Ceding Critical Authority: Responsible White-Settler Readings of Indigenous Literature in Canada

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Abstract

Since the Indigenous civil rights movement began nationally organizing in the 1960s, Indigenous literature has earned increasing prominence in Canadian universities and the cultural mainstream. However, this prominence is tempered by white-settler reading practices that seek to defuse the socio-political commentary of the Indigenous civil rights movement that is infused into much of Indigenous literature. To this end, white-settler students and academics have learned to focus on tropes of separation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, the edification of white-settler readers, and affective rather than active responses —particularly to endemic tragedy — in Indigenous texts. Such readings allow white-settler readers to consume Indigenous literature according to comfortable, expected patterns that do not challenge the probity, validity, or sovereignty of contemporary Canada. These reading practices have filtered out of university settings and into the cultural mainstream where they have become the framework for modern reconciliation-politics in Canada. This paper looks to the works of Thomas King and Eden Robinson as exemplary Indigenous writers whose work is assessed according to these white-settler reading tropes while systematically, stylistically, and structurally resisting them. Conversely, Joseph Boyden's work and career exemplify the popularity available to (Indigenous) writers who embrace these tropes. The contrasts and similarities between these authors illustrate the critical landscape that has formed around Indigenous literature as a popular genre. Moreover, reading these texts for their socio-political content suggests why and how white settler reading practice must change.

Abstrait

Depuis le début de la structuration des mouvements de droits civiques autochtones à l'échelle nationale dans les années 1960s, la littérature autochtone s'est vue octroyer une proéminence croissante au sein des universités canadiennes et de la culture courante. Cette proéminence est cependant modérée par les pratiques de lecture formées par le colonialisme invasif et implémenté par les colons blancs. Celles-ci cherchent à désamorcer les commentaires socio-politiques des mouvements de droits civiques autochtones qui figurent dans une grande majorité de la littérature autochtone. Avec ses pratiques en main, les étudiants et les académiques issus de ce colonialisme invasif ont appris à apporter une attention particulière aux tropes de séparation entre les communautés autochtones et non-autochtones, à l'édification des lecteurs eux-mêmes issus de ce même colonialisme, ainsi qu'à une réaction affective aux textes autochtones —particulièrement aux tragédies endémiques — plutôt que tangible. Ce style de lecture laisse les lecteurs colons consommer la littérature autochtone d'une position confortable et préconstruite, et qui ne questionne ni la probité, ni la validité, et ni la souveraineté du Canada contemporain. De plus, ces pratiques de lecture ont désormais quitté le seuil de l'environnement universitaire pour se propager dans la culture courante, où elles constituent le cadre des politiques de réconciliation au Canada. Le texte qui suit prend Thomas King et Eden Robinson à titre d'exemple d'écrivains autochtones dont les ouvrages sont jugés selon les mœurs du colonialisme invasif et les pratiques de lecture qui en découlent, mais qui réussissent tout de même à les résister systématiquement, stylistiquement, et structurellement. Or, les œuvres et la carrière de Joseph Boyden

incarne la popularité disponible aux auteurs (autochtones) qui endossent ces tropes. Les contrastes et les similarités entre ces auteurs illustrent l'environnement critique qui circule et englobe la littérature autochtone en tant que genre littéraire populaire. En outre, lire ces textes pour leur contenu socio-politique indique pourquoi et comment les pratiques de lecture du colonialisme invasif doivent changer.

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Abbreviations

Aboriginal People's Television Network (APTN)
American Indian Movement (AIM)
Assembly of First Nations (AFN)
Blood Sports (*BS*)
The First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada (FNCFCSC)
Green Grass Running Water (*GGRW*)
Medicine River (*MR*)
Monkey Beach (*MB*)
National Indian Brotherhood (NIB)
Son of a Trickster (*SOAT*)
The Back of the Turtle (*TBOTT*)
The Inconvenient Indian (*TII*)
The Orenda (*Orenda*)
The Sasquatch at Home (*TSAH*)
The Truth About Stories (*TTAS*)
Three Day Road (*TDR*)
Through Black Spruce (*TBS*)
Trickster Drift (*TD*)
Truth and Bright Water (*TABW*)

Chapter 1: Introduction to White-Settler Reading Tropes

Indigenous[1] literature in English has only recently become a popular genre. Despite several early Indigenous writers, "Aboriginal literatures and literary criticism as a field of study came to prominence in Canada in the late 1980s" (Fee and Russell 193). This prominence grew out of the Indigenous civil rights movement that gathered momentum after 1960 through organized political resistance calling for legislative and cultural change in Canada. During this time, Indigenous writers and scholars in both Canada and the United States formulated new, anti-colonial political, social, and literary frameworks; the "twenty-year span of time [from 1970 to 1990] saw the beginnings of what has become a vibrant, inventive, and growing community of contemporary Aboriginal (First Nations and Metis) essayists, novelists, poets, playwrights, and humourists, many of them also educators and scholars from a variety of disciplines" (LaRocque 15). Some of these writers and scholars entered Canada's academies, literary institutions, and cultural mainstream, but even given the many successes of the movement, "some relic colonial attitudes are still in circulation" (LaRocque 15). Indigenous critics note that even as Indigenous issues and peoples are increasingly visible, "public dialogue…influences the ways Aboriginal authors are read and the types of narratives readers construct" (Ryhms 109). That is, as the activism and writing of Indigenous thinkers has developed from the 1960s to now, the ways they are managed by colonial white-settler society have settled into distinct patterns to meet them.

[1] I use the term Indigenous throughout this paper to designate First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples. Legally in Canada these groups are referred to either as Aboriginal or Indian. Other writers use the term Native to designate these groups, although Native is sometimes used to

Since the emergence of widely published Indigenous literature, white-settler Canada has applied a socio-political agenda to reading it, particularly in classrooms: soothing white-settler guilt by focussing on insoluble, apolitical aspects of Indigenous life. Here, I will trace the origins of that agenda and outline its key tenets. These readings emphasize temporal, social, and geographic distance from Indigenous communities, commendable edification for white-settler readers, and affective engagement — particularly with tragedy — that ignores socio-political content. I look to the careers of the renowned Indigenous authors Thomas King and Eden Robinson to illustrate not only how these tropes operate, but to show how Indigenous writers surpass and resist them.

First, I will show how the uneasy socio-political context of the latter half of Canada's 20th Century gave rise to distorted reading practices for Indigenous literature as it was adopted into the academy. Second, I will highlight how even as these reading practices are applied to King and Robinson, both authors resist and transcend them. Their works present contemporary, culturally specific Indigenous communities interacting with white-settler Canada, set limits on white-settler education, and resist totalizing affective readings; but these details are often missed or ignored by academic white-settler readers and reviewers. Third, I examine the work of Joseph Boyden — its contrasts to King's and Robinson's work and its socio-political status in Canada's literary and media institutions — to demonstrate how these tropes migrate from the academic-publishing realm into mainstream culture and media. Finally, I will look to the work of King, Robinson and other Indigenous writers for cues about how white-settlers should read Indigenous literature: recognizing their continued culpability as part of a colonial state, taking responsibility for learning about culturally specific Indigenous communities, engaging

with those communities materially rather than affectively, and ceding critical authority to Indigenous writers and texts. My intention is not to critique how or what Indigenous writers create, but rather the socio-political agenda underlying white-settler reading practices of Indigenous literature. If we amend modes of institutional engagement with Indigenous literature and politics in Canada, we support the significant societal change envisioned by Indigenous activism instead of merely simulating it.

The community of Indigenous literary critics has already built considerable consensus about the colonial stereotypes applied to Indigenous literatures. First, they point out that popular depictions of Indigenous people are figments of white-settler readers' imaginations, what Gerald Vizenor calls "simulations that audiences…consume in Western literature and motion pictures" (*Manifest Manners* 6). These "simulations of dominance are the annihilation, not the survivance of tribal stories" and must be resisted by "tribal imagination, experience, and remembrance, [that] are the real landscapes in the literature of this nation" (9-10). Such popular simulations include the idea that Indigenous narratives "foreclose on active and vivacious Indigenous political and social lives," particularly in urban spaces (Hunt 100). In addition, Eve Tuck points out that much of the institutional engagement with Indigenous communities has been "intent on portraying our neighborhoods and tribes as defeated and broken" (412), thereby allowing the full import of Indigenous writing to be "converted by many academics to an aesthetic victimry" (Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses* 21). What white-settlers imagine about Indigenous literature routinely contradicts the realities Indigenous critics assert.

Vizenor and others argue that Indigenous writers must define the critical terms of their own literature so as to avoid colonial misrepresentation. King makes a similar point

when he says "[i]t's important, I think, to keep those kinds of lines straight [between who is Native and non-Native] because otherwise we begin to have non-Natives doing the same that they have done for years and years, and that is to speak for Native people" (King to Lutz 108-109). Attending to authorial subject-position is important in considering Indigenous authors; Greg Sarris, Craig Womack, Jace Weaver, Jeannette Armstrong, and King all emphasize the cultural specificity that is often overwritten by the idea that Indigenous literature is a homogenous genre.[2] Armstrong points out that even as an Indigenous writer, her authority over Indigenous texts is limited: "other than Okanagan, everything has come to me through the window of translation into English. In other words, how do you scrunch everything up and fit it into that window, so that it can be read on the other side?" ("Keynote Address" 21). Several of these critics propose similar solutions to these common limitations in white-settler institutional readings.

The primary focus of these solutions is to make Indigenous texts and critics the authoritative centre of Indigenous literary dialogue. While these writers do not advocate that white-settler readers abandon their engagement with Indigenous peoples, they point out that not all engagement is helpful: "[d]ialogue, like stories, can work to oppress or to liberate, to confuse or to enlighten. Just because we are conversing with one another does not mean we are understanding one another" (Sarris 5). Engagement means truly listening to the voices and terms of Indigenous writers in order to avoid what Harold Cardinal calls the "*mirage gap*" in understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples ("A Canadian" 216). One of these terms is to let the voices closest to

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[2] See Sarris's *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts*, Womack's *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, Weaver's *American Indian Literary Nationalism* and *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community,* Armstrong's *Looking at the Words of our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*, King's *The Truth About Stories*.

specific texts and traditions speak about them instead of non-Indigenous readers. As Lee Maracle points out: "colonial white society assigned itself some crazy Knower's Chair and handed white people the authority to sit in it… It is rare that they will give it up so that they can learn from Indigenous people" (76). White-settler readers and critics must cede their own authority over Indigenous literature and give up institutional practices that "read Native texts without ever engaging, let alone encountering, Native peoples": an uncomfortable, but necessary prospect (Weaver, "Splitting the Earth" 12).

Socio-Political Development: From Indigenous Activism to Indigenous Literature

The nationally publicised political activism that arose in Indigenous communities after 1960 is a foundational context of modern Indigenous writing. I begin here because this is when status First Nations peoples were first given the federal vote in Canada without the loss of their constitutional status rights (Leslie).[3] The enfranchisement of First Nations and Inuit communities in Canada helped to begin an era of social, political, and artistic change. Full voting rights meant that Indigenous peoples had electoral sway on issues like Indigenous land, treaty rights, education, and social welfare rather than these being governed solely by the terms of the *Indian Act*.[4] Thus, it made increasing

[3] To be a "Status Indian" in Canada is a legal definition that designates First Nations people who are registered with the federal government. The conditions for registering have changed drastically over time (Henderson, "Indian Act"). Métis, Inuit, and non-Status First Nations people are not "Status Indians" although the legal definition of "Indian" in the Canadian Constitution Act of 1982 does apply to these groups (Mccue; "A Consolidation of the Constitution Acts 1867 to 1982"). The Inuit gained the right to vote federally in 1950, but ballot boxes were not available to them until 1962, effectively disenfranchising Inuit in their traditional territory until then (Leslie).

[4] The *Indian Act* is the legal document in Canada that designates the rights and definitions of Indigenous peoples. It is a highly contested and evolving document containing many racist, assimilationist, and sexist policies, but it also codifies many of the special rights of Indigenous peoples including rights to taxation exemption, land, and federal services.

sense for Indigenous peoples to organize nationally on such important socio-political issues. This national organization has had three primary consequences: legislative change, greater awareness of Indigenous peoples and issues amongst Canada's general public, and a political network of pan-Indigenous thinkers, politicians, and writers.

National organizations were crucial to the Indigenous civil rights movement. Cardinal describes "[n]ationwide Indian unity" as "a dream long held by Indian leaders" which, with "the growth of strong provincial organizations…[and] a viable national organization, the National Indian Brotherhood," provides "the strength of unity, the power to help make some of our other dreams come true" (*The Unjust Society* 17). In 1961, The National Indian Council was founded. In its subsequent iterations as the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) beginning in 1967, and, since 1982, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN), it has been a key player in the national and international organizing of Indigenous peoples.[5] Besides offering a national forum for Indigenous leaders, the NIB-AFN and its provincial partner organizations were instrumental in defeating the 1969 White Paper, winning official apologies and settlements for residential school and Sixties Scoop survivors, demanding legislative recognition in the *Constitution Act of 1982,* and offering support and visibility to various protests and legal challenges from the 1960s onward. These organizations and the advocacy of individual people and nations

[5] When the NIC became the NIB in 1967, it no longer represented Métis or Inuit constituents. As a result, The Canadian Métis Society (which later became the Native Council of Canada) formed to represent Métis and other non-status Indigenous groups while the NIB represented status First Nations peoples (Posluns). In 1971, The Inuit created a similar organization: The Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (which later became The Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami) (Freeman). The NIB acted as the representative organization for Indigenous peoples at the UN from 1972-1975, until the creation of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP) in 1975. George Manuel, the leader of NIB became the first leader of the WCIP (Turcotte).

created a climate of unity, progress, and social standing amongst Indigenous peoples that Canada and its institutions were forced to respond to.

It was in this climate of increasing national attention to Indigenous issues that Canadian universities began to introduce Indigenous Studies and Indigenous literature into their curricula. The exact timeline of when Indigenous content, literature, and faculty entered Canadian universities is not readily available in collated form, which necessitated that I research the institutional history of individual universities (See Appendix 1). In Canada, the earliest Native Studies course was offered at Trent University in 1969 (See Appendix 1). Trent University is now celebrated for its early programming for and relationships with local First Nations; an article commemorating the 50-year relationship between Trent University and local First Nations recounts how "in 1964, Curve Lake [First Nation] Chief Dalton Jacobs made the contribution [of two dollars] to kick-off the fundraising campaign for the yet-to-be-born university." Trent University went on to create the first Indigenous Studies Program, the first Aboriginal Student Space, the first Bachelor of Arts Degree in Native Studies, and the first special access program for Indigenous students ("Trent University celebrates"; "Our leadership in Indigenous Studies"). The symbolic gesture of donating the first two dollars to a university that in turn championed Indigenous inclusion was in keeping with widespread demands in Indigenous communities for education and representation. Trent University was the first, but not the last, Canadian institution to accede to those wishes.

Trent University acted as a model other Canadian universities would follow: developing relationships with local Indigenous communities, and creating courses with Indigenous content, literature, and student support. Indigenous content was smattered

through Canadian universities' anthropology and ethnography departments, but Indigenous Studies as a standard part of university curricula came about in the 1980s and 1990s, though many universities did not add fully-fledged departments of Indigenous Studies until the 2000s or later (See Appendix 1). Exact dates of when Indigenous literature entered university curriculum are harder to come by, although a majority of Canadian universities now provide at least some courses exclusively devoted to Indigenous writers (See Appendix 1). Nevertheless, recognition within the academy has been a long and politically fraught struggle. Writing in 2002, Kristina Fagan argued:

> Native literature has been recognized within university literature departments only over the past twenty years or less. During this time, a great deal of effort has been put into legitimizing Native literature within the university, showing that the literature exists, that it is good, that it is part of a tradition, and that it is worth studying. (*"What about you?*" 238)

The readership of Indigenous literature inside and outside universities in Canada increased from the 1970s onwards, as indeed, did the number of published Indigenous writers: both spurred by increased national interest in Indigenous issues. As the politics of the Indigenous community demanded wider national attention, so too did its literature.

The focus of this attention is different for Indigenous activists than for white-settler academics. As universities adopted Indigenous literature into the curriculum, they also developed colonial approaches to its political content antithetical to Indigenous interpretive frameworks. As Deena Rymhs points out: "[w]hat results [from reconciliation] is a discursive re-enactment of past roles …Just as Aboriginal writers engage in political discussion, so, too, are academic treatments of literature part of social

contexts and familiar discourses…guilt spills over into academic treatments of texts" (109). Admission of Indigenous literature into the academy does not automatically result in political change, and can, in fact, entrench old "familiar discourses." The curricular disruption caused by Indigenous activism simultaneously instigated its counteraction.

One such counteracting force, Fagan explains, is the constraint placed on Indigenous literature specialists of how and what they study in order to be published and hired within the academy (*What About You?* 238). In the face of increasingly visible Indigenous activists, artists, politicians, and peoples, the academy has crafted comfortable approaches to uncomfortable truths raised by their presence. As Fagan points out, enshrining the national response within Humanities departments was one such effective cushioning measure. So too was focussing on Indigenous literature rather than social or legislative policy. As Jodi Melamed argues analogously about minority literatures in the US, "universities [serve] as a prominent institutional base for managing minoritized difference" (3). The academy has carefully narrowed the focus and scope of Indigenous content it will accept; the focus on literature is both inclusion and inscription.

Yet another remove was to focus on palatable interpretations of that literature while ignoring others. Creating comfortable, recognized tropes about Indigenous literature is an ideologically useful means of managing white-settler guilt;

> they reduce the amount of time and effort required to approach the study of Native literature. It is much easier to generalize about the colonization of Native people than to study specific tribal histories and traditions, many of which are very complex and often not written down. It is more convenient to use familiar

> theoretical approaches than to explore ways of thinking and knowing within Native communities. (Fagan, *What about You?* 240)

These tropes make studying Indigenous literature easier for white-settlers. Moreover, universities have recast the political unity Indigenous peoples employed to gain entry to the academy as a cultural unity that erases "specific tribal histories and traditions." Thus, white-settler approaches to Indigenous writing neutralize or ignore its political context.

Thomas King is a good representative case study of how the (inter)national Indigenous politics of the 1960s and 1970s entered Canadian institutions. Born and raised in the US, King traveled the world and worked a variety of jobs before completing an MA in Film Studies in 1971. He went on to write one of the first scholarly works on Indigenous oral traditions for his PhD thesis at the University of Utah in 1986 (Busby). He was one of the first generation of Indigenous Studies professors at both the University of Lethbridge (in the early 1980s) and the University of Minnesota. In the 1990s, his career as a writer took off with the publication of *Medicine River* (1990) and *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993). King continued to write well-regarded novels throughout the 1990s and 2000s, helped to write and perform the widely popular CBC Radio program *The Dead Dog Café* from 1997 to 2000, became the first Indigenous Massey Series lecturer in 2003, was granted the Order of Canada in 2004, and won the Governor General's Award for Literary Merit in 2014. King's career illustrates several key elements of how Indigenous literature developed from the 1960s to now.

First, the movement spanned international borders; King's studies and political interests stemmed from his life growing up and studying in the US, his travels in New Zealand and Australia, and his work in Canada. His novels and interviews make clear

that, for him, the Canada-US border is an arbitrary divide in the context of Indigenous culture and identity (King, *TTAS* 102). Second, King's journey from being a lone PhD student interested in Indigenous oral storytelling in 1986, to a Governor General's Award-winning writer and teacher of Indigenous literature over the following decades is a good index of the growing interest in Indigenous literature. Finally, the political and social history, commentary, and analysis layered into King's works reflect how embedded this history is with the ascendance of Indigenous writers. King is part of the first generation of Canadian and American Indigenous writers to grow up in the political activism of the 1960s and 1970s, and embed that context in their popular works and the academy: ushering in a new generation of Indigenous authors including Eden Robinson.

Robinson, who is 25 years King's junior, broke into a Canadian Indigenous literature scene in which writers like King had been publishing, and teaching university courses on widely popular Indigenous literature for over two decades. She began her publishing career with her well-reviewed short story collection *Traplines* in 1996: three years after King had been nominated for the Governor General's Award for the second time (See Appendix 2). She went on to even greater critical success with her first novel, *Monkey Beach,* in 2000, for which she was nominated for the Giller Prize and offered "six-figure, two-book package deals negotiated with publishing companies in Canada, the United States, Britain, and Germany" (Hoy 174). Robinson enjoyed immediate accolades, but does not escape stereotypical readings. She is not complacent about the artistic strictures laid out for Indigenous writers; "'[p]eople assumed I couldn't write anything that wasn't native because I'm native,' Robinson says, rolling her eyes…'I wrote about non-native characters [in *Traplines*] just to show them I could'" (Methot). Despite the

advantage of having this established genre to join, "being marketed…as a Native writer" means Robinson must resist being forcibly pigeon-holed by white-settler expectations of Indigenous literature; she has to "show them" that her Indigenous subject-position does not define her writing (Hoy 174). The careers of King and Robinson grew out of the political culture of the 1960s to1990s that made space for Indigenous writers; those same careers are beset by reading practices formulated to contain that space.

Circular Politics: Indigenous Literature in White-Settler Canada

The 1960s saw many minority literary genres fighting for inclusion in Canadian and American universities. The Canon Wars of the 1980s to 1990s resulted in the proliferation of minority literatures at universities on both sides of the border. In Canada, the growing concern to foster a distinctly Canadian culture[6] combined with a government policy of multiculturalism[7] ensured a place for many minority genres in the Canadian academy so long as they could be packaged as national literature: part of a united multicultural heritage rather than a collection of disparate literary traditions. As in the US, courses, faculty, and departments devoted to minority and post-colonial literatures

[6] The Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (often called the Massey Commission) recommended in 1951 that the Canadian government create an institution to foster Canadian cultural development in order to avoid being overwhelmed by American cultural content. This recommendation was fulfilled in 1957 by the formation of the Canada Council for the Arts, whose mandate is "to foster and promote the study and enjoyment of, and the production of works in, the arts" (Harvey).

[7] Canada's multiculturalism policy can be traced to the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1963-1969). Multiculturalism was adopted as a national policy under Pierre Trudeau's government in 1971 (Jedwab). Canada's multicultural policy is often held to contrast the US's melting pot, but because both philosophies were in service of a unitary national character, the rhetorical strategies of each are remarkably similar.

became increasingly standard institutional furniture from the 1980s onward, challenging and expanding the traditional Western canon.

As John Guillory explains in *Cultural Capital*, the societal motivations for (re)creating these canons "organizes the syllabus and determines criteria of selection much more directly than the particular social biases of judgment" (xiii). That is, Canada's interest in formulating a cohesive multicultural national literature created space in its academic canon rather than the content or quality of specific authors' works. More importantly, it founded a nationalist mythology on their inclusion: Canada as a unified multicultural society, political challenges overcome, cultural identity enshrined in a national canon. The success with which Canadian multiculturalism has been accomplished either socially or symbolically is debateable. Writing in 1993, Janice Keefer argues that Canada's "dominant culture — constructed as single, unified, and normative — [has surrendered] hegemony" as minority writers have become "received as representative, even paradigmatic forms for an entire social formation" (265). However, such a social formation forces minority writers to both designate themselves as such and relinquish their minority subject-position to the dominant moniker Canadian (Kamboureli 5). Indigenous literature has come in for this same paradoxical inclusion in the Canadian canon. Crucially though, the status of Indigenous peoples as pre-existing Canada in every sense — historical, geographical, social, and cultural — has required Canadian academies to be particularly inventive when enshrining Indigenous literatures in a nationalist canon.

As I have already argued, the advent of Indigenous Studies and Literature departments grew out of the political mobilization of Indigenous peoples (and many other minorities) in Canada from the 1960s to the present. The momentum of this political

movement coincided with a proliferation of published Indigenous writers in Canada: Maria Campbell, Rita Joe, Tomson Highway, Cardinal, Armstrong, King, and others.[8] Crucially, it was in this political climate that Indigenous studies entered the academy: conditions of social curiosity, but also disquiet. Because white-settler reading practices were developed in these circumstances, they counteract and pacify the challenges that Indigenous activists from the 1960s to 2010s posed to white-settler Canadian institutions.

My second chapter defines the tropes that developed specifically to manage Indigenous literature within the academy-publishing environment. I look to critics of Indigenous literature including Dallas Hunt, Helen Hoy, Margery Fee, Vizenor, Cardinal, Rymhs, Fagan, Womack, and Maracle for trends in the engagement of Indigenous literatures more broadly. These trends coalesce around the tragic catharsis of Indigenous lives and the education-redemption of white-settler readers. The corollary of focussing on such tropes is that white-settler readings overlook important subject matter such as the historical and contemporary political content in Indigenous works; "[l]iterary scholars…have tended to stay away from specific Political…topics within Native literature, such as land ownership, law, and governance" (Fagan, "Tewatatha:wi" 14). Furthermore, the construct of white-settler readers gaining meaningful knowledge of the pan-Indigenous Other through reading relies on the Indigenous world being separate, past, or peripheral. Problematically, this both assumes that white-settler readers can attain Indigenous subjectivity through reading, and that Indigenous writers should (and do) provide the opportunity to fully inhabit (pan-)Indigenous experience. The works of King and Robinson transcend and often directly challenge these narrow tropes (and in so doing, prove that they are there to be challenged). Nevertheless, universities, reviewers,

[8] The Native American Renaissance in the US was happening concurrently.

and white-settler readers continue to undermine or ignore this content, thereby defusing traces of the politics out of which King, Robinson, and Indigenous literature emerged.

Thus, colonial management of Indigenous literature allows "ostentatious cultural deference…[to] coexist unabashedly with a superior sense of entitlement to the cultural productions of a people and even to the people themselves" (Hoy 5). Such entitlement leads to the "self congratulatory mode that enables whites to 'critique themselves before anyone else does'" thereby avoiding complicity in colonial societal structures (Fee and Russell 196). This creates a second problem: white-settler political complacency. The academy tacitly substitutes passive reading of novels for more material engagement on the part of non-Indigenous students "thus erasing the reality of ongoing colonial rule over indigenous peoples" (Simpson and Smith 13). Together, these tendencies fundamentally misconstrue Indigenous literature placing white-settler expectations at the centre of readings rather than the texts, their authors, and their politics;

> Too-easy identification by the non-Native reader, ignorance of historical or cultural allusion, obliviousness to the presence or properties of Native genres, and the application of irrelevant aesthetic standards are all means of domesticating difference, assimilating Native narratives into the mainstream. Along the way, they are means of neutralizing the oppositional potential of that difference. (Hoy 9)

While both King and Robinson fight to maintain the "oppositional potential" of their work, Canada's academy transmutes it to stereotype.

My third chapter will demonstrate that the white-settler Canadian public has largely embraced the academic-publishing tropes of "Indigenous" literature as these

reading practices have filtered back out of the academy into the Canadian mainstream media. I argue that once there, they begin to impede and even regress real-world political and social progress. As an embodiment of this phenomenon, I will look at the career success of Joseph Boyden, whose self-proclaimed Indigenous identity helped make him one of Canada's most widely lauded writers. His success at "assimilating Native narratives into the mainstream" by using the tropes that King and Robinson so diligently resist, demonstrates how deeply white-settler readers are invested in Indigenous stereotypes of the essential difference between white-settler (Canadian) and Indigenous experience, tragedy, and easy affective identification with Indigenous peoples (Hoy 9). That is, what white-settler readers have come to recognize as the essential qualities of Indigenous literature are so artificial as to be easily appropriated by non-Indigenous writers or those, like Boyden, whose Indigenous credentials are not universally accepted. These reading practices are inherited from an academy-publishing industry that has filtered out the socio-political content of Indigenous writers like King and Robinson in order to formulate a more palatable politics of reconciliation[9] which is in turn promulgated by Boyden and white-settler institutions.

In my fourth chapter, I offer some strategies to ameliorate institutional readings of Indigenous texts. Far from arguing that Indigenous writers do not have a place in the Canadian academy, I want to insist that these books belong in classrooms, but classrooms under the direction of Indigenous critical practices and practitioners rather than "scholars [who] can never…understand the native's perceptions and interpretations" (Johnston

[9] While reconciliation is a popular buzzword in Canadian politics today, many Indigenous commentators reject or critique the word because it implies that Indigenous people are equally responsible for the ills of colonialism as are white-settlers and that there once existed a non-exploitative relationship between Indigenous peoples and white-settlers.

113). The first step toward accomplishing that goal is acknowledging and resisting the tropes I have outlined. First and foremost, this can be done by looking to Indigenous writers and critics — like King and Robinson — who actively reject imposed understandings of their works. To do so will require white-settler readers to resist the urge to reconcile-through-reading; as Rymhs argues, "reconciliation, paradoxically, can displace the wronged party…[and] invites…appropriation" (116-117). If reading a novel makes white-settler readers feel they have done all the necessary work of reconciliation, it is materially damaging to the project of engaging with Indigenous communities to address sovereignty, land rights, treaty rights, and inequalities in the criminal justice, social welfare, health, and education systems. King and Robinson provide insights in their writing that could lead readers to engage fruitfully with many unsettling issues stifled in stereotypical white-settler readings: the history of systematic oppression of Indigenous peoples, connections between popular stereotypes and real-world white-settler attitudes, the continued complicity of institutions in colonialism, and contemporary Indigenous activism. Reading Indigenous literature for this content is necessary to the socio-political engagement with Indigenous peoples that universities are congratulating themselves for accomplishing simply by putting Indigenous literature on the syllabus.

Changing the Course: Methods for Reforming White-Settler Reading Practice

In order to isolate the trends I see in white-settler readings of Indigenous literature and suggest ways to improve them, I will use a multi-pronged approach. First, I will analyze the paratext of King's and Robinson's work in order to identify patterns in the

aesthetic and political focus of reviewers. I will also use interviews with King, Robinson, and Boyden to show how each of these writers perceives and responds to the critical emphases applied to their work. Second, I will analyse King and Robinson as models of resistant Indigenous writing. By examining the socio-political import of their texts, I will show how King's and Robinson's work adheres to the political-pedagogical projects of the Indigenous civil rights movement even as it is read through a lens of white-settler pedagogy that seeks to neutralize the unsettling political content of Indigenous activism. Third, I will historicize the track record of Canadian institutions to illustrate their foundations in appeasing rather than engaging with Indigenous socio-political activism. Fourth, I will look to the body of work by critics of Indigenous literature — with an emphasis on Indigenous critics and writers — in order to identify pedagogical problems with white-settler reading practices and suggest more complete readings for Indigenous literature. In this way, I will use the paratext surrounding King, Robinson, and Boyden to isolate problematic patterns in white-settler readings of their work.

Looking to Indigenous writers to improve white-settler readings is not just good academic practice, but important social policy. Cardinal asserted in 1969 that:

> [t]alking and listening have been one-way streets with white men and Indians. Until very recently white men have expected Indians to do all the listening…For many years now our people have talked about what concerned them most, have suggested solutions to our problems as we see them, have talked generally about our hopes for a better future…But all talk, brilliant or dull, visionary or cautiously realistic, remains futile when the people you talk to simply won't listen…Some

> Canadians listen but they wish to hear Indians say only what white people want to hear. (*The Unjust Society* 11)

Unfortunately, this assessment continues to ring true 50 years later; white-settler readers are encountering Indigenous content, but still only hearing what they want to. In doing so, they continue to suppress Indigenous peoples and their ideas for change. What is more, many white-settler students and academics are doing so under the guise or mistaken impression of performing reconciliation, thus"[q]uite unintentionally…fall[ing] into the cycle of paternalism" and colonialism that so much of Indigenous literature sets out specifically to challenge (Cardinal, *The Unjust Society* 91). This creates a readership of "predominantly of well-meaning white liberals" who seek symbolic means of demonstrating their "innate 'goodness'" while being "simultaneously absolve[d]…of having to engage in any wider political acts of restitution for Indigenous peoples, such as changing the structural arrangements that perpetuate the material conditions they face" (Hunt 101). Real change requires political acts that address "material conditions" and institutional cultures. Reading Indigenous literatures according to stereotypical tropes that specifically cater to notions of white-settler absolution fundamentally counteract that necessary change. Thus, reforming white-settler reading practices is the first step in creating conditions in which reading Indigenous literature can fulfill its potential for real socio-political progress in Canada's universities, government, and populous.

Chapter 2: White-Settler Reading Practices in Canadian Institutions

Thomas King and Eden Robinson — and Indigenous authors in general — are studied in classrooms with an inordinate focus on four main tropes. The first is the notion that Indigenous texts should educate white-settler readers about Indigenous lives and communities that are fundamentally separate geographically, culturally, and/or temporally from contemporary Canada. Second is the belief that white-settler readers can learn to understand (all) Indigenous peoples through reading any Indigenous literature. Third, that cathartic tragedy is a definitive expression of Indigenous experience. Fourth, that affective reading doubles as an act of redeeming reconciliation for white-settler readers and thereby negates the need for material political engagement. I argue not only that these tropes have necessarily made our readings of works by King and Robinson incomplete, but that they detrimentally affect the criticism and teaching of Indigenous literature in general. However, at least in the academic setting, there is a growing body of Indigenous writing that exists alongside the white-settler focus on Indigenous stereotypes and works to combat these tropes. In the sections that follow, I trace how these tropes appear, and the critiques offered by King, Robinson, and other Indigenous critics.

Both King and Robinson explain that being a First Nations author affects how they are assessed and marketed in the academic-publishing industry. For King, it constrains how and what he publishes as well as motivating him to create space for other Indigenous authors. As King explains to Jordan Wilson, "[t]he first book, they didn't want to publish anything but Native material…But I had some really great stories that didn't have anything to do with Natives, just storytelling" (King to Wilson). In a similar concession

to publishers, he allowed his pseudonym Hartley Goodweather to be replaced on his series of detective novels when the first novel failed to sell (King to Wilson). What these examples demonstrate is that King's identity as a First Nations author is integral — in his publishers' view — to the content and marketability of his work. Knowing this, King sees one of his primary roles as a well-known Indigenous author being to create less constrained space for other writers: "if you have a Native writer who is writing and selling…the next Native writer who comes along who's got some interesting looking stuff, well the publishing house might take a chance on them, whereas in the past they would not, just simply wouldn't" (King to Wilson). King has carved out a successful career for himself and consistently chipped away at institutional restraints, but he clearly recognizes what he is up against.

Robinson's appreciation of publishing constraints leads her to ignore and contradict them in her writing; "Mostly I ignore [the Canadian literary realm]…when I was first starting my career, I heard a lot about what I should be writing and the way I should be writing… I was expected to be an expert on everything Indigenous and I kept saying that's not really my role" (Robinson to Johnson). By refusing that role, Robinson resists the constricting expectations of the academic-publishing industry. Her choice to ignore the Canadian literary realm and its ideas about her writing demonstrates an awareness of white-settler reading tropes as well as the fact that Indigenous literature as a marketed genre receives her work in predictable, prefabricated ways. For King and Robinson, these tropes, these institutional pressures are well established facts of life: making it all the more significant that their works consistently resist conforming to them.

Trope of Distance

White-settler readings of Indigenous literature tend to focus on the idiosyncrasy and remoteness of Indigenous lives compared to contemporary white-settler Canadian experience. This separateness includes imagining Indigenous people existing solely on-reserve and excluded from urban environments, being unfamiliar or opposed to mainstream (white) Canadian culture, or being relegated to anachronistic, archaic spaces. Moreover, this Otherness is homogenizing; in being the designated opposite of the white-settler community, Indigenous peoples become a unified pan-Indigenous population in the mind of white-settler readers. Thus, for these readers, distance provides both safety from and uniformity to Indigenous communities.

These attitudes are subtly embedded in Canada's literary institutions. Jennifer Scott and Myka Tucker-Abramson argue, for example, that in Canada, the literary prize industry, represented by the Giller Prize and Governor General's Award, commodify an idea of Canadian multiculturalism that keeps the white-Canadian vs ethnic Other binary intact (12). Dallas Hunt points out that maintaining this binary often means ideologically barring Indigenous presence from urban environments, even though approximately 50 percent of Canada's Indigenous population is urban (Statistics Canada); "[w]hile Indigenous peoples have been relegated to reserve spaces and remote settlements (both in legislation and in the popular imaginary), they have simultaneously been removed from urban areas" (98).[10] Thus, popular and institutional imaginings of Indigenous people promote an idea that they are not integrated into non-Indigenous society or spaces.

[10] Status rights such as tax exemption are only available to those living on-reserve, a legislative reality that keeps many Indigenous people in remote areas (Henderson and Bell).

Moreover, they are often imagined as belonging to the past: "if there's one thing that non-Native readers love to read, it's how real Indians lived. They love to read about the oldtime Indians" (King to Lutz 115). Reading Indigenous literature becomes a way of exploring and finding an Other that exists elsewhere, but is not present in either sense.

Indigenous theorists and writers contest and complicate this view. They point out that such stereotypes create artificial, essentialist definitions:

> [t]hat term, "Native literature," implies a constant link between the category "Native" and the literature. As a result, the texts are often seen as a direct reflection of "Native" life and culture, and there is a prevailing emphasis on aspects of the work that are seen as distinctively "Native" — certain themes, traditions and social issues" (Fagan, *What About You?* 239)

Here, Kristina Fagan points out two aspects of the separateness of Indigenous literature within the academy; first that it is seen to be about "Native life and culture" exclusively, and second that this separateness is maintained by always looking for "certain themes, traditions and social issues" imagined to be Indigenous by nature. The very idea of a multicultural Canadian literature requires that Indigenous literature be "measured against an imaginary and illusory idea of an 'original' and necessarily white Canadian literature" (Scott and Tucker-Abramson 10)**.** Like other Indigenous critics, King challenges such simple binaries between white-settler and Indigenous peoples: "I didn't want to…pit Indians against whites. Because I think you begin to lose track of some of the really powerful elements of contemporary Native life…you make it sound as though the Native people spend their entire existence fighting against non-Native whatever. That just isn't true" (King to Lutz 111). While there are certainly differences between white-settler and

Indigenous experiences, for King, depicting their worlds as completely separate, opposing entities is to "lose track of…contemporary Native life."

This focus on contemporary existence is important to both King and Robinson; they talk about history, but they do not write historical fiction. Moreover, the history they reference is always explicitly connected to the present. In his non-fiction book *The Inconvenient Indian*, King speaks directly to such connections: "[w]hile I spend time in the distant and the immediate past, I've also pushed the narrative into the present in order to consider contemporary people and events" (xv). King and Robinson never try to isolate the past as a detached reality in their books; where the past is included, it is part of the current, modern-day lives of their characters. For Indigenous critics and writers, Indigenous and white-settler experiences impinge on one another in both productive and undesirable ways: historically, politically, socially, and spatially.

Although many of King's and Robinson's characters are Indigenous, their settings always ensure that they interact with other communities. *Medicine River* is named for the town that adjoins the Standoff reserve, rather than the reserve itself. Characters in *Green Grass* mostly emanate from a reserve near the fictional town of Blossom, but live variously in Blossom, Edmonton, Calgary, Toronto, and Los Angeles. Similarly, Truth and Bright Water are communities on either side of the Canada-US border: one a reserve, one a small town with a mixed population. In *The Back of the Turtle,* Gabriel returns from a successful job as a bio-chemical scientist in Toronto to the similarly adjoined reserve-town communities of Smoke River Reserve-Samaritan Bay. Likewise, Robinson sets her stories off-reserve as often as on. While *Monkey Beach* is set primarily in her home reserve of Kitamaat, Lisa's life includes many connections to the nearby town of

Kitimat, and later Vancouver. In Robinson's *Traplines,* one story is set in a village (implied reserve)-town duo like those in King's novels, one is set in a city or town where "the nearby highway" can be heard (39), one moves between Kitamaat, Kitimat, and Vancouver, and one is set entirely in Vancouver's East Side. Her short story "Terminal Avenue" and novel *Trickster Drift* also take place in Vancouver. King's and Robinson's characters are not confined to reserve settings; they inhabit all of Canada. Furthermore, they allow Indigenous characters to move between and connect to urban and rural spaces, and to engage with white-settler society and mainstream culture.

King's characters participate socially and economically in many "mainstream" capacities. Although some of his characters work on reserve as cooks, smugglers, and band council members, many more work elsewhere: as professors, scientists, lawyers, artists, photographers, hairdressers, actors, and stork clerks. These characters live, work, and interact in the world that white-settler readings insist is separate from Indigenous existence. While not all of these interactions are pleasant, they demonstrate how Indigenous people are integrated into mainstream Canadian society; even when that society is hostile, Indigenous people are engaging with it, often in daily, intimate ways. To take just the characters in *Green Grass*, we see that Latisha's restaurant relies heavily on non-Indigenous clientele, Alberta teaches mostly white students, Charlie works as a corporate lawyer for the firm fighting his home reserve, Lionel's boss is an aggressively misguided white man as are many of his customers, the white Dr. Hovaugh oversees the care of the four First Nations elders, Eli has a long and happy marriage with his white wife from Ontario, and the creation-characters First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman, and Old Woman meet one white Western archetype-character after another. All

of these interactions, even when they are contentious, make the point that there are not separate worlds for Indigenous and white-settler people: only differing perspectives, experiences, and cultures.

King certainly pokes holes in white-settler perceptions of Canada, but he does not offer an alternate, separate reality for Indigenous peoples. Rather, he challenges his (white-settler) readers to acknowledge Indigenous presence as he does explicitly in the repeated closings of his Massey Lecture series: "don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now" (*TTAS* 29). Ignorance or avoidance of Indigenous communities does not stave off complicity for King; Indigenous people and their history exist materially within the fabric of Canadian society, whether or not white-settler readers acknowledge or act on it.

King and Robinson both show the interwoven possibilities of urban and rural, Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds, but she goes further by creating some characters whose subject-positions are site-based rather than race-based. She responds to Helen Hoy's remark that critics could not agree on the ethnicity of her characters in *Traplines* by saying "I just assumed they were really young and really poor" (qtd. in Hoy 154). Instead of focussing on racial characterization, Robinson's eclectic references help to enmesh her Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters alike in contemporary, urban landscapes; "[r]eferences to amplifiers, chug buddies, roller rinks, nachos, biker chicks, scorpion tattoos, Jacuzzis, body piercing, granola bars, shaved heads, and VCRs, to Disneyland, Ritalin, Armani, Jehovah's Witnesses, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and Oodles of Noodles abound" (Hoy 188). Such references cut across the many societal demographics that collect in cities: including but not specifying Indigenous peoples.

Robinson explicitly describes "East Van" as home to "anarchists and activists, blue-collar families and immigrants. The hippies who couldn't afford Kitsilano…organic co-ops and hemp shops…mom-and-pop restaurants…a Jamaican jerk shack beside an Ethiopian vegetarian café beside a hydroponics bong place" (*BS* 34). These allusions shatter all three aspects of the trope of distance; Robinson's characters are contemporary, urban, and part of Canada's mainstream cultural milieu.

Unlike her critics, Robinson does not consider the race of her characters — or Indigenous authors — to be their most important quality; her position as an Indigenous writer does not, for her, demand that she make mutually exclusive choices to write about Indigenous or non-Indigenous characters, even when reviewers imply she should. Tom, the main character in "Contact Sports" and *Blood Sports,* is never overtly identified by ethnicity. Robinson makes the important point that social issues — in the case of *Blood Sports,* domestic violence, poverty, and drug addiction — need not be racialized; they are just as much urban problems or Canadian problems as they are Indigenous ones. In this way, Robinson creates stories that relate to socio-political issues that statistically affect Indigenous communities at a higher rate than white Canadians, but without reinforcing stereotypes that these problems are solely Indigenous ones.

King and Robinson both write novels where Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters interact, and where urban and rural spaces are available to Indigenous peoples. King carefully interweaves the lives, histories, and locations of Indigenous peoples and white-settlers to show the true entanglement of Canadian society. Robinson takes this technique one step further by creating some characters who are marked only by their entanglement with that society, not their racial subject-position.

Trope of Edification

There is a longstanding critical debate about how much Indigenous writers need to do to parse their works for white-settler audiences. Many early writers in the genre made explicit their mission to educate (implied white-settler) readers with their writing; Maria Campbell's 1973 autobiography *Halfbreed* closes its preface with "I write this for all of you, to tell you what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country. I want to tell you about the joys and sorrows, the oppressing poverty, the frustrations and the dreams" (8). During the Indigenous civil rights movement, this made sense since many of the movement's goals relied on pointing out the contemporary conditions of Indigenous communities. However, this role of instruction has become expected of many Indigenous writers since; "[non-native readers] remain most interested in those indigenes who provide them with an entrée into Native culture, who appear to offer initiation into a hidden world of tribal wisdom" (Weaver, "Splitting the Earth" 2). Another element of this expectation is that Indigenous writers, no matter what their particular heritage, can offer thorough knowledge of all Indigenous lives: that there exists a pan-Indigenous culture to which reading can provide access. As I have argued above, pan-Indigenous organization is politically useful, but, for white-settler audiences, it also erases cultural and stylistic difference amongst writers with vastly different cultural backgrounds. It "institutionally validate[s] some forms of difference and make[s] others illegible" in the service of presenting a palatable Indigenous identity and history to white-settler readers (Melamed 11). Thus, white-settler audiences have come to expect — and have been

marketed the idea — that reading Indigenous literature is an instructive activity that will account for cultural ignorance and grant broadly applicable insight into Indigenous lives.

Increasingly, Indigenous critics point to the need to fight this demand to educate their white-settler audience about Indigenous identity, particularly an artificial pan-Indigenous one. King himself argues that the effort of presenting Indigenous stories to white audiences has yielded "mixed" results with post-colonial readings being "heartening" but ultimately inadequate (*TTAS* 114-115). King suspects that many Indigenous authors — amongst whom he specifically names Robinson — "are creating their fictions…for a Native audience, making a conscious decision not so much to ignore non-Native readers as to write for the very people they write about" (*TTAS* 115). Just as Elena Machado Saéz argues of Caribbean diasporic writers, Indigenous authors must "[struggle] with the marketability of ethnicity" striking a balance between offering historical revision, and catering too much to the "pedagogical imperative" imposed by "academic and mainstream market expectations" (2-3). That is, they must find ways to sell their work to white-settler readers who want to buy access to their knowledge and identity without sacrificing the specificity or integrity of their communities.

Many Indigenous critics decry a pan-Indigenous identity arguing instead for increased cultural specificity:

> in reading First Nations Literature the questioning must first be an acknowledgment and recognition that the voices are culture-specific voices and that there are experts within those cultures who are essential to be drawn from and drawn out in order to incorporate into the reinterpretation through pedagogy, the context of English Literature coming from Native Americans (Armstrong, *Looking at the Words* 7).

Womack, in his treatise on specifically Creek literary history and theory, says that his "greatest wish is that tribes, and tribal members, will have an increasingly important role in evaluating tribal literatures" and moreover that he feels "the responsibility as a Creek-Cherokee critic to try to include Creek perspectives in my approaches to Native literature" ("Introduction" 1). The specificity of these approaches stands in stark contrast to the erroneous treatment of Indigenous literatures offered in universities to largely non-Indigenous students. Certainly, many of these texts speak to similar topics, characters, or interests, but as both Armstrong and Womack point out, Indigenous cultures and writings have highly individualized social-aesthetic contexts. The Indigenous civil rights movement made organizing according to a pan-Indigenous configuration politically effective, and writing in English obligatory, but both these necessities are colonially imposed; pan-Indigenous subjectivity is not an innate feature of Indigenous artistic production. As Indigenous activists make progress in gaining recognition and inclusion, Indigenous critics are pushing for greater cultural specificity and less responsibility to edify white-settlers. The academy and publishing industry, however, remain stalled where they started in the 1960s: seeing Indigenous literature as a homogenous category that Indigenous writers are responsible for making accessible to white-settler audiences.

Certainly critical responses to King indicate that his work is marketed as an edifying representation of pan-Indigenous experience. *Medicine River* is "provocative enough to make non-native readers think a little longer and harder about the lives of the first people they live among and the places they inhabit" (back cover); *Inconvenient Indian* is "[e]ssential reading for everyone who cares about Canada and who seeks to understand Native people, their issues and their dreams" (back cover); a review of *Back*

of the Turtle asserts that "King is in the business of pointing out the awkwardness of all the years of tortured history between native people and non-native people" (praise for page). The moral overtones of such reviews point to the assumption that reading these books is praiseworthy self-improvement as much as it is aesthetic enjoyment. Moreover, the implied homogeneity of "Native people" and concerns in these reviews ignores much of the tribal specificity of King's works.

Occasionally, King undertakes the task of educating his possibly ignorant audience, as he does in *Green Grass* when Alberta gives a lecture on Fort Marion Ledger Art. Even here, though, King expresses his scepticism about such an undertaking in his naming of her students; Henry Dawes, John Collier, Mary Rowlandson, Hannah Duston, Elaine Goodale, and Helen Mooney are named for white politicians, writers, settlers, and reformers with wildly varying attitudes to Indigenous peoples (18-19; Flick 144-145). Their assorted behaviours in Alberta's class (sleep, inattention, and aggressive note-taking) demonstrate the uneven degree to which trying to adapt Indigenous knowledge to white-settler classrooms is worthwhile for King (18-21). Moreover, the historical episode Alberta is teaching her class involves gathering up and imprisoning First Nations leaders from many tribes, suggesting that any attempt to force different tribal traditions together in the cause of colonialism is problematic at best. In reading *Green Grass,* there is no assurance that white-settler readers will, or should, have all the answers given to them.

King signals the need for such informed understanding by including many references that rely on the knowledge — either pre-existing or procured — of the reader. For example, when Dr. Hovaugh lists the years that the four elders have escaped from his facility, it is up to readers to know the dates' significance: "the Indians disappear in 1969

and 1952…[a]nd 1971, 1973, 1932" (King, *GGRW* 48).[11] The fact that these dates are left without defined significance leaves the reader to find (or assign) it. These esoteric allusions are everywhere in *Green Grass*: Lionel accidentally takes part in AIM's Wounded Knee protest, but only the informed will understand why this makes him a target of militant anti-Indigenous law enforcement on both sides of the border (57-64); King uses un-translated Cherokee at the beginning of each section and in several conversations (5, 15, 101, 227, 325; Flick 143); Eli refers to "the Cree in Quebec" and Sifton makes multiple references to "the big project in Quebec" by way of referring to — but not explaining — the 20-year conflict between the James Bay Cree and Hydro Quebec (376, 135, 407). Similarly, every character name in the novel has loaded historical, political, or social connotations: the tourists who visit the Dead Dog Café are named for Canadian writers and historical figures of the frontier (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous): "P. Johnson… S. Moodie…A. Belaney…J. Richardson" and "Louis, Ray [and] Al" (Louis Riel) (156, 334). King references a dizzying array of legislation, artists, tribal mythology, early European explorers, Indigenous leaders, critical theory, early settlers, and politicians from time immemorial to the contemporary moment.

Unlike his references to Western culture — the Bible, Robinson Crusoe, Melville, Hollywood Westerns — these are not likely to be widely recognizable to a white-settler audience; they require specific readerly knowledge for full understanding. By insisting on

[11] This leaves us many possibilities: 1969 might be the publication of Canada's White Paper, or the year the Occupation of Alcatraz began, 1952 marks the year that the US's Termination Policy was developed (coming into law in the form of the Termination Act the following year). In 1971 the occupation of Alcatraz ended and the White Paper was withdrawn. In 1973, Wounded Knee was occupied. In 1932, Duncan Campbell Scott ended his tenure as head of Canada's Department of Indian Affairs, a position in which he oversaw the peak of the residential schools and government assimilation policy. (Wittstock; Legace and Niigaanwewidam; "Native Voices Timeline;" McDougall). Perhaps none of these are the events King had in mind (although many of them are also discussed in his historical account *The Inconvenient Indian*).

this range of knowledge, and that readers find it largely outside the text, King makes a political statement about what is (un)acceptable ignorance amongst white-settler readers and calls on a variety of specific tribal histories rather than a pan-Indigenous one. Throughout his opus, as in *Green Grass,* King makes the reader responsible for knowing or learning history he and his characters reference; he gives years, places, and names to mark sites of further necessary learning.

Robinson's work, coming later in the development of Indigenous literature as a popular genre, is less markedly defined by critics as instructional; the edification trope has developed into an understood, but indirectly expressed mainstay of the genre. Reviews focus on the significance of her works existing in the field of Canadian literature; *Monkey Beach* is "a valuable addition to North American literature" (back cover). Paula Simons, in introducing Robinson as a Kriesel Lecturer says that *Monkey Beach* "told readers more about the hard truths of growing up aboriginal in this country today than a thousand government reports or inquiries, or newspaper stories" (*The Sasquatch at Home* xii). Such an introduction is a clear indication of the importance placed on educating explicitly non-Indigenous audiences about "growing up aboriginal in this country." Robinson's *Son of a Trickster* likewise pleased critics by "[doing] much to enhance the growing body of Indigenous Canadian literature" (praise for page) and allows fellow novelist Claire Cameron to feel she "learned about what life might be like in a particular community that I've never been to" (praise for page). These well-trodden pathways of critical approach — only slightly modified over the 30 years King and Robinson have been publishing — to their works demonstrate how critics find and value

the same educational, pan-Indigenous properties even in markedly different Indigenous texts.

Like King, Robinson is clear that there are stories she is unwilling to share even as she provides some specifically Haisla context. But where King emphasizes the necessity for his readership to learn as much as they can by venturing outside his novels, Robinson emphasises that there are subjects that are permanently off-limits to some readers. Robinson refuses to exhaustively parse her novels for white-settlers:

> When I first started writing, I had to contextualize everything and found it tedious. My editor at the time asked how inclusive I wanted to be. Leanne Simpson, on the other hand, expects the reader to do the work of understanding the context of her stories in much the same way we have been expected to learn the context of mainstream stories. I fall in the middle of these approaches now, because I'm aiming my fiction at people who have been raised in an urban environment or were adopted out in the Sixties Scoop and are finding their way back to their cultures. (Robinson to Baker)[12]

Notably, even the contextualization Robinson is willing to offer is not predominantly for white-settler readers, but for an array of Indigenous readers. She is fulfilling exactly the role King theorized for her — "making a conscious decision not so much to ignore non-Native readers as to write for the very people [she] write[s] about" — with less regard for telling white-settler readers what they should learn than what they can never know (*TTAS* 115).

[12] The Sixties Scoop refers to a Canadian government policy from 1951 to the 1980s that resulted in the large-scale confiscation of Indigenous children who were adopted out to white families in Canada and the US (Niigaanwewidam and Dainard).

Monkey Beach does give such unfamiliar readers a clear approach to the history and location of Robinson's home community of Kitamaat in which the novel is set: "[f]ind a map of British Columbia. Point to the middle of the coast. Beneath Alaska, find the Queen Charlotte Islands. Drag your finger across the map, across the Hecate Strait to the coast and you should be able to see a large island hugging the coast…Princess Royal Island is the western edge of traditional Haisla territory" (4). The passage goes on to give a brief history of land claims, colonization, and the naming of the community in a way that gives readers unfamiliar with the territory their bearings. But before this comfortable introduction to the setting, Robinson has already set limits on how much a non-Haisla speaking reader will be able to understand; on the first page, the protagonist Lisamarie (Lisa) hears six crows calling to her in Haisla "*La'es* —Go down to the bottom of the ocean. The word means something else, but I can't remember what" (*MB,* 1). Despite the translation, readers are assured that their understanding is incomplete, that the Haisla word "means something else" that they do not have access to. While Robinson does include Haisla history and language in the book as Lisa learns about traditional foods and plants such as "q^{o}alh'm," "jak'un," "dalta," "du'qua," "oxasuli," "[p]ipxs'm," "sya'k^{o}nalh," "kolu'n," "ci'x^{o}a," and "uh's," the explanations are part of Lisa's learning from her grandmother, rather than didactic sidebars addressed to the audience (*MB,* 74, 93, 149, 150, 151, 159, 160, 213, 264, 271). Furthermore, no pronunciations are given for non-fluent Haisla speakers, leaving these readers to either admit their ignorance, or seek out a fluent speaker to grant (or deny) full access to the text. Fluency in Haisla is a necessary quality of full access to *Monkey Beach*; without it, readers can only understand so much.

Robinson takes great care to define the limits of what she allows white-settler readers to understand according to Haisla cultural protocols. When talking about writing *Monkey Beach,* Robinson explains how she had to:

> consult with [her] aunties on the stickier issues, like Haisla copyright. I knew I couldn't use any of the clan stories — these are owned by either individuals or families and require permission and a feast in order to be published…I wanted a couple of scenes at a potlatch, but wasn't sure what I'd have to do to have it included in the novel. A cousin of mine said although most traditional people were uncomfortable talking about the potlatch itself, what the people were doing or saying while the potlatch was going on was a different story. It turned out better for the story because I'd had three exposition-heavy pages that were reduced to a quick transitional paragraph. (*TSAH* 31-32)

Robinson's explanation makes clear that her focus is not educating a white-settler audience by making them familiar with as much of Haisla culture as possible. Instead, her primary concern is with telling a story that is linked to the specific culture, history, and land of the Haisla people without revealing too much.

Neither King nor Robinson is writing to educate white-settlers or speak for all Indigenous peoples. King, however, does offer pointers to history and context important to a fuller understanding of his work: his characters come from specific nations, histories, and places. He places the responsibility of seeking out information about these peoples, histories, and places on the reader. Robinson, too, is willing to offer enough information for the reader to situate themselves if they work at it, but goes a step further by also

designating areas circumscribed by specific culture, place, and knowledge-keepers as permanently inaccessible; white-settler readers can learn, but only so much.

Trope of Totalizing Cathartic Tragedy

Many Indigenous critics and writers have noted how themes of trauma are accentuated in criticism of Indigenous literature without an equal regard for themes of resurgence and continuation. As Hunt puts it, "Indigenous people, in a Canadian context, are now over-determined by trauma since the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; that is, Indigenous peoples are only legible through their private, personal, and individual traumatic experiences" (99).[13] In the face of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Inquiry, and the increasingly visible realities of Canada's historical and contemporary treatment of Indigenous peoples, it is perhaps unsurprising that white-settlers should get the idea that trauma is all there is to know about these communities. The mode of reading Indigenous literature as tragedy also contributes to a mindset that places Indigenous people in the past and their problems beyond help. It is a "vanishing Indian" trope with a modern neo-liberal twist; it does not deny that Indigenous people still exist, but implies that their problems have been dealt with by being officially acknowledged or, alternatively, are so endemic as to be permanently insoluble: a fact of Indigenous existence. Thus, reading

[13] The Truth and Reconciliation Commission itself, which compiled stories and records of Canada's Residential Schools, was one prong of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, which awarded cash payouts to residential school survivors. These payouts consisted either of "Common Experience Payments" based on a formula for years spent at residential school or payments from an "Independent Assessment Process" which granted dollar amounts according to how much sexual, physical, or psychological abuse survivors could testify to (Marshall *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement*).

Indigenous stories as tragedies allows white-settler readers two comfortable positions: that of bemoaning past wrongs now set right, or of bemoaning current wrongs beyond help. Either way, such readings cast Indigenous peoples as hapless victims of tragedy rather than active participants in society.

While many Indigenous writers — including King and Robinson — depict violence and damage, Indigenous critics point out that to focus on these elements exclusively risks making colonization and its legacy the key features of Indigenous experience. Insisting that Indigenous stories are all about resilience can have the same effect; "many critics see the resistant narrative as focused on and existing for the colonial society, thus inadvertently reproducing that society's dominance" (Fagan, Donaldson et al 265). This is not to say that Indigenous texts do not deal with colonialism or contain tragic elements, rather that it is important to recognize that this is not all they are; "[n]atives are not helpless victims of colonial devastation, but instead the shrewd protectors of Indigenous thought" (Teuton 11). Thus, reading these accounts as testimony rather than irredeemable tragedy is important to properly comprehending Indigenous literatures and communities. To fail in this, as Eve Tuck argues academics and audiences have done, creates misleading damage-centred versions of reality:

> These characterizations frame our communities as sites of disinvestment and dispossession; our communities become spaces in which underresourced health and economic infrastructures are endemic. They become spaces saturated in the fantasies of outsiders… intent on portraying our neighborhoods and tribes as defeated and broken. (412)

Such readings are so typical, particularly in academia, that they become the only way that white-settler readers understand Indigenous experience.

These narrow understandings are detrimental to reading Indigenous literature. Gerald Vizenor vociferously disputes such readings, arguing for Indigenous "survivance": "[s]urvivance is not just survival but also resistance, not heroic or tragic, but the tease of tradition, and my sense of survivance outwits dominance and victimry. Survival is a response; survivance is a standpoint, a worldview, and a presence." (*Postindian Conversations* 93). In Vizenor's view, to be cast as tragic heroes or victims is equally abhorrent; both imply positions outside dominant society rather than disruptively active within it. Hunt similarly emphasizes non-tragic readings of Indigenous literature that avoid "envisioning Indigenous peoples as solely ruined, as culturally 'broken,' as permanently and terminablytramautized [sic], as too angry to function in polite, political discourse, as well as a range of other deficit-oriented positionalities" (100). Like Vizenor, Hunt proposes looking at how Indigenous peoples are functioning, engaged, and vigorous rather than inevitably doomed by unavoidable circumstance. Keeping this broader focus in mind is helpful in apprehending the full potency of King's and Robinson's works.

King's stories abound with tragic elements, but resist totalizing tragedy in ways often missed by white-settler critics. His characters experience suicide, domestic violence, abandonment, murder, poverty, racism, and death. Nevertheless, his novels consistently record but do not wallow in misfortune because his stories end on trajectories of continuation. As King himself comments in his interview with Wilson: "*Medicine River*, my very first book, I had stuff in there that was a little on the darker side—alcoholism, physical abuse. I've never shied away from it, I just don't make it a

centre point of my writing. I like a balance, and there's enough gloomy stuff out there already" (King to Wilson). Similarly, in *Truth and Bright Water*, a balance is struck between calamity and continuation. The central character, Tecumseh, loses his cousin Lum and beloved dog Soldier in the last chapters of the novel. The gravity of these deaths is not unrecorded; Lum's uncle comes to the funeral drunk, Tecumseh seemingly ideates suicide when he jumps into the river where his cousin died before returning home to mourn his loss. Unlike classic Western tragedies, Lum's death brings limited catharsis since it is a pointless accident (or possibly suicide) and in no way brings on a new chapter in Tecumseh's life: his father is still an unreliable drunk, his parents are still separated, he does not want a new dog, he still has the same thing for dinner every night. But Lum's death is recorded alongside life continuing around and after this tragedy: Cassie seems to be home to stay having reconciled with her sister, Tecumseh's mother fulfills a lifelong dream when she performs brilliantly in her first ever play, and receives much-deserved flowers from an admirer. Life is not an unmixed joy, but it does continue at the end of the novel with the promise that Tecumseh and his family will actively go on with life.

Tecumseh's eccentric employer, Monroe Swimmer, acts as a model of how Tecumseh might enact survivance: actively participating in the world even as he struggles with it. Monroe has left a career as a "big-time Indian artist" after being fired from his job restoring 19th century landscapes because he "painted the village and the Indians back into the painting" and, presumably, for reclaiming the bones of First Nations children being kept in museum collections (25, 142, 264). Upon his return to live in the abandoned church in Truth, Monroe begins painting its exterior so that it becomes invisible within the landscape, and places buffalo sculptures along the river, which, by the end of the

book, seem to be moving (277). Monroe engages — however peculiarly — with the disasters of colonization in an active, rehabilitating way: erasing the physical legacy of Christianity, and returning the buffalo to the prairies with Tecumseh's help. In his series of Massey Lectures, King provides a good description of what is happening here when he compares Christian and Indigenous origin stories: "[i]n our Native story, we…move by degrees and adjustments from a formless, featureless world to a world that is rich in its diversity, a world that is complex and complete…the pivotal concern is not with the ascendancy of good over evil but with the issue of balance" (*TTAS* 24). Monroe makes strides toward this balance, and teaches Tecumseh to do the same. With this in mind, it is clear that a damage-centred reading of King's work misses exactly half of what is there to be read. Despite his grief, it seems likely that Tecumseh's story will continue: not as heroism or tragedy, but as survivance.

In his Governor General Award-winning novel *Back of the Turtle,* King continues to depict a world full of characters resolutely dealing with real-world catastrophe. The novel describes an environmental disaster known as "the Ruin" that has decimated the flora and fauna of the Smoke River Reserve-Samaritan Bay community (160). As in his other works, King is aware that tragic Indigenous lives are what many of his readers are expecting. One of the only remaining inhabitants, Mara, berates Gabriel for coming to see the abandoned reserve: "'Indians. See where they died. Tour their homes. Relive their last moments. That could be fun'" (100). Mara's assumption that Gabriel has come to gawk is a reminder of the white-settler voyeurism surrounding Indigenous damage. Instead of catering to such voyeurism, King again balances damage and continuation. The full effect of "the Ruin" is only fully revealed near the end of the novel, after the reader learns that

the ocean, Hot Springs, and forests around the community are still viable. What is more, King gives the environmental devastation of the community its proper global context by referencing other real-world environmental disasters including "'Chernobyl. Idaho Falls. Chalk River…Pine Ridge…Rokkasho and Lanyu…Renaissance Island,'" "'West Anniston creek,'" "SDF 20," a mistakenly dropped radioactive bomb that was detonated "a few kilometres downstream form Quebec City," and the Alberta tar sands (23, 38, 42, 60, 112). Thus, damage is not specific to Indigenous communities, nor is it the only condition to be found there. Once again, King describes a depressingly accurate set of historical truths, but without removing the possibility of continuation. Gabriel gives up his plan to commit suicide over his guilt at his part in "the Ruin" instead pursuing an uncertain relationship with Mara at the end of the novel. Despite the continued devastation of the local environment and economy, both people and animal life slowly begin to return in the final chapters. Although it still faces continued resistance "from local communities and First Nations," the stock price of Domidian (the company responsible for "the Ruin," and other deadly environmental disasters) is rising at the end of the novel (513). Neither good nor evil is ascendant. Instead, *Back of the Turtle* is a complex narrative neither tragic nor heroic, but an ongoing balance that resists totalizing interpretations.

Showing a similar disregard for happy, uncomplicated endings, Robinson is a self-avowed proponent of violence and horror in her writing. Her books include physical and psychological torture, rape, murder, and brutality in both real and supernatural worlds. Where King relies on balance to resist totalizing tragedy, Robinson maintains the agency of her characters even in drastically uneven matches with fortune. Though deeply

affected by violence to a much greater extent than King's, her characters are never rendered inert by it.

Robinson's first novel, *Monkey Beach*, for example, surpasses its review as "Glorious Northern Gothic" by including two rapes, an attempted rape, and five (or possibly six) gruesome deaths (back cover). Nevertheless, Lisa is never helpless; even after losing her uncle, her grandmother, her friend, her cousin, and surviving a rape by one of her best friends, she maintains her agency, community connections, and supernatural powers. When her brother disappears, she actively searches for him using her command of the supernatural world to guide her search. Robinson explains that early drafts of the novel were written from another character's point of view, but she found these needed to be rewritten because the character lacked Lisa's agency: "the main character was a young woman named Karaoke…Karaoke was traumatized by the events of [her life] and lay flat on the page" (*TSAH* 31). By contrast, even in the extremity of disaster, Lisa is actively alive. Her near-death experience in the final pages reunites her with lost loved ones who encourage her to return to the land of the living:

> "*Wah*," she says. "My crazy girl. Go home and make me some grandkids."
>
> "Hiya, Monster," Mick's voice says. "Don't listen to her. You go out there and give 'em hell. Red power!"…I can understand the words even though they are in Haisla and it's a farewell song, they are singing about leaving and meeting again, and they turn and lift their hands. (373-374)

Although this scene comes as Lisa is drowning in the ocean, its overtones are encouraging. Her experience validates the continuation of the Haisla language, the efficacy of Lisa's gift to contact the spirit world, the reliability of family connection even

after death, and the possibilities that exist for Lisa back in the land of the living to have grandchildren or "give 'em hell." The passage suggests that even if this is Lisa's death, it will not be an ending, but a kind of "leaving and meeting again." Furthermore, she has agency to decide whether this is her death; she is not confined by Western tragic tropes of inescapable destiny. Thus, despite the many tragic events in *Monkey Beach,* the novel maintains continuous presence and agency for its main characters; resistance is not futile.

Robinson resists totalizing tragedy similarly in her other books. Jared, the protagonist of *Son of a Trickster* and *Trickster Drift* is preserved from ruin by his ability to make choices: even suicidal ones. At the end of *Trickster Drift*, Jared is faced with a choice between allowing his supernatural relations to use his powers to travel and hunt in new worlds, and dying himself. He chooses to sacrifice both his life and his principles to transport the coy wolves to an airless world where they suffocate and he himself is killed, eaten, and resurrected repeatedly by his vengeful aunt. His choice to preserve those he loves costs him his life and great mental and physical anguish, but it is a choice he makes consciously, not helplessly. Moreover, even in the midst of experiencing repeated death, dismemberment, and reanimation he is able to make another choice to save himself:

> Just to hear something other than his own bones crunching, he sang "Someday,"…
>
> "Stop it," the cannibalistic Georgina said. "No Nickelback!"
>
> "Or what? You'll eat me?" Jared said….Jared sang louder. Mentally, in his head — because he was choking, fainting, and couldn't so much as squeak —Jared sang and sang and sang. (*TD* 369)

His defiance in the most hopeless of situations is the means of his escape. The novel ends with mass casualties and leaves Jared reeling from the realization that "he could be as violent as his mother," but Jared never loses the ability to act, to engage with the world, to change his fate (*TD* 368). In fact, his autonomy is effective against the most extreme totalizing tragedy; Robinson gives Jared the power to successfully exit an endless cycle of trauma and victimization by exercising his agency.

Both King and Robinson resist totalizing cathartic tragedy. King includes tragic events in his stories, but balances them with the promise of continuation. Robinson offers even darker lives for her characters, but evades cathartic tragedy with agency. Both authors insist that catastrophe and disaster are not universal in Indigenous literature; they are elements tempered by balance, continuation, and the choices of Indigenous peoples.

Trope of Affective Response

As I have shown, reading Indigenous works as irredeemably tragic is a particularly common way to elide socio-political content. Implicit in considering characters tragic heroes or victims is the idea that they cannot be helped in any way. As Tuck succinctly puts it, "damage-centered research involves social and historical contexts at the outset, [but] the significance of these contexts is regularly submerged. Without the context of racism and colonization, all we're left with is the damage, and this makes our stories vulnerable to pathologizing analyses" (415). That is, without socio-political context, the damage becomes permanent rather than something people can respond to materially. To focus on one aspect of any novel exclusively is incomplete, and in the case

of Indigenous literature, the result of focusing on tragedy is that serious political commentary gets missed by readers intent on relishing or sympathizing with calamity. Such affective responses are not only incomplete, they are limiting: "[i]n a Canadian context, reconciliation has been driven by a public wishing to atone for its colonial past. The process invites an appropriation and subsequent dissolution of guilt through affective responses to history" (Rymhs 117). White-settler readings are a response to this "colonial guilt" that developed within institutions from the 1960s to the present day. While increased white-settler awareness of culpability is helpful, Rymhs points out that there are "political and interpretive possibilities" that are blocked by reading a book simply to assuage or produce guilt (117).

Affective responses in general — sympathy, but also humour, nostalgia, and affinity — can also serve to disguise socio-political content. Paradoxically, a critical focus on the humour in Indigenous literature operates the same way as damage-centred readings. Many Indigenous writers, including King and Robinson, do create very funny stories in which they use humour to highlight real social, political, and historical issues. These issues are frequently passed over by critics focussing solely on their affective response to the novels' humour or trauma. Amused or sympathetic affective responses to Indigenous literature allow white-settler readers to appease consciences without engaging with socio-political content such as land rights, treaty rights, residential school, systemic oppression, violence against Indigenous women, and political appropriation of and apathy towards Indigenous communities.

When critics cast King's and Robinson's novels as simply funny or tragic, they imply that the only proper response is emotional because the subject matter is not current,

relevant, or actionable. The result is self-congratulatory apathy on the part of white-settler readers. Even amongst an audience who might describe itself as liberal, anti-racist, or post-colonial, such readings can become a problem when they stand in for material reconciliation and "social justice…gives way to other interests" including "[w]hite psychic security…and theoretical objectivity"; these interests, or "aversion[s]," create a "tendency…to look away, to fall back on cliché or learned responses" (Budde 246). In particular, white-settler readers tend to "look away" from Indigenous land and treaty rights and contemporary institutional racism in the form of insufficient social services and overrepresentation in prison and in-care children populations. In this way, both collective (Canadian) and individual (white-settler) responsibility becomes a matter of expressing emotion (particularly guilt) rather than the impetus for action or self-assessment: "[g]uilt, in effect, becomes a dissolute concept, swept into colonial history, attributed to past government policies or directed at faceless institutions rather than being individually or personally owned" (Rymhs 108). While potentially well-meaning, such white-settler readers avoid personal responsibility and complicity. Hunt defines "well-meaning white settlers" as "so-called progressive white liberals who may have some basic critique of colonialism, yet seek to transcend their complicity in it without actually giving anything up or engaging with the challenges to their moral authority that are issued by Indigenous-led decolonization efforts" (Hunt 94). These sympathetic white-settler readers are addressing their own needs in responding to Indigenous texts, rather than the demands of that text.

The reconciliation white-settler readers seek in their desire to "transcend their complicity" is only possible by giving up a certain amount of "their moral authority"

(Hunt 94). The suggestion that any such sacrifice is necessary is unsettling for many white-settler readers: "[w]hen some Western readers/critics, accustomed to being at the center, read Native American nationalist criticism, they cannot fathom being marginalized, or even excluded, themselves" (Weaver, "Splitting the Earth" 25). Instead of facing up to these possibilities, white-settler readers are going through the motions of reconciliation by reading Indigenous works, but not doing the work demanded by that reading. Studying Indigenous literature becomes a way to pre-emptively shore up moral authority rather than relinquish it. This tendency to read Indigenous literature emotionally as a technique to avoid white-settler culpability in the continuing legacy of colonization is counterproductive because it pre-empts necessary social change that works like King's and Robinson's call for.

Despite the wide range of genres King has written in, critics consistently focus on humour as a defining technique in his work.[14] Of the sixteen reviews included in the paratext of *Medicine River*, almost half describe the novel as variously "comical," "light-hearted," "hilarious," "funny," full of "deadpan humour," or "constant delight" (praise for page, back cover). While the novel is undoubtedly funny, all the included reviews prioritize this humour over the novel's socio-political content, except for a lone review that states: "King entertains, while slipping his serious messages into the reader's consciousness" (praise for page). King himself offers a much more nuanced description of how he uses humour: "I prefer to allow people to see the humorous side, even of a bad situation. I don't think of myself as a comic writer, although a lot of people do. I think of myself as a satirist, and satirists generally handle serious topics with humor. It's a way of

[14] King has written novels, short stories, poetry, lectures, children's fiction, non-fiction, screenplays, and radioplays.

making the medicine go down:" medicine, in this case, being the unwelcome history of Indigenous oppression in and by Canada (King to Wilson).

The paratext of King's *Green Grass* is similarly focused on the humour of the novel. Of the sixteen reviews included in the Harper Perennial edition, eleven use descriptors like "comic," "funny," or "witty," one calling it full of "titillating In(dian)-jokes" (praise for page, back cover). Such reviews emphasize affective responses over the need to discover the context of what these "In(dian)-jokes" might be poking fun at. Once again these reviews showcase how critics read King's work through a very particular lens: one that enjoys light-hearted jokes and artistry while avoiding more uncomfortable political content. Again, this is a very funny novel, full of irony and sharp wit, but like *Medicine River,* this humorous approach makes dramatic, pointed political and social commentary belied by such reviews and the book jacket's description of it as a "magical, rollicking tale" (back cover).

Reviewers of Robinson's work are similarly reticent in highlighting the socio-political content of her writing, focussing instead on the visceral affective responses elicited by her work. But where King is typecast as funny, Robinson's reviewers focus on her bleakness. In her debut *Traplines*'s 22 reviews, 13 use words like "bleak," "disturbed," and "brutal" (praise for page). These are apt descriptions of the four stories, but such adjectives are used to describe the writing and events of the stories without linking them to their larger socio-political context. Of the reviews included on the book jacket, only one comes close to mentioning this context: "Robinson probes the gritty unpleasant aspects of her culture in an unflinching and honest manner" (praise for page). Although this review does link the aesthetics of the novel to the real world, it

problematically does so in a way that assigns the source of "the gritty unpleasant aspects" to Robinson's (Indigenous) "culture" rather than to socio-political context. This is particularly telling of the bias toward seeing Indigenous communities as fundamentally dysfunctional since few of the characters in *Traplines* are explicitly marked as First Nations. The collection explores urban poverty and family violence: not exclusively Indigenous content. Nevertheless, the included reviews focus either on aesthetic responses to this content bereft of socio-political context or — even more troublingly — simply assume the context of trauma is Indigenous culture itself. As in reviews of King's work, critics point out affective responses, but not their historical, and socio-political sources.

Much of the casual conversation contained in King's novels, reveals disturbing history. As a child, the main character in *Medicine River,* Will, loses his status rights as a result of the Indian Act's policy of stripping status from First Nations women who married white men (9). This lost relationship with the reserve community is a central condition of Will's personal journey in the novel. To focus on the book's undeniable humour, but not praise its equally intricate political content is telling. When a community elder comes to Will for advice on how to apply for a credit card, his admittedly hilarious summary of the travels that require the card also contains important social commentary:

> People want me to talk about what it's like to be an Indian. Crazy world. Lots of white people seem real interested in knowing about Indians. Crazy world...But those people in Germany and Japan and France and Ottawa don't want to hear [modern] stories. They want to hear stories about how Indians used to be. I got some real good stories, funny ones, about how things are now, but those people

> say, no, tell us about the olden days. So I do…People are real curious, you know. When I was in Japan, I told them the story about Old Man and Old Woman, and when I was done, everybody stood up and clapped…Just stood there and clapped. Like they never heard that story before. (170-175)

While the content of this extended conversation between Will, Harlen, and Lionel is undoubtedly funny, it makes a serious point about the political and social position these First Nations characters find themselves in: relics, not part of the contemporary world, curiosities from the past used for the amusement of non-Indigenous audiences. Lionel correctly notes that his non-Indigenous audiences only want to hear "about how Indians used to be" and reject "good stories, funny ones, about how things are now." The expectations of his audience shape the stories Lionel is allowed to tell: contemporary politics is definitely off the menu.

In the world of Medicine River, however, contemporary politics is everywhere. The occupation of Wounded Knee is not just referenced but attended by one of the characters in the novel, who shows off a picture of himself with the real-world Wounded Knee activists Dennis Banks and Gladys Bissonette (191). This activist history is worth fighting or even killing over; Ray and David get into an argument when one contends that AIM "stands for Assholes in Moccasins" and the other that political inaction makes one "an apple or a coward" (252-253). The argument develops into Ray beating David and taking his AIM leather jacket before David retaliates by killing him. The incident is told with dark humour, but the humour is certainly not the only thing to notice about the incident, or the novel.

One of the main characters in *Green Grass*, Eli, spends his time physically and legally blocking the development of a hydroelectric dam that would (and eventually does) destroy his family cabin on reserve land. In his daily conversation with Sifton, the dam architect and manager tasked with getting Eli to give up his battle against the company, Eli points out some hard real-world truths about resource development on reserve lands:

> "So how come so many [hydroelectric dams] are built on Indian land?"
>
> "Only so many places you can build a dam."
>
> "Provincial report recommended three possible sites."
>
> "Geography. That's what decides where dams get built."
>
> "This site wasn't one of them."
>
> Sifton rolled his lips around the cup. "Other factors have to be considered too."
>
> "None of the recommended sites were on Indian land." (111)

The tone may be ironic, but the facts are hard to laugh at, as is the clear talking past one another evident in the conversation. Still, as we have seen, most of the included reviews of *Green Grass* fail to note the centrality of Indigenous land rights in the novel. What makes this a particularly gaping oversight is the fact that *Green Grass* is doing what might, in another author, be seen as radical social commentary. King does nothing less than retell Christian and Western origin myths to reveal them as arbitrarily hierarchical, misogynist, and colonizing. The Abrahamic God becomes a confused dream of Coyote's run amok (2-3); Noah becomes a lascivious comic villain overseeing an arc covered in poop (145-146); Robinson Crusoe bemoans the fact that "as a civilized white man, it has been difficult not having someone of color around whom I could educate and protect" only to have Thought Woman refuse to take his suggested name of Friday, leave him

behind and take the name Robinson Crusoe for herself (294-295*)*; the hapless Dr. Joe Hovaugh contrasts the omnipotence of his namesake by fruitlessly pursuing the escaped elders from his hospital; Old Woman meets Young Man Walking on Water and bests him at controlling the roaring waves only to have him petulantly claim the feat as his own:

> Hooray, says those men. We're saved.
>
> Hooray, says Young Man Walking On Water. I have saved you.
>
> Actually, says those men, that other person saved us.
>
> Nonsense, says Young Man Walking On Water. That other person is a woman.
>
> That other person sings songs to waves.
>
> That's me, says Old Woman.
>
> A woman? Says those men. Sings songs to waves? They says that, too.
>
> That's me, says Old Woman. That's me.
>
> By golly, says those men. Young Man Walking On Water must have saved us after all. We better follow him around. (351-352)

Funny it may all be, but it points to Christianity and Western literature as purveyors of prejudice, misogyny, and self-aggrandizing myth-making with much the same directness as colonial cultures defined Indigenous ones as savage and primitive. It is searing social commentary, and it is woven throughout the text seemingly without the reviewers finding it worth mentioning.

Despite Robinson protesting that because of her "highly political" family she "wrote as apolitically as possible," *Monkey Beach* is full of political characters and events (Chou). Lisa's uncle Mick is a former AIM activist with a collection of T-shirts sporting slogans like "Free Leonard Peltier!...[and] Columbus: 500 Years of Genocide and

Counting" (56). As a result of her family influences, Lisa is kicked out of school when she refuses to read aloud from a book "that said that the Indians on the northwest coast of British Columbia had killed and eaten people as religious sacrifices" (68). Lisa's response is decidedly political:

> I sat there shaking, absolutely furious.
>
> "Lisa?" she'd said. "Did you hear me? Please read the next paragraph."
>
> "But it's all lies," I'd said…
>
> "Ma-ma-oo told me it was just pretend, the eating people, like drinking Christ's blood at Communion."
>
> In a clipped, tight voice, she told me to sit down. Since I was going to get into trouble anyway, I started singing "Fuck the Opressors." (68-69)

If Robinson is reticent about making direct political commentary, her characters certainly are not.

Moreover, the novel explores the complex intergenerational effects of Canada's colonial history. In the novel, Lisa learns that her grandfather abused her grandmother and that this was one reason Ma-ma-oo allowed two of her children, Mick and Trudy, to be sent to residential school. The decision not only traumatizes Mick and Trudy, leading them both to alcoholism and unhealthy relationships, but has a long-term effect on Trudy's relationship with her mother. As Trudy's daughter Tab explains to Lisa, "Mom's mad 'cause she thinks she picked Ba-ba-oo over them" (254). As *Monkey Beach* demonstrates, one of the effects of this kind of inherited trauma in families is that it interferes with the transmission of tradition and culture; while Ma-ma-oo passes on much of her knowledge of Haisla food, history, and spirituality to Lisa, whose father was not

sent to residential school, Tab seems to be completely cut off from her grandmother as a result of Trudy's anger. This residential school trauma is also passed from Josh — who is sexually abused at school — to Karaoke, who he rapes in turn. The experience leaves Karaoke incapable of serving as the book's main character or of maintaining a relationship with Lisa's loving brother, Jimmy. As well as the history of residential school, *Monkey Beach*'s characters experience contemporary social ills. Lisa, for example, has a graphic confrontation with three white men who try to abduct first her cousin and then her. Although Lisa narrowly escapes, her aunt Trudy is explicit in correcting Lisa's naive assessment of the situation:

> "It was broad daylight," I said. "And there were tons of witnesses. They wouldn't have done anything."
>
> "Honey," she said, "if you were some little white girl, that would be true. But you're a mouthy Indian, and everyone thinks we're born sluts. Those guys would have said you were asking for it and got off scot-free." (255)

This is a story and assessment that might come straight out of the Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Here again, *Monkey Beach* directly engages contemporary socio-political issues affecting Indigenous communities. Such candid depictions highlight the absurdity of reviews content to see Robinson's work as emotionally "disturbing," but not as disruptive socio-political commentary.

That King and Robinson are both reviewed with consistent reference to the affective rather than socio-political content of their work points to white-settler Canada's unwillingness to engage with contemporary Indigenous issues. The humour in King's novels allows him to present his political commentary as satire, but it certainly does not

remove the potency of his message as his reviews try to suggest. Robinson's stark depictions of brutal reality would seem less prone to having their socio-political roots elided, and yet reviewers still manage to focus on affect over effect when reviewing Robinson's work. What is important to understand is that both King and Robinson are using different affective strategies to similar political ends, and meeting the same stubborn resistance to see past emotion to political engagement.

Socio-Political Effects of Institutional Attitudes

As I have demonstrated above, the tropes used to read Indigenous literature are at odds with the writing of King, Robinson, and the work of Indigenous scholars more generally. Whereas popular white-settler imaginations of pan-Indigenous peoples relegate them to reserves or to the past, King and Robinson show the integral presence of specific Indigenous communities in Canada in both urban and rural spaces. Where white-settler readers expect to authoritatively educate themselves simply by reading Indigenous literature, King and Robinson set important limits on the explaining they are willing to do in their texts. While white-settler readers have come to favour damage-centred readings of Indigenous literature, Robinson and King make sure that their stories contain tragic elements, but not totalizing tragedy ending in ruin and catharsis. Although many critics promote passive affective responses to their works, both King and Robinson use humour and pathos to make contemporary political comments demanding change. Because of the mismatch between institutional expectations and the content of King's and Robinson's writing, white-settlers often misread their texts. While such misreading may seem to be

the result of harmless differences in aesthetic focus, in fact they serve to neutralize the unsettling socio-political work of Indigenous writers and activists. The very academy that took up Indigenous literature in response to Indigenous political organization has fostered palatable approaches to this literature that counteract its socio-political content.

Chapter 3: White-Settler Reading Practices in Canadian Popular Culture

The climate within universities — the student population and literary taste that they foster — migrates into the broader Canadian public to create real-world cultural and political consequences. What's more, they dictate not just what is said about Indigenous people, but who gets to speak, who is recognized as Indigenous, and where money and priorities are focussed. These real-world cultural and political stakes are embodied in Joseph Boyden's controversial career. In Boyden's work and public persona, the arbitrary tropes formulated by academic-publishing institutions become the bedrock of his creative and authorial philosophy, and, in his success, become celebrated as the authentic expression of Indigenous experience in Canada.

Boyden's great literary and public success set against King's and Robinson's shows how mainstream white-settler Canada, from CBC's audience to the Prime Minister, embrace a trope-centric writer with dubious Indigenous subjectivity in place of more resistant Indigenous writers. Between them, King, Robinson, and Boyden have won every major Canadian literary award, often the same ones in different years (see Appendix 2). Significantly though, between the Giller Prize, Governor General's Award, and the CBC Reads competition, Boyden has collected more total wins and nominations than either King or Robinson, despite his career and list of publications being shorter than either: his brand of Indigenous literature and identity has proved more popular and easier to sell. Of course, qualitative judgements are always at play in any comparison of awards, but it speaks to the somewhat paradoxical regard in which King and Robinson are held as

writers that both have served on the Giller Prize Jury without ever having won the Giller themselves (see Appendix 2). Tropes win out over socio-political commentary.

Boyden's success in comparison to Robinson and King is telling in several ways. First, it is an example of how works that adhere to the tropes I have enumerated are welcomed and rewarded by white-settler institutions at least as much — if not more — than works like King's and Robinson's that challenge such stereotypes. Second, given the controversy over Boyden's Indigenous identity that I discuss next, his career is an example of how Indigenous stereotypes have become so embedded that, for white-settler readers, fulfilling them — personally and artistically — can confer Indigenous identity just as securely as a deeply rooted Indigenous subject-position. Boyden proves that white-settler reading tropes have so thoroughly distorted the Indigenous politics that garnered national recognition of Indigenous peoples that the tropes themselves are now fundamental to popular ideas of what it means to be and write Indigenous. Boyden frequently declares "a small part of me is Indigenous, but it's a huge part of who I am"; analogously, a small part of Indigenous writing adheres to tropes, but tropes are a huge part of Boyden's writing and success as a luminary of Indigenous Canadian literature ("My name is Joseph Boyden").

The Boyden Controversy

In late 2016, Boyden was publicly called out over the validity of his Indigenous identity. The first public accusations came from Robert Jago as guest host of the @IndigenousXca Twitter account and the Aboriginal People's Television Network

(APTN). This set off a firestorm of commentary and argument in both social and mainstream media about Boyden's identity, his actions, and his place in Canadian literary circles and Indigenous communities. As Jorge Barerra documented in his article for APTN, "Boyden has variously claimed his family's roots extend to the Metis, Mi'kmaq, Ojibway and Nipmuc peoples," none of which claims could be conclusively substantiated. Moreover, Barrera found evidence that Boyden's uncle Erl, who Boyden has cited as an inspiration for his own connections to Ojibwe culture, claimed in multiple published records that he only pretended to be First Nations to sell knick-knacks to tourists. Boyden's immediate response on Twitter claimed he had been misquoted and misinterpreted, but did not resolve questions about his Indigenous heritage (@IndigenousXca). The controversy that followed, and continues, in the wake of these claims indexes important aspects of the tropes, treatment, political foundations, and popular imaginings of Indigenous literature in white-settler Canada.

Eight months after the scandal broke, Boyden published a lengthy self-defense in which he appeals to many familiar white-settler tropes to justify his Indigenous subjectivity. First, Boyden points to several of his Indigenous supporters: "The Sandy family," "the Tozer family," "Lisa Meeches," "Chanie Wenjack's sisters," "Donna Chief from Wabigoon," "Lee Maracle," "Tina Keeper," and "a good, good Anishnaabe man. A great man" implied to be Basil Johnston ("My Name is"; Barrera). While these supporters do claim Boyden —"[s]ome of us call Joseph Boyden our uncle or cousin…Joseph is one of us" — those he names are from different First Nations bands: the Tozer family are Cree, the Sandy and Johnston families Ojibwe from different bands, and Boyden also

claims membership in the Ontario Woodland Métis ("My name is"). [15] By claiming belonging to these different Indigenous groups through relationships rather than lineage, Boyden is appealing to a variety of pan-Indigenous community; he does not claim membership to one particular band or nation, but rather, through the relationships he has forged, to the Indigenous community as a whole ("My name is"). In place of naming a specific community he descends from, Boyden offers a general DNA test — "Native American DNA. Check" — again identifying as part of the continent-wide community familiar to white-settler Canada rather than a culturally specific one ("My name is").

Boyden also invokes Canada's history of racism towards Indigenous peoples to explain his uncle Erl's reluctance to identify as Indigenous (despite the fact that he was very publically identifying as Indigenous while claiming to others that he was white). By characterizing Erl as a "mixed-blood man living life the way he wanted in a white world that could never understand him," Boyden plays on affective responses to the tragic condition of Indigenous peoples in a racist world in which Indigenous and white-settler cultures can only conflict, not interact ("My name is"). Boyden completes his defense by appealing to his variety of Indigenous links and to the good his writing has done by educating Canada:

> If I am accepted by people in Indigenous communities, if I have been traditionally adopted by a number of people in Indigenous communities, if my DNA test shows I have Indigenous blood, if I have engaged my whole career in publicly defending Indigenous rights as well as using my public recognition as an author to shine light on Indigenous issues, am I not, in some way, Indigenous? ("My name is")

[15] The Ontario Woodland Métis is also a contentious organization since it requires no proof of Indigenous lineage for membership. It does not enjoy provincial recognition, or recognition from the Métis Nation (Andrew-Gee).

Certainly, the answer for Boyden — and for some Indigenous and non-Indigenous people — is yes. However, the ways Boyden portrays his Indigenous subject-position are tellingly aligned with the tropes of white-settler Canada instead of the ideas of Indigenous writers and critics: his identity is pan-Indigenous, his value is in "shin[ing] light on Indigenous issues" to edify the public, and tragedy is central to his representations of Indigenous experience.

White-Settler Tropes in Boyden

After the scandal broke, many did step forward to support Boyden: "his publisher, major book festivals and the organizations behind some of the country's biggest literary prizes" as well as "Boyden collaborators — artists and organizations" (Lederman). Even Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who ran on a platform of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, came out in public support of Boyden saying "[o]n a personal level I have to say I'm a big fan of Joseph's storytelling abilities and his passion and compassion" (Andrew-Gee). Similarly, Trent University released a statement defending Boyden's Honorary Doctorate, explaining it was

> focused on his literary work as significantly contributing to the world's understanding of the intricacies of indigenous and Canadian culture…As the first university in Canada to introduce an Indigenous Studies degree, at Trent we understand the complexity of indigenous identity in modern Canada and the importance of treating the issue with sensitivity and fairness. (Lederman)

The wording of Trent University's support is particularly interesting in its tacit confirmation of white-settler reading tropes. First, it suggests that "indigenous and Canadian culture" are separate entities, rather than interpenetrating histories. Second, Boyden's work is worthy because of its educational role in "contributing to the world's understanding" of Indigenous culture. Moreover, this statement boldly claims that being the first to "introduce an Indigenous Studies degree" allows Trent to "understand the complexity of indigenous identity in modern Canada," suggesting not only that indigenous identity is singular, but also that Trent University has enough understanding to weigh in on the nature of that identity. This list of supporters is a fairly representative selection of bastions of institutional white-settler Canada; it is significant, if not surprising, that they should come to Boyden's defense.

Confronting this institutional response, many of Boyden's detractors in the Indigenous community point out that even if everything Boyden says about himself is true, his self-definition still does not live up to community standards of Indigenous identity politics. Jago, sums up this position well when he says "[t]his is not a matter of blood, but a matter of belonging…a Native is a person who identifies as Native *and* is recognized as such by an Indigenous community. At its most basic, this is the definition of Indigeneity that few Indigenous people would dispute" ("The Boyden Controversy"). In accordance with Jago's definition, Maracle, who Boyden describes in his article as "[a] wise Indigenous woman I know," refuses to weigh in on Boyden's authenticity because, as a Sto:lo woman, she has "no say in what the Ojibwe people do. If they accept anybody….That's not my business…The people we should be talking to is the Ojibwes of Georgian Bay" (*The Current*). The fact is, though, that although Boyden may feel

accepted by certain Ojibwe communities and families (as well as Métis, Nipmuc, and Cree ones), no community has stepped forward to claim him as belonging to a specific band or place even where individuals have (Jago, "The Boyden Controversy"). Moreover, his claim of adoption within communities is questioned by another of his friends and supporters: Wab Kinew. Despite successfully promoting Boyden's *The Orenda* in the Canada Reads competition and publishing a largely supportive article in the aftermath of the scandal, Kinew points out that "being adopted into a given family doesn't necessarily make you a member of their nation" (Andrew-Gee). Kinew also notes that "[Boyden's] novels remain powerful. But they were always the work of a talented outsider. Even if he is Anishinaabe, he is not a member of the nations he wrote about — the Mushkegowuk, the Huron, the Haudenosaunee. Recognizing the distinctions will inform readers" ("There is room in our circle for Joseph Boyden"). Independent of whether or not Boyden has Indigenous blood, his subject-position as an Indigenous person and particularly an Indigenous spokesperson is problematic because he ignores — as white-settler reading tropes do — the cultural specificity and independent authority of the culture(s) he claims belonging to.

As several critics have noted, Boyden's novels themselves are as problematic as his identity claims because in many ways, they fulfill the stereotypes that Indigenous critics have cause to deplore. First, Boyden's work emphasizes a knowable but separate Indigenous world existing in oppositional conflict with white-settler society. His novels *Three Day Road, Through Black Spruce, The Orenda,* and *Wenjack* are all set

predominantly in the past and in rural Ontario.[16] Likewise, his short story collection *Born with a Tooth* focuses exclusively on markedly Indigenous characters whose worlds clash painfully with colonizing white culture. Where King and Robinson show Indigenous characters interacting (sometimes successfully) with the rest of Canadian society, in Boyden's story collection, the result is always divisive and tragic: suicide, addiction, depression, loss of culture. By these subtle means, Boyden's work adheres more fully to white-settler reading tropes than that of King or Robinson.

Boyden's novels are designed to educate and engage specifically white-settler audiences. Boyden himself describes his role as writer as one of giving white audiences Indigenous experience through reading: "a white person reading my novel, for example —they *are* the Native person, they get to see the world from a perspective that might have been very foreign to them before, and now it's very close" (Ryan 304). Unlike King or Robinson, Boyden does not set limits or conditions on white-settler access to Indigenous experience, but suggests that reading is enough to create genuine understanding. Just as King uses Cherokee, and Robinson Haisla, Boyden uses Cree in several of his novels. But unlike King and Robinson, he always offers either direct or contextual translations: "'*Mona, Nootahwe.* No, Father'…He was a *wemestikushu*, white as a pickerel's belly…'*Ashtum.* Come'" (*TBS* 93). Rather than establishing that full knowledge is a matter of subject-position and work, Boyden makes it his stated mission to provide complete understanding to all readers equally wherever possible. Speaking of his debut novel *Three Day Road*, Boyden explains "I didn't want to go into the novel thinking 'I'm going to teach every Canadian about Native involvement in the war,' but it

[16] Exceptions to this pattern include *Through Black Spruce*'s alternating narrative, which contains some scenes in modern Toronto and New York, while *Three Day Road* sets much of its action on the front lines of World War I in France.

was definitely a passion of mine to want to shine a little light on a part of our history that so few know about" (Boyden to Wyile 222). Clearly, Boyden sees his role as Indigenous writer as shaped by the need to educate white Canadian readers.

Boyden is not alone in viewing his work this way. Speaking of *Three Day Road's* treatment during the Canada Reads competition (where it won audience choice), Anouk Lang argues:

> assertions that the novel is "a book that all Canadians should be proud to read" are worth attending to, as they suggest that instead of taking the book's recuperation of previously submerged histories as symptomatic of a much wider set of issues in present-day Canada still to be resolved, they indicate a different kind of interpretation entirely: a sense of satisfaction at the telling of a history that can be appreciated uniformly across the nation.

What Lang points out is that Canada Reads voters and panellists experienced reading Boyden's book not as a call to present action to redress history, but as an act of redress in and of itself. Their reading of the novel becomes a redeeming act; through their education about the history, they have extinguished their responsibility to respond to it. They "comprehend the act of reading a novel as (and as a substitute for) an active politics of social transformation" or redress (Melamed 24). Thus, Boyden's work fulfills the white-settler reading trope of edification through the reading of Indigenous texts.

Boyden's work also focuses on endemic tragedy in Indigenous lives. As Jago puts it, his work is "focused exclusively on grievance and tragedy…it all fits into the 3-D (drum, dead, drunk) stereotype" ("Why I Question"). Boyden's work does suggest some continuity to Indigenous history and lives in that his first three novels chronicle several

generations of one Cree family. However, these lives are marked by constant inescapable trauma and violence: war, torture, rape, murder, addiction, racism, and death. Of course, King and Robinson also write on these topics, but in their works the trauma is balanced with other elements and resistance is feasible, if not always successful. In Boyden's works, trauma is on display in the service of totalizing cathartic tragedy.

Boyden's approach is more fatalistic that either King's or Robinson's. Hayden King, in reviewing *Orenda* writes that the "Sky People who open each section of the book observe the carnage below and conclude the grim history was pre-determined partly because of the selfishness, arrogance and short-sightedness of the Huron…For Canadians, the Orenda is a colonial scribe and moral alibi" ("Critical Review"). This damning review stands in stark contrast to King's *Green Grass*, whose Sky people spend the entire novel attempting, against the odds, to ameliorate the damage of colonization, rather than resigning to its inevitability. Indeed, *Orenda*'s prologue creates a framework limiting white-settler culpability in colonialism:

> *We had magic before the crows* [Jesuit priests] *came…But who is at fault when that recedes? It's tempting to place blame, though loss should never be weighed in this manner. Who, then, to blame for what we now witness, our children cutting their bodies to pieces or strangling themselves in the dark recesses of their homes or gulping your stinking drink until their bodies fail?* (4)

Rhetorically, this suggests that the Huron people bear at least some of the blame in letting their traditions and people disappear. *Orenda* ends with an epilogue in which "*Aataentsic, the Sky Woman*" laughs at her people when white-settlers arrive "*because we couldn't see our own demise coming*" and concludes that despite this demise, the Huron people have

not irrevocably lost anything: "*Now is what's most important, Aataentsic says. Orenda can't be lost, just misplaced"* (487). This conclusion offers a comfortable reading of colonialism as inevitable and redress as unnecessary, since "now is what is important" and "Orenda" — the magic beliefs of the Huron — is safely immune from being lost. Tragedy becomes an aesthetic centrepiece in Boyden's works, rather than a call to action.

Moreover, Boyden's public persona as a figurehead for Indigenous communities has coalesced around speaking about the most harrowing episodes of Indigenous history. Jago points out that his contributions to periodicals often "focus on grievances" and Boyden himself frequently refers to his own role as an honorary witness at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission ("Why I Question"; "My name is"). His most recently published work, the novella *Wenjack*, is a fictionalized retelling of the true story of Chanie Wenjack, who died in 1966 while trying to walk home from residential school. Boyden ends the novel with Chanie's death from exposure, but shows Chanie's spirit dancing with his animal companions: an inevitable but cathartic death. Contrast this with Robinson's depiction of Lisa's (possible) death at the end of *Monkey Beach* in which her drowning is not inevitable, but a choice, and in which there is no easy catharsis for the reader because the ending is left indeterminate. In many ways, Boyden's management of tragedy in his writing encourages white-settler readings of totalizing cathartic tragedy that King's and Robinson's do not.

Because Boyden's stories rely on such tragic, affective readings, his work does not make the active call to contemporary action that King's and Robinson's do. While it is certainly true that the historical content of Boyden's novels — particularly his focus on residential schools — has tangible social and political effects in the present day, his

novels tend to narrate them as past tragedies rather than present concerns. Or, at least, as present concerns that cannot be ameliorated. Where King and Robinson draw productive lines of connection between past and present, Boyden's characters often become hopelessly bogged down in the history of trauma. There, are, of course, exceptions and variations to how Boyden's work can be interpreted, but his unvarying focus on traumatized Indigenous characters in almost exclusively rural settings contrasts sharply with King's and Robinson's variety of settings, characters, and outcomes.

Boyden has become a member of "the CanLit aristocracy" at least in part because he offers this palatable, familiar depiction of Indigenous life: mourned as part of Canada's now-redeemed past, comfortably isolated from its contemporary existence and part of Canada's self-proclaimed "age of reconciliation" (Andrew-Gee). As Eric Andrew-Gee points out, Boyden is Canada's "perfect reconciliation man. Someone whose sensibility contained the best of European and aboriginal cultures…Someone who knew the history of colonial injustice and cruelty, and never stinted bloody details in the telling, but who spoke about them in a tone more mournful than bitter, always pointing the way toward healing and forgiveness." Note how this assessment of Boyden's suitability relies on all four white-settler reading tropes: "European and aboriginal cultures" are separate entities rather than interpenetrating aspects of Canadian culture. Boyden's work is lauded for dispensing knowledge of "the history of colonial injustice," and though the work maintains a damage-centric focus on the "bloody details," the reward is a cathartic "healing and forgiveness." Given this alignment of Boyden's literary image with white-settler reading tropes and the admitted tenuousness of his Indigenous subject-position, the fact that he has such prestige in Canada's Indigenous literary scene shows just how

efficacious, endemic, and mainstream academic-publishing stereotypes of Indigenous literature have become.

Boyden illustrates important problems with the study of Indigenous literature in Canada whether or not one accepts his Indigenous credentials. By his own admission, Boyden has taken up an extraordinary amount of airtime being the public spokesperson for Indigenous issues (Medley). Hayden King suggests that Boyden is "benefiting from a crafted ambiguity" that appeals to mainstream Canadian society ("Joseph Boyden, where are you from?"). His brand of Indigenous identity appeals to white-settler readers, even as it frustrates Indigenous ones; "for many Indigenous people, the fact of Boyden's fame has become a symbol of the neglect, incomprehension and veiled aggression of even the most well-meaning white Canadians" (Andrew-Gee). The fact that the media spotlight favoured a self-professed "white kid from Willowdale with Native roots" to be a national Indigenous spokesman over the many other talented, prolific Indigenous writers — like King and Robinson — and activists who can firmly trace their roots to specific communities is deeply significant (Wong). Metatawabin, a Cree elder, former chief, and residential school survivor, says of Boyden: "The dominant society recognizes him …He occupies the figment of their imagination. And there's a lot of money to be made there" (qtd in Andrew-Gee). White-settler Canada is content to buy Indigenous identity, and literature, about tropes that are comfortable and recognizable, even when those tropes "[meet] a non-Native standard for a type of race-based identity that [Indigenous peoples] don't recognize" (Jago, "The Boyden Controversy"). Boyden's popularity is what happens when white-settler expectations are more important than Indigenous socio-political realities.

Boyden is the Indigenous writer that white-settler Canada wants and expects, racially, creatively, and ideologically. He demands affective responses to the tragedy of Indigenous existence, but offers cathartic reconciliation in return for learning a history that is largely set in the past, or far away from contemporary, urban Canadian society. He offers complete admission to and understanding of Indigenous communities both in his stated goals and as a person partaking in both (white) Canadian and Indigenous subject-positions. Where King, Robinson, and many Indigenous literary scholars resist white-settler tropes, Boyden enacts them. In doing so, and in taking on the role of representative Indigenous spokesperson despite his limited credentials, Boyden embodies and further embeds the institutional problems with the study and reception of Indigenous literature in white-settler Canada.

Chapter 4: Ameliorating White-Settler Reading Practice

Having demonstrated the tenacious, regressive power of white-settler reading tropes, I propose three strategies for combating their effects: assigning responsibility to white-settlers to read Indigenous literature alert to the dangers of alienating, edifying, affective tropes, changing the institutional culture surrounding Indigenous literature, and attending to the terms set up by Indigenous texts themselves, both creative and critical. I do not claim that there is one correct way to read Indigenous literature, not least because, as I have suggested, it is damaging to consider it an innately homogenous genre. What is important — particularly for white-settler readers and institutions — is to abdicate critical authority when reading Indigenous literature and instead cultivate an awareness of the tropes so often applied to these texts and the work Indigenous writers do to resist them. The fact that important writers like Thomas King and Eden Robinson as well as a significant body of Indigenous criticism consistently challenge these tropes means an awareness of them is crucial to a full reading of the literature. Moreover, it is an important social and political step to make in order to allow white-settler readers who are interested in performing reconciliation-restitution to approach the process meaningfully and without recapitulating their inherited colonial authority.

I have argued that these tropes grew out of a response to Indigenous activism that stirred up feelings of white guilt in white-settler readers. The reading practices, developed within academic and literary institutions, have created a way for white-settler Canada to redirect this guilt, but have crucially not responded to the key issues of the Indigenous activism and writing that created the guilt in the first place. Moreover, as these

stereotypical attitudes have moved from cultural institutions into the public sphere, they have closed down or even undone gains made by socio-political Indigenous activism. To get outside this feedback loop and actually engage the issues, white-settler readers must relinquish their right to feel comfortable; they need to, if not feel guilty, at least feel responsible to actively address ongoing colonial violence and recognize their own privileged position as readers and critics. Moreover, the interpretive power over Indigenous literature should be vested in Indigenous writers and texts.

Trope-Resistant Readings

The first step to creating better white-settler reading practices is to note and resist the tropes that are currently in circulation. White-settlers should be critique readings of Indigenous texts that promote a separate or past Indigenous world, privilege white-settler edification about Indigenous experience, and rely on affective responses (particularly to cathartic tragedy). Such critical context is important to recognizing the resistant elements of texts like King's and Robinson's but perhaps even more crucial to understanding texts like Joseph Boyden's that earn popular appreciation by playing into these tropes. This awareness is an extension of post-colonial reading, but goes beyond simply looking for traces of colonial damage and influence in Indigenous texts. Significantly, it combats specific configurations of white-settler reading practice that have developed to give the comforting impression of progress by positing a deliberately distorted understanding of what Indigenous literature is doing and saying.

White-settlers need to be aware of how these tropes can other Indigenous peoples. White-settler reading tropes insist that Indigenous experience is distant temporally and geographically from contemporary Canadian existence thereby relegating Indigenous peoples to non-participation in and exclusion from urban environments, diverse communities, and contemporary politics. Whether or not white-settlers personally interact with Indigenous peoples, the history, politics, and social realities of each are fundamentally, consistently conjoined. Canadian and Indigenous worlds are not completely separate even if they have different perspectives and emphases; they are fundamentally interwoven communities even when — especially when — they conflict.

Of course, it is also important to remember that there is no monolithic Indigenous community to be assumed by writers or readers of Indigenous texts. The common concerns of Indigenous peoples are often instituted by a shared response to colonialism. Resistance is an important and effective political unifier, but to assume cultural homogeneity on the basis of a common cause is specious. As Kristina Fagan explains,

> [t]here is a deep value in looking at the shared history and perspectives of Native people on their own terms. But this move should be balanced, not by deconstruction of Native knowledge, but by careful attention to the diversity of Native people, their particular complexities whether they be individual, tribal, regional, political etc. Such specificity, which is often missing in criticism of Native literature, can give content and meaning to our broader work on Native people. (*What About You?* 244)

The different nations, worldviews, experiences, and communities that come under the umbrella term Indigenous are contentious both within and outside the community. There

is no one definition of Indigenous that is universally agreed upon (as demonstrated by the Boyden controversy); that is, Indigenous "writers are unique and not only products of 'groupness'" (Fagan, *What about You?* 245). What is important, then, is that in reading Indigenous literature, white-settler readers in particular pay attention to the cultural specificity of the text rather than expecting it to speak to all Indigenous peoples, issues, and worldviews. King and Robinson model such specificity; *Green Grass* illustrates important Sun Dance protocols including that it must not be photographed, *Monkey Beach* introduces food and plant uses specific to the northern Pacific coast. White-settler readers are responsible for both recognizing the interpenetrating existence of Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds, histories, and spaces, and for appreciating the cultural specificity of those worlds, histories, and spaces.

As I have shown, both King and Robinson set important limits on educating readers who may not be knowledgeable about Indigenous language and history. In doing so, they create responsibilities for readers to bring or find knowledge from outside of the text to bear on its reading. Particularly for white-settler readers, this may involve learning unfamiliar history, geography, and language. This allusive strategy is ubiquitous in literature. What makes it different in Indigenous texts is the fact that the allusions are (in)accessible to different groups than they usually are. They require white-settler readers to do work, as Robinson points out, "the same way we have been expected to learn the context of mainstream stories" (Robinson to Baker). Of course, King and Robinson meet their readers more than half way; they do significant work to indicate the historic, social, and geographic specificity of the characters they write about and they are writing in English. But they do not do all the work, nor should white-settler readers rely on them to

do so. Even if it means going to new sources of knowledge, or admitting a degree of ignorance, white-settler readers need to be prepared to educate themselves in ways they may not be used to in other genres.

It is also important for white settler-readers to resist superficial affective responses to Indigenous literature. This is not to say that readers should not engage emotionally or aesthetically with a text; of course that is part of any reading. What I suggest is that an emotional response to an Indigenous text that ignores the political underpinning or reality of the text is incomplete. Residential school attendance in *Monkey Beach* directly leads to alcoholism, rape, and murder in the novel's contemporary present; government legislation displaces Will in *Medicine River* and dictates the way Tecumseh's father can make a living in *Truth and Bright Water*. The continuing consequences of residential schools and restrictive government legislation demand more than emotional acknowledgement: they demand socio-political attitudes, infrastructures, and activities change. Where Indigenous literature uses tragic or humorous elements to highlight socio-political realities, those realities should inform any response to the text. Labeling such stories as merely funny or tragic is inadequate, especially for white-settler readers who feel they are decreasing their colonial culpability by reading Indigenous literature.

Revising Academy Management of Indigenous Literature

Teaching white-settler students to cede their critical authority to read Indigenous literature as trope-resistant and culturally specific will require changes in white-settler institutions, particularly in university and publishing culture. Of course, there is great

variety amongst white-settler engagement with Indigenous texts at the individual and institutional level: some more useful than others. Nevertheless, there are still many traces of damaging colonial reading practices to be discerned in institutional treatments of King, Robinson, and Boyden texts: the reviews of these writers' works, the prize histories of each author, the institutional responses to the Boyden scandal, the preponderance of Indigenous criticism targeting the tropes I have delineated, the uneven development of Indigenous Studies and Literature Departments in universities across the country. Rooting out these problems in academia should be an institutional priority across Canada.

The study of Indigenous literature at schools and universities is a step in the right direction; it has created a greater readership for Indigenous texts, more critical attention for those texts, and, increasingly, a body of criticism written by Indigenous commentators. However, it is important that the simple presence of Indigenous literature in classrooms not be celebrated as a complete solution to institutional racism. The difference between Indigenous existence and presence within the academy is analogous to the difference Gerald Vizenor delineates between survival and survivance: "practices of survivance create an active presence, more than the instincts of survival, function, or subsistence" (*Survivance* 11). For Indigenous content to matter in the academy, it needs to change the academy, not simply survive in the form of stereotypes. Fagan points out that Indigenous scholars, and courses within universities are still vulnerable to appropriation:

> Does the inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge in the university benefit Native people or does it just give the university the appearance of diversity?...If we see ourselves as helping Native people, have we asked them what kind of help they

> want? Does this stance of 'helping' contribute to our own sense of authority?...to change our work we must also change institutional expectations and policies. (*What About You?* 248)

If the expectation universities and white-settler students have for Indigenous literature is simply that it will burnish their multicultural, anti-racist credentials, then it is contributing to the "sense of authority" and rectitude that Fagan describes more than it is representing Indigenous peoples. This sense of authority and rectitude is based on the academy "provid[ing] cultural solutions for racialized economic and social disorders;" substituting "overvalorized and undertheorized literature" for real socio-political action (Melamed 109). Instead, universities should change materially in response to Indigenous content: change hiring practices, teaching practices, course offerings, and student outreach. Such substantive rather than symbolic changes will open up possibilities for Canadian institutions to truly align their socio-political power with the aims of Indigenous peoples.

Publishing and prize-giving institutions also need to change in order to ensure they approach Indigenous literature without white-settler reading tropes. Currently, the publishing and prize industries in Canada favour the kind of Indigenous literature that white Canadians want to read: focussed on distant, edified, reconciliatory, non-complicit roles for white-settler readers. Even in the publication of works like those of King and Robinson, the marketing focuses on palatable tropes white-settler readers find in their novels rather than on the socio-political content of the works themselves.

Of course, this is not the case for every reviewer of every Indigenous text, but it is a trend established enough that Boyden can win more awards than King in a career that is over a decade and nine published works shorter. Literary Canada has created a narrative

for itself that includes Indigenous peoples but is comfortable for white-settler readers. Our cultural and political institutions have distorted the appraisal of works coming from Indigenous writers; "[i]f we are to create space for a true multiculturalism, for a true multiplicity of voices, we need to reject the kind of political system which creates prize cultures that focus upon the definition and creation of a national literature for exclusionary, expropriatory, and marketing purposes" (Scott and Tucker-Abramson 19). In order to shift this tendency, white-settler readers need to have books marketed to them as uncomfortable contemporary commentaries rather than edifying depictions of distant trauma by publishers and prize givers. The literary merit of writers like King and Robinson is not in question, but the mode in which their works are read, particularly by white-settler readers is still unhelpfully, colonially influenced by publishers, reviewers, and prize-giving institutions. In trying to create a palatable version of Canadian history for contemporary times, white-settler readers have found ways to read and approach Indigenous literature that relegate Indigenous experience to tragic, separate, past environments, and downplay our continuing complicity in colonization.

Indigenous Critical Authority

Perhaps most importantly, Indigenous theorists and writers need to be given priority in creating a theoretical framework for reading Indigenous literature. This does not mean that white-settler critics and readers should not engage with this literature:

> We *want* non-Natives to read, engage, and study Native literature. The survival of Native authors, if not Native people in general, depends on it. But we do not need

> modern literary colonizers. We only ask that non-Natives who study and write about Native peoples do so with respect and a sense of responsibility to Native community. (Weaver, "Splitting the Earth" 11)

Instead of abandoning Indigenous literature altogether, white-settler Canadians should be taking their lead from Indigenous theorists and texts rather than being "modern literary colonizers." They need to be part of the conversation, but not its directors or gatekeepers. As Margery Fee puts it, "[w]ithout a conversation with living First Nations people about what they think and feel about their writing, their culture and their lives, the likelihood that we will have produced bad interpretation arises, as we make ourselves the experts, and them into the mute subjects of monologic expertise" (*Reading Aboriginal Lives* 7). This danger is properly counterbalanced by allowing Indigenous voices to direct the conversation on Indigenous literature.

The debate about belonging and the continued formation of this critical field does not belong to white-settler communities, but to Indigenous ones; "[j]ust as Native American literature by definition can only be produced by Native writers, so Native American literary criticism (in contrast to criticism of Native American literature) must be in the hands of Native critics to define and articulate, from resources *we* choose. It must be simply a criticism of our own" (Weaver, "Splitting the Earth" 17). As I have shown, the texts of King and Robinson participate in this project of formulating Indigenous frameworks because they resist dominant tropes of Indigenous literature, at the same time setting up new interpretive recommendations; "contemporary texts contain the critical contexts needed for their own interpretation and, because of the intertextuality of Native American literature, the critical commentary and contexts necessary for the

interpretation of works by other Native writers" (Blaeser 59-60). Because this crucial information is encoded within the texts themselves, they must be read attentively rather than being shoe-horned into a pre-existing set of tropes applied from without.

Indigenous theorists are already busily combatting many of the tropes I have argued are challenged and revealed by the writing and treatment of King and Robinson. Many of these scholars focus on providing alternatives to the damage-based affective responses to Indigenous literature that are so prevalent amongst white-settler readers and institutions. Eve Tuck, "submit[s] that a desire-based framework is an antidote to damage-centered research" (416). By this she means recording not just the trauma or brokenness of communities, but also the lived daily reality, the hopes, desires, and possibilities of that community. This strikes me as a remarkably similar balancing act to the one described and performed by King and Robinson: "concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (Tuck 416). Exploring such complexity allows for non-stereotypical Indigenous identities to emerge, which in turn challenge other white-settler stereotypes and provide a more complete view of Indigenous lived experience: experience reflected in the works of King and Robinson.

According to several Indigenous critics, white-settler readers should also pay attention to the cultural specificity of many Indigenous texts rather than imagining a pan-Indigenous identity that can be accessed and understood through any piece of Indigenous literature. Expecting a pan-Indigenous identity relies on a colonial construct that may be useful to Indigenous people as a common cause to resist colonialism, but when applied as a uniform identity by white-settlers becomes yet another version of the *Indian Act*,

creating white definitions of belonging and applying them to Indigenous communities. Jago explains this danger in his reaction to Boyden's identity claims:

> Something that appears to be hard for Non-Native people to accept is that they don't get to define our communities for us anymore. This is *our* debate, and it's one taking place, in separate forms, in more than 600 different communities across Canada…The concept of Native as its own identity (and not as a placeholder word for a specific tribal or nation identity), is a product of colonialism and the Indian Act. ("The Boyden Controversy").

Jago's formulation insists that no Indigenous author speaks uniformly for all Indigenous peoples, and that therefore, any white-settler reader engaging with an Indigenous text is engaging with a specific formulation of Indigenous identity and experience, not a pan-Indigenous one. Respecting this specificity is a key responsibility of white-settler readers.

The desire for access to broad pan-Indigenous knowledge leads to a second problem: the idea that Indigenous culture can be learned and then explained to and by outsiders. King himself sums the problem up succinctly: "[e]verybody tries to hit upon one particular Indian at any point in time to answer all the questions about Indian affairs in the whole of North America. Most Indians won't take that job, so people go looking for someone who will. Most times it's a non-Indian who thinks he knows all about Indians" (King to Lutz 109). White-settler readers need to appreciate Indigenous as a category they do not have the power to define. Instead of trying to pin down a definitive understanding of what it is to be Indigenous, white-settler readers should listen to the voices from the many culturally specific communities negotiating positions within and around that designation without weighing in themselves.

Such conscious withdrawing from authority requires continual self-examination amongst white-settler readers, in particular those teaching or commentating on Indigenous literature. In large part, this means relinquishing comfortable narratives in which ongoing white-settler complicity is minimized: the comfort provided by white-settler reading tropes. As Leslie Roman explains, white-settler readers need to cultivate "a willingness to be included in narratives which fully account for the daily ways we (whites) benefit from conferred racial privilege as well as from our complicity in the often invisible institutional and structural workings of racism" (84). This is not to say that white-settlers should disintegrate into guilty self-flagellation, but it does mean that they need to acknowledge the continued presence of racist, colonial infrastructure. The presence of that infrastructure creates inherited benefits for white-settlers of every political stripe, benefits that come at the cost of Indigenous peoples and that demand active, material redress. The very beginning of that redress is resisting the ideals that white-settler readers can gain moral equity through emotional sympathy. Fee sums up this principle as expressed in the works of Leslie Silko by arguing that white-settler writers (and readers) must acknowledge their own subject-position before trying to come to terms with others; "to simply slide into a new identity, while enforcing a fixed, authentic identity on the other" is simply a way of avoiding the acknowledgement of white privilege and colonial complicity (*Ethnicity and Aboriginal Peoples* 687).

It is not easy to give up on being in the right by dint of being well-intentioned. However, in the case of Indigenous literature, giving up moral and cultural authority is what is required of white-settler academics and readers. Laurie Kruk writes about her own developments and failures in teaching Indigenous literature properly, and explores

the personal motivations and biases that contributed to her teaching experience: "I think in a way I was protecting both the students *and* myself from the full exploration of these questions of identity…[that] stem from our resistance to content that frightens as it implicates us" (312). Kruk's honest assessment of her difficulties and shortcomings is an example of the kind of self-critique white-settler teachers and readers of Indigenous literature must employ. Even more than this, it is the sort of critique they need to be willing to hear from Indigenous writers and critics. White-settlers must cede authority over Indigenous texts, and the assessment of their own performance to Indigenous authors. It is a difficult process, but it is not anything that has not been implicitly demanded of Indigenous authors and critics. In fact, all that is being asked is that white-settler critics remember the socio-political position they have inherited; "[t]hose non-Aboriginals who have spent long careers 'between' cultures do not 'lose' their whiteness or avoid any responsibility for colonization, any more than do Aboriginal people instantly become assimilated by the adoption of Western culture" (Fee and Russell 198). It is all but impossible for Indigenous authors to write outside the context of being Indigenous; until that changes, the same should be true for white-settlers.

Conclusions

In Canada over the past 60 years, Indigenous communities have been increasingly visible politically, legally, socially, and culturally. The political activism and organizing of the 1960s onward secured Indigenous peoples space in classrooms, publishing houses, political platforms, national news coverage and Canadian legislation. Despite this and

other significant accomplishments, colonial attitudes have persisted in constraining and distorting Indigenous challenges to Canada's legal and ideological foundations. Indigenous works suffer from similar constraints to other minority literatures, but to an even greater extent. This is because Indigenous presence and resistance in Canada goes to the very heart of its national cultural viability since it raises questions about the physical land it occupies and the ethics of its doing so; for white-settler Canadians in particular, it destabilizes the validity of a history, state, and infrastructure that privileges white Canadians above all others.

This being the case, the management of Indigenous literatures in the Canadian academy has developed to downplay Indigenous socio-political challenges to comfortable, established narratives of Canada: narratives that elide Indigenous presence, authority, and strength in favour of tropes that depict Indigenous peoples as separate from white-settler Canada, archaic, culturally homogenous (and therefore intelligible), and irredeemably dysfunctional. Colonialism continues in white-settler readings "not only [as] a material practice of dispossession but as a representational practice of social scientific discourse" (Simpson and Smith 5). Effectively, these tropes have defused the content of Indigenous socio-political activism that forced white-settler Canada to pay attention to Indigenous peoples in the first place by maintaining the fictions of distance, colonial authority, and probity for non-Indigenous Canada. Academy inclusion, paradoxically, becomes a means of stifling rather than amplifying the voices of Indigenous writers and thinkers. As a result of these trends in academia, popular Canadian culture embraces erroneous ideas about Indigenous literatures and identities, leaving Indigenous communities the task of, yet again, fending off colonial authority and

definitions to make space for themselves in Canadian society. In many ways, the current socio-political climate is a mirror of what it was in the 1960s: Indigenous representations are still colonially skewed, white–settler understandings are still authoritative.

I have argued that the tools to ameliorate this appropriative loop are already available in the works of Indigenous writers and theorists like King and Robinson. If white-settlers resist reading Indigenous literatures according to self-serving tropes and instead attend to the voices of Indigenous critics and writers, several new opportunities become available. First, white-settler readers can stop being misguided proponents of stereotypical views of Indigenous peoples. At the very least, this should mean non-Indigenous readers become citizens with fewer assumptions and more facts about Indigenous perspectives and experiences. Second, by attending to the socio-political content of some of these perspectives, white-settler readers may be inspired to make material changes in the ways they vote, protest, listen, work, hire, speak, research, and engage. Literature has long been a source of socio-political ideas, and although I have no delusions that in this case it can solve all the uneasiness of Indigenous-Canadian relations, it can serve as a beginning. As so many Indigenous activists, theorists, and writers have said of white-settler Canada, "[n]ow they must listen to and learn from us" (Cardinal, *The Unjust Society* 17). If white-settler readers can listen and learn, if they cede their authority to decide what Indigenous texts mean, and if they can admit their own discomfort and complicity with Canada's legacy of violence and apathy towards Indigenous peoples, then material change becomes more likely: not just in classrooms, but in all of Canada.

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Appendix 1: Indigenous Content at Canadian Universities

This table is a collation of information from Canadian University websites and professors. In order to confirm my contention that the Canadian academy began to pay attention to Indigenous literature and content beginning in the 1960s, I wanted to know generally when content and courses began to appear in Canadian universities. Although information was not uniformly available from all universities, this table confirms that the very earliest courses began in the 60s and 70s followed by an increased number of Indigenous content courses in the 1980s and 1990s culminating in standalone Indigenous Studies Departments in the 2000s and 2010s. The great variety of information available through institutions' websites and institutional memories points to the fact that although Indigenous content is now an established part of Canadian academia, the history of its entry into the academy is under-examined. This table is a small snapshot of that history.

≈ Approximately
— Unknown

University	***Indigenous Content Courses First Offered***	***Indigenous Studies Credentials First Offered***	***Indigenous Studies Department/ Program Founded***	***First Indigenous Faculty Hired***	***Indigenous Literature Courses First Offered***	***Indigenous Literature Courses Mandatory for English Degree***	***Indigenous Literature Courses Currently Offered (2020-2021)***
Dalhousie University	≈ 1975 (Transition Year Program)[1]	2015 (interdisciplinary Indigenous studies program)[1]	None[1]	2020 (In English Department)[1]	—	No[1]	Yes[2]

University	***Indigenous Content Courses First Offered***	***Indigenous Studies Credentials First Offered***	***Indigenous Studies Department/ Program Founded***	***First Indigenous Faculty Hired***	***Indigenous Literature Courses First Offered***	***Indigenous Literature Courses Mandatory for English Degree***	***Indigenous Literature Courses Currently Offered (2020-2021)***
University of Victoria	1969 (Linguistics courses teaching Indigenous languages)[3]	1974 (Education and Linguistics offer Native Indian Language Diploma Program)[3] 2001 (minor and major offered through Faculty of Humanities)[4]	2018[5]	—	—	—	Yes (mixed Indigenous and non-Indigenous texts)[6]
Concordia University	2010[7]	2013[7]	2013[7]	2013[7]	—	No[8]	Yes[9]
Queens University	Unknown, but at least some courses were offered prior to 2013 when they became part of the Minor in Indigenous Studies[10]	2013 (Through Faculty of Arts and Science)[10]	None (Administered through the Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures)[10]	—	2013 for sure, but probably earlier[10]	No[10]	Yes[11]

University	*Indigenous Content Courses First Offered*	*Indigenous Studies Credentials First Offered*	*Indigenous Studies Department/ Program Founded*	*First Indigenous Faculty Hired*	*Indigenous Literature Courses First Offered*	*Indigenous Literature Courses Mandatory for English Degree*	*Indigenous Literature Courses Currently Offered (2020-2021)*
University of Toronto	≈1990s[12]	—	—	1998 (English Department)[12]	1998[12]	Yes[12]	Yes[13]
University of Western Ontario	≈1990s[14]	≈2008[14]	≈2008 (stand-alone program with links to multiple faculties)[14]	—	2006 for sure, but probably earlier[14]	No[14]	Yes (course on global Indigenous literature)[15]
Memorial University of Newfoundland	—	—	1997[16]	—	—	Yes (for English Honours Major)[16]	Yes[17]
University of Waterloo	—	2019[18]	—	—	—	No[18]	Yes[19]
University of Saskatchewan	≈1980[20]	1982[20]	1983[20]	—	≈1980[20]	No[20]	Yes[21]
University of Ottawa	1982[22]	—	2013[22]	—	—	—	Yes (mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous texts)[23]

University	*Indigenous Content Courses First Offered*	*Indigenous Studies Credentials First Offered*	*Indigenous Studies Department/ Program Founded*	*First Indigenous Faculty Hired*	*Indigenous Literature Courses First Offered*	*Indigenous Literature Courses Mandatory for English Degree*	*Indigenous Literature Courses Currently Offered (2020-2021)*
Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue	1983[24]	2007[24]	2016[24]	—	1985 (as part of teacher training program)[24]	N/A	N/A
University of Alberta	1984[25]	1984[25]	1984[25]	1985 (possibly earlier)[25]	1984 [25]	Yes[26]	Yes[27]
Carlton University	1992 (through school of Canadian Studies)[28]	—	2010[28]	—	—	—	Yes[29]
York University	2006[30]	2018[30]	None (housed in Department of Equity Studies, but moving to Department of Humanities as of July 2020)[30]	—	2005[30]	No[30]	Yes (mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous texts)[31]
University of Windsor	—	—	None[32]	—	—	—	Yes[33]
University of Guelph	1995[34]	None[34]	None[34]	1995 (Thomas King)[34]	1995[34]	No[34]	Yes[35]

University	*Indigenous Content Courses First Offered*	*Indigenous Studies Credentials First Offered*	*Indigenous Studies Department/ Program Founded*	*First Indigenous Faculty Hired*	*Indigenous Literature Courses First Offered*	*Indigenous Literature Courses Mandatory for English Degree*	*Indigenous Literature Courses Currently Offered (2020-2021)*
University of Calgary	Late 1980s[36]	2004[36]	2004[36]	—	Late 1980s for courses containing Indigenous texts, early 1990s for standalone Indigenous Literature courses[36]	Yes (for English Majors)[36]	Yes[37]
Trent University	1969[38]	1965 (Anthropology)[39]	1969[38]	1975[38]	—	No[40] But Indigenous content courses are required[41]	Yes[42]
Ryerson University	—	None[43]	None[43]	2020[43]	—	No[43]	Yes[44]
University of British Columbia	—	—	2001[45]	—	1998 (earliest archived course listing, possibly earlier)[46]	—	Yes[47]
Universite de Montréal	1961[48]	2015[48]	2015[48]	—	—	—	Yes[49]
McGill University	—	—	2014[50]	—	—	—	Yes[51]

University	***Indigenous Content Courses First Offered***	***Indigenous Studies Credentials First Offered***	***Indigenous Studies Department/ Program Founded***	***First Indigenous Faculty Hired***	***Indigenous Literature Courses First Offered***	***Indigenous Literature Courses Mandatory for English Degree***	***Indigenous Literature Courses Currently Offered (2020-2021)***
University of Manitoba	1973[52]	—	1975[52]	at least since 2003 (in English, possibly earlier)[53]	2003[54]		Yes[55]
McMaster University	1987[56]	—	1991[56]	—	1987 for courses containing Indigenous texts, 1995 for standalone Indigenous Literature courses[56]	No[56]	Yes[57]

Appendix 2: Prize Histories of King, Robinson, and Boyden

This table is an attempt to quantify the nebulous public appreciation of King, Robinson, and Boyden in order to compare their mainstream cultural status. As I note above, qualitative judgements are always a part of prize-winning, but this table provides a snapshot of how these three authors compare in public recognition in four of the most prestigious award categories available to Canadian authors: The Giller Prize, The Governor General's Award for Literature, the Canada Reads Competition, and the Order of Canada. The fact that Boyden, with the shortest career and fewest published works, should have the most prizes and nominations speaks to the mainstream popularity of his works; they earn greater public recognition than either King's or Robinson's.

	Thomas King	**Eden Robinson**	**Joseph Boyden**
Scotiabank Giller Prize[58]	Appointed to Giller Prize Jury (2002)	Shortlisted (*Monkey Beach*) Shortlisted (*Son of a Trickster*) Appointed to Giller Prize Jury (2020)	**Won** (*Through Black Spruce*) Longlisted (*The Orenda*)
Governor General's Award[59]	Nominated (*A Coyote Columbus Story*) Nominated (*Green Grass Running Water*) **Won** (*Back of the Turtle*)	Shortlisted (*Monkey Beach*)	Shortlisted (*Three Day Road*) Shortlisted (*The Orenda*)
Canada Reads[60]	Nominated (*Green Grass Running Water*) Nominated (*The Inconvenient Indian*)	Nominated (*Son of a Trickster*)	Nominated (*Three Day Road*) **Won** (*The Orenda*)
Order of Canada[61]	**Appointed** 2004		**Appointed** 2015
Nominations	**5**	**4**	**6**
Wins	**2**	**0**	**3**
Years Active	**1989-2020 (31 Years)**	**1996-2020 (24 Years)**	**2001-2020 (19 Years)**

Appendix 3: Timeline of Indigenous Activism 1960-2020

While this is by no means an exhaustive list, the following table outlines some of the major results of Indigenous activism and organizing from 1960 to the present day. It gives an overview of the remarkable legal, social, and political strides made by Indigenous peoples in Canada in just the last 60 years. While some of these events may be familiar to a mainstream Canadian audience, many more of them are part of white-settler Canada's blind spot regarding socio-political issues arising in Indigenous communities. As this timeline demonstrates, no one of these events are one-off issues that have been finally settled; they are part of a continuous tradition of activism seeking to improve Indigenous lives, protect and enshrine Indigenous rights, and win redress and recognition from the Canadian government. The context of this tradition is woven into the novels of King and Robinson and is important to the reading of Indigenous literature in Canada more generally.

Year	Event
1960	• Status First Nations People Enfranchised[62]
1961	• National Indian Council Founded[63]
1967	• National Indian Brotherhood and Canadian Métis Society Formed[63]
1969	• White Paper Introduced and Defeated[64] • Residential Schools Transferred to the Control of Canada's Federal Government[65]
1970	• Discussions about an Inuit Territory (that would eventually become Nunavut) begin[62] • Jeanette Corbiere Lavell files a lawsuit contesting the loss of her First Nations status through marriage to a white man arguing this contravenes Canada's *Bill of Rights*[66]
1971	• Inuit Tabiriit Kanatami is Formed[67] • Jeanette Corbiere Lavell wins her appeal in Federal court arguing that the *Indian Act* controverts equality guaranteed for women under Canada's *Bill of Rights.* The case was appealed and decided before the Supreme Court in 1973[66] • Yvonne Bédard takes the Six Nations Band to court for trying to evict her from on-reserve housing on the basis of her having lost her First Nations status through marriage to a white man. The Supreme Court of Ontario rules in her favour, but the case was appealed and decided before the Supreme Court in 1973[68] • Hydro-Québec begins the James Bay Hydro Electric Project, flooding and contaminating large amounts of Cree land and starting a decades-long dispute over the project with the James Bay Cree[69]
1972	• NIB becomes NGO organization representing Indigenous peoples at the UN[70]

1973	• Supreme Court Acknowledges Indigenous Land Title[71] • Committee formed to Negotiate Land Claims with Yukon First Nations[62] • NIB files a land claim on behalf of Northwest Territories First Nations for a third of the territory[62] • The cases of Jeannette Corbiere Lavell and Yvonne Bédard — both challenging the removal of their First Nations Status rights under sexist provisions in the *Indian Act* — are tried together before the Supreme Court of Canada. The court rules against the two women, saying that Canada's *Bill of Rights*, and its guarantees of equality for women, could not supersede legislation contained in the *Indian Act*[66 68]
1974	• Native Women's Association of Canada Formed[72] • Ralph Steinehaur becomes First Indigenous Lieutenant-Governor[62]
1975	• NIB replaced as UN representative of Indigenous peoples by the World Council on Indigenous Peoples (WCIP)[70]
1977	• Willie Adams becomes the first Inuit to enter Parliament as a member of the Senate[62]
1980	• "Constitution Express" activists travel from Vancouver to Ottawa to raise awareness about Indigenous rights and issues[62]
1981	• Sandra Lovelace Nicholas takes Canada to court before the United Nations Human Rights Committee, claiming that the *Indian Act* violated international laws. The UN rules that Canada is in contravention of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights[73]
1982	• The Assembly of First Nations is formed[74] • Canadian Constitution is patriated with specific recognition of Indigenous land title and treaty rights[62]
1983	• Tsilhqot'in Nation blockades logging access to Xeni Gwet'in territory. After negotiations break down, the Tsilhqot'in Nation brings the Province of British Columbia to court in 1998[75]
1984	• Inuvialuit Final Agreement Signed[62]
1985	• Indian Act amended to restore status to First Nations women who lost status by marrying non-First Nations men[62]
1990	• MP Elijah Harper symbolically blocks passage of the Meech Lake over its failure to consult Indigenous peoples[76] • Oka Crisis when Mohawk activists block golf course development on a traditional burial ground[77]
1991	• Public inquiry into residential schools[65] • Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples begins to investigate the relationship between Indigenous peoples and Canada[62]
1993	• Nunavut Land Claims Agreement signed[62] • "War in the Woods" at Clayoquot Sound: Tlaoquiaht First Nations and environmentalists blockade Old Growth

	logging[78]
1994	• Dudley George killed by the Ontario Provincial Police during the Ipperwash Crisis[79]
1995	• Upper Nicola First Nations members blockade Douglas Lake Ranch over fishing rights[62] • Gustafsen Lake Standoff[80]
1996	• Last residential school closes[62] • Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples reports[62]
1998	• Tsilhqot'in Nation begins proceedings against the Province of British Columbia over the right of the province to grant logging licenses on traditional Tsilhqot'in territory without consultation with Tsilhqot'in peoples[75]
1999	• Nunavut Territory formed[81] • Nisga'a Treaty Approved; first modern Treaty signed in British Columbia[62]
2000	• Nisga'a First Nation Land Claim Agreement becomes first modern treaty in BC to go into effect[62]
2005	• Kelowna Accord[62] • The First Nations Child, Family Caring Society of Canada (FNCFCSC) release a report detailing how provincial and federal government disputes over paying for First Nations social and medical care impact First Nations peoples, particularly children. The report recommends adopting Jordan's Principle: guaranteed access to necessary government services without delays caused by jurisdictional arguments[82]
2007	• Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement comes into effect[83] • UN passes the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; Canada votes against[84] • AFN and FNCFCSC launch a complaint lead by Cindy Blackstock with the Canadian Human Rights Commission against the Federal government for discriminating against First Nations children by underfunding child welfare services; the government of Canada tries to have the case dismissed several times over the next nine years[82] • Sharon McIvor wins her case (after 17 years) against the BC government for discriminating against First Nations women who regained their status under amendments to the *Indian Act* in 1985. Under the amendment, only the children of these women inherited their status rights, not their grandchildren (unlike men with the same status rights)[85]
2008	• Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada is formed[62] • Prime Minister Stephen Harper formally apologizes to residential school survivors[62]
2011	• Bill C-3 Passed to ensure status rights restored to First Nations women under the 1985 amendment to the *Indian Act* could be passed on to children of those women the same way as for First Nations men[85]
2012	• Idle No More Movement begins[86]

2014	• Supreme Court of Canada rules that Aboriginal title extends to all lands that they traditionally occupied even when those lands are not part of reserves. This gives First Nations the right to be meaningfully consulted on any use of Crown lands in their traditional territory. This resolves a case brought against the Province of British Columbia by the Tsilhqot'in Nation in 1998[75]
2015	• Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada reports[62] • Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women begins[87]
2016	• Supreme Court rules that the legal definition of "Indian" applies to Métis and non-status First Nations people[62] • Canada endorses UN Declaration on Indigenous Rights[62] • The AFN, FNCFCSC, and Cindy Blackstock win their case at the Canadian Human Rights Commission; Canada is found to have discriminated against First Nations Children by underfunding child welfare programs[82]
2017	• Sixties Scoop survivors receive settlement from federal government[62]
2019	• Wet'suwet'en First Nation members begin protesting the Trans Mountain Pipeline passing through their territory[62] • Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women reports[62] • Bill S-3, which aims to respond to sexist provisions in the Indian Act comes into effect[62]
2020	• Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs protest RCMP presence on traditional Wet'suwet'en territory enforcing the construction of the Coastal GasLink project. Protests supporting Wet'suwet'en sovereignty take place across Canada. Members of the Tyendinaga and Kahnawake Mohawk communities block rail lines in support of the RCMP withdrawing from Wet'suwet'en territory[88]

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