aboriginal Writers’ Collective and the Urban Shaman Gallery. The editors of *Indigenous Poetics in Canada* comment that “His art took many forms, including poetry, oral performance, visual art, and radio drama, all of it marked by playful irony, formal experimentation, and streetwise philosophy” (*Indigenous* 374). As Francis has gained recognition for his important work since the publication of his MA creative thesis *city treaty*, in 2002, it seems that critics emphasize the multidisciplinary and communitarian influences on his work. In her Doctoral thesis, Barbara Romanik argues that “by connecting Francis to the Aboriginal Writers’ Collective and the Urban Shaman Gallery, the archival material allows the

reader to understand how Francis' perceptions of community, mobility, and urban and rural spaces were influenced by his Aboriginal culture and identity and by his exposure to various Native artists and artistic practices" (Romanik 190). Like the editors of *Indigenous Poetics in Canada*, Romanik highlights the integration of community with Francis' artistic practices as observed through the study of archival material at the University of Manitoba. Francis' artistic practices are not limited to or by poetry as a genre. Instead, Francis Indigenizes the concept of genre to integrate many artistic practices of a diverse urban Indigenous community.

In an interview with Francis conducted by Rosanna Deerchild and Shayla Elizabeth, Francis makes some helpful comments that seem to explain his artistic practice as an aspect of his worldview. He explains that his artistic practice is not limited by any generic boundaries, but that it is an expression of how he exists in the world. Deerchild comments on Francis' eccentricity and says "You have your own category. What is going on in that head of yours?" ("Interview" 247). Francis responds, "Well, everything, man!" and he continues to joke that he doesn't think of himself as eccentric, he is simply misunderstood (247). When he is asked about which genres he works in, he responds that he "writes poetry, obviously [...] I write screenplays for film and television, and stage plays, and one of my favourite means is radio drama" (248). Elizabeth pushes him a little bit on his preference for radio drama and, oddly, he responds by talking about his attraction to poetry: "I think, you know, poetry is probably, I don't know, the closest to the writer, I think. It's sort of more you, in a sense, than other forms of writing" (249). Francis clearly has a close relationship with poetry. It seems that this sense of closeness that he shares is related to the fact that poetry allows "everything" that is going on inside his head to be expressed in with as little limitation as possible. Francis is close to and connected to poetry because his use of an Indigenized form of poetry has allows him to incorporate a number of

different art forms. Later in the interview he comments on his practice of incorporating visual art into his poetry: “The visual world and the written world meet somewhere, right?” (250). He poses this in the form of a question. He is not questioning the existence of visual art and written art as genres, but he does challenge the generic boundaries. He focuses on how different art forms meet, rather than how they are different. He is most interested in destabilizing the boundaries and combining multiple genres. To use his own word, Francis is an “edgewalker.”

The section of *city treaty* called “EDGEWALKER” clearly shows how Francis positions his work in-between genres, in a space of connection, to express a way of being in the world. Once again, Francis emphasizes the fertility of this liminal space and refuses to choose a single side of the binary oppositions that settler-society thrusts upon Indigenous peoples. “we all walk edges uncertain / on border slippery” (Francis 28), says Francis. As Warren Cariou points out, Francis’ “Edgewalker” “is someone who travels along those boundaries, making them visible again and providing a necessary window across them” (“Edgework” 32). Cariou also suspects that Francis would “agree that the poet is the ultimate edgewalker” (32). Although it is impossible to be certain of why Francis chose to work in poetry, Cariou speculates that Francis is attracted to poetry because of the great potential it has to decolonize and “expose those edges” (33). Cariou writes:

I believe [poetry] retains the capacity to shake up the divisive mindset that is endemic in our class-inflected and still-colonized world. It can destabilize those edges that keep Aboriginal peoples marginalized in contemporary North American culture, and it can do this by holding different realities side by side: by juxtaposing the received mainstream perception of colonial reality with a perception that is rooted in Aboriginal experience. (33)

According to Cariou, poetry lends itself particularly well to the difficult work of destabilizing the many edges that divide our world. It is not a mistake or random chance that Francis chooses to adapt this genre to his own purposes of revealing his Indigenous worldview.

The lines of “EDGEWALKER” give a concrete demonstration of generic edgewalking. The lines alternate between right, left, and center alignment. There are wide spaces separating some words within lines. The last stanzas of the section are in italics. Yes, the “border” is “slippery” and the “edges” are “uncertain,” even when it comes to how the words are printed on the page. A productive way to read these non-standard, disorienting decisions is as gestures that allow Francis to stay on the “slippery” border between social constructions, oral and written, as well as genres such as drama, poetry, and film. Francis does not commit to staying on one side or the other of the binaries. Instead, he is working hard to hold the space “between dirt poor / and filthy rich”, “death and birth”, as well as “the biggest edge / that makes some fall off / economic cliffs / do u rent / or do u own” (28-9). Despite the perilousness of the edges that Francis describes, he is insistent on inhabiting these sites and is Indigenizing poetry so that it is capable of delivering a message from Indigenous peoples on their own terms. Francis knows that “*the media must gather and make headlines*” and that Indigenous people are “*not heard*” as the settlers move in with treaties to extract wealth from the land (29). Nevertheless, Francis waits in his liminal space:

*until that new breed    medicine*  
*man cat bush doctor*  
*that*  
*influence*  
*medium (29).*

Francis is innovating so that he can work in a medium that more accurately delivers the treaty he wants. He manipulates his text so that it becomes a meeting place between the written and the oral. This medium is rooted in Indigenous forms of “*medicine*” and is an adaptation of non-

Indigenous forms.

Although Francis is critical of the written form, it seems that from the beginning of *city treaty* he is committed to blending written genres with various other genres of art. The first page features a piece that could be described as visual art, lyric poetry, or concrete poetry. It shows us the permeability of genre. The words “treaty buster” (Francis 3) are repeated in faint ink inside a thick black border. On top of that is printed a lyric poem entitled “Joe TB.” Furthermore, the first stanza is askew in orientation to the rest of the stanzas. There are even slightly different versions of this poem’s format in the archives and in Francis’ MA thesis. Even though the form of the section challenges genre, the content goes even further in challenging political boundaries. The “TB” of “Joe TB” stands for “Treaty Buster.” This recurring character serves the purpose of destabilizing the fixed nature of printed text in the form of treaties. In a certain sense the construction of genre can also be considered a form of treaty or contract between a writer and the audience. Joe TB is not only busting the legal treaties between Indigenous peoples and governments, he is also busting the “treaty” between writers and audiences that is formed when writers say they are working in a specific genre. For example, readers understand that they are not reading a work of non-fiction when they read Francis’ long poem. They are entering into an agreement with the writer where they will permit the poem to include elements of the imaginary. Writing in a certain genre creates a set of expectations for both how the reader will read and how the writer will write. By creating a challenging new genre, the “treatypoem” (49), Francis is also challenging the nature of legal agreements such as treaties. Joe TB is another edgewalker who destabilizes the structures of genre within settler-colonialism. Towards the end of the poem Joe TB has finally accomplished his task:

Joe TB  
picks himself off the ground

the rust gone from  
word spurs  
the treaty got  
busted (67)

Joe TB is one of a few characters that fluidly move in and out of the various sections of this poem. In this passage we see him accomplish the goal of all edgewalkers, which is to destabilize the punitive structures that surround them. Francis is challenging the edges that are often constructed around genre.

Although Joe TB is ultimately successful in his task of busting treaties, Francis outlines the hard work that his job entails. Joe TB proves to his audience that he knows “twenty words that rhyme / with moose” (Francis 3). However, he is emphatic that one of the words is “not truce never never truce / cuz i am a treaty buster” (3). Throughout the poem, Francis draws particular attention to the failures of treaties, especially document-based treaties, to represent the interests and epistemologies of Indigenous peoples, especially urban peoples. He invites his audience to “PLAY SMALL POX BLANKET BINGO” (47). “Under the N: NATIVE VERSUS SETTLER, THE SEQUEL” (47). This Bingo is no game, but yet another document that pits settlers and Indigenous peoples against each other in a dangerous scenario. Francis is very emphatic about what to do with this sort of oppositional treaty making. He says, in bolded script: “**Fuck your colonial euro-attitude dudes / Your post colonial angst**” (47). He continues:

Fuck mohawk gas  
Atlanta braves  
Cleveland indians  
Washington redskins  
THE KANSAS CITY CHIEFS (47).

Ultimately, he is breaking down the dehumanizing binary of what Emma LaRocque calls “the ‘civ/sav’ dichotomy” (LaRocque 37): the civilized european settler set against the savage native. Francis shows the hopelessness of a situation where settlers and natives are thrown into

opposition: “settles whitesunset // unsettled red” (Francis 48). If treaties are based on an oppositional model, then one side will always end up “unsettled.” Thus, Francis rejects the notion that a treaty must be only one thing: written in a static, immovable genre. Francis rejects the socio-legal function of writing when the clown says: “you don’t write / treatypoems for the money / you make waves” (49). The clown is showing that the treatypoem is intentionally resisting capitalist modes of control. They are not writing this poem to make money, but rather as a form of disrupting capitalist settler-colonialism. The clown resists the legal perceptions of who Indigenous people are as defined by written treaties and replaces these treaties with new forms of treaty that stem from multi-generic Indigenous perspectives.

There are other good examples within *city treaty* of how the form and content of this work are allied in order to cross generic and political borders. One important reason for this crossing of generic borders is his dissatisfaction with the limited way that writing can speak for a people or for history. The section in *city treaty* called “**paper scraping**” provides one such powerful critique of the limitations of written text taken out of context. He asks “how” written words “submarine thoughts?” (Francis 20). By using the noun “submarine” as a verb, Francis challenges the repressive structures of the English language and the way in which our thoughts must be mediated through language. He is arguing that written words actually repress the thoughts they are meant to represent. Words are only the signifiers of thoughts and they are far from perfect in their ability to accurately represent them. The next line provides an example of the inability of language to accurately represent thoughts:

“u haul            u gloat            u canoe” (20).

These simplifications of language are little more than ambiguous advertising slogans. To understand what these words are gesturing towards, the poet needs to “dig” into their contexts.



Luckily, documents act as palimpsests and Francis is more than willing to do this subversive work of digging. He asks “why an ex is too dangerous when poets / dig / too / deep / how about / paper turds” (20). Francis likens the treaties marked with exes to “turds.” The danger that he alludes to is similar to the danger of the information that one can glean by rooting through the garbage, both literal and metaphorical, of even the most powerful people and institutions. The poet is an archaeologist digging through the garbage of settler-colonialism and has the potential to reveal the truth behind these documents. Once again, the edgewalking poet is destabilizing the documented histories of settler-colonial society.

Although settler-colonial society has no use for the garbage that it leaves behind, it is revealing of a shameful past that a nosy poet could certainly uncover. The section concludes with a brief exchange between the clown and first person narrator: “clown: when do we examine you / me: as long as the grass grows” (21). Here we have an allusion to the fabled declaration that the treaties will be honoured as long as the grass is green and the water runs. However, there is dangerous opposition coming out in these lines between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews. The grass and water are part of a planet that can renew itself, while treaty documents are considerably more static. This is a point of intersection between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews. The Indigenous worldview privileges a deep relationship with the land, which is a living entity, while a non-Indigenous view privileges the mostly lifeless document that is at odds with the living world. Francis is exposing the limitations of these mostly lifeless documents. However, he does not stop with that. He also proposes ways to breathe new life into these documents through the introduction and blending of various genres.

Francis continues to use multi-generic humour to deconstruct negative stereotypical images of Indigenous people in his piece “**Court Transcripts**”. The piece is a reworking of a

scene from George Ryga's play *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. Francis credits Ryga by indicating that he is the transcriber of the scene: "(trans. g. reega)" (9). Then Francis formats the lines as if they are a play or a transcript with each line preceded by a person's name and a colon. It begins, "judge: why did you do it? / clown: they put the wagons in a square circle and I just lost it, man" (9). Francis is developing an intricate web of connections between genres and various historical accounts. Francis calls *city treaty* a long poem, which also incorporates transcripts, theatrical scripts, maps, and visual art. He combines these different forms of document to challenge the notion that each genre of art should be homogenous. It seems that Francis is attracted to the postmodern aspect of the long poem in the sense that the Canadian long poem is "a mobile, mixed, and radical form" (Cooley 181). In his article "Documents in the Postmodern Prairie Long Poem," Dennis Cooley cites *city treaty* as an example of such a long poem (205). Helpfully, Cooley also points out that by choosing the long poem "the poet is trying to make a new start, a fresh beginning unencumbered by ways of writing that don't 'belong' (184). Francis' long poem goes even further than being "unencumbered" by modes of writing or art that is not easily categorized within constructed generic boundaries. He is using the long poem precisely because of its generic flexibility to critique inflexible conceptions of genre. Cooley provides a number of comments that draw on several scholars regarding the long poem's postmodern influences and instability as a traditional genre. Significant among the theories about the long poem Cooley draws upon is Kroetsch's postmodern designs on the long poem:

Spurning metanarratives, Kroetsch would have us become "archaeologists" – not historians, but archaeologists – who proceed by "clues, fragments, shards, leading or misleading details, chipped tablets written over in a forgotten language" (78). The poet moves in surmise and conjecture, turns up things, surrenders to guesswork, flaunts her suppositions. (178)

Francis' "paper turds" (*city treaty* 20) could certainly be added to Kroetsch's list of

archaeological discoveries available through the long poem. Francis' choice of this unstable and deeply flexible genre is a strategic part of his Indigenization of genre. Nevertheless, it should be clarified that artists from many cultural contexts seek to destabilize genre. I point out Francis' affinity for the long poem as an example of how lineated poetry can be used in the service of the larger movement of Indigenization and decolonization.

Francis' incorporation of diverse genres through the use of the long poem indicates that he is writing from a perspective that has little use for such restrictions. The final lines of "**Court Transcripts**" satirically depict the legal pronouncements that have forced Indigenous peoples into poverty. "judge: do not pass go/ do not collect five dollars per year free parking / no wagons" (9). The allusion to the board game Monopoly ("do not pass go") highlights how deeply at odds settler-colonial capitalism is with Indigenous worldviews. Furthermore, these lines reveal how shallow the government's promises are. Although five dollars may have seemed like a lot of money at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is an insultingly low amount to be paid for the surrender of huge areas of land today. Furthermore, Francis gestures towards the anxiety of settler-colonial administrations. The judge offers "free parking" on this newly obtained but land but stipulates that there are "no wagons" included in this rather stingy offer. Presumably, the judge is concerned that the Indigenous people will not be able to refrain from burning these wagons. Francis has created his own intergeneric form to express injustices towards Indigenous people from his own point of view.

What remains clear throughout the many twists and turns of *city treaty* is that Francis is constantly innovating to uncompromisingly express himself from within his worldview. Often this requires adaptation and translation. The section "**Street smiles**" discusses one of the adaptations of rural to urban settings that many Indigenous people have had to make. Francis

depicts the urban landscape as a deeply troubled and inhospitable setting for Indigenous people to live in. Like Mercredi in his wolf poems, Francis is pointing out that the city is at odds with Indigenous ways of living. Nevertheless, Indigenous people find clever ways to survive in these inhospitable places. In one particularly revealing stanza, Francis writes,

there are smiles melted into the  
pavement  
by those shiny white body paints  
that innovative new urban art genre  
making soul  
turf (26).

Francis gestures toward Indigenous “urban art” as a new “genre.” There is much more at stake here than the classification of artistic genres. For Francis and many Indigenous artists along with him, creating art from Indigenous perspectives is necessary for survival, because art is an integral part of life. Art is “making soul / turf” (26). Art provides the living foundation, the “turf,” on which souls can grow and thrive. Even when the “turf” is understood to be marked territory, Indigenous practitioners of this art form are marking their own souls from their own unique perspectives.

Eric Gary Anderson is once again relevant to this discussion because he asserts the importance of understanding that Indigenous poetry is necessarily contextualized by the broader context of an Indigenous worldview. He concludes his article “Situating American Indian Poetry” by saying that “Native poetry *situates itself*, very much within the poet’s particular Native culture(s) *and* very much within a variety of intertribal places, precisely because it does not come from out of nowhere” (54). Francis has intentionally written his long poem from these “intertribal places” and edgewalked the various genres that intersect there. He has created a treaty in a space of intersection rather than division and approached poetry rooted firmly in his own worldview. He is “Indigenizing” poetry in the sense that Renate Eigenbrod asserts when she

writes that Indigenizing

means to respect the connectedness that Indigenous artists and writers name as their source of inspiration in approaches which are in themselves connected — with different disciplines, languages and discourses and reaching out to Aboriginal communities. (“Not Just a Text” 83)

Both Eigenbrod and Anderson stress the importance of recognizing and respecting the fact that Indigenous art comes from a place of connectedness. Similarly, Francis emphasizes the connectedness that different genres and groups of people have by breaking down generic and political boundaries — in short, by treaty busting.

UK Scholar and slam-poet Helen Gregory is another writer who recognizes the potential for edgewalking in poetry and uses poetry for that reason. She provides a helpful nuance to the discussion about the role of the oral and the written within poetry. She writes, “the border traditionally drawn between oral and written poetry is permeable” (Gregory 79). In her essay, she is problematizing the distinction between the written and the oral as it exists in her experiences with slam poetry. Along with artists and scholars working in many different fields, Gregory advocates for a destabilization of the borders that are usually drawn between different media and genres. She embraces the fertility that is made possible by combining these media. Embracing this notion of permeability, rather than submitting wholly to the idea that poetry must be neatly contained in a generic box, is at the heart of what Indigenous poets are doing. Perhaps it is this permeability of genre that attracts so many Indigenous writers to poetry and allows poetry to exist so comfortably within an Indigenous worldview. In this sense, all poetry is a natural ally in the process of decolonization because it is a form that encourages the crossing of generic borders. This generic border crossing mirrors the crossing of colonial borders that Indigenous poetry also accomplishes.

Gregory also observes that both oral and written texts are products of “socio-historical

contexts” (Gregory 79) and draws on the work of such scholars as Jerome McGann and Donald McKenzie who also advocate for a “socialized view of the text” (79). Gregory is one of many scholars who is less interested in the intentions of individual authors and more interested in the ways that texts are shaped by the societies that surround them. Furthermore, each text is in a state of flux and continues to be shaped by socio-historical influences. *city treaty* is an excellent point in case. It was published in printed form by Turnstone Press in 2002; however, it is also available in a slightly different digital form as Marvin Francis’ M.A. thesis (Francis). Furthermore, many versions of the poems can be found in the archives at University of Manitoba (Marvin Francis Fonds Box 6 Fds 5-7). These contextual shifts are good examples of what Gregory is talking about when she says, “Written poems are not finished products, static in space and time. Rather, they exist in many varied forms and are realized within a range of social interactions that construct the text differently” (Gregory 91). Gregory is not an Indigenous person, and of course there are many artists both Indigenous and non-Indigenous who embrace the fluidity of their text. Francis is far from alone in editing and releasing versions of his poem. However, what is unique in the case of Indigenous authors seems to be that the motivation for challenging restrictive forms of genre can be found within Indigenous worldviews.

As we will see, Francis provides a number of useful examples of avoiding the trap of genre. Moreover, his reason for avoiding this trap is rooted in Indigenous worldviews. He Indigenous poetry so that it becomes a meeting place where generic barriers are permeable. There is something particularly attractive about poetry and poetics that draws Indigenous artists. As Neal McLeod said at the launch of his book *Indigenous Poetics in Canada*, “That’s our national sport. Some people have soccer, we have wit and poetry. It’s not a surprise that there are so many Indigenous poets in this country” (“Indigenous Poetics in Canada — Winnipeg

Launch”). It seems that Indigenous people are able to adapt many important aspects of their culture into poetry.

### *Genre and the Politics of Recognition*

This section applies Glen Coulthard’s concepts of the “politics of recognition” to the way that genre can be used to control and enclose Indigenous artistic practices. Coulthard argues that Indigenous sovereignty cannot be realized as long as Indigenous people seek the recognition western-oriented nation states. Similarly, I argue that Indigenous artistic practices are decolonial because they do not attempt to conform to settler-society’s notions of genre. After a brief discussion of Coulthard’s work, this section will focus on the ways in which Indigenous writing acts as a rebuttal, coming from an Indigenous point of view, to the fallacious ways that Indigenous peoples have been portrayed in colonial writings. As Emma LaRocque and others argue, Indigenous writing serves to restore the dehumanized figure of the “Indian” to self-identified understandings of Indigeneity. Both Marvin Francis and Katherina Vermette are deeply engaged in humanizing Indigenous people through their writing. Aboriginal writers perform identities that are deeply influenced by the medium of writing, but they are Indigenizing this medium. Marvin Francis, in particular, emphasizes the ongoing process of writing and the necessity that writing be continually adapted to suit Indigenous cultures. Although many rightly argue that Cree and Ojibway cultures have always had writing, writing in these contexts looks quite different from the long history of print publication in European based cultures. It seems that printed poetry is, in many ways, a new medium that is being integrated into Indigenous worldviews.

Coulthard provides a valuable theoretical discussion of the ways in which settler-colonial

domination have shifted from the overtly violent to strategies of “entic[ing] Indigenous peoples to identify” themselves within an unequal society. He writes:

in situations where colonial rule does not depend solely on the exercise of state violence, its reproduction instead rests on the ability to entice Indigenous peoples to identify, either implicitly or explicitly, with the profoundly asymmetrical and nonreciprocal forms of recognition either imposed on or granted to them by the settler state and society. (Coulthard 25)

Coulthard’s notion of the politics of recognition rests on this foundation: that Indigenous people are enticed into identifying themselves on the terms set out by settler-society. If Indigenous peoples define themselves in relationship to the state, then the state maintains its image of liberalism and the Indigenous people are given the illusion that they are being listened to by the state. Although this colonial domination may seem preferable to overt state violence, the end results of the politics of recognition are similarly destructive to Indigenous lifeways. Basically, the violent structures of colonial domination are internalized by Indigenous peoples. Later in the chapter, Coulthard adds that under current systems of settler-colonialism,

colonized populations tend to internalize the derogatory images imposed on them by their colonial “masters,” and [...] as a result of this process, these images, along with the structural relations with which they are entwined, come to be recognized (or at least endured) as more or less natural. (32)

This internalization of deeply negative self-images makes settler-colonial domination a very difficult opponent to confront. This means that many Indigenous people are unaware of the domination that they suffer and understand the status quo as the “natural” way of being.

Coulthard’s response to this debilitating dynamic of the contemporary settler-colonial state is to promote self-recognition amongst Indigenous peoples. Therefore, Coulthard posits that in order for Indigenous people to be free they must shed the settler-state definitions of who they are and replace them with their own grass-roots epistemologies and ontologies. He writes,

the empowerment that is derived from this critically self-affirmative and self-



transformative ethics of desubjectification must be cautiously directed away from the assimilative lure of the statist politics of recognition, and instead be fashioned toward our own on-the-ground struggles of freedom. (41)

I argue that artistic expression that is firmly rooted in Indigenous points of view is one of several “on-the-ground struggles of freedom.” The effectiveness of this struggle is based on the fact that many Indigenous artists are directly confronting the false images that are propagated by the politics of recognition within a settler-colonial state. They profoundly resist this “assimilative lure” and replace it with images of Indigenous sovereignty. Furthermore, and I will elaborate on this in the conclusion of this section, Indigenous self-definition of genre and medium is an example of a grass-roots act of decolonization.

A number of Indigenous literary scholars deal with the false, and damaging, images of Indigenous people propagated through various forms of media. Thomas King explains the predicament that many Aboriginals find themselves in when they do not perform the role of the “Indian.” He shows that Indigenous identity has been fabricated by settler society. So effectively has this myth of the “Indian” been integrated into settler culture that it can seem like more trouble than it is worth to refute it, thus allowing Indigenous subjugation to continue. In his Massey Lectures, collectively published as *The Truth About Stories*, he talks about the lure of submitting to this imaginary figure, the “Indian.” King illuminates the performance of “an Indian who has to dress up like an Indian and act like an Indian in order to be recognized as an Indian” (*Truth About Stories* 45). He further explains that popular notions of Indigenous identity are figments of the imagination. “In the end there is no reason for the Indian to be real. The Indian simply has to exist in our imaginations” (54). This fundamental divide between the imaginary “Indian” and Indigenous people is an issue of performance. Many Indigenous people are expected to perform a version of the imaginary “Indian” so that they can easily be identified by

settler culture. When Indigenous people do something, such as writing, that does not easily harmonize with settler society's notion of what an imaginary "Indian" should be doing, these Indigenous people are deemed inauthentic. So, the colonial authorities expect Indigenous people to put settler society at ease by performing this imaginary identity. By transgressing from the role of the imaginary "Indian," Indigenous writers begin a process of decolonization.

King expands on this notion of the imaginary "Indian" in his more recent book *The Inconvenient Indian*. Here, he makes the helpful distinction between three types of Aboriginal people as perceived by settlers in Canada and the U.S.: "Dead Indians, Live Indians, and Legal Indians" (*Inconvenient Indian*). Dead Indians are largely a creation of popular culture and even though they are based on little more than essentialized figments of the European imagination, they are deemed to be the most authentic. Furthermore, there are few people left to advocate for their memories because governments were very effective in their wars against them. Live Indians and Legal Indians both present problems for governments, which is why it is especially difficult to be recognized legally as an Indigenous person. King goes on to explain the impact of negotiating between these categories for Indigenous peoples: "For us Live Indians, being invisible is annoying enough, but being inauthentic is crushing" (*Inconvenient Indian*). It seems that being ignored and invisible is something that can at least be tolerated. However, the burden of being considered inauthentic is something that Indigenous people need to deal with more assertively. Many Indigenous artists and activists have taken up this cause by asserting their identity on their own terms.

Emma LaRocque is more pointed in her critique of settler-colonial portrayals of Indigenous peoples in Canada. She frames her book, *When the Other is Me*, as a rebuttal to what she calls the "super-myth" of Indigenous "savagery" (LaRocque 4). She writes that "as

Canadian Native and non-Native peoples, we find ourselves, our respective cultures, lives, and experiences, constructed and divided as diametrically opposite to each other” (4). Her book shows that “the ‘Indian’ as an invention serving colonial purposes is perhaps one of the most distorted and dehumanized figures in White North American history, literature, and popular culture” (4). Yet she goes further than this. Beyond observing this tactic of dehumanization, she begins a process that humanizes the “Indian.” She, like other contemporary scholars, is pointing out that decolonization occurs when Indigenous writers incorporate their cultures into the work that they do. LaRocque argues that Indigenous writers counter the portrayal of savagery. They are “humanizing the ‘Indian’ by exhibiting Native faces and feelings, re-establishing the viability of Native cultures, and even reversing the charges of savagery” (4). Indigenous people writing from within their own cultures perform an act of decolonization. By the very fact of their writing, they refute the charges of savagery laid on them by colonial literature. By telling their own stories in their own ways, they assert the survival of Indigenous cultures and resist the politics of recognition.

Turning to the practical application of these theoretical discussions, Marvin Francis’ second book reveals the sinister economic realities that motivate empirical enterprises. These economic inequalities are largely “endured” (Coulthard 32) by Indigenous people because the idea that the poverty is natural has been promoted by settler society. *Bush Camp* offers a glimpse of the real economic situation that faces Indigenous peoples in Canada, and refutes these negative Indigenous identities. Aboriginals are not the only people being taken advantage of and forced into a perpetual cycle of poverty and hard labour jobs, but Francis draws a particular focus on the systematic racism employed against them. Francis paints a picture of life in a bush camp, beginning with the nicknames that different people receive. He writes “of course, any

Native guy on site, usually the / laborer [...] his nickname, guaranFUCKINGteed, has gotta / be /←↑↓/ chief” (*Bush Camp* 4). While there seems to be some possibility of negotiating an identity for non-Aboriginals at the bush camp, Aboriginal people are not offered any such possibilities. Just as Aboriginal identities are prescribed, so are the economic fates of Aboriginals doing hard labour jobs. In the section titled “**bushed**,” Francis outlines the incredibly restrictive position of a worker who has reached a point of desperation: “*just freaking put me on top of that list of layoffs, cuz layoff means poge, / quit means food bank... I can’t take it no more no more*” (35). Francis paints a picture of Native life that offers very little freedom and few opportunities for escape.

One possible opportunity to break the cycle of poverty, or at least some of its negative effects, is art. The poem “**Soup for the Hood**,” puts the poor into the spotlight, humorously warning “do not try to hide the hungry      Because potatoes got / eyes” (60). Directly after this poem come the lines describing the protagonist, Johnny Muskeg, yearning for his beloved Jenny and writing poetry: “*He wanders erratic happy in turbulent / He thinks of Jenny / Writes poetry on sidewalk chalk temporal*” (60). Although this is one of the few times that the reader sees Johnny Muskeg “happy,” the alternative that art seems to offer him is short lived. The poem “**johnny abandons art for jenny**” offers the observation “that art don’t count for much when you sit in rooming house” (70). By the end of the collection, Jenny seems to be able to express herself on her own terms, while Johnny is trapped by the cycle of urban poverty.

The final poems of *Bush Camp* offer a sort of pronouncement upon the economic situation of Indigenous people. The last stanza of “**crow court**” reads:

Jenny, somehow fluent in crow, somehow glib in bush culture,  
serene upon the carefully selected stump that was her witness chair,  
gets to see the track makers from makswa (bear) to old,  
cranky turtles  
she sits think-ponders of Johnny and his city mapping (74).

Inexplicably, Jenny is able to speak crow and remain in the bush, while Johnny seems doomed to remain in the city and in poverty, both financial and cultural. “**children of the cement**” depicts Johnny’s urban world as a cycle of poverty. The plants and animals of a once sustaining place are replaced with “*beer bottle forest,*” and “*food bank animal*” (75). As the collection concludes, Johnny seems doomed to continue the legacy of the “children of cement” (75). The audience is asked to bear witness to “*the child*” being sealed in cement: “*see the men pour over the child / see the cement harden / hypodermic sand toys*” (75). This is certainly not a favorable ending for the “children of the cement” but the silence around the intergenerational poverty of urban Indigenous peoples has at least been broken. The audience acts as witness to this ongoing social injustice. Furthermore, Johnny is aware of the situation he is in. He remains in a place of extreme precarity, but he is much more aware of this situation and will be more able to react to it in the future. He is constantly vigilant, keeping his “trap antennae aquiver” (75). His attempt to break free of the cycle of poverty is unsuccessful, but there are glimmers of hope as he becomes aware of how society is working against him. Francis does the important work of revealing the economic imperialism of settler-colonialism in this poem so that future generations may be able to break free from the legacy of being children of cement.

Katherina Vermette’s Governor General Award-winning collection *North End Love Songs* is an excellent example of resisting the negative stereotypes that settler society attempts to force upon Indigenous people. It does this by subtly, and persistently, replacing negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people with more positive portrayals based in Indigenous understandings of family and community. Although the collection is dealing with a number of crucial issues within urban Indigenous populations, Vermette refuses to be complicit with performing the identity of the imaginary “Indian.” Instead, this collection often chooses to look

at the beauty of Winnipeg's north end, one of Canada's more notorious neighbourhoods, noted for the high rates of poverty and its large Indigenous population. One way she does this is by focusing her attention on fine details, and specific people in the north end. Such is the case with her poem "dust." The poem is told in the third person and features a description of a daughter doing one of her chores: dusting the dining room. Vermette focuses her attention on the plate rail while the daughter dusts. We see the daughter

run the rag down  
the length of wood  
her finger in the crease  
where the plate edge  
is supposed to go

but there are no plates (Vermette 46).

Instead the mother keeps "native inspired / stuff like / the pictures of her children," "a soap stone carving," and a "painting / of a child [...] resplendent in regalia" (46). This scene is complex, but it certainly emphasizes the valuing of family within Indigenous cultures. It is also remarkable that the plate rail is re-tasked for what the mother wants it to do. In a sense, the mother has Indigenousized the plate rail. Additionally, Vermette offers a subtle critique of the "knick nacks" (46) that the mother places on the rail. The photos are "framed in *fake* gold" (46, my emphasis). The value of these photos is in no way related to the frame. Vermette contrasts the pretentious anxiety of settler-colonial capitalist culture with the actual content of the photo frames that speak of familial love. Also the painting features a child "with perfect / all the way brown skin / resplendent in regalia" (46). Vermette is Métis; she does not have "all the way brown skin." These lines speak to the simplification that colonization commits. Indigenous people are expected to perform the simplified, uncomplicated identity that settler society casts upon them. This painting is one of these prescribed identities and the poem gently resists this simplification

by refusing to reduce the identity of the daughter to the colour of her skin.

In the heart-wrenching section of poems titled “November,” Vermette once again shifts the reader’s perception of events from what the media focuses on, to a personal perspective. The section deals with the disappearance of a young man and draws heavily from Vermette’s own life. Her brother fell through thin ice on the Red River and was only found after months of searching. This series of poems does the imperative work of humanizing one of the many disappeared Indigenous people in Canada. The poems situate the missing person as a beloved member of a caring family:

his sister asks him  
to borrow a sweater  
he hesitates  
teases  
finally says  
*fine* (70).

This gentle teasing between brother and sister is remarkable for its portrayal of deep connectedness. The brother and sister show genuine compassion and care for one another, not only submitting to one another’s wishes, but doing so with grace and good humour. This is the last familial interaction that anyone has with the brother and it is starkly contrasted in the next poem with the media’s portrayal of the brother’s disappearance.

Of the different photos that the family provides the paper with, the newspaper selects the photo “with / his hat hung low / half his face/ in shadow” (71). Clearly this photo is not the best one to help people identify the brother. He was not even wearing a hat when he disappeared. Vermette’s poem reveals the bias in the newspaper’s portrayal of the story: “the headline reads: Native Man Missing After Binge” (71). However, Vermette chooses to display the generous attitude of love that the family has for the missing brother and son when the speaker describes her mother cutting out the article. The narrator explains her mother’s actions saying, “she thinks

he would like / that they called him / a Man” (71). Although the headline is blatantly racist, seemingly minimizing the tragedy of a young man gone missing by emphasizing race and substance abuse, Vermette chooses to draw the only positive identifier that she can from the headline. Vermette emphasizes the identity of the missing person as a brother, a son, and a man, despite the settler-colonial authorities’ attempts to minimize and ignore the tragedy of another missing Indigenous person in Canada. In a later poem, “indians,” Vermette clearly depicts this institutionalized racism: “indians go missing / everyday / blue suits shrug” (90). The potent work of Vermette’s decolonization is to show her readers that people going missing are not “indians,” but that they are somebody’s brother, sister, mother, father, son, daughter, and friend. Vermette humanizes the figures that the settler-colonial media continues to portray as drunk, savage, or subhuman. Her writing, especially because she is a Métis woman reframing the identity of Indigenous people, acts to decolonize our settler-colonial society.

In addition to defining their identities on their own terms in resistance to the politics of recognition, Indigenous artists are also defining genre on their own terms. Another way to think of this is to borrow Gary Anderson’s language once again. He asserts that Indigenous poetry “does not come from out of nowhere” (Anderson 54). In this case, the source of Indigenous poetry is an Indigenous culture that integrates many forms of artistic expression into daily life. Francis portrays the writing process in *city treaty* as both multi-generic and multi-media. This writing process is in no way bounded by restrictive understandings of genre, but seems to be incorporated holistically into Indigenous lifeways. One advantage of understanding the writing process in this way is that it takes into account the many aspects of, and parties involved in, the treaty making process. Indigenous people are often left out if we only consider only the written aspect of treaty making. Furthermore, urban Indigenous peoples have often been excluded by



settler-colonial legal definitions of Indigeneity such as Indian Status. In his interview with Deerchild and Elizabeth, Francis alludes to this when he says that urban Aboriginals are “sort of left out of the loop in a lot of senses” (“Interview” 248). He describes the project of writing/righting *city treaty* as an examination of “the treaty as literature from the urban perspective” (248). Francis is highly aware that the work that *city treaty* does must originate from this marginalized space. After all, he embraces the role of “edgewalker” and “treaty buster.” Even in his brief description of the work, it is evident that Francis is trying to redress the shortcomings of previous treaties by making this “city treaty” a much more inclusive and restorative document.

Francis seems to adopt the label of poetry for *city treaty* because of poetry’s capacity to include many forms of expression in opposition to other media, such as “legal” documents, which make a practice of excluding. Academic and artist Lindsay “Eekwol” Knight provides another echo of the notion that an important strength of poetry is its inclusivity. Although most of her research and cultural practice involves Plains Cree music, she observes that “words, music, paint, beadwork, a river — there is poetry in it all” (Knight 260). Furthermore, she writes that “poetics in Indigenous world views become something different... [It] is how we resist the loss of comprehension of and connection to both the physical and spiritual world” (260). Knight is arguing that “poetics,” when employed as a part of Indigenous worldviews, become much more than artistic expression. For her, poetry is a decolonial tactic of resistance that helps Indigenous people maintain contact with their culture. Both Knight and Francis subscribe to the notion that poetry can be a socialized space where many important connections are made. Knight concludes by saying that Indigenous poetics are “about maintaining a compassionate mind within our own nations, rebuilding our history and strengthening our future” (262). Like Knight,

Francis' art comes from "within" Indigenous cultures to restore Indigenous lifeways.

Francis invites his audience to consider some of the extra-textual gestures that have so far been ignored in most treaty documents, despite the fact that Indigenous oral accounts of the treaty making process have been carefully preserved. As the clown and the narrator review a number of written accounts of treaties, they observe that there is a significant amount of information missing about the Indigenous participants. The Indigenous people represented are gathered into one "collective" group. They note that all the Indigenous signatories are part of "*one collective tribe*" (10). This tribe is called "HIS MARK" (11). According to this reading of the treaties, the names and tribal identities of the Indigenous people signing this treaty have been overshadowed by the phrase "HIS MARK." Furthermore, the action of actually making this mark and the agreement that went along with it is all but erased. Francis is showing that these marks cannot easily be contained within a document when he includes symbols in his poem: crow feet (13), a cross, a star, a shaded moon (18). There are "no witnesses available" (18) to interpret these marks for us. As a result, these marks, which are often clan symbols full of rich significance within Indigenous contexts (Sinclair 75), are reduced to an indication that Indigenous signatories who were not able to write their names. Francis notes the importance of finding ways to express traditional Indigenous values, such as the interpretation of clan symbols, especially from within the threatening place of settler society. Francis realizes that the settler tendency to produce legally-binding static documents is particularly damaging to Indigenous peoples: "we live in circles // we die in this square piece of paper" (13). As discussed in the previous two chapters, Indigenous epistemologies are based on the cyclicity of the living world. In these lines, Francis shows that the sense of vitality embodied by the circle is in opposition to the sharp linearity of legalistic written forms that bring about the assimilation of

Indigenous peoples.

In the face of the western style of documentation that forms the core of most existing treaties, Francis proposes a new sort of treaty that incorporates multiple genres and their potential for documenting treaties. Francis draws on games as a form of documentation. This time it is a deck of

heart lake cards with corners all bent couple of cards missing  
a hybrid of old and new  
'marked' by some loser with felt pen  
the joker always the favourite (63).

Instead of the bingo cards that seem to offer nothing but the old formulations of settler domination, this deck of playing cards offers hybridity and chance. Furthermore, the rules have been broken — or to use Francis' word, "busted" — because the deck has been marked. This form of treaty is subversive because "*the little ones come first*" (63). Those who have historically been left out of the treaty making process are now given priority. The cards themselves may be documents, but they still bear the marks of performative gestures: some are missing because they have been lost or taken, others are "'marked'" to aid a cheater. Furthermore, they invite the continued, equalizing gesture of shuffling and embrace trickiness as embodied by the joker. Francis' cheeky taunt, "**put that in the treaty and smoke it**" (63), prioritizes the Indigenous ceremonial practice of the sacred pipe while simultaneously destabilizing the value of written treaties. Instead of the old, broken models of treaties, Francis proposes a treaty with

no more drunk words  
you cannot lie in a treaty  
many languages, customs, environments,  
have to be included everyone has some voice. (64)

Francis holds this new treaty to an almost impossible standard of accuracy: "to cover all of the territory the treaty must be as large as the land itself like a borges map" (67). Remarkably,

Francis finds the middle ground once again by admitting that he will not be able to write this whole treaty and that it must be an ongoing, organic process of both writing and performance:

and we sit  
me and this clown  
and now have  
just recently begun  
to right

the city treaty (67).

Francis invokes a sense of play with his pun on the word “right.” He chooses to occupy the in-between space of both/and, showing that the process of creating the city treaty is one that involves both writing and setting right. Additionally, he shows that creating this new treaty will be a long and organic process because he and the clown have “just recently begun” (67). To accomplish this task, he emphasizes the collaborative aspect of the treaty project by using the collective pronoun “we” throughout the poem.

Writing, all puns intended, this treaty will be nearly impossible, unless it is done with a lot of help. Francis summons this help from other Aboriginal writers, whom he calls “word drummers” (68). Among these are names such as Momaday, Harjo, Armstrong, King, Highway, Vizenor, McNickle, and Erdrich. He also includes some of his fellow Winnipeg writers involved in the Aboriginal Writers’ Collective such as Annharte and Duncan Mercredi. He is depicting the work of these writers in a very unconventional way. He says that their work is not a static form of archival documentation, but a living act of performance: drumming. Furthermore, he encourages us to “follow the word drummers to the city treaty” (69). Not only is this a treaty that defies static forms, but it depends on the movement and involvement of everyone. Francis concludes his treaty with the observation that the work of these writers is slow and costly. He writes, “those word drummers pound away and hurtle / words into that english landscape like

brown beer bottles [...] / turtle words crawl slowly from the broken glass” (69). Like the flood in Nêhiyaw and Anishinaabe origin stories, the final scenes of *city treaty* are ones of destruction. Once again the turtle bears the weight of reconstructing the world as “turtle words crawl slowly from the broken glass” (69). Francis has no illusions about the implausibility of entering into a city treaty. Nevertheless, he provides a powerful example of one of the many writers who have taken on the daunting task of resisting the politics of recognition. He does this by beginning to write his own non-generic treaty from an Indigenous perspective.

As Coulthard argues, Indigenous peoples will not decolonize if they remain within the system of settler-colonialism. They must draw from their own cultures to achieve freedom from colonial domination. In most respects Marvin Francis rejects settler culture’s notions of how art should be contained within genres and separate media. He exemplifies a rejection of the politics of recognition. Furthermore, Francis and Vermette both provide good examples of how art can respond directly to the misrepresentations of Indigenous people. These writers take the opportunity to replace the identity of the imaginary “Indian,” and instead self-identify from their own perspectives. Although there certainly are some forms of writing, such as birch bark biting and pictographs, that have long been a part of Indigenous cultures, printed poetry is a new media for these poets. Especially in Francis’ *city treaty*, we see the distinction between values when Indigenous and non-Indigenous people approach writing. Indigenous writers resist the static and rigid genres of writing. They point out the inaccuracies and shortcomings of written texts. By resisting the boundaries of genre, they are Indigenousizing poetry so that they can express themselves from their own perspectives.

*Performing the Written*

In this section I will continue to situate Indigenous poets in-between the two terms “performing” and “written”; however, I will approach this in-between place from another direction. This section will show the ways that Indigenous poets are performing the written. The Mohawk/Tuscarora artist Janet Rogers provides a helpful metaphor for understanding the relationship between written poetry and performance poetry in Indigenous contexts: the relationship between a mother and a child. She says that moving a poem from the page to a performance is “cutting the literary umbilical cord” (Rogers). There is still a deep, kinship relationship between the page and stage, but they remain distinct. Rogers also talks about how productive it can be to combine poetry with forms of visual art, as Francis does. She says that she likes “stretching poetry to live in many different arenas” (Rogers). This desire to stretch poetry to exist in multiple genres may not be an exclusively Indigenous motivation, but it certainly is a sentiment shared by most Indigenous poets.

Janet Rogers comes up again in Lillian Allen’s article “Poetics of Renewal: Indigenous Poetics — Message or Medium?” She plays the role of expanding the notion of what poetry can be. Rogers aligns very nicely with the way that other Indigenous poets are working to adapt poetry so that it is unrestricted by genre. Allen describes Rogers’ interactions with students in a creative writing class:

What was most valuable for the students was not the “poetry” per se but the fact that they came away understanding that there are different ways of knowing — different epistemologies, if you wish — and possibilities in their own art for distinct voice and original thought. (Allen 298)

This is yet another example of the connection Indigenous peoples have with poetry. What is remarkable about Indigenous poetry is that it provides freedom from many of the barriers that genre can present. It opens up possibilities rather than limiting them. Innovators such as Marvin Francis, or in the categories that Allen gives us, “spoken-word poet, dub poets, and Indigenous

poets” (300), seem to be interested in poetry because it can “worry words’ [...] in the revolutionary creative movement of ‘word worriers’” (300). These word worriers are consistently stepping outside of the boundaries of the media they work in.

As I have already discussed in the first section of this chapter, there are a few places in *city treaty* where Francis shows that he is writing for both stage and page. The section “**BNA ACTOR**” (*city treaty* 34-37) is the best example. He interrupts the spoken lines with stage directions in squared brackets. The section begins “[PULL OUT RED SKULL (from captain america) RED / INJUN BOOK, PASS BOOK TO THE AUDIENCE]” (34). The “RED SKULL (from captain America)” is a blending of Shakespeare’s Hamlet looking at Yorick’s skull as he contemplates suicide and a nazi supervillain from the Captain America comics. This is yet another clear example of the blending of genres. The passing of the “INJUN BOOK” to the audience also seems to challenge the boundary between the written and the performed. It raises the question of what sort of performance this actor is giving if he is also providing his audience with reading material? Could it be that this is the book by which the audience can measure how well this actor performs the stereotypical roles of Indigenous people: the “rubie” (36) or the “noble savage” (34)? These divisions between word and action are other edges that Francis is drawing our attention to. The BNA actor is challenging the constructed identities of Indigenous people by parodying Hamlet’s famous soliloquy.

However, when Francis performs this poem on the CD *Soup for the Hood* it seems that he does not follow the instructions. Neither does he read them out loud. In the printed version of *city treaty* Francis indicates a pause (35), instructs the actor to “[PULL APART A SKULL

FIND A POEM]” (36), and concludes by telling the actor to bow (37). One might think that if this poem were to be performed, these instructions would simply be carried out. It is

difficult to tell through audio recording alone the extent to which he follows or does not follow the directions, but in general Francis does not pause for long enough to complete the directions. The only times that Francis pauses is while the live audience is responding with laughter. For instance, there is no alteration to the pace of the reading when the stage direction says “[FIDDLE WITH SKULL]” (34). However, when Francis follows this with “They call me / Omelette!” (34), he pauses as he gets a big laugh from the audience. This pause is of course completely natural because he wants the audience to appreciate his joke, but the performed version of the poem is not following what appear to be stage directions. He has made some accommodations in his performance but he has not included the elements that seem to be most intentionally designed for performance: the stage directions. This seems to indicate that this poem is in-between page and stage. The stage directions are not really stage directions, but lines of poetry that are, ironically, not followed when the poem is performed. This is yet another example of how Francis is continually approaching his art from perspectives that blend genre. There is no “authentic” version of this poem, but a text that seems to be a living entity that continues to grow and change with each performance and publishing.

This sense of the text continually changing is also evident in the recording of Francis reading “**EDGEWALKER**” on the CD *Soup for the Hood*. Once again this poem shows itself to be an excellent example of how Francis inhabits the liminal spaces between genres, and moves fluidly between writing and performance. When he reads it, Francis seems to disregard some of the performance cues that he puts into the written version. For the most part, when Francis performs, he enjambes all of the lines despite the variations of alignment, the unconventional spacing, and the frequent line breaks. He is also collaborating with a guitar player. Francis and the guitar player adopt similar phrasing that seems to override the rhythms implied by the



spacing implied in the printed version. Francis groups the lines into comfortable, breath-length phrases and the upbeat guitar, which at times seems incongruous with the somber themes in the poem, follows the phrasing set out by Francis. For instance, Francis performs the lines “between Heart                      Brake tears // crying in the snow” in one breath without any pauses to indicate the pun he creates by putting a big space between “Heart” and “Brake.” Nor does he indicate that there is a stanza break between “tears” and “crying.” Both lines are simply folded into one phrase.

In some ways this version of “**EDGEWALKER**” seems to challenge Rogers’ metaphor that describes the written text as mother and the stage-based performance as child because there is no sense that one of these media has come before the other. There is no sense that one of these forms is the original and that the other is following it. Instead it seems that Francis is equally comfortable moving from page to stage as he is moving from the stage to the page. Different media are not so much ranked in importance as they are related through a non-hierarchical kinship tie. This also seems to stand up in a comparison of a page from “**EDGEWALKER**” found in the archives. Francis’ editing process is not necessarily a progression towards an entirely finished text, but rather a series of variations. This spontaneity in Francis’s writing is something that can be observed when looking at manuscripts of his writing in the archives. We see him experimenting with a pencil on his typed script by switching the order of the words rich and poor (Marvin Francis Fonds Box 6 Fd 9). (See next page for image). He seems to have gone back to his original typed version of the poem in the printed version. Making changes to typed versions of poems is certainly not an uncommon form of editing for writers, but what is very interesting here is that the sense of progression from earlier, less refined drafts to completed and published drafts is not permanently fixed.

Marvin Francis ©

**EDGEWALKER**

We all walk edges uncertain

On border slippery

Between dirt ~~poor~~ rich

And filthy rich poor

Between heartbraking tears

Crying in the snow

And sandy beach hot laughter

Between bush and city

street bus and the moose track

Point out edges that cut off our mind

From the crack baby

Cracking smiles at college bank account

We edge walk thin tenuous thread that dangles both death and  
birth

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Poetry - 2003

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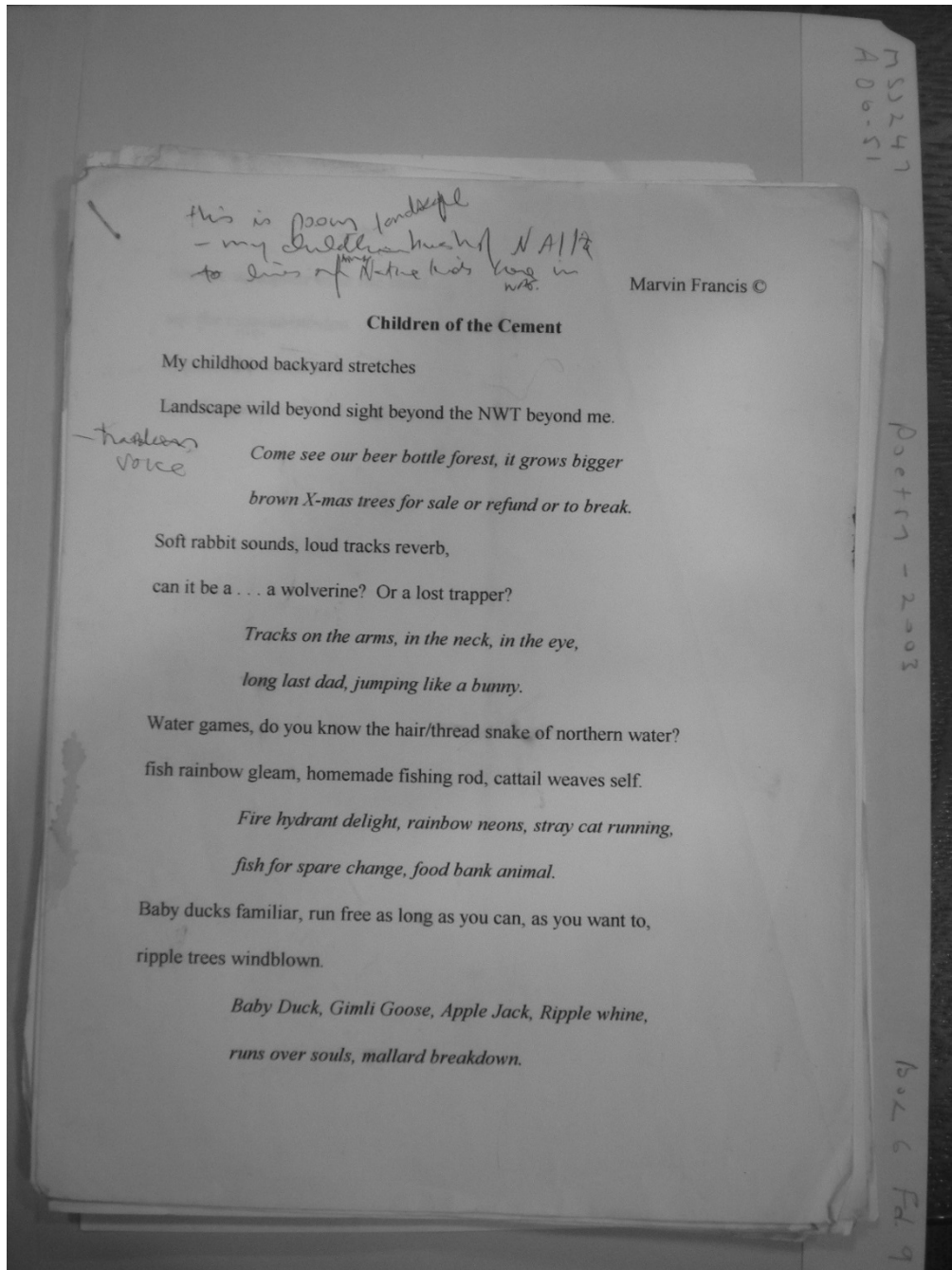
He also continues to experiment with the spacing. The spacing in the archive version differs significantly from the published version. To once again use the example of the lines “between Heart                      Brake tears // crying in the snow”(city treaty 28), we can see that the pun created by the space between “Heart” and “Brake” has again been omitted. This lack of a space between the two words is also consistent with the way the line is written in his creative MA Thesis (city treaty 25). Additionally, box 6 of his fonds contains a number of versions of the manuscript that vary between including and not including the space (Marvin Francis Fonds Box 6 Fds 5,6,7,9). Given that this poem exists in so many different forms, it seems that Francis does not defer to the authority that written texts are often given. This lack of deference to the written word is not unique to Francis, but he does seem particularly open to the interplay between the different forms his poems take. This openness is consistent with how he talks about his artistic practice and what scholars are saying about Indigenous peoples incorporating their art into a more comprehensive way of being in the world.

Although there are relatively few documentations of Francis’ performances of his poetry, the impacts of his performances are still keenly felt by those who knew him. Francis’ partner Cindy Singer recalls him preparing to perform in her brief tribute to him at the launch of *Indigenous Poetics in Canada*. Singer pictures “Marvin in the corner vibrating [...] with a sheaf of papers, a new poem written for tonight” (“Indigenous Poetics in Canada — Winnipeg Launch”). Even though Francis has passed away, his presence was still keenly felt at the launch that included playing an audio recording of him reading. What is most fascinating about Singer’s description of Francis is the palpable energy that Francis brings to the performance of a written text. She pictures her partner “vibrating.” Singer also highlights the way in which Francis would adapt his performances to a special occasion or audience: his “new poem” would be specially

“written for tonight.” The short description Singer offers of Francis’ performance reveals a lot about his creative process. Francis put significant energy into each of his performances. Furthermore, it seems as if both performance and writing are integral parts of his artistic process. His was a non-hierarchical creative process that included both performance and writing. According to Singer’s description of Francis’ performance, it seems that it was common for poems to be written specifically for performance. Yet we also know that many of the poems in *city treaty* were written for the page because this work was his creative MA thesis in English. This collaborative creative process that included equally valued work on both page and stage is an important example of the ways that Francis resists strict borders of genre. What Lillian Allen says of the class working with Janet Rogers is also applicable to the experience of Francis’ audience: they “came away understanding that there are different ways of knowing” (Allen 298). Francis’ creative practice is not limited to any single genre or medium. For Francis, it seems that the most important part of his art, was that it was grounded in his own Indigenous perspective.

The archival records of Francis’ papers also paint a picture of how Francis would interpret his poems in different contexts and for different purposes. On the following page is an image of one Francis’ drafts of “Children of the Cement” (Marvin Francis Fonds Box 6 Fd 9). This poem is indicative of the state of most of the poems in this folder (Box 6 Fd 9). These are not drafts that have been neatly laid aside in a drawer. These seem to be performance copies of his poems. The corners are dog eared, several of the pages are water damaged, and there are stains from what appears to be coffee. Furthermore, many of the copies have what seems to be performance notes on them. In the following image Francis has written a few words introducing the poem. It is hard to make out exactly what it says, but the note seems to be something like: “this is my childhood landscape poem” and then “to lives of children who live in Wpg.” It seems

like these are the sorts of remarks that one would make when introducing a poem at a reading. Furthermore, the word “voice” appears along the side of the page that could be a direction for how Francis was planning to read the poem. Francis’ artistic practices are not fixed in one particular form or genre. It seems quite clear that he would adapt his poems to suit their contexts as fully as possible.



Louise Halfe is also a fine performer of her written work who draws on the whole of Cree culture to enrich her artistic practice. Like Francis, she resists being limited by genre. This sense of breaking outside of genre may be a more positive way of articulating what reviewer Theresa Shea says about *Blue Marrow*.

Moreover, the poet's language, while at times vibrant and precise, too often reads like prose rather than poetry. While Halfe's work clearly draws on an oral tradition (and might be better appreciated when read aloud), she subjects her poetic voices to the demands of the printed page. Judged by this standard, the subject matter of *Blue Marrow* is more interesting than the infrequent flashes of poetry. (Shea)

Like Neal McLeod in his introduction to *Indigenous Poetics*, I think that this "prose rather than poetry" impression that Shea gets, comes from Halfe's connectedness to her own culture, and not any deficiency in the quality of her writing. Shea acknowledges that it was necessary for Halfe to translate her content from an oral story form onto the printed page. It seems counterproductive for a critic to label a work of art with a particular genre and then critique this art for not being contained by this genre, especially when Shea's notion of what poetry is remains unexplained. One of the great strengths of a book like *Blue Marrow* is that it challenges reader assumptions of genre. It exists as a book that can and should be "read aloud" (Shea). However, it also exists as a printed text on the page. It is poetry, but it is also a story rooted in a rich oral history. The genre of poetry is not a limitation for Halfe.

In a video of Halfe reading at Calgary's Glenbow museum in 2009, Halfe comments about the limitations of form, and the importance of including conversations in the work that writers do. She says, "it's really important to learn and share ideas. I think it's really important as Aboriginal writers that we share these ideas... disagree and agree... it's a good thing" ("Louise Bernice Halfe"). Halfe's views about the importance of dialogue and the participation of writers

in discussion are not exclusively Indigenous. There are certainly many writers who participate in festivals and interviews from all backgrounds. However, Halfe does suggest that there is something about this discussion that is particularly “important as Aboriginal writers.” Although the camera is focused only on her, the response of the audience can be easily heard in the soundtrack and Halfe seems completely comfortable in this setting. Halfe takes advantage of filling in some of the details that she feels do not come across in her writing. She laments the lack of humour in her books, emphasizing a Cree accent and imploring, “Grandmothers, send me your dirty stories” (“Louise Bernice Halfe”). She gets a response of genuine laughter from the crowd and continues, saying “that on paper, it [the humour] just doesn’t come across.” Nevertheless, Halfe takes full advantage of this opportunity in front of a live audience to more completely represent her artistic practices. She credits writing and the sharing of this writing with letting “the pus come out” so that healing can start. In Halfe’s reading of her poetry she is careful to contextualize her work as a part of something much bigger: the healing process of Aboriginal people recovering from the many hurts of settler-colonialism. Halfe’s brief introduction twice mentions the fact that Halfe attended Blue Quills residential school. Her work is not limited by genre, but grounded in experiences as an Indigenous survivor of residential school and her identity as an Indigenous woman.

As Halfe continues to contextualize her work as “medicine” (“Louise Bernice Halfe”), she goes on to read her poems from the “poop” series, where the speaker writes letters to the pope, using a dialect of Cree inflected English. There are some subtle, but important differences between reading these poems in *Bear Bones & Feathers* and witnessing Halfe perform them. The first is that she fills in some details about her difficult relationship with the Catholic church due to her experiences at residential school. She says that she “sent these books to the Vatican when

they came out,” along with a letter detailing her ideas for how some of the catholic church’s money should be spent. Presumably, she sent several copies of *Bear Bones & Feathers*. All that she got back was a brief letter saying that “we’ve noted the contents of your books” (“Louise Bernice Halfe”). These clarifying background details, along with hearing Halfe pronounce the word “poop,” somewhere in between “pope” and “poop,” help to bring the deeply political satire of this poem to the foreground. She also adds one brief line to her poem “Der Poop.” In *Bear Bones & Feathers*, the speaker of the poem ends with the closing salutations, “maybe we dalk again next time i see you / in da newspaper” (*Bear Bones* 102). In the video, Halfe adds the line “in da outhouse” (“Louise Bernice Halfe”). Reading the poem, it is clear that the speaker is in the outhouse; however, this setting may be lost on listeners. It seems like Halfe is adding this line to make the setting clearer for her audience. As a result of this added clarification, the audience gets the joke, responding with laughter at the end of the poem. Once again, Halfe seems to show that she includes far more humour than she gives herself credit for. Yet this could be another indication of the importance of including both writing, and performance for Aboriginal writers.

There are also two videos currently available of Halfe reading from her latest book of poetry, *The Crooked Good* (“Louise Halfe — Calgary”; “Louise Bernice Halfe”). This most recent collection of poetry goes even further than *Blue Marrow* in occupying a space in between the written and oral. Perhaps the dearth of critical responses to this book is in part due to the fact that it is difficult to find other books to compare it to. It does not fit easily into a genre. There are many good reasons for this, but principally, it seems that this book is not only a book, but a story that has been passed down through generations. In Halfe’s reading at the Glenbow Museum she explains how the story of rolling head, on which *The Crooked Good* is based, was passed down through generations in her family (“Louise Bernice Halfe”). She continues, commenting that she



has “woven this story [of rolling head] into the lives of three Aboriginal women.” It is clear that this story did not begin as a book, but it is equally clear that it does not end as a book either. Through the different inflections that Halfe provides in her readings, she is able to continue this story and provide some helpful context as well as interpretations. She re-orders and contextualizes her poetry differently in her readings than she does in her books. Halfe begins reading from *The Crooked Good* by reading the section “*ê-kwêskît*- Turn-Around Woman” (*The Crooked Good* 3-4). She reads this two-page section and then reads from the section “Everyday is a Story” (5-7). However, she starts reading this section at the bottom of page six, skipping over nearly two pages without any indication to the audience. Then she stops to give some more background about the next section she will read. Although the next section, “Father Francis Du Person”(8-9), comes immediately after “Everyday is a Story” (5-7), Halfe pauses in her reading to discuss her response to the dehumanizing comments about Aboriginal peoples that many Europeans have made throughout history. She says, “this whole text is about responding and saying,” she continues almost under her breath, “well fuck you guys” (“Louise Bernice Halfe”). Halfe adds humour and extra context to her readings, changing the order and context that her books have. Once again, she does not allow her work to be contained by any single genre, but reinvents her written text when she performs it. Halfe’s reinvention of the poem for performance is not a trait unique to Indigenous writers, but in the Indigenous context, this reinvention of the text does have the natural consequence of being an act of decolonization.

When she reads at the Calgary Spoken Word Festival, she gives an even more lively performance. She begins with her gently teasing her audience by speaking Cree to a group that seem to mostly non-Indigenous. She says that she likes to make people uncomfortable by speaking Cree: “It’s really a polite way of saying: ‘I was here first’” (“Louise Halfe —

Calgary”). She also gives the audience some instructions for how to read the book: “*The Crooked Good* has to be read from front to back.” She proceeds to do exactly this. Although she does not have time to read the whole book, she does read the first full section. After two pages, we begin to hear some percussion accompanying her voice. It is not entirely clear if this is something that was added after the video is made or whether it was live. In either case, this percussion emphasizes that the collection is not limited by its written form but can include performed music as well. As with Halfe’s reading at the Glenbow museum, she shows that genre and medium are not limitations on the broader context in which her work exists. Halfe recontextualizes her work specifically for the stage. She also skips the English translation of the Nêhiyawêyân (Cree language), emphasizing that the words the characters speak are not in English. Halfe says, “kayâs kî-mamâhtâwisiwakiyiniwak” and omits the English translation “*These gifted mysterious people of long ago*” (*The Crooked Good* 3). Once again this may make the audience members uncomfortable because they do not understand. However, Halfe has already expressed that this is her intent. She is showing that she belongs in this place and is unapologetic about speaking a language that her audience may not understand.

Perhaps it is fitting to conclude this chapter with a discussion of an exciting new poem by Duncan Mercredi, “This City is Red.” As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, he is working hard to ensure that Indigenous stories do not “become indistinguishable from all of the other stories out there” (“Achimo” 22). He is deeply concerned that the meaning of Indigenous stories will be lost in the translation from oral stories in Indigenous languages to printed texts in English. He asks, “Will that same emotion, that same rhythm, be captured on the written page? I’m not sure unless you happened to be there to hear the story first-hand” (21). He is rightly concerned about this translation and the important meaning that it too often fails to convey. Although it may

not be intentional, it is fitting that one of his latest works, “This City is Red,” has not been published in any definitive way, but written and then performed for live audiences.

The first time I heard this poem performed was in April 2013. Mercredi had been invited, along with a number of other Winnipeg poets, to do some short readings before then-Parliamentary Poet Laureate Fred Wah spoke. Mercredi presented his poem as a work in progress that he had already been reading for other audiences. I also heard Mercredi read an excerpt of the poem at the Manitoba Indigenous Writers’ Festival in January of 2014. Most recently, I heard Mercredi read this poem at the Speaking Crow open mic in March of 2015. Each of these performances catered to the specific audiences Mercredi was performing for and even the contexts of current events that surrounded them. Although I was not in attendance, Mercredi also reads from “This City is Red” before his story at Neechi Commons as a part of the Cree Stories event in the summer of 2014. There he gives context for his poem in a similar way that both Louise Halfe and Marvin Francis do when they perform. Summer 2014 was a highly eventful summer for the Indigenous communities of Winnipeg. The summer followed in the afterglow of Idle No More that was at its height over the winter of 2013-2014. It was also the summer in which Tina Fontaine was murdered and found in the Red River, instigating much social activism amongst Winnipeg’s Indigenous community. Mercredi introduces “This City is Red” by saying that it is “in response to the week that has been” (“Cree Stories (Aug. 14, 2014) at Neechi Commons”). At the time of this poem’s reading the search for Tina Fontaine was underway, but she was not found until August 17. He may not be referring to this directly, but it is important to note the politically charged atmosphere and the specifics of this time and place in which the poem was being read. He could also be referring to the fact that he had just been participating in a rich and productive week examining Cree stories with Neal McLeod and a

number of students from across the country. In any of these scenarios, “This City is Red” is a poem that is constantly changing and adapting to serve as part of Winnipeg’s Indigenous community. It is certainly not contained by any single genre.

The practice of performing newly written and unpublished writing is common among the members of Winnipeg’s Aboriginal Writers Collective. The recording *Red City: A Compilation of Aboriginal Spoken Word*, features both Marvin Francis and Duncan Mercredi reading unpublished work. Mercredi performs a poem called “Red City.” This poem could be an early version, or at least part of the inspiration of “This City is Red.” It features the same street-view walking tour of Winnipeg and the same sense that the speaker is being rejected everywhere he turns in the unfriendly city (“Red City”). It is difficult to say exactly how these two poems are related because Mercredi has performed so many separate versions of “This City is Red,” and so few have had public recordings made. However, both “Red City” and “This City is Red” express the painful irony of settlers coming into Indigenous territory and making these hosts feel like hated outsiders in their own homes. Mercredi begins this earlier poem: “Spent years looking for the path from Highway six to Main Street / being a part of that moccasin invasion that searched for a way in / my words used as weapons” (“Red City”). The irony of this member of the “moccasin invasion” having to fight so hard to find a place in this city that was once a meeting place for his people is painful indeed. Furthermore, the message of this poem is consistent with the message Mercredi continues to share in the versions of “This City is Red” he reads: Indigenous people belong to this place, but they are not welcomed. They are forced into what is basically an urban reservation. He says, “the trail weaves throughout the city / from Main to Higgins to Broadway to Osborne to EK then Transcona / and the Northend beckoned with promise” (“Red City”). Although the speaker of the poem walks the many neighbourhoods of

Winnipeg, it is only the Northend where he is “beckoned.” Like the trail of tears, this trail leads to the dislocation of Indigenous peoples from their traditional homes. The end of the trail is one of the most impoverished urban neighbourhoods in the entire country: Winnipeg’s Northend. Winnipeg may be the traditional sacred homeland for many groups of Indigenous peoples, but Mercredi reveals how unwelcome they are in most areas of the city as he reads this poem.

Eleven years after this recording was made in 2003, two online videos appeared that feature Mercredi reading from “This City is Red.” The videos include different sections of the poem. The first video was recorded at the Manitoba Indigenous Writers’ Festival in January 2014 and the second, which I’ve already discussed, was recorded later that year as a part of the fourth Cree Stories event in August of 2014. In the first video Mercredi gives the same sort of list of neighbourhoods that he does in “Red City.” He says, “This city is red. Its heartbeat played on animal skin. Its song and dance echoes down to St. James, EK, Fort Rouge, Tuxedo and snakes its way circles back to St. B. St. Vital, shakes the ground by Louis’ resting place” (“MIWF 2014”). This is obviously a different sort of tour than Mercredi gives us in “Red City;” nevertheless it conveys a similar sentiment and discusses the city as a place where Indigenous presence (“song”) is permitted, but Indigenous people are not really welcome. Earlier in this video he says, “This city is red. Full of lies, deceit and false promises full of fumbling stumbling young suburban men in fancy cars with fancy ideas. Full of hate and venom they cruise Selkirk, low track, Higgins and Main in cover of darkness” (“MIWF 2014”). As the suburban men, which means they are almost definitely white, “cruise” the poorer Indigenous neighbourhoods of the Northend, the poem’s speaker names the hate these men bring with them. It is not enough for these privileged thrill seekers to have “fancy cars” and live in a suburban neighbourhood, it seems that they also want to engage in some sort of colonial voyeurism or poverty tourism and

exploitation of these already impoverished neighbourhoods. Mercredi shows that Indigenous people have belonged and always will belong to this place, despite the contempt of these voyeurs. He concludes this reading saying, “This city is red. Founded on a new song of the Red and Assiniboine. Cradled in the Northend and nurtured by the fire keepers to keep the memory alive” (“MIWF 2014”). The sense of belonging between the Indigenous people and the place they live is based on nurturing and artistic practices. The city is “Founded on a new song” and “Cradled in the Northend.” Ownership and belonging are not defined by legal documentation, but by relationships. Furthermore, these relationships with land are “nurtured by fire keepers,” story tellers. For Mercredi, as for Francis and Halfe, each reading is an opportunity to adapt the written word into new multi generic forms that better suit Indigenous worldviews. For Indigenous artists, their work is not separate from their lives or from their communities but integrated into ““a holistic way of being”” (Wilmer 4).

Although Indigenous poets may not be the only artists interested in poetry because of the way it resists genre, they do seem to recognize the potential of poetry to celebrate the connectedness of different artistic genres. This broader sense of connectedness is cited by many scholars of Indigenous studies to be the core value of an Indigenous worldview. For these Indigenous artists, poetry is attractive because they can Indigenize it so that it is consonant with their worldviews that integrate art into life. The work of Marvin Francis, in particular, provides a strong challenge to the borders often constructed around western notions of genre. In *city treaty* he demonstrates how a printed book of poetry can be a meeting place for various art forms. He demonstrates that the reason he emphasizes this connectedness of genres is because he is writing from an Indigenous worldview. There is also an important parallel between the politics of recognition and genre. Indigenous artists use many different forms to assert their own identities

on their own terms. Additionally, their resistance of rigid western notions of genre is allied with their resistance to western state definitions of Indigeneity. Finally, these poets do not consider the written form of their work to be in any way final. The “eurocentric trap” (Anderson 35) of genre is just one of many traps that Indigenous artists must evade. Francis, Halfe, Mercredi, Scofield, and Annharte evade the trap of genre with skill to decolonize our world through art. Warren Cariou argues that “the poet is the ultimate edgewalker” (“Edgework” 32). Walking these edges between genres can “shake up colonial mindsets” (33) and play a significant role in the decolonization of Indigenous peoples.

## Conclusion

“Stay calm and decolonize”<sup>17</sup>

The still-colonized realities of life in countries such as Canada, the United States of America, Australia, and New Zealand are stark for Indigenous peoples. Nevertheless, Indigenous peoples throughout the world are rising to the challenge of decolonization. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith asserts, Indigenous peoples are learning to transmit their “own alternative, oppositional ways of knowing” (Smith 204) into settler-colonial technologies, such as writing.

Decolonization, this “way out of colonialism” (204), works in two ways simultaneously. As I have already mentioned in my introduction, Waaseyaa’sin Christine Sy puts this nicely when she says, “Decolonization, generally, may be understood as a process and event that includes both resistance against colonization and the reclamation of Indigenous lifeways” (Sy 185). I have argued that poetry is one particularly apt form of decolonization in the prairie Indigenous context because it allows the important elements of medicine, storytelling, and ceremony to be translated into what was once a European medium. Furthermore, poetry mobilizes a powerful form of activism through Indigenization and challenges the colonizing borders that are too often erected around artistic genres. The decolonization that is exemplified in the work of Louise Halfe, Duncan Mercredi, Gregory Scofield, Marie Annharte, and Marvin Francis acts as both “reclamation” and “resistance” (185). Although I have focused my attention most closely on these five poets, decolonial art is not limited to these writers or to Indigenous communities. Furthermore, decolonial art is not limited to any specific genre, such as poetry.

The Jamaican born dub poet Lillian Allen provides a remarkable example of how people from various marginalized and colonized communities can ally themselves together through their

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<sup>17</sup> Quotation taken from an Interview with Buffy Sainte-Marie (White).



art to decolonize. Additionally, Buffy Sainte-Marie reminds us that decolonial activism occurs across many forms of art and even in the way one lives her life. The future of decolonial art seems to be very bright and it will be brighter still if people of many different cultural backgrounds practicing many different forms of art can ally themselves with one another.

The Caribbean is one of far too many examples of oppressed and colonized places throughout the world. However, Caribbean poets like Indigenous poets continue to take great strides towards creating realities outside of the context of colonialism. For the most part, the Caribbean is not settler-colonial, but this region still suffers the effects of a long legacy of colonial rule and makes great efforts to decolonize itself and its cultures. This remarkable feat is often accomplished by using the very tools of colonialism to decolonize. Scholar of Caribbean literature David Dabydeen explains how dub poets use “re-made” (Dabydeen 410) sound system technology very similarly to the way in which Indigenous poets are re-inventing poetry. Dabydeen writes, “The deliberate exploitation of high-tech to serve black ‘jungle-talk’ is a reversal of colonial history” (410). This re-invention of colonial tools is just one example. Dabydeen also argues that dub poets are “*folking* up literature” (414). This is another clever and powerful formulation of what Joy Harjo says Indigenous writers do: “transform[ing] these enemy languages” (*Reinventing* 22). Although there are significant differences in the challenges that face Caribbean and Indigenous poets, one challenge that they do share is a need to adapt colonial languages for decolonial purposes.

Caribbean poet John Agard’s poem “Listen Mr Oxford Don” is another extremely witty formulation of this decolonial tactic of re-inventing English. Agard writes:

I ent have no gun  
I ent have no knife  
but mugging de Queen’s English  
is the story of my life

I don't need no axe  
to split/ up yu syntax  
I don't need no hammer  
to mash/ up yu grammar (Agard)

In two brief stanzas Agard accomplishes both crucial actions that make up decolonization: he takes back the ability to speak for himself and he resists the colonial authority of the “Queen’s English.” From one perspective Agard is celebrating the Caribbean dialect that Lillian Allen calls “natural, joyous and feisty” (*Women* 11). The repeated double negatives throughout this passage (“I ent have no” and “I don’t need no”) do not make sense in the logic of English grammar, but they do exude the energy of Caribbean dialect. Furthermore, the rhyme scheme is infused with innovative improvisations. In the first stanza the abcb rhyme scheme keeps the reader anticipating the resolution until the very last word, “life.” The aabb rhyme scheme of the second stanza has quite the opposite effect: the reader is almost overwhelmed with the frequency of the rhyming words. The skill with which Agard manipulates language to fit within his form deeply undercuts the stereotype that Black English speakers are inarticulate. He further subverts the stereotype of racialized tendencies towards violence. The speaker does commit a “mugging”, does “split/ up” and does “mash/ up,” (Agard), but this is all on the metaphorical level of language. Similarly, Indigenous poets use dialect to great effect as they use the implements of colonialism against itself. Annharte says that she likes to “‘massacre’ English when I write” (“Borrowing” 60). Louise Halfe also uses dialect in her poem “Der Poop” as she adopts the satirical voice of an Indigenous person responding to the pope saying he is “sorry” (*Bear Bones* 102). Marginalized people around the world are decolonizing the language that had once been used to oppress them.

Lillian Allen is highly aware of the potential to adapt poetry so that it both affirms her

identity and resists the oppression of colonialism. She takes great pleasure in the use of what she calls the “Jamaican language” (*Woman* 11). She is also highly conscious of the fact that there have been deliberate attempts to repress this subversive dialect of English in order to exert colonial control. She says that policing the use of dialect is an “orchestrated strategy to ‘keep these people in their place’ and to stigmatize something so fundamental to a people’s identity and sense of self” (11). Her response to this oppression, like the response of so many artists who are part of marginalized groups, is both fitting and beautiful. Allen adapts the English language and English poetry so that they no longer have the power to “keep these people in their place” (11). Her artistic practice is such that it cannot be contained by the print publishing industry and her use of language is not contained by dictionaries or style guides. She says, “Like a jazz musician with the word as her instrument, reading and performing these poems is an extension of the creative and creation process for the work” (9). Just as jazz adapts aspects of Western music to improvise an entirely new, decolonial music, so poetry in the hands of members of marginalized groups is adapted. Allen asserts that poetry cannot be contained in any single medium, insisting “always a poem, once a book” (9).

Like the Indigenous poets I have discussed, it seems that Allen is drawn to poetry because of its potential for extreme flexibility and its performativity:

Because dub poetry is not strictly pagebound, and because institutions in our society do not account for our existence, we have gone directly to the public, recording, performing and self-publishing. We sidestepped the all-powerful “middleman” who serves as the arbiter of culture. Dub poets — with their activism and solidarity work, a network of readings and poetry across the country, and a political stance and media profile — have emerged as a major national Black cultural presence in Canada. (21)

It is also important that Allen has adapted poetry to fit her needs. She specifies that she is writing “dub poetry” and that she and many other practitioners of the form have “sidestepped the all-

powerful ‘middleman’” (21). Furthermore, the role of artist or writer is only a part of who these dub poets are and what they do. Like Maria Campbell who says “My work is in the community...as an organizer” (qtd. in Miner 321), these poets are doing much more than simply writing and reading poems. Their work is a major statement of a once marginalized presence. Like Indigenous poets, Allen understands her work to reject what Coulthard calls the “politics of recognition” (Coulthard 151). Dub poets are only able to do their work because they define themselves from their own points of view. Additionally, their poetry is performative in the sense that it is doing significant work to assert the unified identity of marginalized groups.

In “To a Jazz Musician / (Contemplating Suicide)” Allen demonstrates the capacity of poetry to speak for a group without succumbing to limiting artistic or political structures. The poem is a sort of origin story for jazz. The first line echoes genesis: “In the beginning was a lone jazz musician” (*Women* 122). However, this origin story is quite divergent from the biblical tale. It speaks of a limitless capacity for re-creation. She writes that “mind cannot comprehend limits of structure / time and space intrude” (122). Unlike the biblical creation that moves from chaos to closely structured order, this origin story has “no limits of structure.” Like the Okimasis brothers in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* who are instructed to use art to “make a new world” (Highway 227), the jazz musician in this poem is told:

create a new universe  
in here  
out there  
somewhere! (*Women* 123).

For Allen, art is a powerful creative force that is her most cherished tool for destabilizing structures and hierarchies. For both Allen and many Indigenous writers, art has the capacity to create “a new world” and “a new universe.”

Although Caribbean and Indigenous concerns are not identical, there is much to be

gained by cooperation on key issues. Once again, Lillian Allen uses poetry as this unifying force for “all lovers of the earth” (96). Her poem “Dis Ya Mumma Earth / (Peace Poem)” argues that “peace...justice...equality” (96) can only be realized through unity. She says, “nuclear arms protesters, anti-war activists / liberation fighters / we are the poets” (96). According to Allen, these “lovers of the earth” share the identity of being poets. Allen’s argument for peace reduces the logic of realizing peace on “mumma earth.” She argues for peace “cause everything pon it / we blood an sweat in it / is fi everybody homeland” (96). While the distinction between settler-colonial and post-colonial realities is important to make, it is equally important to realize that all decolonial struggles are connected by a responsibility to care for the earth. It seems that poetry is a particularly powerful form to bring about these collaborations.

Buffy Sainte-Marie has long been a strong voice for decolonization through art. In a similar way to which Allen unifies marginalized people through a shared desire for peace and a love of the earth, Sainte-Marie’s most recent Polaris Prize winning album *Power in the Blood* advocates for a united front against war and social injustice that includes all marginalized people. In adapted lyrics from the band UB40’s song “Sing Our Own Song,” she sings:

When the ancient drum rhythms ring  
The voice of our forefathers sing  
The will to live will beat on, we will no longer be pawns  
To greed and to war  
We will be Idle No More (Sainte-Marie).

Although she has included some important Indigenous symbols, such as the drum and the Idle No More movement, she is not doing this to exclude other groups of people. She is singing in the inclusive plural first person as she retains the original chorus: “We will stand for the right to be free / We will grow our own society / [...] We will sing our own song” (Sainte-Marie). Perhaps even more directly than the poets I have discussed, Sainte-Marie is addressing the dynamic that

Coulthard defines in his term “politics of recognition” (Coulthard 151) in this chorus. Sainte-Marie is not speaking specifically from within an Indigenous context because this is a song about many marginalized groups working together. Nevertheless, she seems to argue that these marginalized groups that have suffered as a result of colonization can only be free of this suffering by standing on their own strengths independent of any state. She argues that marginalized groups of many sorts can join their strengths and, as she sings in the final chorus, “rebuild a just society” (Sainte-Marie). This rebuilding power is done without the recognition of the state. As she asserts throughout the song “We will sing our own song.” Furthermore, Sainte-Marie gestures to the solidarity of various groups with complimenting interests in the music of this song. She maintains the original reggae back beat, especially noticeable in the electric guitar, but she also adds a sample from the Northern Cree Singers and finishes the song with their voices.

Sainte-Marie’s conviction in what she teaches through her art is very clear in the hope and encouragement that she shares with the next generation. She has been an inspiring artist since the early 1960s, but she continues to focus on the youngest generations with messages of hope for the decolonization of our world. In her beautiful lullaby “Ke Sakihitin Awasis” (Cree for “I love you baby”), she sings:

On some reservation your purification’s begun  
It’s the fifth generation the young and the old are as one  
Singing come back to the Sweetgrass  
come back to the Pipe and the Drum  
and be your future. (Sainte-Marie)

In this gentle, plaintive song she urges the younger generation not to forsake the sacred teachings of “the Sweetgrass... the Pipe and the Drum.” She is encouraging this young generation and asserting that their best future incorporates traditional Indigenous teachings. Even more

inspirational than this lullaby is the final anthemic cut on the album, “Carry It On,” where she convincingly argues that there is still significant power in grass-roots activism. This power rests in the way in which people choose to relate to the earth. She sings, “Lift your heart to your own home planet” and asks the piercing question: “What is your attitude / Are you here to improve or damn it?” (Sainte-Marie). In the face of the cynical observation that money “makes the world go round” (Sainte-Marie), she presents this rallying cry: “take heart and take care of your link with Life.” Like many Indigenous artists, Buffy Sainte-Marie adapts the tools that have been used in the past to colonize and control Indigenous people. She adapts these tools to assert Indigenous epistemologies about the role that humans should be playing in the world. This is a powerful form of decolonization.

Sainte-Marie is highly conscious of the decolonizing work that her music continues to do. In an interview with Shad on CBC radio she acknowledges that “marginalized people from all over the world have similar problems because of colonialism” (“Action stars”). Like Indigenous poets, she is learning how to adapt to the world around her so that she can still express her Indigeneity on her own terms. In the same interview she talks about the necessity of “being willing to mutate in a good way” (“Action stars”). This positive mutation that Sainte-Marie is talking about here seems to be similar to what Beth Brant means by calling Indigenous women’s writing “Good Medicine” (Brant 9). Furthermore, this willingness to mutate is another way of describing the adaptability inherent in Indigenization. Like Indigenous poets and many other “marginalized people,” Sainte-Marie is learning to use non-Indigenous media in Indigenous ways. She also talks about the advantages of “Indigenous things: our survival values our music, let alone our problems that need to be fixed. It’s all good and it’s a pleasure to be involved with Indigenous people in education” (“Action stars”). Although decolonization is certainly a

struggle, it is a struggle that can benefit all human beings. Sainte-Marie says that Indigenous people have a particular ability for overcoming the problems of colonization that continue to face the world: “That’s why we are so good at letting people know what it’s about because we’ve been dealing with it forever” (“Action stars”). Nevertheless, she continues to be positive about the prospects for future generations: “We can do this. As human beings, we can do this.” For Sainte-Marie, the challenges of decolonization are very real, but they also bring out the best in Indigenous people and the best in humanity.

The reason that Sainte-Marie is able to stay so up-beat about realizing positive change through her decolonial art is that decolonization is, at its core, the assertion of one’s true identity. She says that her art is simply an extension of her life and who she is when she mentions that her drive “comes from my life” (“Action stars”). In her comments about her music being blacklisted from radio play in the United States she says, “I just kept keeping on...because my life informs me in ways I want to share with other people” (“Action stars”). Furthermore, she argues that there is incredible potential for Indigenous artists today. In the same interview she says: “Native music right now is kind of like black music was in the 1930s and 40s where people are discovering: not only is it good, but it is multi-genre and it relates to what is already going” (“Action stars”). Sainte-Marie considers her art to be much more than a form of entertainment. Her art is an extension of who she is and a means to the end of people treating each other and the planet with respect.

Sainte-Marie remains encouraging in other interviews she has shared with the press. She tells Rosanna Deerchild that “We can continue to celebrate our positivity as well as complaining very well about the things we want to change” (“Buffy Saint-Marie’s”). Here Sainte-Marie articulates the two ways in which Indigenous artists are decolonizers. Decolonial Indigenous



artists not only bear witness to the abuses of colonialism, but also celebrate their own rich cultures. For Sainte-Marie, Aboriginal music is a very natural extension of what Indigenous people have always been doing. She says: “It’s a whole scene for me... We all do our own thing...and we have been doing it all along” (“Buffy Saint-Marie’s”). However, she is careful not to minimize the challenges of settler-colonialism. In a print interview she states that

“The problems are real...But they’re bigger than simple race hatred. It’s about the interrelated nature of the patriarchy, residential schools, unfairness, malnutrition, alcoholism and the overall shittiness of being poor. These are systemic problems that won’t get resolved until indigenous people are respected as human beings who’ve been abused by the colonizers for centuries.” (White 15)

Sainte-Marie understands that many of the problems faced by marginalized peoples are interrelated and that decolonization is about learning to respect and recognize the humanity in each other. Sainte-Marie offers this reassuring advice to anyone seeking to address the continuing challenges faced by a world with real problems: “Stay calm and decolonize” (15).

Indigenous poets provide one good example of the potential for art to bring about decolonization. Yet, they are far from the only examples of Indigenous people who use art to bring about vast social change within colonial contexts. This discussion of Lillian Allen and Buffy Sainte-Marie is just one potential direction in which further research on the potential for art to decolonize can go. As Louis Riel allegedly said just before he was hung for treason, “My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirits back” (*Manitowapow* 6). The one hundred years are over and the spirits of Indigenous people are being given back by artists across many genres. Louise Halfe, Duncan Mercredi, Gregory Scofield, Marie Annharte, and Marvin Francis show many of the important ways in which these spirits can be returned through the resistance of settler-colonialism and the assertion of Indigenous worldviews in their artistic practices.

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Just before nine one morning, I was waiting for my bus to go and teach an Indigenous literature class. A man who seemed to have been out all night was making rounds to the collection of people huddled in the shelter against the cold of this late November morning. Everyone was ignoring him as he asked for spare change. He walked up to me, I said “hello.” He said: “Nobody talks to me. Can I be a fucking person too?” He was asking for change I couldn’t provide and he was angry. He said, “I look at you and I see a white man. You started a war! This is our land! What did I ever do to you? How come we live in poverty while you have a job? I’m not afraid of you; I’m not afraid of anything!” He wanted to fight. He wanted someone to make immediate change in the realities of living in a still-colonized city, a still-colonized country. Even though it was a cloudy morning and the sun had just come up, he was wearing sunglasses. But I could tell that he was staring at me with an intensity that demanded some sort of answer. All I could offer him were hollow platitudes about how unfair the whole situation is. He was not satisfied with these. He was close enough to me that I could smell liquor on his breath and I was beginning to be afraid. I wouldn’t fight him; I gave him a few bus tickets and walked to the next stop. As I walked I started wondering if I should have ignored him like the other people at the bus stop. Had I only created more conflict around a problem that I could do next to nothing to correct?

I couldn’t let the encounter go. I thought of some lines from a song I teach in my classes, Buffy Sainte-Marie’s “Now that the Buffalo’s Gone.” She sings, “even when germany fell to your hands / consider dear lady, consider dear man / you left them their pride and you left them their land.” As I sat on the bus on my way to teach Indigenous literature I thought about how the

man was right to be angry. White people did take the land of his people, a people who had done nothing to provoke this theft except exist in this beautiful place. That is an act of war.

Nevertheless, it seems nearly impossible that all the descendants of settlers in north america could go back to europe. Such a mass exodus would not put things back to the way they were before hundreds of years of colonial rule anyways. When it really comes down to it, I would prefer not to be waiting in the cold for the bus in Winnipeg if there was a place for me in the comparatively warmer Ireland, Scotland, Sweden, or Germany. If I lived in one of these countries I would never have the feeling that I live there illegally, on stolen land, and the man at the bus stop would not have to put up with another white man on his territory. No matter what we may prefer on either side of this situation, there is no space for all non-Indigenous to go back to wherever our descendants came from. Most of us were born in this country through no fault of our own. The man wanted to fight for his “pride” and his “land,” but the only person who would even hear him out was a white man who presumptuously considers himself an ally of Indigenous people.

The unfairness of settler-colonialism is a reality that plays itself out on the streets of cities like Winnipeg, Edmonton, Regina, and Thunder Bay every single day. There are many hurting and angry Indigenous people and many obviously privileged white people. As long as we allow the animosity between these two groups, which are going to have to live with each other for the foreseeable future, we will remain with a status quo that is largely unacceptable for all people who live in Canada. We need to adopt a different strategy than confrontation. Decolonization is this different strategy. It is an active process that involves the intervention of both Indigenous and settler peoples.

This thesis project has highlighted one of the encouraging areas in which decolonization is happening: poetry in the Indigenous prairie context. However, encounters like the one I had with the man at the bus stop are sobering reminders that this work of decolonization is in the very early stages. There is much work to be done and it will take generations to complete before settler and Indigenous populations can reach an agreement and heal from the violence of colonial structures. These stark realities are discouraging, but true to Louis Riel's prophecy, "artists" (*Manitowapow* 6) have begun the process of decolonization. Sometimes it seems like there is no way to escape the stark realities of settler-colonialism; yet artists like Louise Halfe, Duncan Mercredi, Gregory Scofield, Marie Annharte, and Marvin Francis direct all of their considerable powers to finding this escape. They show that their artistic practices are much more than "a mimicry of colonial narrative structures" ("Cree Poetic Discourse" 92), to quote Neal McLeod once again. The art of these Indigenous people is an expression of who they are and it is produced on their own terms. This art is so effective at beginning the process of decolonization because it restores many of the interconnected aspects of Indigenous culture that continue to be threatened by settler-colonialism such as medicine, storytelling, and ceremony. Furthermore, this art uses the practice of Indigenization as a form of social activism against settler-colonialism and Indigenizes structures such as genre so that Indigenous peoples are freer to express themselves on their own terms. Decolonization is a daunting task with many challenges still to come, but it has already begun. Both Indigenous and settler peoples need to respond to these beginnings and take their place in this movement.

I maintain that the restoration of "medicine" that functions in a good way within Indigenous cultures is one of the first priorities of decolonization. The poetry of Louise Halfe stands out as a particularly clear example of how medicine can be adapted into our current

contexts. She and many other Indigenous artists illustrate how deeply settler-colonialism has damaged Indigenous communities. The recent publication of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's report confirms that the Indian Residential School system "can be described as 'cultural genocide'" (*Executive Report 1*). This is just one of several injuries towards Indigenous peoples that were launched on a massive scale in Canada. Bearing witness to and telling the truth about these injuries through art is tantamount to letting "the pus come out" ("Louise Bernice Halfe"). Moreover, the healing work that is being done goes further than pus-letting. Writing poetry has provided an invaluable space of redress for many writers, even if it cannot bring complete healing and restoration of traditional medicine to Indigenous peoples. This decolonial poetry plays a part of a much larger and prolonged process of decolonization.

Duncan Mercredi provides a powerful example of how oral stories from Indigenous contexts can be translated into printed poetry. His understanding of the potential to restore Indigenous culture to its rightful place is also a fine example of cautious optimism. As I've already quoted, Mercredi says that the stories he heard during the process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission "were poetic, with a rhythm that would rise and fall, depending on the emotion in which the story was told" ("Achimo" 21). Mercredi has intentionally drawn a parallel between the oral character in the stories told by Indigenous peoples and poetry. Still, he is careful to interrogate how effectively the oral character of the stories can be transmitted into the written form: "Will that same emotion, that same rhythm, be captured on the written page? I'm not sure unless you happened to be there to hear the story first hand" (21). Once again, Mercredi's poetry is a powerful beginning to restoring the power of oral stories within Indigenous culture, but it is not a replacement for what settler-colonialism has taken away. Like

medicine being adapted into poetic form, stories are also adapted as a part of the process of decolonization.

The final aspect of Indigenous culture being adapted into printed poetry that I considered was ceremony. While specific laws against the practice of traditional Indigenous medicine or storytelling would have been very difficult to enforce, certain Indigenous ceremonies were prohibited in Canada and other settler-colonial nations. Gregory Scofield has taken significant steps to translate ceremony into his poetry. He is one of several Indigenous writers who consider writing to be performative in the sense that it does something. In the specific instances of the ceremonies in Scofield's work, the poetry is often performative on the spiritual level. The very fact that he performs these ceremonies is an act of redress for the banning of ceremonies in the past. In addition, these ceremonies redress some of the injuries inflicted on Indigenous peoples in the past. All three of these aspects of Indigenous culture — medicine, stories, and ceremony — are interconnected parts of Indigenous life that continue to be threatened by settler-colonialism. Transmitting some of the energy of these aspects into printed poetry is a good beginning to the process of decolonization.

In some ways, it was more difficult for me to realize the way in which decolonization occurs in the poetry of Marie Annharte and Marvin Francis. While both poets are certainly translating aspects of Indigenous culture into their art, they also provide excellent examples of Indigenization. Annharte's article "Borrowing Enemy Language" theorizes about her practice of using English in unconventional, Indigenous ways as an act of resistance against settler-colonialism. Her poetry shows that aspects of settler-colonialism, like language and print publishing, can be adapted and used against the system itself. Like other acts of decolonization, this single technique does not complete the process, but contributes to the many tactics

Indigenous peoples are using to free themselves of the most harmful aspects of settler-colonialism.

Finally, Marvin Francis's artistic practice makes it very clear that Indigenous artistic practices are not separate from daily life, nor are they limited to any particular artistic genre. Francis incorporates a wide variety of artistic genres into his work. His expansive long poems include elements of visual art and script. Furthermore, these poems do not have a singular "authentic" form. Sections of *city treaty*, for example, were performed live and recorded. The poem was also published as both a book and an MA thesis. Nevertheless, like all the poets I've discussed, Francis believes that there is something particularly apt in the pairing of poetry and Indigenous worldviews. This is perhaps due to the intimacy and potential for self-expression that poetry affords. Francis says that poetry is "the closest to the writer [...] It's sort of more you [...] than other forms of writing" ("Interview" 249). Ultimately, expressing one's self and one's culture is at the very core of the process of decolonization. To find a way out of the various structures of settler-colonialism we, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, must continue to express ourselves on our own terms.

If we look at settler-colonization the same way as that man I met at the bus stop, it seems that we are at an impasse. It is simply unrealistic to expect all people who are not Indigenous to the Americas to go to the places their ancestors came from. Many, myself included, have no single place other than Canada to call home. I am quite sure that Indigenous poetry is not the sort of response that the man at the bus stop desires, but it does negotiate ways around the stubborn colonial impasse. There must be restitution for the profound injustices of settler-colonialism and Indigenous artists are beginning the process of decolonization. This is not a simple or short-lived process, but it is necessary if Indigenous and non-Indigenous people want to live without the

persistent open wound of settler-colonialism. Decolonization is a complex process and like other complex processes it must be completed in degrees. The hopeful truth, amid what often seems to be a bleak reality, is that the process has already begun and increasing numbers of people are contributing to the process. Institutions such as education systems, universities, and municipal governments are making conscious efforts to decolonize and Indigenize themselves because of this ongoing movement. We can all participate by following Buffy Sainte-Marie's slogan: "stay calm and decolonize" (White 15).



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