Indigenous Relationality: Women, Sex, and The Animate

by

Brittany Johnson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Faculty of Native Studies
University of Alberta

© Brittany Johnson, 2017

Abstract

"Indigenous Relationality: Sex, Women, and The Animate" discusses Indigenous relationality from within the context of animacy, kinship, and sexualities through a decolonial approach of Two-Eyed Seeing. Using nehiyaw ways of knowing as the foundational theoretical framework through which the author analyzes texts, this thesis undertakes close readings of Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, Katherena Vermette's *The Break*, Zoe Hopkins' *It Takes a Village*, and Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer*. The author draws exclusively from Indigenous women writers for primary texts, and primarily Indigenous theorists and scholars to analyze the texts and formulate an argument for Indigenous relationality within Indigenous women's writing. The creative practices of beadwork and burlesque are also analyzed as texts. Both are forms of Indigenous theorizing and relationality, and both serve as means of teaching, healing, and decolonizing. Within this thesis is also a small section from a larger body of creative writing. Creative writing in and of itself also does theoretical work, as Indigenous narratives provide teachings and create strong foundations for further learning; these stories do the important work of passing on knowledge to future generations. The use of nehiyawewin throughout this research is imperative to form a decolonial lens through which to analyze each text and/or performative act.

Acknowledgements

In ensuring that I pass on my research in a good way, I wish to acknowledge and thank those who have inspired, taught, and been champions in supporting me.

To my nehiyawewin teachers: Reuben Quinn, âyihay for teaching me a course in nehiyawewin in 2016, and for being kind enough to pass on your knowledge to me even after the course. To Dorothy Thunder, âyihay for your teachings in a nehiyawewin intensive course during nîpin 2017; I cannot wait to learn more from you. To Angela Van Essen, âyihay for TAing for Dorothy and for being there for our learning, and for being such an inspiration to learn. To Simon Bird, âyihay for your online 6 AM conversational nehiyawewin classes in nîpin 2017, and for being available for my questions. You all have set me on a good path of relearning my language, and I hope that I will get to learn more from each of you in years to come; kinanâskomitinâwâw!

To Tanner and my beautiful babies, Wyatt and Clara: I thank you for your never-ending love, snuggles, patience, and supplies of coffee. You are my zing, my world, my everything! I could never have done this without any of you!

To my mother, Bridget, nohkom, Cathy, and stepmother, Sheila: you have shaped me into the woman I am today, and without your guidance, this never would have come to fruition. Thank you for all you have done for me.

To my supervisors: Dr. Kim TallBear and Dr. Roxanne Harde, thank you for being available and supportive as I have worked through theorizing, creative writing, and performing; your guidance and insight have been invaluable for me.

To my examining committee: Dr. Tracy Bear and Dr. Julie Rak, thank you for your insight, for your support, and for being a part of something so formative for me.

To the Faculty of Native Studies: thank you for creating a space for Indigenous scholars to pursue the work that we need to do, for supporting me throughout my journey, for welcoming me into the family.

To my friend Richard Van Camp: mahsi cho for your encouragement, humour, and for believing in me—you have inspired me so much and I am honoured to have your support and to call you my friend. Your cheerleading has reignited my desire to write creatively, and to trust the creative writing process.

Creator: I thank you for dreams, for words, for my creative imagination and for giving me the ability to tell stories.

To my readers: This thesis has been an eye opening and, at times, difficult journey that has awakened parts of my spirit and of my creative self that I have either been denying or ignoring for far too long. It is my sincere hope that what I have written here resonates with each of you, and that I have done my part of passing on what I am able to in a good way. Thank you for choosing to read what I have written here.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ii
Acknowledgements iii
Table of Contents v

INDIGENOUS RELATIONALITY: WOMEN, SEX, AND THE ANIMATE

A Good Beginning 1

Introduction:
Setting the Mood and Theoretical Structure 4

Chapter One:
Sex: Spirits, Cupcakes, and Relationality 24

Chapter Two:
Dreams, Ghosts, and Animacy 42

Chapter Three:
Beadwork, Burlesque, and Frogs: Creative Approaches to an Understanding of Relationality 58

Conclusion:
Until We Meet Again: Êkosi 94

Works Cited 98

A Good Beginning

Ahâw niototemitik! Welcome to my thesis, my friends. Throughout "Indigenous Relationality: Women, Sex, and The Animate," I will do my best to honour all of my relations: human, other-than-human, other-than-animal, (non)bodied, and unseen. I do this through using words and names in nehiyawewin, through honouring each being's personhood. I honour the language of my ancestors through relearning and using words or things I have been taught, and I translate as best as I am able. If in any way I have written or stated something that does the opposite of what I am setting out to do, I humbly ask for forgiveness and will listen and learn from those who know more than I do. In order to do my part in listening with my heart—something I will discuss more throughout my thesis—I must make sure to learn, to take correction, and to make sure that what I am passing on to the next generations is done so in a good way.

This research has been an interesting journey for me; I have embarked deeper into my language, culture, and decolonized what it is I do as an academic, a writer, and an iskwêw. It has been a smudging, a cleansing of my academic mind and a healing journey to work through my own bodily sovereignty. My thesis has led me on a path to loving myself and loving more deeply the way our Peoples think, feel, and write. It has been a time to learn in new ways and to think through the literary tradition of textual analysis from a decolonial lens, to challenge the widely accepted and acknowledged western traditions of what is considered to be a legitimate textual form or theory. It has been a time of learning what decolonization truly entails, and how this relates to sexualities, animacy, and ultimately, relationality.

A large part of relationality is worked through language—both oral and sometimes written language—and also the language of bodily movements and creative practices. I frame my understanding of this through nehiyawewin[1] (*Cree*). Just like nehiyaw[2] scholar and writer Tracy Bear before me, I choose to not italicize words in nehiyawewin as when something is italicized, there is an othering of the word, drawing attention to its differentness and implying that it does not belong. Māori scholar Alice Te Punga Somerville wrote about the problematic nature of italicization of Indigenous words in her poem "Kupu rere kē:"

> *My friend was advised to italicize all the foreign words in her poems.*
> *This advice came from a well-meaning woman*
> *with NZ poetry on her business card*
> *and an English accent in her mouth.*
>
> *I have been thinking about this advice.*
>
> *The publishing convention of italicizing words from other languages*
> *clarifies that some words are imported:*
> *it ensures readers can tell the difference between a foreign language*
> *and the language of home.*
>
> *I have been thinking about this advice.*
>
> *Marking the foreign words is also a kindness:*
> *Every potential reader is reassured*
> *that although obviously you're expected to understand the rest of the text,*
> *it's fine to consult a dictionary or native speaker for help with the italics.*
>
> *I have been thinking about this advice.*
>
> *Because I am a contrary person, at first I was outraged -*
> *but after a while I could see she had a point:*
> *When the foreign words are camouflaged in plain type*
> *you can forget how they came to be there, out of place, in the first place.*
>
> *I have been thinking about this advice and I have decided to follow it.*

---

[1] My ancestry on my mother's side is Métis, nehiyaw, and Dene. At this point in my life, I have only been given opportunity to learn nehiyawewin, but I fully intend to learn Michif and Dene to honour my ancestors. My father is Swedish, and so I would also like to learn more about this ancestry as well.

[2] Words in nehiyawewin, even when considered a proper noun, will not have capitalization, as this is what I was taught to do; there is no differentiation in nehiyawewin as there is in English for proper nouns. Unless the word is placed at the beginning of a sentence or part of a chapter title, I intentionally do not capitalize.

> *Now all of my readers will be able to remember which words truly belong in* Aotearoa *and which do not.* (Alice Te Punga Somerville)

Te Punga Somerville eloquently writes what many Indigenous scholars have been fighting for in our work: to not have words in our mother tongues be othered, italicized, made to stand out in some way. Her italicization of each word in English strengthens her argument against the italicization of Indigenous languages; Aotearoa as the only non-italicized word stands out, but this time it stands out as the only word that is not "foreign" in her poem, as the word which truly belongs. Following the lead of Bear and Te Punga Somerville and under the suggestion of Knowledge Keeper Reuben Quinn, I have chosen to italicize the word *Cree*, to draw attention to the English word placed onto nehiyawak, to show that this word does not belong. While I do not go so far as to italicize every single word in English—as English is my first language—I have purposefully othered the word *Cree* so as to make a statement about its differentness and to draw attention to the fact that it is a word that was imposed and thus will not be used in this thesis. I do not italicize or differentiate words in nehiyawewin; I do this in order to give the same standing and acknowledgement to my ancestral language as English in what I have written.

I have done my best to honour the words in nehiyawewin by spelling them as I was taught to spell them in standard roman orthography. I wish to acknowledge that there are multiple dialects and spellings for many of the words I have used, and that I have tried to stick to dialect neutral words or spellings as much as I am able. In the future, I would love to have the ability to incorporate syllabics in my writing as well.

Setting the Mood and Theoretical Structure

When reading Chippewa writer Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* and Standing Rock Sioux novelist Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer*, I was drawn to the interconnections of the sexual, physical, and spiritual in relation to Indigenous female bodies; I was drawn to how the innate power of each iskwêw[3]—the collaboration of uniquely female abilities, spaces, and places—is an essential aspect of the self, and the ways in which this power is utilized and strengthened through interactions with other beings. The ways in which we interact with one another from a Nehiyaw understanding is not predicated on the hierarchical understanding of human, animal, plant, mineral, but is rather through the understanding of kahkiyaw îwâhkohtoyâhk: we are all related, in a rough translation. Feminist or ecofeminist discussions of these ties to each other and to the included but always-separate "nature" or the "natural world" often contend that the materiality of the more-than-human world should be taken seriously and that it has not been, rendering ecofeminisms into the "backwoods;" ecofeminisms, from an ecofeminist perspective, have then been othered and excluded from much of feminist thought (Alaimo and Hekman 4). Taking that further, Indigenous standpoints are generally missing from ecofeminisms and feminisms in many of their forms; we are forgotten or our understandings of materiality, animacy, and wâhkôhtowin are not accepted as legitimate. This same forgetting of Indigenous thought is present in discussions of animacy. Mel Chen discusses this exclusion and subjugation of Indigenous understandings within the literature on animacy throughout their text *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. They point out: "the total result looked for by colonial domination was indeed to convince the natives that colonialism came to lighten their darkness"

---

[3] I discuss the deeper meaning of the word iskwêw later, but it should be understood as meaning "woman." This word applies to all women, and can be coupled with a modifier to describe more specifics about the iskwêw, such as nehiyaw-iskwêw or mônîyâs'kwew (white woman).

(50). If the settler colonial state has come to "lighten our darkness," then it can be understood that our ways of knowing and doing and theorizing have long been othered, silenced, or else fetishized—as the "native" has been systemically and systematically othered and objectified. Indigenous Peoples, who have since colonization been appointed the "backwoods" spot, have always understood that the material and tangible "nature" of the other-than-human world is not an "other" world; we are connected and joined with one another and understand this connection in ways that can be put into conversation with ideas of human/nonhuman[4] connection attempted by ecofeminist materialists and their generation of new theoretical languages and analogies. Indigenous writers and artists express these interconnections in ways that are best interpreted and discussed from within Indigenous understandings of relationality. These understandings of relationality involve using and honouring our languages and cultural traditions, even in partial ways, as not only cultural production but as theoretical interventions.

In order to honour my language and fully explain my theoretical approach to Indigenous relationality—and within that, nehiyaw relationality—I use words in nehiyawewin and explain their significance. The central theoretical framework of this thesis is the Indigenous pedagogical, research, and practical approach of "Two-Eyed Seeing[5]," in which both Indigenous and western knowledges and languages are respected and acknowledged as being of equal importance (Iwana et al., 3). Two-Eyed Seeing is not merely looking through one theoretical lens at a time, or taking only certain ideas or understandings from Indigenous ways of knowing and pasting them onto non-Indigenous knowledges. It is rather about an interweaving, a braiding of both schools of thought together in a way that acknowledges the uniqueness and difference of each, but at the same time creates a stronger analytic structure for holding a theoretical framework together rather than having each knowledge system be a thread on its own (5). Having Métis, nehiyaw, and European ancestry, incorporating language and blending the two forms of thought in a way that honours the Indigenous and non-Indigenous sides of my ancestry is important to me, and so I honour my roots on all sides by engaging with the texts in this way. Directly related to this understanding, in order to combat the sickness that is colonial thought, I choose to draw primarily from Indigenous theorists—only using non-Indigenous theorists where I am unaware of an Indigenous theorist who has published work on a specific topic—and exclusively Indigenous creative texts, and by doing so, I engage in a political act of deconstructing what it means for me to be a theorist, a writer, a performer, an Indigenous academic, and an iskwêw. To explain this on a deeper level: I engage primarily with Indigenous texts and theorists as the historical and ongoing systemic and systematic oppression of Indigenous persons is still affecting our everyday lives; by giving primacy to Indigenous texts I am ensuring that my work is decolonial in nature. Given the overbearing presence of settler colonial thought within the institution, Indigenous scholars, writers, and theorists have been working hard to counteract the sickness that is colonial dominance; I join their ranks and seek to counter what is considered a scholarly thesis, what is considered a scholarly form, what is deemed "acceptable." By writing in this way, my writing acts as a smudge to rid myself of colonial thinking, a medicine to clear away negative energies from my mind, body, spirit, and emotions; I am left with a Two-Eyed understanding of the texts and theories I choose to engage with as I am writing in a decolonial form from within a colonial school of thought. It is through this interweaving of Indigenous and non-Indigenous theory and language that I discuss animacy, sexualities, and ultimately, relationality, as they pertain to Indigenous women.

---

[4] I do not use the term nonhuman throughout my thesis, however, I have used it here as it is the commonly used descriptor in ecofeminism.

[5] Two-Eyed Seeing was coined by Mi'kmaq Elder Albert Marshall, and then used by the Cape Breton University's Institute for Integrative Science/Toqwa'tu'kl Kjijitaqnn and Health. The term is based on the teachings of "late spiritual leader, healer, and chief Charles Labrador of Acadia First Nation, Nova Scotia" (Iwana et al., 3). Members of the IISH include Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, Elders Albert Marshall and Murdena Marshall, university researchers, artists, and other community members.

Relationality is complex: it explains not only where our place is in the universe, but how that place is related to all the other places and persons within the spaces that we occupy together; it includes and explains how we are interconnected to one another. Within these shared connections and spaces, there are included other-than-human, other-than-animal, (non)bodied, and unseen beings, and these beings are understood as being either animate or inanimate; not everything that is inanimate means that it cannot become animate or cannot be acted upon, as much of animacy is dependent on the actors, actions, or connections that are needed for something—such as a dream—to become animate. Relationality also includes theory: theory is not merely something for academics alone, but is rather an integral part of Indigenous stories, histories, and art. In "Land as Pedagogy," Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson discusses this approach from a Nishnaabeg perspective: "'theory' is generated and regenerated continually through embodied practice and within each family, community and generation of people. 'Theory' isn't just an intellectual pursuit—it is woven within kinetics, spiritual presence and emotion; it is contextual and relational. It is intimate and personal" in that each person must be held responsible for taking "theory" and using it to find and generate meaning within their own lives (7). The theory of relationality can then be understood as an animate being: it is constantly producing and reproducing, providing new stories and teachings that are not only good for the whole, but are necessary for the individual as well. It is imperative then to read and listen to Indigenous stories, both traditional and modern, to engage with the creative and to learn from those things that we create, to allow those stories or those patterns or those characters that come to us to be allowed to become animate and tangible not only for ourselves, but for our individual families and our communities as a whole. By reading and listening in this way, we honour Indigenous histories, sexualities, and knowledges.

In discussing relationality in conversation with sexualities, I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to historicize: without the historical and ongoing narratives of colonization and marginalization, intergenerational trauma, and silencing of Indigenous languages and cultural traditions, there is no context from which to discuss Indigenous texts. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Māori scholar Linda Tuhuwai Smith discusses decolonization as being possible when the two strands of the language of critique—the authenticity of "a time before colonization in which we were intact as indigenous peoples," and "an analysis of how we were colonized, of what that has meant in terms of our immediate past and what it means for our present and future"—weave together and thus make decolonization possible (25). I do not entirely agree with the statement that in order to decolonize there must be a return to a pre-colonization state where we were "intact"—as the creation of the term "Indigenous" and how we describe Indigenous persons were imposed through colonialism—but rather decolonization is made possible when Indigenous persons use Indigenous knowledge in order to abolish binaried, heteronormative discourse imposed by settler colonialism, and do so from within institutional structures, through creative means, or through engaging with the political. In order to rid ourselves of the infection of colonial thought I described earlier, Two-Eyed Seeing can be used as the base from which to create theoretical frameworks and disseminate Indigenous knowledges from within the language of the colonizer; through this approach, Indigenous writers and theorists alike become like decolonial white blood cells, ridding the body and soul of colonial infections, inoculating the body, mind, and soul against imposed sexualities and embracing our relational selves.

If you are unable to embrace your sexual, relational self, unable to identify as a sexual being or to celebrate relationality—as Indigenous women's personhood was removed historically, and continues to be ignored—then the idea of Indigenous female sexuality becomes queer in and of itself; the queerness of Indigenous female sexuality includes *all* those who identify as women, but as I discuss, it is important to understand that my use of the term "queer" is not only based on Two Spirit or other gender-queer sexualities. In the introduction of *Queering the Non/Human*, Noreen Giffney and Myra Hird discuss what exactly it means to be human, and what it means in relationship with the terms "queer" and "theory." They say that using the term "queer" is "a concerted effort to make sense of, and make space in, a world that has given up on us" (4). From an Indigenous perspective, the "world that has given up on us" has additionally marginalized Indigenous "queer" persons, and the very term "queer" itself may not be the best term for an Indigenous understanding of non-heteronormative sexualities, as the very act of Indigenous persons having sexualities is queer: how can a person without the political and human status of a person have sexuality without being viewed as deviant, as, in fact, queer? If this person has relations with the same sex, in a multi/more-than-sexual orgy, with an other-than-human being, how much more queer and unaccepted is their form of relating? Giffney and Hird state that "how we *do* queer theory invoke[s] considerations of *what* we do with queer theory" (12). Throughout my thesis, I subvert expected modes of engaging with queer theory; this unexpected use of queer theory in turn informs *what it is I do* with this different approach to queer theory: it is not so much a methodology "to unpick binaries and reread gaps, silences and in-between spaces" (5), but is rather a queering of that which is considered to be queer, a challenging of those spaces and places that are not discussed in much of queer theory, a challenging of the personhood and animacy of what we *do* with queer theory. In my understanding, queer theory is always changing and fluctuating, and there is a necessary space for specifically Indigenous queer theory that is not predicated on Two-Spirit critique alone. To make use of queer theory in an Indigenous sense, we must make sure that we *do* queer theory from within an Indigenous framework. The link between queer and theory "is not so much an active/passive relation as an intra-active one; their enfolding an act of 'becoming-otherwise'" (12). Through an Indigenous understanding of relationality, the "becoming-otherwise" is a becoming-person, a struggle to maintain our inter-relations within a suffocating settler sexuality; to become-person when your personhood has been so far removed is an act of decolonization, and is a queering of the settler sexuality that has been imposed. To become-person is to become animate, is to come alive. In essence, for someone who is Indigenous to not only claim the status of "human" but to also become a "person" is a queer act in and of itself; to become animate is to defy the objectivity of settler colonial views of what it means to be "Indigenous."

Animacy, in one Indigenous understanding, is deeply embedded in our cultural traditions and in our life experiences. It is not simply a theory; it is a tangible way of understanding the world around us and is a defensible translation of key understandings within wâhkôhtowin, a term that I will discuss in greater detail throughout. Wâhkôhtowin, as described by nehiyaw writer and scholar Neal McLeod in *Cree Narrative Memory*, not only grounds our collective memory, but also necessarily points to the importance of our relationships with the entirety of creation (14). Wâhkôhtowin "keeps narrative memory grounded and embedded within an individual's life stories. It also grounds the transmission of *Cree* narrative memory: people tell stories to other people who are part of the stories and who assume the moral responsibility to remember" (15, italicization mine). Part of being connected to each other through an understanding of wâhkôhtowin is having not only the ability to define our world and our relationships via oral accounts and stories as we have since time immemorial, but also the responsibility to remember. If we do not remember the words of our ancestors, what will we be left with? If we do not learn our ancestral languages and the teachings embedded within the very words themselves, how can we say that we are working to decolonize the colonial systems of thought and knowledge transmission in which we find ourselves trapped? How can we remember that which we do not actively seek to understand and then pass on to others so that they too can remember? According to Mel Chen, animacy is "a specific kind of affective and material construct that is not only nonneutral in relation to animals, humans, and living and dead things, but is shaped by race and sexuality, mapping various biopolitical realizations of animacy" (5). I agree with Chen that culture and society work to shape animacy, however, language and its relation to the concept of "animacy" seems to be left out of Chen's understanding; animacy is, in and of itself, animate. If I am to understand animacy as being merely an affective and material construct—a construct through which I discuss wâhkôhtowin— then I am not truly taking an Indigenous approach to animacy; our approaches to animacy are non-static and include more than just that which is seen and that which is unseen. Moreover, this approach must incorporate Indigenous languages (nehiyawewin, in this case).

Throughout Chen's text I find that there is a missing discussion of the other-than-animal, non-bodied, or the unseen; all of which are a part of wâhkôhtowin, a part of the animate world, albeit in different forms and different (non)bodies and the unseen. In one section of their text, Chen talks about toxicity, stating that toxicity is "a *condition*, one that is too complex to imagine as a property of one or another individual or group or something that could itself be so easily bounded" (196). Essentially, toxicity is not animate or inanimate, but is rather a condition of (in)animate bodies joining together. Chen goes on to discuss how when a toxin comes into our bodily system, it can have negative affects such as changing the way we think, act, and feel; essentially, to be intoxicated is to experience change in our selves. While this discussion of toxicity begins to get at the unseen or the (non)bodied that I mention, what I find missing from this discussion is that which is not microscopic or tangible/measurable: that which is spirit, is part of dreams, is relational. A large part of the colonization of these relations is done using the language of the colonizers, as in English, "the only way to be animate, to be worthy of respect and moral concern, is to be a human" (Kimmerer 57). Discussing other-than-humans—which is understood as animal, vegetable, mineral, more or less—as non-persons is particularly troubling in that not discussing those Nations or persons that do not belong to a colonial understanding of what each other-than-human category means leaves out a large part of what could be understood through the lens of wâhkôhtowin as animate. Without meaning to, such non-Indigenous understandings can be seen in a nehiyaw worldview as essentially denigrating these relations; they are de-personed. I choose to use the word de-personed because other-than-human, other-than-animal, (non)bodied, or the unseen *are* all persons, and so to invoke the idea of *non*-human can be seen as diminishing their existence. This diminishing is directly connected to the idea of dehumanization, a term which is also problematic, but I include it here due to my discussion of Chen's work. Chen says, "One form of what is understood as dehumanization involves the *removal* of qualities especially cherished as human; at other times, dehumanization involves the more active *making* of an object" (43). If we take away those qualities that are supposedly only human, then what we are left with is "animal" or a being with other-than-human qualities devoid of, or with lesser, value. We do a disservice to our relations when we categorize them via colonial understandings of humanness rather than seeing them as persons; each person has unique qualities that should be honoured and respected through their place and space within relationality, within community. What do we make then of Indigenous bodies, Indigenous persons, when these bodies are not only not human, they are also not persons?

Indigenous bodies and persons have been "dehumanized" under colonial structures of Indigenous subjugation but they have also been de-personed; their bodies and personhood were viewed not as human—a category held in the highest regard—but as animalistic, which is a negative label under heteronormative colonial thinking. Under this same line of thinking, Indigenous bodies and persons were viewed as objects in the making of the terms such as the "drunken Indian," "dirty half-breed," and "noble savage"; they were viewed as inanimate. According to Saulteaux/Métis scholar Janice Acoose, Indigenous women have long been considered that which is to be objectified, dehumanized, and made into objects to be acted upon, all which is structured into the ways in which western society views the Indigenous female body: most often, as the "squaw" (37). To build on this, Indigenous bodies were first stripped of human qualities: dehumanized, and then depersoned. Potawatomi scholar and writer Robin Kimmerer eloquently describes the "grammar of animacy." She writes:

> This is the grammar of animacy…In English, we never refer to a member of our family, or indeed to any person, as *it*. That would be a profound act of disrespect. *It* robs a person of selfhood and kinship, reducing a person to a mere thing. So it is that in Potawatomi and most other indigenous languages, we use the same words to address the living world as we would use for our family. Because they are our family. (55)

This statement is as true in nehiyawewin as it is in Potawatomi: we address all of our relations as family, as connections, as animate beings deserving of personhood. So too do we understand language itself as being animate.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Kimmerer discusses language as being animate. She begins by saying that colonization caused her to grow up not speaking or even hearing her mother tongue, that it "was washed from the mouths of Indian children in government boarding schools where speaking your native tongue was forbidden" (49). The fact that she points out that the language is threatened, much like threatened or endangered species, is important: language in and of itself is animate, holds value and qualities of personhood; an understanding of language in such a way is central to an Indigenous understanding of animacy. A moment Kimmerer describes when only the other Elders understand the joke of one Elder, spoken in their language, is a heartbreaking scene. One Elder says: "It's not just the words that will be lost. [. . .] The language is the heart of our culture; it holds our thoughts, our way of seeing the world. It's too beautiful for English to explain" and another wonders "What will happen to a joke when no one can hear it anymore? How lonely those words will be, when their power is gone. Where will they go? Off to join the stories that can never be told again" (50, 51). Language is the heart of culture, and if we are to listen with our hearts to understand, we must do our best to prevent heart disease by medicating with the words of our ancestors and having them become a part of our very beings. We must do right by the words and give them the respect and honour that they deserve and that we need in order to survive and decolonize the ways in which we now view the world around us. If we honour our bodies and our communities in this same way, by honouring our animate places and connections with/in wâhkôhtowin, we fight back against the heteronormative dominance of settler colonial thinking.

Indigenous women have long been subjected to the corporeal politics of western heteronormative thinking; stripped of their humanness and their personhood, they have been conceived of as outside the realm of animacy; they have become objects under colonial thought.

If Indigenous persons are understood to be objects, to be animalistic or less-than-human, then how can Indigenous persons be understood to have any of the rights assigned to "humans?" Under the oppressive power of settler colonialism, that which is "human" is that which falls in line with the expectations of a white-centric, largely Christian, heteronormative society; anything outside of that understanding is lesser then, can be consumed or dominated, and thus is removed from the label of "human," from the label of "person." The historical and continued colonial oppression of Indigenous persons perpetuates the objectification of Indigenous individuals as non-persons and reinforces the tacit idea that the standard for human is white, straight, and Christian. Under this colonial thought, it is near impossible for an Indigenous person to be viewed as fully "human" when one is not only considered to be less-than-human, but is also completely devoid of being considered a "person." The colonial state has historically held and continues to hold the ultimate decision-making power on "who" or "what" is considered a person; and under colonial logic, Indigenous understandings of concepts such as wâhkôhtowin—how we are all interrelated, how other-than-human, other-than-animal, the (non)bodied, and the unseen are persons—have no basis and are unacceptable. Without an Indigenous theoretical lens through which to discuss concepts such as personhood and animacy—and the place of Indigenous women within this framework—it will be difficult to understand that Indigenous persons have been trying to achieve personhood rather than humanness. I cannot discuss personhood when those (non)bodies that are persons and Nations and Peoples are systemically oppressed and othered and categorized in little colonial boxes, unless I do my due diligence to decolonize and abolish colonial thinking that de-persons our Peoples, that does not accept Indigenous theoretical and cultural concepts as legitimate, and has a focus on that which is "human." "Human" is not the ultimate category to belong to, cannot be the ultimate category, when each Nation and People has their own songs, their own forms of governance, is part of wâhkôhtowin.

Given my use of the term wâhkôhtowin, it is important for me to explain what it is that *I* mean when I use the term. According to Kathleen O-Reilly-Scanlon, Christine Crowe, and nehiyaw scholar Angelina Weenie in their text “Pathways to Understanding: Wâhkôhtowin as a Research Methodology,” wâhkôhtowin is a “word meaning kinship or the state of being related, [and] is a fundamental concept for understanding Indigenous culture and traditional beliefs” (30). The researchers use this understanding of wâhkôhtowin along with connection to ceremonies and to Elders, as well as a reliance on what I would say is a Two-Eyed Seeing approach to memories in their research; they describe this as how to incorporate wâhkôhtowin in research. In another article describing wâhkôhtowin in Community-Based Participatory Research with Alexander First Nation, Gokiert et al. describe wâhkôhtowin as “‘establishing good relationships.’ Wâhkôhtowin encompasses more than simply relating to others; it provides the basis for individuals to function well together . . . [it] can be conceptualized as a methodology . . . that is decolonizing” (3). In this instance, the researchers undertook Community-Based Participatory Research, ensuring that there was “a balance of power between researchers and Indigenous participants through community-developed and supported *Guiding Principles* for research conduct,” and state that by doing so, they fostered research grounded in wâhkôhtowin (14). Many other researchers in Indigenous Studies have been engaging with wâhkôhtowin as a theory, as a term, and as a concept that must be understood within Indigenous Studies if we are to engage with decolonial work. What is important to understand, however, is that wâhkôhtowin is not a concept that can be “coined” by any one theorist, writer, researcher, or scholar, or that can be given a specific definition. In the two previous examples of the term being used in research, each had a different albeit similar understanding of what wâhkôhtowin means. The teachings I have been given on the term from Elders and Knowledge Keepers are different still. Each Elder or Knowledge Keeper will have different gifts and teachings that they provide, and what one is provided with may not be the same as what someone else is given. As told to me by an Elder, "wâhkôhtowin is the place that we need to get back to." Wâhkôhtowin then is not just a term or a theory or an understanding of the world, wâhkôhtowin is animate, is material, is a place and space that we have been separated from due to colonialism. However, through learning about wâhkôhtowin by engaging in ceremonies, teachings, and stories with Elders and Knowledge Keepers, our understanding of what exactly wâhkôhtowin truly means will only continue to deepen and to change over time. Wâhkôhtowin—as I understand it in its most simplified form—explains the ways in which we are all interconnected; that is, how each animate person or Nation is related and reliant on one another. Within wâhkôhtowin are the emotional, spiritual, physical, and sexual ways in which we connect; these connections necessarily include gender identities and sexualities.

Discussing Indigeneity and sexuality together is difficult, although Indigenous feminisms do a lot of the heavy lifting to begin these conversations. Indigenous persons, especially Indigenous women, were stripped of their own sexual practices and had their sexual identities repressed by European settlers. Stó:lō writer Lee Maracle states: "Until March 1982, feminism, indeed womanhood itself, was meaningless to me. Racist ideology had defined womanhood for the Native woman as nonexistent, therefore neither the woman question nor the European rebel's response held any meaning for me" (15). Womanhood for Indigenous women, as I understand it, includes our bodies, sexualities, and the ways in which we are interconnected to all our relations, and it is not necessarily included within "feminism;" within "feminism," heralded as championing change for women, Indigenous women and other women of colour are often forgotten. If one is not a person, how can one be a woman?

On the other hand, according to Cheryl Suzack, a scholar from the Batchewana First Nation, Indigenous feminisms are about "how gender injustice against Indigenous women emerges from colonial policies and patriarchal practices that inscribe gendered power dynamics to the detriment of Indigenous women" (261). When Indigenous women talk about Indigenous feminism, it can challenge profoundly settler feminist priorities, e.g. struggles for equality with men. Instead, they might center the "colonial policies and patriarchal practices" that have assigned Indigenous women to less-than-human, non-person status within western society, including in relation to white women. In a blog post, Naomi Sayers, Anishinaabekwe from Garden Rivers First Nation, writes that for her, feminism is important for Indigenous women. It is "not just fighting against the patriarchy," but is rather about "the importance of community. It means returning to [a] balance in relationships," ensuring that Indigenous feminist discussions are intersectional, and that the lived experiences of Indigenous women in community as well as the communities themselves are addressed ("Why We Need Indigenous Feminism"). For feminism to truly be Indigenous then, it must incorporate not just gender equality, but rather must look at lived experience, our places and spaces with/in community, and the community as a whole; from an understanding of wâhkôhtowin, this must necessarily include men and children as well as our other-than-human, other-than-animal, (non)bodied and unseen relations. Indigenous feminism provides a theoretical and action-oriented space through which Indigenous women can work to reclaim and decolonize our bodies and our sexualities, and to then decolonize relationality as a whole.

In order to decolonize relationality, it is imperative to do so from within an Indigenous framework. What does an Indigenous theoretical framework truly look like? Not all Indigenous persons can be painted with the same brush, and thus it is important to not take a pan-Indian approach to Indigenous theoretical frameworks and ways of knowing, although the sharing of approaches can be generative for increased Indigenous theorizing globally. Traditions and customs and language dialects are constantly evolving and changing, and so Indigenous theory must be understood as being living; Indigenous theory is animate, just as language is animate as it evolves over time. Relearning our languages works to decolonize the ways in which we think, act, and feel about ourselves and our place(s) with/in the settler colonial state and with/in the structures of oppression that we seek to dismantle. To theorize about Indigenous texts using Indigenous language is decolonial in nature; and to do so from within the confines of a settler colonial institution in a thesis primarily written in a colonial language is an act of decolonization. Decolonization cannot be done without action. It cannot happen if we, as Indigenous scholars, writers, theorists, performers, beaders, mothers, fathers, aunties, uncles, daughters, sons, storytellers, are not the ones acting and doing so with the guidance of Elders, Knowledge Keepers, our other-than-human, other-than-animal, (non)bodied, and unseen relations.

As part of my work to decolonize, I wish to acknowledge scholars such as Janice Acoose, whose work set the stage for future scholars to incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing into their scholarly work, from within the English language and from within settler colonial institutions. In direct opposition to the status quo of western patriarchal society, she states, “until very recently Indigenous women were thought of as voiceless, illiterate, the worst of the oppressed, and in some cases, not worth mentioning” (15). By writing about Indigenous women’s strength and power as an Indigenous woman herself, her work began the work of decolonizing what it is to be an Indigenous woman, to rip off those negative labels associated with the Indigenous female body such as the "squaw." She proved that Indigenous women can not only be completely literate in English but be literate in our own cultures, languages, and ways of knowing, and to express ourselves from within the language of the colonizer. While my work engages with fiction rather than autobiography—and as such, I do not engage with her work in my theorizing—the work that she has done is important, and must be acknowledged as the trailblazing effort that it was and is.

Dr. Tracy Bear has done groundbreaking work on the Indigenous erotic, and did so from within nehiyaw ways of knowing, utilizing nehiyawewin, and challenging the conventions of what is expected of a dissertation by abolishing the purely academic approach to a scholarly work such as a thesis or dissertation. She challenges the dissertation by incorporating creative writing throughout, and this is something that I am also doing. Throughout "Power in My Blood" she honours nehiyaw ways of knowing by ensuring that she engages with "locality, textual resistance, ceremony, and relational accountability" (21). Throughout my own work, I find myself situating myself similarly: resisting the conventions of the scholarly thesis, and striving to ensure that my work here is done in a good way, in a way that honours all my relations, that works as healing and ceremony. Bear discusses that Indigenous women can move past the dictates of western oppressions of the Indigenous female body, and can in fact "reclaim their corporeal sovereignty, and further, that Indigenous authors and artists who express the erotic contribute to the decolonization of Indigenous women, girls, and genderful[6] folk" (46).

---

[6] Bear explains this term as one that focuses on the spectrum of genders rather than the binary restrictions of male/female (viii).

Further to her discussion on our ability to reclaim bodily sovereignty, Bear discusses the reclamation of desexualized Indigenous "metaphorical moral guides" (36). Bear describes the story "The Girl Who Married a Bear," writing that often in print form, "such metaphorical moral tales are often altered to eliminate traces of sex and sexuality to reflect the more palatable Christian ideals of procreation" (37). Bear mentions that in the original oral version of the story, there is no marriage but there is rather "erotic, sweaty, hairy sex" between the woman and the bear (37). Under patriarchal, heteronormative editing, Indigenous stories involving sex with other-than-human beings or sex that is not for procreation is often changed to reflect Christian values of monogamy and marriage; if the sex is left in the story, it is generally only acceptable from within the confines of Christian matrimony. This desexualization of Indigenous stories has led to misunderstandings of some Indigenous stories as being "mythical", as being merely moral in nature, or as being taboo due to sexual encounters with a being that is other-than-human. This non-acceptance of non-heteronormative relations does not accept instances in fictional texts where a woman, such as Fleur Pillager, engages in sexual intercourse with a lake spirit; it is especially taboo that she engages in these relations while married to her husband, Eli. My thesis works to reclaim Indigenous female sexuality in all of its forms, not just those that fall within the "palatable Christian ideals of procreation."

Laguna Pueblo Paula Gunn Allen, who was and is the ultimate in the queer auntie, discusses in *The Sacred Hoop* the "linkages" between "the human and the nonhuman worlds," and that it is because of these "linkages" that "magical things" are able to happen (22). These "magical things" that she mentions are described as transformation—bodily and otherwise—; teleportation; healing; ability to communicate with other-than-human, other-than-animal, (non)bodied, and unseen; changing another's will—I assume through use of medicine, such as

Charlene engages with in *The Grass Dancer*—; and the ability to steal or store another's soul (22-23). While I am paraphrasing with my some of own wording, the work that she was doing in 1992 is an attempt at explaining relationality to a likely predominantly non-Indigenous readership. She used the "myths" of Indigenous Nations as the basis for accepting and coming into "our true identit[ies]" (116). In this same vein, I use works of fiction, Indigenous theory, and the creative as means to rediscovery and reclamation of Indigenous personhood.

Throughout the journey of writing "Indigenous Relationality: Women, Sex, and The Animate," as the title suggests, I have focused primarily on relationality, and those topics that find themselves within relationality: animacy, sexualities, and kinship. The first chapter, "Sex: Spirits, Cupcakes, and Relationality," discusses sexualities and their place within relationality through close readings of Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer* and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*. I take a Two-Spirit lens to scenes of sexual, physical, and spiritual joining together of Fleur Pillager with a lake spirit, Misshepeshu, and also of a more-than-sexual multi-(non)bodied orgy that takes place between Charlene Thunder and six boys under the influence of lust medicine.

In my second chapter, "Dreams, Ghosts, and Animacy," I will delve into a discussion on animacy. Nehiyawewin is a language based not in gender but rather in that which is animate and that which is inanimate—but sometimes can become animate based on who is interacting with the inanimate being or object—and I base my discussion on animacy heavily in nehiyawewin. From within this framework of animacy, I discuss teen pregnancy and a waking-dream vision by Lara in Heiltsuk/Mohawk writer Zoe Hopkins' *It Takes a Village,* and the animacy of dreams and spirits through Cheryl's dream sequences and a monologue by the (non)bodied Rain in Métis novelist Katherena Vermette's *The Break.*

My third chapter, “Beadwork, Burlesque, and Frogs: Creative Approaches to an Understanding of Relationality” is quite different than the first two chapters. In this chapter, I discuss how through beading and burlesque I have worked to decolonize my mind and spirit, and to reclaim my bodily sovereignty. Both of these endeavours are understood as healing, as theory, and as being decolonial in nature. Following my discussion on these two topics, I have included a short selection from a longer work of fiction. It is important for me to include non-western or commonly accepted forms of theory within “Indigenous Relationality: Women, Sex, and The Animate,” and beadwork, dance, and storytelling have been a part of our cultural and theoretical traditions since time immemorial.

Sex: Spirits, Cupcakes, and Relationality

Through the influences of settler colonialism, Indigenous female sexualities have been condensed to a singular sexuality, a sexuality that has been created and imposed on them through the domination of what Scott Lauria Morgensen calls "'settler sexuality': a white national heteronormativity that regulates Indigenous sexuality and gender by supplanting them with the sexual modernity of settler subjects" (106). This change from the plural to the singular has resulted in a negation of women's sexual and spiritual autonomy, and has resulted in women being dominated over by the structures inherent in settler colonialism. Sexuality, or even sexualities, is not the best way to define Indigenous relations as it does not articulate the ways in which sexuality is interwoven with the physical, emotional, and communal selves. Because of the ineffectiveness of sexualities as a descriptive term in and of itself I have chosen to discuss sexualities from within the framework of relationality, as sexuality is not something of its own, but is rather a part of relationality. There are multiple avenues to and forms of Indigenous relationality, through the experiences of being cis-gendered; Two-Spirited; as an other-than-human, other-than-animal, unseen, or (non)bodied being; performing and relating to male femininity or female masculinity; or any other forms of (non)embodiment or interactions of and with animacy—a term which I will discuss in greater detail in the following chapter. Relational interactions are not limited to the physical; these interactions also involve trans/multi and (non)human embodiments of power or energy and the mutual and interconnected ways these bind us through sexual, emotional, physical, and spiritual interconnections. These exchanges through the physical and the spiritual are both affective and material in nature, bringing together other-than-human, other-than-animal, (non)bodied, and unseen beings, both living and dead, all which are, according to Mel Chen, shaped through sexuality which in turn is perpetuated through an understanding of animacy, which must be understood through an Indigenous lens. Essentially, I cannot fully discuss sexualities on their own, but must discuss sexualities as being a part of relationality, which is connected to animacy and our kinship ties to one another, to the ways in which we are connected through wâhkôhtowin. In this chapter I will focus on what exactly relationality, and within it, sexuality/ies are from a decolonial, Indigenous lens through the analyses of Susan Power's *The Grass Dancer* and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*.

If I am to discuss Indigenous women or womanhood, it is important that I utilize my Indigenous understanding of what exactly "woman" means. Being a Métis woman with nehiyaw and Dene ancestry, part of my journey in decolonizing relationality has been to re-learn nehiyawewin, a language spoken by my ancestors; I cannot truly discuss Indigenous womanhood without my language and its teachings being central to my understanding. In nehiyawewin (*Cree*), the term iskwêw is used to describe what in English would be called a woman. In discussions with and teachings from nehiyaw Knowledge Keeper Reuben Quinn through whom I took a course in nehiyawewin, it was explained that the bastardized translation of "woman" does not even come close to what being a nehiyaw-iskwêw means. Explaining to the class that iskwêw means more along the lines of those who have the capability to bring forth, see into, and prophecy for seven generations in the future, he made clear the deeper connotations and meaning of "iskwêw:" the spiritual and relational interactions and place of women within nehiyaw culture is so much more than is explained in the simple term "woman." There is no room for being an iskwêw without the ties to culture and nationhood, to ensuring that our future generations are looked after. Lee Maracle discusses the importance of identifying with nation and cultural/racial heritage in her text *I Am Woman*. She fights back against those who say we are all "people" and should interact with one another in that manner, saying "You want me to consider myself not

Native, not Cree, not Salish, but a person, absent of nationality and racial heritage. All of us just people, without difference . . . you pick up a guitar and teach European. . . songs to all the children, but nowhere do European children learn . . .music of my children . . . Such sameness amounts to everyone's obliteration but your own" (81). Without the ties to cultural identity, our very personhood is diminished, colonized, assimilated. We are not just people, we are Peoples. In the same vein as her argument against the reduction of being proud to be a member of your nation to being just another "person"—a person who, undoubtedly, is defined by colonial understandings of what it means to be a person or being and in fact has been stripped of personhood—I strive to discuss Indigenous women as iskwêw and not only as women; it is with this understanding of iskwêw that I discuss Indigenous womanhood, sexualities, and relationality.

In order to decolonize Indigenous relationality, it is important to historicize and understand the context through which Indigenous sexuality was first colonized; this colonial oppression and labeling of sexuality occurred when settlers colonized Indigenous lands, enforcing their own ideals of sexuality (singular) onto Indigenous Peoples[7]. As discussed in the introduction, decolonization is made possible when Indigenous persons use Indigenous knowledge to abolish binaried, heteronormative discourse imposed by settler colonialism, and do so from within institutional structures, through creative means, or through engaging with the political; these can be separate or all together. Often not discussed in detail but of utmost importance is the utilization of Indigenous language in order to decolonize; there can be no true understanding of nehiyaw or other Indigenous knowledges and cultures without knowing the language—only the general idea can be discussed and much of the true meaning and interpretation is lost when bastardized into English. It is imperative that we do not assume that there is an ideal utopian "Indigenous place" to get back to, but rather we must work from within the structures of settler colonialism still in place to decolonize these structures in an Indigenous way. By employing this methodology, Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) literary scholars and writers can analyze texts and histories in a way that honours our Peoples and acts as a form of resistance against the ways in which colonialism has impacted our stories, histories, and modern lives; through this interweaving of past and present, we decolonize settler sexuality through relationality.

---

[7] I recognize that I have not included a discussion of non-Indigenous LGBTQ persons within settler sexuality. While an in-depth discussion on this topic is outside the limits of this thesis, it should be noted that the settler sexuality I discuss also disallows other non-Indigenous queer sexualities.

To resist the impositions of settler colonialism on Indigenous female relational sexuality, Indigenous Studies scholars have been writing about what constitutes sexuality in an Indigenous framework. In a chapter in *The World of Indigenous North America*, David Delgado Shorter writes: "we . . . need to seek an understanding of indigenous sexualities that recognizes sexuality not as a thing or object that is constituted once and unchanging. Rather, sexuality might prove to be a relating, a sharing of power, reconstituted over and over based on the intersubjective dynamism of two or more persons" (497). If we understand that Indigenous sexuality, as viewed through mainstream perceptions of Indigeneity, was created through the impositions of "settler sexuality" on Indigenous Peoples—that before colonization there was no "indigenous sexuality" but rather modes of relating to one another through communal, physical, emotional, spirit-to-spirit interactions—then it is imperative to decolonize "indigenous sexuality" using an Indigenous understanding of community and relationality. Decolonization cannot take place without our languages, theories, communities, and cultures being central; Indigenous persons must be the leaders in decolonization or we face recolonization. If we are not championing decolonial movements, then we are once again being placed under the impositions and ideologies of colonial structures. Rather than pining for a return to an imagined pre-contact sexual freedom—an imagined space that has time and time been misinterpreted or has painted each Nation with the same brush—there must be a decolonization of settler domination of Indigenous bodies, communities, and indeed, sexualities, through a relational and spirit-to-spirit mode of understanding.

In *The Grass Dancer*, Susan Power's protagonist, Charlene, utilizes her grandmother's lust medicine in order to seduce six of her young male classmates; she does this in order to fill an aching emptiness inside her. Charlene places her eyelashes in cupcake batter, baking one cupcake for each of the boys. After she has handed them out, she realizes that "there was no giving back their naïve faith, no calling off the medicine [she] sensed rushing through her veins, a thick serum that made her feel both nervous and drowsy" (295-96). In giving the unassuming boys a physical part of herself through medicine[8], she connects with them in an intoxicating interweaving of lust and spirit. The medicine is more potent than she thought possible, and she is unable to stop what has been put in motion. She takes the boys with her to an abandoned house, and soon "hands covered every inch of her body, so that Charlene was unaware for several minutes that her clothes were gone. When she did notice, Charlene began to cry, but her tears were wiped away by someone's fingers. The hands claimed her, moved across her and inside her. She lost track of her limbs, couldn't tell her toes from her ears" (297). Charlene enters into not only a sexual joining with the boys, but a spiritual, emotional, and physical joining as the power of the medicine overtakes the boys along with her. Her tears are wiped away in the same instance that she is being penetrated, which overrides her emotions with sexual need until she is no longer able to tell where she ends and one of the boys begins. As Shorter states, the discussion of all my relations, or, in a nehiyaw understanding, we are all related—kahkiyaw îwâhkohtoyâk—, “is not a human-centered directive” because “sexuality, as a power, is an attribute of being that affects change in all social relations, not just human. Humans are a part of, not separate from, the world of relatedness” (500). Charlene uses the interconnections that are formed between bodies, medicine, and spirit to attempt to fill an aching and empty spot of emotional need; her relations with the boys change from the social relation of classmates into a joining together, a more-than-sexual transformation of individual sexual beings into one. Because their bodies and spirits join together in a (non)bodied way to the point where they are indeterminable from one another, their joining goes outside of merely sexual and becomes more-than-sexual: that is, they are joined together through the sexual, spiritual, physical, and communal in a way that supersedes the abilities of the sexual on its own through the vehicle of the medicine. The medicine is just as animate and tangible as the boys inside of and on top of her; their joining together can only be explained through an understanding of Indigenous relationality.

---

[8] By medicine, in this case, I am discussing the use of the physical and the spiritual together in order to obtain a desired outcome or control over the bodily/spiritual/sexual energy of another person. Not all medicine is used in this way; however, this is what I am meaning by "medicine" in this scene.

By using relational ties to spirit and lust via medicine in order to gain the sexual desire of the six boys, Charlene “forgot her name and believed she was one of six boys, became each of them in turn as they claimed her cold body pressed into the splintered floor” (297). In the relational act of having sexual intercourse with each of the boys, she becomes them, intimately knows their pasts and their presents; they become as stated by queer Laguna Pueblo writer and activist Paula Gunn Allen: “more spirit than body, more spirit than intellect, more spirit than mind" (*The Sacred Hoop*, 59). In becoming the boys, Charlene crosses boundaries of gender; she embodies both maleness and femaleness. She enters a previously unoccupied space of powerful intermixing of her sexual and spiritual self with those of the boys; Charlene rises into a level of relationality unattainable otherwise without the intervention of the medicine—an active, living being that courses through their blood—enabling each of the seven participants to cross boundaries of physical relating into a spirit-to-spirit interconnection that dissolves boundaries of embodiment. By being outside of the confines of her physical body, Charlene can not only connect on a much deeper spiritual level with each of the six boys, she literally becomes them and they her. As Chen discusses, "animacy and its affects are mediated not by whether you *are* a couch, a piece of metal, a human child, or an animal," or in this case, a powerful spiritual energy created via eyelashes and cake batter, "but by…how you are interpreted and how dynamic you are perceived to be" (210). The power of the lust created by the medicine she uses overrules everything else and results in an unintentional dynamic relational, (non)bodied connection that, while under the influence of the medicine, connects their entire beings together in a deeper form of affected relation than would have taken place otherwise; they join through sex, medicine, and affect. Lisa Tatonetti states in *Indigenous Men and Masculinities*: "affect is…more than emotion: it is a *bodily* experience…[and it] is necessarily *relational*" (134-35). Charlene enters into a bodily and relational experience with the six boys, resulting in an intersecting of bodies, spirits, and affects. Affect is tied directly to relationship and to the body; relational sexualities, which include but are not limited to intercourse—as in Charlene's more-than-sexual joining with the six boys—are tied to the body, which is tied to relationships with others, and all are interconnected through the interconnections of (non)bodied power or energy. Tatonetti says, "power, like affect, necessitates community, necessitates interaction, and, importantly…implies a relationship that is not inherently antagonist" (135). Too much or uncontrolled power or energy can result in interactions that supersede the ways in which two or more people or beings are able to relate to one another—in this case, through a multi-being/more-than-sexual orgy; the "not inherently antagonist" relationship between power and affect enters an opposing paradigm when power is enforced rather than mutually connected. It is only through understanding the intricacies of Indigenous relationality that there can be an understanding of the flow and exchange of power and energy; this flow or exchange takes place between two or more beings through the (non)embodiment and interconnectivity of energies. In Charlene's case, the lines between female and male energies become blurred—the seven spirits and bodies joined together enter a more-than-sexual, multi-(non)bodied relational joining in a way that denies heternormative and binaried thinking; they are interwoven in a way that can only be explained through relationality.

Gender fluidity and the exchanges of power that take place due to the embodiment of both maleness and femaleness—in relation to spiritual and sexual power—are central to many Two-Spirit critiques. Mi'kmaq scholar Louis Cruz argues that Two-Spirit people can "embody, literally, masculinity and femininity roles with strength…can play with our genders, sexes and sexualities" (54). Further to the embodiment of "roles," is the *plural* embodiment and spiritual interjoining of male and female (or otherwise), in varying numbers, in sexual and spiritual interactions with one another. It is through this plurality that the literal multi-person/spirit/sexual interweaving that took place when Charlene and the six boys were joined in sexual relation to one another becomes valid; it raises the question of what this specific scene in a fictional novel written by an Indigenous writer says about Indigenous relationality. How do we define gender and sexualities or explain the interconnections of energies and (non)bodies when influenced by spiritual means? Furthermore, how do we talk about these exchanges between multiple beings at the same time? What happens when these transformative acts of sexual and spiritual connectivity involve the other-than-human, other-than-animal, the (non)bodied or the unseen? In order to fully discuss these interactions, they must be discussed from the standpoint of relationality: kinship, the flow of energy and thought between humans, other-than-humans, (non)bodied beings, spirits, and dreams in means both physical and otherwise.

The sexual interactions between humans and other beings—human or otherwise—have the ability to transcend physicality, to enter into an intimate and spiritual realm or "world" where we can begin to understand ourselves and how our interconnectedness directly and indirectly ties us to one another. It is through interactions such as between Charlene and the six boys that we can understand the relatedness of our communities, histories, and our selves and develop the language of critique necessary for discussing multi-being, more-than-sexual, and trans-being sexual experiences and relationships. Indigenous studies scholar Julia Emberley states: "While mythologies contain remarkable differences and possibilities for framing the multidimensional 'worlds' we inhabit, specific to decolonization is the analysis of how the contest of epistemologies shapes human, and other, social and political kinships" (20). We must look to our mythologies, to our languages, the histories passed down through blood and through oral teachings, our dreams, and interactions with the other-than-human, other-than-animal, (non)bodied, and unseen in order to decolonize the sexual colonization that occurred when our lands were encroached upon by European settlers, that colonization that denounced relationality and forced European ideals of sexuality and relation to "nature" by their hierarchical and patriarchal structures of power and oppression.

The writing of Indigenous persons is therefore tantamount to decolonization, for as Cherokee scholar and writer Daniel Heath Justice writes, "writing–however it is understood–is both access to and exercise of power and authority in contemporary social and political relations. [. . .And] these are more than simply theoretical reflections but actually engage what writing *means* to real people in their lived experience" (295). The act of writing in and of itself is a form of relationality, it is a way in which we have always engaged with one another—whether this be through dance, oral narratives and histories, or through the creative[9]—only now it is in ink and from within the constructs of institutions and non-Indigenous orthography and space.

Understanding and utilizing our histories, including the oral narrative, as part of our past to inform the present is about cultural survival and resurgence. Including more-than-sexual experiences with multiple persons, with other-than-human beings, or with the unseen is part of Indigenous relational sexualities, understandings, and histories. Linda Tuhiwai Smith says that we "believe that history is also about justice, that understanding history will enlighten our decisions about the future. *Wrong*. History is also about power…It is the story of the powerful and how they became powerful…[and] because of this relationship with power" Indigenous Peoples have been "excluded, marginalized, and 'Othered'" (35). In order for settler colonialism to be successful, there had to be an othering, a domination over the Indigenous Peoples who had always occupied the land. If only the stories and histories of those in power are the ones being told, then the ways in which we understand history are incorrect; without the stories of the oppressed, without their narratives and histories and songs being celebrated and given equal status and acknowledgement as legitimate, then what we think we know is more of a not-knowing than legitimate knowledge. Through Indigenous women writing novels in which sexual experiences include lake spirits and overwhelming lust via dessert medicine such as Power and Erdrich do, Indigenous relationality is decolonized. Telling our stories and discussing multi-relational or sexual experiences with other-than-human beings "is not simply about giving an oral account. . .but a very powerful need to give testimony to and restore a spirit, to bring back into existence a world fragmented and dying" (Smith, 29). Decolonizing relationality through story acknowledges the repressed and disregarded interconnections between Indigenous Peoples and other-than-human beings.

---

[9] I understand the creative as an animate being that must be nurtured, fed, and loved. In order to have a healthy relationship with yourself and with others, it is important to have a relationship with the creative; this relationship can be cared for through various creative acts either personally or acts by others that are viewed/experienced.

In Louise Erdrich's novel, *Tracks*, Fleur Pillager has an intimate and sexual relationship with Misshepeshu, a terrifying and powerful lake spirit. She becomes intimately acquainted with the lake spirit during two separate incidents of drowning. Each time she drowns, her life is saved by the exchange of another person's life, always a man's. Once the men believe that Fleur is intimately acquainted with Misshepeshu by being able to survive these two incidents, they keep away from her even though she is attractive, because "it was clear that Misshepeshu, the water man, the monster, wanted her for himself" (11). Misshepeshu is described as a "devil…love hungry with desire and maddened for the touch of young girls, the strong and daring especially, the ones like Fleur" (11). The lake spirit disguises himself as an attractive man, drawing young Chippewa women into his deathly embrace, drowning those who give in. Fleur is different than the other girls in that she not only survives his embrace twice, but also continues throughout her life to interact with him in the cold depths of Matchimanito. According to the "Glossary of Ojibwe Words, Phrases, and Sentences" in Peter Beidler and Gay Barton's *A Reader's Guide to the Novels of Louise Erdrich* Matchimanito is derived from two words in Ojibwemowin: maji, meaning bad, and manidoo, meaning god, spirit, or Manitou (387). The lake can then be described as waters that are protected by or are the dwelling place for a "bad spirit"—

Misshepeshu. From the same glossary, Misshepeshu is described as “the great lynx . . . lion, panther, [or] underwater panther” (389-90). Why then, would a young woman wish to submerge herself and join with a “bad” feline spirit in the depths of a lake named for its preference for negative energy? What is so different about her that she not only survives drowning two times, but continues to interact in a relational way with this spirit?

Part of the reason that Fleur differs from the other women is that she is not typically feminine. Fleur hangs on the divide between masculine and feminine; her sexuality could be described as female masculinity. She is physically attractive, but it is her aggression and dominating personality/sexuality that draws the attention of men and women alike. Indigenous Studies scholar Lisa Tatonetti discusses Erdrich’s use of female masculinity in another one of her non-typical female characters, Celestine from the novel *The Beet Queen*, about whom Erdrich “writes female masculinity as the improbable and the impossible, as bodily excess, and as the antithesis to heteronormative” ideals of how women should look and behave and the desires that they should have (139). Fleur also goes against these ideals in several ways: through her appearance, through her lack of community with other women, through her dismissal of traditional gender roles (as understood through a colonial influenced dynamic), and through the relational and spiritual power she possesses by communicating with Misshepeshu and the spiritual realm.

After surveyors come to measure the lake, they take an interest in the plot of land where Fleur’s entire family had died from sickness. When they come to her land, “they walked upon the fresh graves of Pillagers, crossed death roads to plot out the deepest water where the lake monster, Misshepeshu, hid himself and waited” (8). Fleur maintains her spatial connection to the lake, Misshepeshu, and to the newly deceased Pillagers whose spirits continue to communicate with her. At this point in her life, Fleur does not communicate with other living members of her community, save for Nanapush, but she rejects even his company for the company of the deceased and the lake spirit. From an Indigenous understanding of animacy, the dead are just as animated and real as the living, and given her ability to engage in trans-being relationality with the lake spirit, it makes sense that she is able to connect with the deceased in this way. She stays alone "in a cabin that even fire did not want. A young girl had never done such a thing before" (8). Fleur completely subverts the norms for a woman, especially such a young one, to be on her own without the guidance and community of women around her; her community was with the spirits, with the (non)bodied and other-than or no longer human. By engaging with the lake and the feline spirit that resides within, Fleur affectively drowns her old self and emerges renewed, powerful, able to commune with spirits and to take on roles and forms that she had previously been unable to achieve.

As Fleur denies the traditional roles and gender performances of women, her power continues steadily to grow stronger. The other members of her community realize that following the drowning and the sickness, they are dealing with something much more serious:

> Alone out there, she went haywire, out of control. She messed with evil, laughed at the old women's advice and dressed like a man. She got herself into some half-forgotten medicine, studied ways we shouldn't talk about. Some say she kept the finger of a child in her pocket and a powder of unborn rabbits in a leather thong around her neck. She laid the heart of an owl on her tongue so she could see at night, and went out, hunting, not even in her own body. (12).

Fleur enters into a trans-being interweaving with spirits and medicines through her intimate connections not only with the dead but also with other-than-human beings and the lake spirit

Misshepeshu. Fleur is able to transform out of her own body into the body of a bear; through her strong spiritual and relational ties to the spirit realm Fleur is able to transform her physical body. She learns "half-forgotten medicine" from Misshepeshu and the spirits with whom she communes. This ability to transform her physical body and to learn old medicines makes sense through an understanding of relationality; Fleur's new communal ties are to the spirit world, and so she can transform herself, and take on new embodied and spiritual forms as she connects with this world.

Fleur's relationship with Misshepeshu can be described, at least in part, through a Two-Spirit lens. While a Two-Spirit lens provides at least a partial context, it does not always delve deeper into the true understandings of relationality; it does not always address trans-being or multi-being/more-than-sexual interactions from a standpoint that is not predicated solely on sex, and it does not decolonize sexualities to levels of relationality. Shorter discusses the history of the "moreakame," who at one time were understood to be healers, and over time the word that was associated with them was "homosexual"; over time and through the effects of settler colonialism, what was once viewed as a necessary designation for communal healing somehow became about sexual preference and orientation. Shorter argues that their power is "social: it is not just a power, but also a power that improves the health of other individuals and thus community health" (496). Through what would today likely be considered a Two-Spirit designation, the "moreakame" used their ability to embody both feminine and masculine spiritual power to promote community, and were necessary for healing. As I discuss Fleur's Two-Spirit abilities, I refer to the term through this enriched understanding of Two-Spirit, as not only being about sexuality or gender, but rather about relationality.

It is through the Two-Spirit ability to embody both maleness and femaleness that Fleur has “magical . . . communication with animals, plants, and nonphysical beings” (Allen 23). Cherokee scholar Qwo-Li Driskill says that the phrase Two-Spirit “asserts ceremonial and spiritual communities and traditions and relationships with medicine as central in constituting various identities,” (73) and Fleur’s interactions with and connection to the spiritual world around her through medicine and submerging in the waters of Matchimanito are integral to her ability to embody both the masculine and the feminine. It is because of her relational abilities that she is able to have such spiritual power; when both the masculine and the feminine are joined together there is intense power, just as when Charlene’s feminine power was joined with the masculine power of the six boys through spiritual and relational means. Fleur’s relational sexual connections with the spirit of the lake empower her spiritual self; when her physical and emotional relationship with her husband, Eli, is strained, she finds comfort and strength in the embrace of Misshepeshu.

Eli, her husband, follows her one night and watches as she quietly leaves the house, “smooth as an otter sliding from a log” down to the lake (106). The night was “too cold for bathing” and yet Eli sees her “step from her rough sleeping shift and walk, stripped and limber, hair hanging deep black, through a swath of light into the waters of Matchimanito.” She is submerged for an unnaturally long time; it can be inferred that she is able to stay under the water so long due to her sexual and spiritual joining together with Misshepeshu. Her sexual experiences with the spirit of the lake tell a history of Indigenous trans-relations; by writing about a spiritual and sexual relationship with an other-than-human and other-than-animal, perhaps (non)bodied being, Erdrich works to decolonize assumptions of Indigenous female sexuality—providing an example of how sexualities make more sense under the umbrella of relationality—in fiction. Fleur communes with Misshepeshu through relational experiences that serve to strengthen her female, yet masculine, power.

Because of her tendency to reject and subvert traditional female gender roles, Fleur can be read as an interpretation of a Two-Spirit or female masculine individual; being Two-Spirited is not synonymous with queer or having non-hetero sexual relationships or gender identities. Kwagiulth scholar Sarah Hunt and settler scholar Cindy Holmes note that, "the term Two-Spirit has been used to reflect the identities of Indigenous people who embody *both* masculine *and* feminine spirits and qualities within Indigenous knowledge paradigms which do not operate through dichotomous systems" (160). Fleur embodies the spirits and qualities of both masculine and feminine. Driskill contends that "Two-Spirit critiques pay close attention to our erotic histories and lives, the way colonization attempts to disrupt and injure Indigenous erotics, and examines how Indigenous erotics disrupt colonial power over our sexualities and bodies" (85). Interactions between human beings and others are part of the erotic[10] histories of Indigenous Peoples; traditional histories and stories from various nations always involve other-than-human beings, and these beings figure prominently. The erotic is part of sexualities, is part of the ways in which we connect to one another through the flow and exchange of energy. The relationship between Fleur and Misshepeshu is an aspect of the Indigenous erotic that can be understood as one that existed prior to the sexual colonization of Indigenous People; the sexual, emotional, communal, physical, and spiritual connections to the unseen or other-than-human beings that surround us are an integral component of Indigenous relationality.

Through engaging in relationality with both human and other-than-human beings, both Charlene and Fleur enter a space that is unattainable without the blending and interweaving of masculine and/or feminine and spiritual power. Charlene literally experiences a more-than-sexual, multi-being joining with the six boys; she becomes each boy as they become her, each of their spirits and bodies becomes interwoven until they form one complete being. Charlene's spiritually charged sexual encounter with the six boys brings them all together—mind, body, and spirit—in a multi-being/more-than-sexual experience; this experience allows them to reach beyond the limitations of sexual intercourse and join together on a level unattainable without the influence of the medicine. Fleur physically transforms her body and understands old ways with medicine through her sexual relationship with Misshepeshu and the connections she maintains to the spirits of her deceased relatives. Charlene is unable to control the spiritual power she gains; the power overwhelms her, resulting in an unintentionally powerful joining of her and the boys. Fleur masterfully wields her sexual and spiritual power following loss by entering fully into her female masculinity; she is able to do this due to her continued joining with Misshepeshu, with her deceased relatives, and by submerging herself in the waters of Matchimanito. Charlene enters into a relational joining with the six boys through medicine alone—medicine that she understood only through watching her grandmother use it, not from connections with the medicine or through learning from spirit—and thus she is unable to control it. Fleur embodies both masculine and the feminine energy and has ongoing relational connections to the beings around her, which results in her ability to wield her power; the strength of her connections to both masculine and feminine power through interactions, interconnections, and exchanges of energy with all manner of beings can be credited to her Two-Spiritedness.

---

[10] For more on the Indigenous erotic, read nehiyaw scholar and writer Tracy Bear.

Charlene's multi-being/more-than-sexual and Fleur's trans-being experiences can be read, at least in part, through a queer or Two-Spirit lens. Driskill says, "Two-Spirit critiques share commonalities with queer critiques that challenge heteropatriarchal dominance and notions, gender binaries, and the policing and control of sexualized and gendered bodies" (71). These two forms of critique, queer and Two-Spirit, make sense to bring together in order to critique experiences and exchanges of power such as the women discussed in this chapter have experienced; however, the two together still fall short in fully understanding and unpacking Indigenous experiences of relationality such as Fleur's and Charlene's. There must be an acknowledgement and acceptance of multi and trans-being sexual experiences from within an Indigenous framework; this framework must acknowledge the stories and histories of other-than-human beings, the unseen, and the connections and importance of dreams, must acknowledge and understand the true meaning of what it is to be an iskwêw without tokenization and Eurocontextualization. Queer and Two-Spirit understandings can only offer the tools for analysis and critique necessary to a certain extent; they tend to be mostly about gender and the performative aspects of male/female. In order to fully understand and discuss the distinct ties between spirits, bodies, and sexualities with other-than-human beings, multi and trans-being relativeness must be included, acknowledged as essential, and not merely dropped as a possibility. By discussing these ties from within the understanding of Indigenous relationality, I thus work to decolonize settler sexuality.

Our interactions with and the flow and exchange of energies to and from humans to other-than-human, other-than-animal, the (non)bodied or unseen beings are integral to the decolonization of settler sexuality. We cannot fully understand the power of Indigenous relationality in all its forms and intricacies until we align interpretations of and relationships to *all* our kin, human and otherwise. By writing female characters that embody less discussed forms of Indigenous sexualities, both Erdrich and Power decolonize the assumptions of Indigenous sexualities enforced by settler colonialism.

Dreams, Ghosts, and Animacy

When discussing relationality, it is impossible to attempt to find a definition or to find a way to incorporate Indigenous understandings of what relationality means without including animacy. Animacy is not predicated on the body alone: it is, rather, inclusive of the physical, sexual, emotional, mental, and spiritual in combination with one another; animacy includes what is visible and what is not, and it also includes various states of being such as alive, dead, and the in-between. In nehiyawewin, the language that was taken from the mouths of my nohkum and my mother, the world is understood not as a gendered construct but is rather based on two qualifiers: animate and inanimate. Animacy is literally a part of the language and the culture, and it is from this base that I discuss Indigenous approaches to such. It is only from an Indigenous understanding of animacy that Rain's dialogue and presences throughout *The Break* make sense; even though she is no longer bodied, she is still a being that continues and is tangible in the lives of her family members. Furthermore, memories and dreams are also included in animacy from an Indigenous understanding, and thus one is better able to make sense of the dreams that Rain's sister Cheryl has; her dreams are more than mere plot movement or foreshadowing. Lana's waking-dream and connection to her unborn child in *It Takes a Village* is an excellent example of animate connections to the world around us, and is similar in many ways to Cheryl's dreams. Without an Indigenous approach to animacy, there can be no understanding of relationality; this chapter discusses both through the characters of Cheryl and Rain in Métis writer Katherena Vermette's *The Break* and Lana in Heiltsuk/Mohawk writer Zoe Hopkins' *It Takes a Village*.

As discussed in "Setting the Mood," the nehiyaw language is based on that which is animate and that which is inanimate. Most often, that which is acted upon by another or which will produce a certain action is considered to be animate, although you can not always bank on this understanding as a universal truth; through ceremony and over time I have learned and will continue to learn more about this form of viewing the world and perhaps why some things one would assume to be animate are not. There are words that we do not have equivalents for in English, but how could there be exact equivalencies from a language based on wâhkôhtowin and relationality to a language based on dominance and othering and binaries? For example, in English, the only way to listen to someone is to listen with your ears; there is the binary opposite of not listening/ignoring. In nehiyawewin, there are several words for the different ways to listen, and one of them is nanahihtawakayê; this word loosely translates to “listen very closely with your ears,” but from what I understand, actually means to listen with your heart. Listening with your heart means more than just your physical heart; it means listening with what connects you to each other, listening with utmost respect for the speaker or person or being that you are listening to, listening with that which connects us all through wâhkôhtowin. Listening with your heart is not just a metaphor; it is acknowledging that even certain parts of our bodies are animate in their own regard, not just as connected to the rest of the body. Based on this understanding, I discuss how we can be connected to those around us even through dreams, if we only choose to listen with our heart.

In *The Break*, Cheryl is a dreamer; she has connections to her ancestors and to other-than-human beings through her dreams. Her dreams comfort her, warn her of things to come, and encourage her to reconnect with the land and with her history. The first instance of Cheryl’s dreaming occurs rather early in the novel, when she “dreamt of birch trees, skinny and white against the snow, and the wolves howling on the horizon. She was snowshoeing, like she did when they lived out in the bush. Her city-girl legs loved every bit of it. She loved it so much that years later, and only in her dreams, her legs still knew every tension, every turn. She could smell the snow, and the winter cold air" (48). This passage is more than just a story or a clever literary device to clue the reader about Cheryl's past or her desires; Cheryl's dream is full of animate characters and beings that have something to tell her. While the act or idea of a dream, powatamowin[11], is not animate, what takes place inside of the dream is; a dream is animate in words such as powatam, which loosely translates to "s/he[12] dreams about something"—the dream is animate in this case because it is a verb associated with a person, rather than just being the act of dreaming. Inside of the dream, there are animate persons with messages and relational connections to Cheryl and to her daughters, her human ancestors, and her other-than-human relations. Birch trees, waskwayak, are animate beings; they are a People, a nation. Snowshoes are often made of birch wood, and so the fact that she is dreaming of snowshoeing and of the birch trees is important: what are the trees trying to tell her? What is the significance of the snowshoes on her feet? Our feet carry us to where we need to go; the snowshoes carry her over the snow, or kôna (a character that deserves a fuller discussion that is outside the purview of this thesis). The wolves, mahihkanak, are tied to her and to the women in her family via her dreams and in her paintings. Because of the continual presence of the mahihkanak nation throughout the story—specifically in connection to Cheryl, and through her, to the other women in her family—mihihkan (a wolf) can be understood as Cheryl's powamow: the animal being that she is intimately connected to and that assists her in her life; a spirit guide, although what is tied to an understanding of "spirit guide" in English is not really the same thing. Through a nehiyaw understanding Cheryl's dreams take on more depth: the waskwayak and the mahihkanak are guiding Cheryl, are speaking to her, reminding her of her connection to them and to the land, reminding her of her place within their connection; they speak to her of wâhkôhtowin, of home.

---

[11] My understanding of nehiyawewin is a work in progress. Having spoken it somewhat as a child through learning with my stepmother, much of what I knew then has been lost; the few words and phrases that I do know are limited but I have a bit of a foundation. Nehiyawemowin, the act of speaking nehiyawewin, is something that is important to me and is important to my understanding of Indigenous literature(s). The words that I use have either been taught to me through language learning with Knowledge Keepers Reuben Quinn and Dorothy Thunder, conversations with other learners and speakers, through social media groups that I am a part of where speakers such as Simon Bird teach learners in new and interesting ways, through his books, and through Facebook status updates by Neal McLeod urging us daily to "be Cree jedis," or through the *Online Cree Dictionary* and the *Alberta Elders' Cree Dictionary*. I have also picked up words through chatting with family members or friends. The words are my teachers. I use the standard roman orthography that I have been taught or that I have read.

[12] Nehiyawewin is non-gendered, however, I will use s/he when pronouns are necessary.

Later, Cheryl once again dreams of snowshoeing, except this time the mahihkanak are not present, at least in their howling form. Cheryl "was with her Louisa this time — or at least she thought it was her girl. It was one of those dream creatures who is someone and then someone else. First she was Louisa, then her sister swaying on the shoes, and then a stranger. Maybe it was Emily. They all have the same shape, really, just move different. But the shadowed face kept shape-shifting in the snow" (110). The continual shape-shifting of the dream-creature-woman points to the connection between Cheryl and the other women in her family, and later, to the waskwayak in the dream; they are relationally connected to one another via kinship, wâhkohtôwin. The dream-creature-woman goes much faster than Cheryl can through the snow, calling her, urging her to catch up as she runs into the darkened bush. Cheryl has trouble catching up. Her feet become useless, and she struggles to move. The dream creature moves "in the bush ahead, until Cheryl couldn't tell it from the trees" (111). Waskwayak, as already discussed, are a People; the dream-creature-woman joins with the trees ahead of Cheryl, becoming a member of their Nation. The dream-creature-woman is intimately connected to the sakâw (forest) ahead of Cheryl in the dream, warning her with its Tree Nation wisdom of what is to come. Immediately after the warning dream, Cheryl wakes up panicked, and her phone rings; "she didn't think—she moved" (111). The snowshoeing—her physical connection to her memories and to the bush—coming to her in dreams is significant; dreams are not just a movie playing in your head, or, as some understand them, just your mind trying to make sense of the day or to add in some foreshadowing or clever exposition to a novel. Dreams are tangible, contain animacy or can become animate, are ways in which we can connect with the spiritual realms that surround us and that we are interconnected with through the blood coursing through our veins, through our connections to the land in the understanding of wâhkôhtowin. Cheryl dreams a warning, she dreams of the land; she is connected to the land and to her ancestors in her dreams regardless of her "city-girl legs," and it is through her ability to listen with her heart to the messengers in her dream that she can act in the way she must in order to help her granddaughter and her daughters. Cheryl's dreams and experiences are written out in the form of long fiction, in the language of the colonizers; however, the very fact that Vermette has written these stories and animate connections into a novel is decolonial in nature, and serves to teach, to heal, and to tear down the structures of settler colonialism. Her novel becomes animate as readers are able to connect to the characters within the stories, to the places and spaces being discussed.

Part of viewing the world around us includes the ways in which we understand the different animate stages of life; these stages include before birth, in the womb, birth, all the way up to when we leave our physical bodies. Métis scholar Kim Anderson discusses these life stages in her text *Life Stages and Native Women: Memory, Teachings, and Story Medicine.* She describes that when we arrive in our physical bodies, our spirit is put into a state of shock at being in a physical form and thus "the spirit enters a subconscious state early in its lifetime, and from there it progresses through the remaining life stages in pursuit of awakening the spirit" (9). What is important to note here is that spirit is always with us and is in fact our original form; we strive to connect on a spiritual level with the world around us, to connect via wâhkôhtowin, throughout our lives. I do not know if I believe that we must “awaken the spirit” so much as we need to accept and connect with spirit and grow in our understandings of the (non)bodied and unseen. If we accept this understanding of spirit/physical connection as a legitimate understanding of how we came to be in the world, we can then understand the inherent value of all of our lives. It is from this understanding that I can discuss Cheryl’s dreams as being animate, as being connected through (non)bodied, animate experiences.

Cheryl’s daughters and granddaughters are central to her life. From within a nehiyaw view of the world, our children are precious, are the very center of our communities and are the greatest form of “wealth.” If we understand how precious children are, then we can understand the continued devastation in our communities due to the ongoing and historical affects of colonization and specifically, the residential school system. Children were ripped away from their families and communities, resulting in the loss of language, cultural understandings, and indeed life from generations of children, resulting in trauma that has been passed on from generation to generation. If the very joy of a nation is taken from them and that generation never learns the teachings of nihtisihkâson—which means so much more than simply “my name is”—how can the next generation be responsible to pass on knowledge and cultural teachings to the next or to understand how incredibly valuable they are? Nihtisihkâson, as I have been taught, means “I am known by this umbilical cord,” or, in an even deeper level, “this is how I am known in the spirit world” and speaks to our connections to our mothers, but also to our grandmothers and their grandmothers and to all of the other persons in wâhkôhtowin. To be connected to your People and to all of our relations is so much more meaningful than “my name is”: being connected through belly buttons, umbilical cords, and spirit teaches your place within the larger web of wâhkôhtowin, teaches that you are important and you are connected to your People. It explains how Cheryl is connected to her lost sister, her daughters, her granddaughter; through dreams and her art and in their day-to-day lives they are all connected to one another, and also to the other-than-human, other-than-animal, (non)bodied and unseen beings and persons within her dreams. It teaches the importance of life and of caring for your baby when you are pregnant as you are in turn caring for your ancestors and for the future generations. How much more important would it be for young persons to learn this kind of understanding of their place in the world in communities facing suicide pacts, domestic and lateral violence, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy? I am not against teen pregnancy, in fact, I had my first child at 17. Teen pregnancy in and of itself is not the problem, the problem is young girls often find themselves without assistance or guidance in how they should raise their babies. This is, of course, not true for all teen mothers as some girls, like myself, have a mother, stepmother, sisters, and/or wonderful grandmothers and aunties to learn from and to be supported by. It is the viewing of teen pregnancy as the ultimate in community issue rather than addressing the lack of support for these girls that must be remedied. Zoe Hopkins' graphic novel provides a relatable and non-judgmental approach to teen pregnancy for young Indigenous women, and does so all while providing cultural teachings to young readers.

In *It Takes a Village*, pregnant teen Lara is annoyed with her mother for attempting to teach her about healthy decisions during pregnancy. She decides that she is going to go to a party and her mother tries to stop her; her mother suggests they go for a walk or go see Gran if she wants to leave the house (5). Lara's mother knows that going to a party could result in health issues for the baby if Lara were to partake in drinking alcohol. Currently, FASD is estimated to be present in 3 to 6 live births out of 1000 across Canada; this rate goes up to about 25 per 1000 live births for Indigenous women in Canada (Salmon 166). When Lara gets to the party, she is tempted to drink, which is illustrated through several frames; she eyes the cans of beer, feels as though she is being watched and sticks her nose up, has an internal debate and then finally picks up a can of beer, all without any interaction or dialogue with others. Such is the ability of the graphic novel or comic to address moments of silence or internal debate, making them more relatable and tangible. Lara's internal struggle over whether to consume alcohol and potentially cause her child to have FASD is made real; even her nearly immediate denial of the decision she was about to make is relatable (11). Shortly after her denial, Lara engages in a waking-dream with a future version of her unborn daughter, Danis. It is through this animate and tangible waking-dream that Lara ultimately makes the decision to abstain from drinking alcohol and to rely on the teachings of and connections to her grandmother and to her community. Danis urges her, "look after yourself. Your baby's brain is just growing and developing now. If you drink, you could hurt the way your baby learns and behaves. And she could have physical disabilities, too. For the rest of her life. It's called FASD—Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder. It doesn't go away when your baby grows up. It lasts forever, so you have to protect your baby's brain" (13). Danis acts as a teacher, guiding Lara to do everything in her power to ensure that her unborn child will have the best chances in life, will be born with a healthy body. While having a child who is differently abled should not be viewed as a negative in general, the act of engaging in actions that harm another being—especially a being who cannot yet speak for his/her/their self—that are completely preventable should most definitely be avoided. While such a blunt discussion on FASD is not necessarily comfortable, the fact that Hopkins writes teachings into the comic is didactic and decolonial: the storyteller here has created a relatable character who learns something that, perhaps, they had never thought of before now. Having these words said from a character that is also a young mother is a stronger anti-drinking campaign for young Indigenous pregnant mothers than any poster or public service announcement.

Amy Salmon discusses that current FASD prevention campaigns targeted at Indigenous women serve to reinstate neoliberal ideals of what makes a good citizen; by drinking during pregnancy and having a child with developmental issues, there would be added financial implications, and so FASD should be prevented at all costs (172). What is missing from this discussion is that the root cause of the drinking—poverty, intergenerational trauma, the loss of traditional culture and community involvement—is of even greater importance to uncover and begin to heal than worrying about potential costs for programming and caring for children with developmental delays. By giving birth to a child that is a “burden” on society, these mothers often must go on social assistance resulting in a second level of marginalization as they are not only producing children of no assumed economic value, but they themselves are no longer productive citizens (173). Lara’s experience of being tempted to drink alcohol while pregnant makes a strong case for how connections to community, tradition, and healthy eating choices—including avoiding alcohol—are of even higher importance than the economic value one can produce, and serves as a more relevant and useful anti-drinking resource for Indigenous youth; it serves as a form of teaching, as an animate narrative that provides teachings that may not have been passed down.

Due to settler colonialism, language—and the teachings inherent within the language—have either been lost or not passed on due to the inability to speak the language or being forced to deny your culture as an Indigenous person; Lara, perhaps, did not receive teachings from the old people, like how to greet the day in ceremony. In a language class with Reuben Quinn, I learned the following: anohc âyimîyiwak oski âyisîyîkiwak, which loosely translates to explain that today, it is difficult for the young people. A large part of why it is difficult for the young people—such as Lara—today is that they no longer greet the day with the old people. When you greet the day, when you have ceremony first thing in the morning, your entire outlook on life changes. Of course, greeting the day is not the only act of ceremony or of learning; pipe ceremonies, smudging, sweats, sundances, and learning how to gut a fish or how to knead your bannock just right are all part of culture, part of learning, part of relationality. How much different would Lara's life be if the cultural traditions of greeting the day and learning from her Elders were part of her everyday experience?

Elders are important for passing on lessons, morals, and traditional teachings, and Lara learns from an Elder, although in an unexpected way. Lara realizes the importance of her grandmother and connections with community through her waking-dream with Danis. Her grandmother is seen in a superhero t-shirt, with her bathrobe like a cape. Danis explains that Lara is seeing her grandmother for who she truly is: "She has so much knowledge and power. You could learn so much from her. She is like a superwoman when it comes to motherhood . . . Your gran's been through it—all of it" (15-16). Lara realizes she could learn much from such a powerful and experienced woman, and so she chooses to sit down and listen to what she has to say. Gran brings her a plate with fish and urges her to eat because "something whispered in my ear—said you have to eat more fish" (16). Gran maintains connections to spirit, to the unseen world; she hears that her granddaughter needs to eat more fish from those (non)bodied or unseen persons, those animate beings, around her and through the teachings of her grandmothers and their words that were passed down to her. She is connected to the (non)bodied or unseen and to these teachings through wâhkôhtowin, and she passes these teachings on to her granddaughter. Gran encourages Lara to eat traditional food so that she will have an easy birth, and provides her with medicine to ensure a healthy pregnancy: love. She tells her "the best medicine for you now is love. Love yourself. And be around people who love you. Your baby knows how you feel. Give your baby happy energy. Keep moving and do good things for your body. Walk in the sun, feel the wind on your face" (18). Lara learns from her Gran's experience and wisdom that maintaining a healthy emotional, physical, communal, mental, and spiritual self is necessary to provide a healthy life not just for herself, but also for her unborn child; she teaches Lara belly button and umbilical cord teachings of passing love to your unborn child and connecting that baby's spirit to their People. The act of love is animate: Gran passes on animacy, passes on teachings of love as being important for all aspects of the self, and in turn for others as well. Just as Cheryl connects with her family and with other-than-human, other-than-animal, (non)bodied, and/or unseen persons through her dreams, so to does Lara connect to those around her—including her unborn child—from the animate connections and actions within her waking-dream.

One interesting scene in the comic is when Lana talks with a dog mother. In nehiyawewin, a female dog is called kiskânak. Just as in English kiskânak, or bitch, has taken on negative connotations; this word is today used commonly as an insult or as a slur for a prostitute. In a story that I once heard about kiskânak, she was highly revered, as she was understood as being a valiant protector of her young. In essence, a kiskânak was viewed as the mother to aspire to or the warrior to want to be like: she would fight to the death in order to protect her young. If you were going to be in a fight, it was best to fight like a kiskânak as she would never give up or back down; she would stop at nothing to protect her People. The kiskânak that Lara engages with is in fact her own mother in the body of a kiskânak; she is caring for many young puppies but also a fawn who has lost its mother (31). By drawing her mother as a kiskânak, Hopkins honours the strength and wisdom of mothers of all Nations. Lara's mother tells her how to care for a baby through love, through holding her baby close (32). When Lara asks her how she is able to look after so many babies, her mother replies, "A mother's love is endless. You will see. I love you to the moon and back, Lara. You will understand once you have your own baby what that love feels like" (33). The fact that Lara learns love medicine and wisdom from a kiskânak then takes on a deeper meaning: she is learning not merely from a "bitch," but instead from a very revered other-than-human mother, a mother that is tied to her own mother. She connects with the kiskânak during her journey in the waking-dream; she learns spiritual teachings while on a spiritual plane.

Having connections to spirit does not end after physical life. Considering that we come into the world through spirit, it makes sense then that when we pass from the physical world, we do not end, but rather we continue within our original spirit form. In the past, when our grandmothers were pregnant, they were imbued with spirit and their very state of being pregnant was viewed as a sacred time (Anderson 43). This view of pregnant women is no longer prevalent in modern society; in fact, many view pregnancy as a burden or disrespect the bodies of pregnant women through violence. The act of giving birth is just as sacred as the act of care for those at the end of their lives; I can attest to the honour I feel when I have cared for those who are on their way out of the physical world and after they have left. When we are at the end of physical life, our bodies deserve and should receive the same respect as when we are brought into this world through the tearing and opening up of our mother's bodies; we are returning to that spirit form.

In discussions of death, it is important to understand that from an Indigenous understanding—at least from the understanding that I have—we do not simply end once we pass on from our physical bodies. One great example of understanding of what happens after death is the character of Rain in *The Break.* At multiple points in the novel, Rain is given a voice, and her voice is always speaking to her daughter. She says to her: “A storyteller once told me our languages never had a sense of time, that past and present and future happened all at once. I think this is how it happens for me now, all the same time. I think this also is why you don’t let me go, because I am still happening” (244). Rain continues, not in the physical body that was brutalized and left to die in the cold, but rather in a (non)bodied form. I think it is important to note that Vermette writes that language continues on; words once spoken carry not only the heat energy expelled in the verbalization of the words out into the universe; they also carry the power to name, to claim, to make new, and to commune with the other-than-human, (non)bodied, or unseen around us. There is no sense of time in the spirit world, at least in the way we understand it as seconds, minutes, hours, days; it is through this absence of linear time as we understand it that Rain can connect with Stella.

These few lines are probably the most striking for me in Vermette’s novel, because they speak to the animacy of death in the way that I understand it: we do not end, we continue on, albeit in various forms. Having been responsible for end-of-life care of residents of a long-term care facility—including post-mortem care—and having been around death more times than many my age, I can say with confidence that when someone’s spiritual body leaves their physical body, their presence is still felt in the room for a long time afterwards, and they do not disappear from the earth; they stay with us. Indeed, for them to come and visit us beyond their physical death is quite common, and I have had my fair share of “ghosts” both during waking hours and in dreams. I accept connection to those who no longer have physical bodies from my own experience and through the teachings I have gained over the years; however, I am acutely aware that there are many who need scientific evidence or measurable proof to accept something that I do not think of in a scientific way or as something that I need to prove. However, to understand continuing on scientifically, we can look to the laws of thermodynamics.

In the first law of thermodynamics, energy cannot be created or destroyed; it can only change form (*KhanAcademy*). From this understanding, when someone passes away, their bodily energy is transformed into other types of energy, such as heat energy or nutrient energy for the earth and other-than-human beings through decomposition; from an Indigenous understanding, this change to a new form of energy means that we are still intimately connected to the world around us through wâhkôhtowin even beyond death. In the second law, every energy transfer, such as some of our bodily energy being transferred into heat that escapes into the universe, decreases the amount of "usable" energy and increases the entropy or randomness of the universe (*KhanAcademy*). With this understanding, it makes sense then that Rain is still happening; she does not end, but she is rather transformed into energy, increasing the random nature of the energy of the universe, being part of something that we can only explain as entropy: the inability of a system's thermal energy for conversion into mechanical work (*OED*). This "randomness" is not random at all, it is rather a return to the spiritual state that we were once in before we chose our parents and were born; our usefulness or energy is worth much more than simply our ability to engage in mechanical work.

Part of understandings of animacy that I have found missing within Chen's discussions is exactly these types of moments where Rain does not end, but keeps happening much like the language of her ancestors: animacy, as it is broadly understood, does not include the tangibility of spirit(s), of memories, of dreams, of the very words that we speak. In other words, it is through an Indigenous understanding of animacy that necessarily includes other-than-human, other-than-animal, (non)bodied, and unseen persons that we can understand these intimate connections as not being random, but rather being a part of our cultures. Robin Kimmerer discusses the physiological connection between gardeners and the soil: “Recent research has shown that the smell of humus exerts a physiological effect on humans. Breathing in the scent of Mother Earth stimulates the release of the hormone oxytocin, the same chemical that promotes bonding between mother and child, between lovers” (236). Our physical bodies release the same hormones that are released after orgasm or through physical acts such as hugging or nursing a newborn baby; we have the same physiological response to something other-than-human and other-than-animal. We literally connect on a cellular level to dirt in the same way as we do to our lovers and to our babies, and our physical bodies continue to have an intimate connection to the earth once we have passed away; our physical bodies become the energy for the earth to continue life all around us while our spiritual (non)bodies continue in a not-so-random or entropic state. It is only from an Indigenous understanding of animacy, of our connections with the universe via wâhkôhtowin, that we can begin to accept how life continues after death, how speaking to and honouring plants results in higher yields and healthier plants, or why it is the body releases oxytocin when you dig in the dirt; we are all intricately connected and dependent on one another. It is through this depth of understanding that animacy can be explained in and of itself as not entirely being predicated on biological and physiological bodies, or on what can be measured, charted, and served up on a platter as evidence or described as the ability to produce mechanical work. Indeed, much of an Indigenous understanding of animacy is actually an understanding of that which cannot be seen, or can only be seen by those who are able to see when they listen very closely with their ears, when they listen with their heart.

An Indigenous approach to animacy necessarily includes the various life stages that we travel through, our languages, our cultural teachings, dreams, memories, and connections to all our relations within wâhkôhtowin. In fact, I believe that wâhkôhtowin is the best word to describe animacy: it includes our connections in all of the aforementioned forms. Through an understanding of wâhkôhtowin, we can understand how Cheryl connects with the waskwayak and the mahihkanak, how she is interconnected with her human, other-than-human, other-than-animal, (non)bodied, and unseen relations in her dreams. Through this same understanding, the connections between Lara’s mother and the kiskânak make sense, as does Lara’s connection with her daughter and her grandmother through her waking-dream. Through learning of wâhkôhtowin, I am able to engage with instances in texts such as these and understand them in more depth. It is only through relearning my language(s) that I will be able to more fully and intimately understand Indigenous animacy as more than another theory, and from there, perform my necessary duty to pass on this knowledge to future generations.

Beadwork, Burlesque, and Frogs: Creative Approaches to an Understanding of Relationality

As discussed in my two previous chapters, there is more to relationality, to wâhkôhtowin, than can be explained through one specific academic or theoretical approach. The totality of an Indigenous approach to relationality is both theoretical and creative in nature and necessarily contains the ways in which we are interconnected and entangled with human, other-than-human, other-than-animal, (non)bodied, and unseen, as well as those things which are animate and/or inanimate. It would be too broad to say that relationality includes everything, but at the same time would leave too much out if I were to say that it only includes those beings or relatives that are tangible either through spiritual, physical, mental, or emotional means. The word "being" is the word in question in this regard: what does it mean to be a being, and, what of those commonly considered "objects" which are actually animate beings? For instance, mîkisis—a small bead such as those used for beadwork—is considered animate in nehiyawewin, and as such, I look to them as animate beings, as teachers from which to learn from. From a western approach that places "things" such as beads in a category that is less-than-human and less-than-animal and absolutely without personhood, it would be impossible to discuss how beads speak to us, guide us, how they teach us. In continuing discussion on personhood and who can claim it, relationality also includes sexualities in all their complexities and expressions; Indigenous women have been viewed as not only lesser-than because they are women, but because they are Indigenous women, and as such, are not given the rights to personhood within colonial structures. The (re)claiming of power through sexual and physical means such as burlesque are not only empowering in regard to building confidence and sex/bodily positivity, but are also acts of decolonization. It is one thing to shimmy and shake to a song; it is another thing altogether to shimmy and shake in a body that has been othered, depersoned, and repeatedly colonized through the impositions of settler sexuality. There is only so much that academic thought and writing and theorizing can do to explain the complexities of relationality: Indigenous women's beadwork, dances, and stories can tell us far more, and naturally act as teachers in a way that is not only relatable, but provides an inside look at how we truly think, speak, feel, and act. Through the readings of fictional narratives, as I have discussed throughout each chapter, we as academics are able to analyze and unpack moments, scenes, and themes, to find connections throughout the text and then connect those instances to other texts. It only makes sense for me then, to include a story at the end of this chapter: stories are excellent teachers and theorists, and so I find it necessary to utilize both academic and creative writing together to understand relationality. This chapter will discuss relationality through beadwork, burlesque, and through a piece of creative writing, which is just as important and perhaps even better at explaining all that I have argued thus far, and so it is important for me to include in my thesis.

Beading is something that has become a large part of both my own life and the lives of many of my immediate family members, mostly in the last few years; due to impacts of the residential school system my mother did not learn to bead until I started a few years back. Beading came naturally to me the first time I ever tried it, something that I did not expect. I was by no means perfect at it, but I found that I instinctively knew, that I heard from somewhere inside me—from my heart—how to stitch, how many beads I would need to complete the row, which colour was necessary to hit the light in the right way. One more row quickly turned into one more petal, which inevitably turned into nearly finishing the whole thing in one sitting. I could not only feel the beads speaking to me, but also felt as though someone was guiding me. I gave this first piece of beadwork to my kokum,[13] and when she saw it she let out a gasp and said her mother used to bead the same kind of flowers, and that it reminded her of her mother. I then knew it was my great-grandmother Christine who was guiding me, and I have felt her guiding me many times since; she is one of my closest learning sources for my beading.

The more that I have beaded, the more that I have learned from the beads. A mîkisis is animate; it is understood as an animate being. Sometimes I think that I know better than the beads, but they always know better, and sometimes they even act on their own. I have thought before that I could squeeze five more beads in the row I was finishing, heard inside that it needed four and threaded five on anyway, only to pull tight and see only four beads. I have insisted that a certain colour needed to be part of my design, only to have the beads literally avoid my needle and refuse to be picked up. I have had a bead of a colour I know I did not pick up wind up on my needle or in my work, only to find that that one little mîskisis was exactly what needed to be there to catch the light just right or to give shadow or depth to the pattern. I have learned that there is never anything created that was not meant to be created: everything that I have beaded is for a purpose or for someone, and sometimes I will not know who it is supposed to be for until I am half way through creating it. Accepting that all beading is done for a reason was something that was difficult for me to grapple with at first, as I am my harshest critic and would sooner rip out the entire thing than be unhappy with my design. I now truly feel as though when I bead it is for a reason and that I have something to learn, and I know that each time I bead it is not only for myself, but often for others as well (including my hardwood flooring, apparently, as I have dropped way too many beads that now live in the crevices). I am by no means an expert beader; I still have much to learn, and have learned and will continue to learn through beading with other women together or through my late night beading sessions with my great-grandmother.

---

[13] The correct term is actually nohkum, meaning “my grandmother.” Kokum is the commonly accepted way to say grandmother today, but technically it means “your grandmother.” I call my nohkum “kokum.”

Beading is a form of storytelling and art: our creations tell stories, hold powerful meaning. Beading is theory: how can beading not be understood as a form of theory if I learn about my culture through the teachings of the beads? Beading is healing: there are some things that are beaded that hold healing power within them; on the flip side, it can do just the opposite and so it is important to be careful of your energy when you are beading so that you do not pass on negative energy into the beadwork. Further to this discussion of beads as vehicles for healing or other energy, beading something like pasties for burlesque and placing them onto a site of past trauma can be a healing experience; the beads work to heal the past injustices to the body. Beading is teaching: I have learned more about myself, more about colours and other-than-human, other-than-animal, (non)bodied, and unseen beings through beading. Through engaging with the beads, I have learned, I have healed, I have shed happy tears watching my children learn how to bead from their kokum.[14]

Another form of healing and theorizing for me has been burlesque; it has become an excellent teacher in decolonizing Indigenous sexualities—and indeed my own sexual and bodily sovereignty—as they are situated within relationality. My colleague, Kirsten Lindquist, and I have been working together to form the Beaver Hills Burlesque Collective: an Indigenous burlesque troupe situated in amiskwaciy (Edmonton). Our troupe is guided and grounded by *Tipi Confessions*, an Indigenous-led sexy storytelling production, engaging in burlesque in a way that is not only entertaining, but educational, decolonial in nature, and ethical. The embodiment of

---

[14] This particular moment was especially emotional for me. It was so meaningful for my children to learn from their kokum, and in fact, this was the first time they used the word "kokum" for my mother; in the past kokum was specifically for their great-grandmother, my nohkum.

Indigenous feminist/queer sexualities is not limited to on-stage performances; however, burlesque is a useful way to heal our relationships to our bodies and to each other, and with/in community. Through burlesque, I have been able to learn about new forms of performance art, and begin to write stories in a performative way, to unpack songs and movements and stories in ways that foster healing and reassert Indigenous female personhood; through learning burlesque, Fanny LuPhine was born and debuted on the Tipi Confessions stage in Vancouver of 2017.

One of the understandings of performing burlesque as I was told by my instructor, Kiki Quinn, is that when you perform you are inviting the audience to watch; they are given permission to look at your body, to watch your movements, to read the story that you are telling. Burlesque is not about arousal, but is rather about teasing, about being confident in yourself and in the knowledge that all eyes are on you. You are allowing your story to be told, and it is not about who is watching or what (non)gender they may be: you are giving consent. What makes performing burlesque as an Indigenous performer decolonial is that “within the context of settler colonialism, Indigenous peoples are not seen as worthy recipients of consent, informed or otherwise, and part of being colonized is having to engage in all kinds of processes on a daily basis that, given a choice, we likely wouldn’t consent to” (Simpson 15). If Indigenous women are so far removed from personhood that they are not seen as being able to give consent, then how much power is regained and reclaimed when an Indigenous woman not only gives consent to look at her body and to read it—consent that she grabs hold of, claims as hers, and offers of her own free will—but does so stripped down to her skivvies? It is not every day that you see someone in bedazzled underwear and bra, (beaded) pasties or tassels, shimmying and shaking and following choreography on a stage and saying: “watch me.” Considering the odd juxtaposition of Indigenous women’s sexuality being queer in that they are not only depersoned so that they cannot have sexuality, but are then also viewed in a highly sexualized manner as an object to be used and thrown away, for an Indigenous woman to bare herself and perform her truth on stage for everyone to see is an incredible act of courage and of decolonization. To perform Indigenous sexualities and stories through burlesque is an act of decolonizing Indigenous women's bodies and sexualities. As Cayuga/Mohawk-Hungarian scholar Emerance Baker writes: "We need to address the ways our bodies have been silenced and made a cultural taboo for ourselves and other Native women" (8). Indigenous burlesque performers rip the taboo off and throw it away with each performance, and encourage other Indigenous women to take the taboos and colonial labels off their bodies and accept themselves as they truly are: strong, resilient, powerful, healthily sexual iskwêw.

To not only claim sexuality and express it as a woman, but as an Indigenous woman, is a political act. Sex, according to Foucault, is a political issue that combines "the disciplines of the body: the harnessing, intensification, and distribution of forces, the adjustment and economy of energies" with "the regulation of populations, through all the far-reaching effects of its activity" (145). For Indigenous persons, the regulation of our sexualities—the removal of the ability to even have sexuality under settler colonial structures of power and the commodification of Indigenous female bodies to be used and abused—was most notably seen through the residential school system, a system of which my own kokum was a victim. Through the residential school system, our grandmothers and grandfathers and each generation following were denied their right to learn about who they are as an iskwesis or a nâpesis from their families, denied moon time teachings, had words for bodies and sex and relationships ripped from their mouths and replaced with the teachings of settler colonialism. The ability to choose whether to, how to, and/or when to reproduce children or to choose a partner was replaced with settler colonial notions of what "normal" reproduction and sexualities look like. Through burlesque, Indigenous dancers push back against settler colonial structures of what our sexualities and bodies must look like, how we present our bodies and to whom we choose to present them. We fight back against the political structures that denied our rights to the theories and knowledges of sexualities, relationality, and wâhkôhtowin that many of us are now relearning and reclaiming. We embrace queer, Two-Spirit, and trans women and men who choose burlesque as the political and performative text that they write and make available for reading to the audience. We take off the "disciplines of the body" enforced on us through colonization and replace them with beaded pasties.

Both beading and burlesque are texts that are not on paper; they are creative and performative texts that serve to heal, to teach, and to help us in learning to acknowledge and honour that we are not but one part: our physical self, mental self, emotional self, and spiritual self are all connected and need to be nourished. When even one of these areas needs healing, it affects each other part. Through beadwork I can heal emotionally, impart love and honour to another person who needs it when I gift them with something I have beaded. Through burlesque, I have been able to begin the process of healing from past abuses and a negative view of my own body; the more I move, the more I take off, the more empowered I become. Through creating both texts, connecting to the animacy of beads and song and dance, I work to decolonize Indigenous women's sexualities and our forms of expression that are trapped within settler sexuality and binaried thinking. I have learned more about relationality through using beading and burlesque as theory than I ever imagined I would; I have found a way of connecting to myself on all levels and to my grandmothers, a lesson I wish I had been given as a child. The creative, including the telling of our stories through various means, is essential to the passing on of knowledge, to healing wounds, to creating a safe space for other Indigenous persons to relate and to understand that they are not alone. As a literary scholar, part of what I do is analyze and unpack texts. It is so much more affective to create those texts and acknowledge that the creative is theory. I do not see the point of writing theory or unpacking texts if no one but other academics are going to read it, and so I choose to allow the creative––the characters, the beads, the dances––to come forth, and nurture them so that they grow and become tangible theory in the hands and hearts of those who need political, sexual, emotional, physical, or mental healing. My understanding of the creative is that it is not only an essential part of healing and understanding relationality, but is also an incredible theoretical lens through which to teach and to perform my duty in passing on, in remembering.

Aside from beadwork and burlesque, I have felt encouraged to write creatively. After attending a writing workshop with Richard Van Camp, I had the overwhelming need to write *Frog Songs*. In fact, driving home from said workshop under the light of the full moon, I had to pull over on the side of the road and begin to write the story of Tierra; I began to engage with another element of the creative, to write a new theoretical approach to my thesis that was missing; this chapter was born out of that night of intimate connection with the creative. I believe that Tierra's story more fully explains my argument for Indigenous relationality. While what I am sharing here is only a small part of Tierra's story––her story is still being written and will result in a much longer text––it is a story that I believe needs to be told. It is through our understanding of our connections to the world around us and to each other that we can heal, learn, and become the necessary teachers for the next generation. As Emerance Baker writes, it is the "making and telling of our stories [that] teach us to do more than react to and survive in this world; [our stories] bring us ways to heal our selves, our families, and our communities" (111).

By writing and telling Tierra's story, I offer what I have been arguing throughout this thesis; my story provides a decolonial framework through which to relate, to heal, and to learn to love ourselves as Indigenous women.

Including these excerpts from *Frog Songs* has a two-fold job: it works to share in a creative form exactly what I have been arguing and theorizing about throughout the previous chapters of "Indigenous Relationality: Sex, Women, and the Animate:" it is the story of a young Indigenous woman navigating life with all her relations: those which are animate, those which are other-than-human, other-than-animal, (non)bodied, and unseen. Tierra's story also acts as a text that is not just for the academic world. It is important for me to pass on what I have learned in a good way, and in order to do so, it is important for me to ensure that my writing reaches a much larger audience than within academia alone. The academic work is, of course, important; however, I strive to make sure that in all I do, I give back to others and do my job as a storyteller to teach and to pass on my knowledge in a good way to as many as I am able.

Having read many pages of academic theorizing and unpacking of texts, I will now share with my readers excerpts from my longer work in progress, *Frog Songs*[15], and discuss it in conversation with all that I have written throughout "Indigenous Relationality: Sex, Women, and the Animate" in my conclusion.

---

[15] It has come to my attention as I have worked through revisions that Haisla writer Eden Robinson has a subheading in one of the sections of her novel *Traplines* that is entitled "Frog Song." I was previously unaware of this, and note that my work is not influenced by or related to Robinson's. It is not uncommon to find creative texts with the same or similar titles. The section entitled "Moonlight" was written 13 years ago, and as I wrote *Frog Songs* I was reminded of "Moonlight" and knew that it needed to be incorporated in some fashion in Tierra's story. In addition, the title, *Frog Songs*, is influenced by and was born under the light of ayîki-pîsim, the frog moon, and it is from within this moon teaching that my larger work is situated.

Excerpts from *Frog Songs*

Frogs

I am four years old and eager to catch frogs. I have been searching everywhere for them, combing my hands through the clover, looking in and around puddles, and lifting up rocks in the grass to see if they are underneath. I have heard that they like to hide under rocks. Much to my dismay, I have not seen or caught a single frog in the thirty minutes I have been searching, which feels more like an entire year. I sit down in the grass and begin to cry, my heart broken over the lack of frogs in my kiddie pool, the blue kind with the built-in slide and bubbles decorating the sides.

My cousin is fifteen and has come to have supper with us, like she does every Tuesday night when her Dad works late. They don't live far from us down the gravel road. Some Tuesdays, like today, she stays for a little longer after supper and hangs out with me. She is the coolest person I know. She asks me why I am crying and I sob to her about the frogs.

"Come with me! I know the *best* places to find a frog!" She tells me. I stop crying and jump up, eager to follow her to the frogs.

We walk hand in hand along the outskirts of the garden with the strawberries and raspberry bushes, careful not to get too close to the wet patches from the recent rain. She walks up to a rotting length of wood on the ground next to the shed.

"Sometimes frogs like to hide in dark, wet places, like under here," she whispers. She lifts up the wood, and I anxiously look towards the earth. Her long, dark hair sneaks out from behind her ears and she tucks it back and scratches her perfectly round nose. Underneath are a million beetles, a nasty centipede, two juicy earthworms that would be fun to stretch apart or stab onto a hook, and some leaves from the fall. I do not see a single frog. I jut out my bottom lip and cross my arms across my chest; my cousin is a horrible liar and she made me come all the way over here for nothing! My cousin looks at me with a small grin on her face. “Look again.” I look down and scan the earth, wondering why I should even look if there aren’t going to be any frogs.

Right there, right in front of my eyes, is a baby frog! It is green and tiny and I squeal with delight. I reach down to grab it, but it hops away. I try again and again, the frog consistently avoiding my grabs. I have chased the frog all the way to the end of the shed and he is still not in my hand. My face turns red with anger and embarrassment, and I am about to try again when my cousin speaks.

“Talk nicely to him,” she says, “he’s just a baby. Tell him you would like to please hold him.” She smiles at me and adds, “And if that doesn’t work, just make sure you cup your hand like this–” she demonstrates and I copy, tongue sticking out of my mouth in concentration, “–and move fast enough to catch the hopping bastard!”

After two more tries, I catch him under my hand. I am so excited, I don’t know what to do, and I just hold him under my hand, feeling him hop twice against my fingers. My cousin walks over and calmly puts her hand next to mine and tells me that on the count of three we will scoop him up together. We do this, and the frog gets almost up to my belly button before he leaps, farther than any frog in the entire world has ever leapt, and lands on the grass with not a single sound. I yelp, worried that he is hurt. My cousin laughs and snatches him up off the ground and cups him between both of her hands.

“I wanna put him in the pool!” I tell her.

“Ok, lead the way,” she says. Sometimes, I wish that she were my sister.

We place little Hoppy in the pool. He looks even tinier in the pool, even though when I am in there with my sisters when they come to visit on weekends there is barely enough room for all three of us. I look around at things to place inside the pool to make him feel more at home. I grab two fistfuls of grass and yank them out of the earth and drop them inside. Hoppy does not look impressed. I scan the ground and see my mother's garden rocks, the rocks she drove all over the countryside to find and we better not touch them because they are for her garden.

"Let's put this rock in there for Hoppy!" I exclaim, picking up the best countryside rock and carefully placing it in the middle of the pool so Hoppy will have a rock to hop on, but won't be able to hop out. I think Mom will understand my gift. Somehow the rock and the grass don't seem to be enough. My cousin has rolled up the sleeves of her tie-dye t-shirt and her shorts, trying to tan her already brown skin on the lawn. She ignores me as I walk by her to the hose and unravel it enough to reach the pool. I walk back over and turn on the water, just a little bit like Dad taught me, and skip back to the pool to watch the water begin to fill up for Hoppy. When he has begun to swim around, I take the hose out and turn off the water, proud of myself for not even asking for help, not even once.

"Can we go get Hoppy some friends?" I ask. I can't imagine poor Hoppy not having any friends.

"Sure, why not."

We head down towards the pond across the gravel road from our place. I know I am not supposed to go over there, but if my cousin is with me I know it will be okay. I can hear the frogs singing happily to one another and I can't help but smile.

"What do you think the frogs are singing about?" I ask.

"How much they wanna hop on each other," she says with a laugh. I think that this is a really strange thing for frogs to want to do.

"Like leapfrog?"

“Yeah, ha, like leapfrog.”

“I like when they sing.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty cool. When you hear the frogs singing, it means that the water is good and that there is life around here.”

We wander around the pond for a while, pushing aside cattails and swatting mosquitoes. I wonder where all the frogs are considering all the singing we heard walking over here and are still hearing now.

Suddenly I see a gigantic frog, the biggest, greenest frog in the entire world, swimming happily through the pond. Without thinking, I take three steps into the water and reach toward him. I fall face first into yucky pond water.

“Shit!” I can hear my cousin yell, even though my face is under the water and I am probably going to drown. I flail and am able to bring my head above the water and I scream for help to my cousin.

“Stand up, Tierra!” My cousin yells.

“I can’t!” I yell. “I can’t stand up, I’m going to drown!” My face goes back under the water. I am panicking and kicking and I open my mouth to scream but I am still under the water. I am able to bring my head out of the water again and gasp for breath.

My cousin curses under her breath and takes two steps into the water and picks me up.

“Stand up! Christ!”

I am suddenly standing, blinking furiously to keep the water that is dripping from my curly light brown hair out of my eyes. The water is only up to my knees.

“Oh,” I say.

“That’s enough frog catching for one day.”

We head back to the house, and I know that Mom is going to be so mad at me for going in the pond. I am walking as slowly as I can, hoping that maybe my clothes will be dry by the time I make it back home if I take my time. I pretend to stoop down and search the grass for things, not really looking for anything in particular.

“Come on, you need to get out of those clothes. You’re gonna stink like a pond.”

I pick up the pace.

Back home, Mom is really, really mad. She yells at me and she tells my cousin she should know better and sends her home. I am thrown into the bathtub, clothes and all, and water is poured mercilessly over my body and Mom is scrubbing and yelling and scrubbing and yelling. She pulls my sister’s hand-me-down shirt with the ruffled sleeves over my head and the neck part gets stuck on my ear and she pulls it really hard and I start to cry because it hurts my ear. She slaps my mouth and tells me to stop crying and I try so hard to stop crying but my ear really, really hurts. She tells me to stand up and she pulls down my pants and panties and tells me to bend over. I am crying and saying no but she starts to yell again so I bend over and she smacks my bare butt harder and more times than I have ever been spanked before. I can’t help it, I cry, I cry so hard no sound even comes out. She runs Johnson’s baby wash up and down my body and I don’t make a single sound until she pulls the plug from the tub, and then I start to wail.

“You made me do this, you little bitch!” She yells at me and I have never felt so guilty in my entire life. She takes me to my room and tells me to get some damn clothes on and I cry while I pull my 101 Dalmatians nightgown over my head. I don’t know what to do so I lay down in my bed. Her black eyes glares at me and she leaves my room, slamming the door behind her. I cry until my breathing returns to normal and the deep hiccup breaths have slowed down.

After a long time, Mom comes back into the bedroom. She smells like cigarette smoke and looks like she has been crying, but she says nothing. She motions for me to come over to her, and I slowly sit up and move closer. She has a hairbrush with her, and she carefully brushes out my hair, making sure that none of the knots hurt when she gets them out. Next she braids it, in two tight braids from front to back and whispers that it will make my hair extra curly tomorrow. I sniffle and she kisses my braids, turns me around and kisses my forehead. She says nothing else, just tucks me into my bed and kisses my forehead again. I pretend not to notice the tear that lands on my cheek when she does so.

As I am drifting off to sleep, I hear the frogs singing loudly, playing leapfrog with one another. The water is good.

In the morning Mom undoes my braids and laughs about her curly-haired girl and has made me pancakes in the shape of cherries and Mickey Mouse. She lets me pour my own syrup and doesn’t get mad when I pour too much. She is the best mom in the entire world.

After breakfast, I go outside to check on Hoppy. He is belly-up in the water, drowned. I had put too much water in the pool and the rock was too tall and too steep for him to climb out onto.

The Kissing Game

Mom and Dad sometimes have fancy nights, and those nights always make me the happiest because they seem like they really love each other. I can always tell when they are going to have a fancy night because Mom will bring home Minute Maid and ginger-ale and a glass jar of Dad’s favourite spaghetti sauce. I will know it is going to be an extra-fancy night when Mom buys one of those frozen garlic breads rather than us having toast with margarine and garlic salt on top.

Ever since my sisters came back home, we have fancy nights about once a month with all of us, and these nights are just the best because no one fights. We help Mom make the dinner and even clean up after while Mom and Dad go to their room to talk. Tamara says they're being sick in there and I wrinkle my nose in disgust, but I don't really know what that means anyway.

One evening, I see Mom in her room putting on lipstick and taking time to pull her hair back into a tight ponytail. Even on our most fancy nights, she does not wear lipstick so I know tonight must be a big deal.

"It's a fancy night tonight," she says, "but this time, me and your dad are going to go out and you girls get to have a babysitter."

I am immediately excited about having a babysitter. I hope it's my cousin.

"Really? Yeehaw!" I yell and skip down the hallway to tell my sisters the good news.

The babysitter arrives. Her name is Fawn and she has pale skin and green eyes and is really fat. Tamara and I giggle about her belly, wondering if we poked it would it wiggle. Tanya ignores us; she is mad that we are having a babysitter. Eventually, she agrees with us that it would probably wiggle, but she just rolls her eyes, ever serious. Mom says that Fawn is the daughter of her friend from work and is sixteen and loves to babysit. Tamara whispers to us that she thinks Fawn likes to sit on babies with her big butt and I laugh so hard I snort. Mom rolls her eyes at us, a Player's Light in her mouth.

"Not sure when we will be back, probably around nine?" They head out the door.

For a babysitter, Fawn is actually pretty boring. Her breath smells bad, and when she isn't looking, Tamara and I make choking faces at each other. She feeds us KD, then she has us sit down to colour in colouring books and makes us work really hard to colour in the lines. What fun is colouring if you have to do it so hoity-toity?

Next she reads a book to us with lots of stories; about a rabbit named Peter and a kitten named Tom and something Puddle-Duck. I think Puddle-Duck is a funny name and I laugh, but Tanya says she is so bored and Tamara always does what she does so they keep whining and saying they feel like falling asleep. Tamara asks if her and Tanya can go to our room and play Barbies, and I am seriously hurt when they tell me I can't come play because I always play Barbies stupid.

"That's ok, you and me can do something real fun!" Fawn says.

I am sad but feel a bit excited that I get to do something my sisters don't get to do.

Fawn pulls out a deck of cards and we play Go Fish, but it's with her rules that aren't our rules and I am over it pretty quickly. Fawn looks down the hallway to see what my sisters are doing, and then starts to put the cards away.

"Do you want to play a game that is even more fun?" Fawn asks.

"Ok," I say. I worry she might call for my sisters to come and play and I am still upset with them and don't want them to come play.

"This game is a special game. It is so special that you can't tell your sisters or your Mom or Dad about it, ok?"

"Ok!" I am very excited about this.

"For this game, you have to come and sit on my lap over on that couch over there, but you have to bring that blanket on the chair with you."

I grab the blanket, a blue and white crocheted one that Dad says was his mother's and skip over to Fawn. She pulls me onto her lap and wraps us both up in the blanket. She kisses my ear, and I think that's kind of weird because I don't really know her. I squirm away and she laughs and chases me.

"I'm going to kiss you!" She says as she chases me around the living room. I think that this is kind of fun. "Here I come, I'm going to kiss you!"

She catches me and I am laughing and she sits down on the couch with me in her lap. She's so fat that when she sits down, dust puffs up and I can se little fibers dancing in the last bits of sunlight streaming through the window. She starts telling me a story about a little bunny rabbit that isn't Peter and I don't remember much of the story because as she is telling it, she puts her hand on my tummy and moves it down towards the waist on my sunflower stirrup leggings.

"Ummmm, what are you doing?" I ask, starting to feel uneasy.

"It's part of the game! You'll see!"

She keeps on telling me the story while she reaches her hand into my panties and I know that this is not okay but she keeps telling me the story and asking doesn't that feel nice and don't you like this game and I am torn because it feels nice in a way that makes my stomach hurt. My body feels weird and her breath smells so bad I want to get sick and my heart is pounding and she kisses my neck in a way that no one else has ever kissed my neck and it makes me scared and I want her to stop but I am scared that she will hurt me if I tell her to stop and I wish my sisters had not decided to go and play Barbies. She stops after a while and laughs and asks me if I like The Kissing Game and I nod even though I don't really like it. She tells me that there is another part to The Kissing Game, and she has me sit on the couch and she kisses me in the same place she just had her hand and tells me that she only will play this part of the game with me because she loves me more than she loves my sisters. I feel myself leave my body and it feels as though I am watching what is happening from the seat on the couch next to me.

After a while, she finally stops. I am ashamed, like I have done something really, really bad.

“Remember, this is our little secret,” she says with a wink.

I nod. She goes down the hallway to see what my sisters are up to and I run to the bathroom and lock the door. I barely make it to the toilet before I am throwing up neon orange macaroni and curdled milk. I smell like her breath and I don’t know how to get rid of the smell of it or my shame.

I tell no one about The Kissing Game. I am too ashamed of what has happened, and too ashamed that I found myself touching down there when I was alone to feel some of those feelings again. I am a bad kid.

Two days later, the phone rings. I assume it is my kokum, and I beg Mom to let me say hello. I climb up on the stool, my favourite stool covered in little blue and yellow flowers and orange leaves and Mom looks mad at me but I insist.

“Hello kokum!” I say happily into the phone.

“Hi sweetie,” comes a voice on the other end of the receiver. “This isn’t kokum, ha ha ha, this is Fawn!”

I urinate in my pants and onto the stool. Mom’s eyes widen and she yells what the hell is wrong with me I’m not a baby anymore and I jump off the stool and run to the bathroom and lock the door. I can hear her telling Fawn that she will call her back later but yes, they need her to babysit tomorrow night.

“No! No! No! I don’t *like* her!” I tell Mom over and over. Mom spanks me and tells me that she is going to have a night out with her friends because Dad is leaving for work and I am not the adult so I don’t make the decisions. She will be gone overnight this time and my sisters are silent and I wonder for a second if they know about The Kissing Game but I don’t ask and they don’t tell.

Tomorrow night rolls around and I dread what might happen. The night passes without incident, and I think maybe Fawn forgot about The Kissing Game and maybe it won't happen this time. Just when I think all is good, Fawn tells my sisters to go play in their room and says I can stay and help her with something that is special just for six-year-olds.

She wraps the blanket around herself and peeks out at me from the gaps in the stitching.

"I'm going to kiss you!" She says with a huge grin as she stalks towards me.

Mushrooms

Mushrooms are interesting beings. They can grow on trees, in large patches of clover, in the grass, in the mud, basically anywhere. Not only can they grow in so many different places, they practically grow overnight! One day you have a fine looking patch of grass and the next day it is spotted with mushrooms. Some mushrooms are perfectly fine to eat, some can kill you, and some can make you see colours so intense and experience feelings so deep you feel as though you have seen God (or the Devil, if the people you are with are assholes).

The word for mushroom in Cree is ayîkinônâcikan, which is a really interesting word. Ayîki means frog, or those who herald in the thunderbirds in the spring. Nônâcikan means nursing bottle, or the nipple on a bottle; essentially, it is the thing that nurses, at least that is what I think it means. So if you put the two words together, it means frog-sucker or frog-nurser, at least from what I can gather. I am by no means a fluent speaker of the language ripped from the tongues of my grandmothers and grandfathers, but I try. Mushrooms give life to frogs, I guess.

When I was ten years old, Tanya made me eat an entire can of mushrooms. She told me that if I did it, she would give me ten bucks; if I didn't, she would beat me up. She was babysitting us that night so I had to do it. What you need to know though, is that mushrooms had always made me gag. They are vile. I would always pick them out of my food and pretend to drop them on the floor, or cry really hard until Dad felt bad for me and said I could leave the table, or sit there for hours eating every last nasty piece of fungus until Mom was satisfied.

I was about thirty mushrooms in and feeling the pain. I was gagging and crying and Tanya was grinning her evil grin, mushroom light shining in her black eyes, Mom's eyes, and just waiting for me to give up so she could give me a good pounding. Tamara suggested that maybe I could try them with sugar since I liked sugar on my cereal, and I thought that maybe that would work.

Let me tell you something: mushrooms from a can and sugar do not belong together. They do not want to get to know each other, they do not want to hold hands or fool around in the backseat of a shitty old Ford. They are mortal enemies that must be kept very far away from each other.

I spooned a bunch of sugar into the can and mixed it up really good, then took a bite. At first it was sweet and delicious, and then I wanted to vomit from the combination of sweetness, mushroom juice, and slimy texture. I gagged violently. Tanya's eyes flashed eagerly and Tamara looked sorry for me. But I had a point to prove. I dug my spoon in deep and shoved even more in my mouth. I thought I might actually make it until one little mushroom slid down my throat. That was it. I projectile vomited across the counter, onto both of my older sisters, all over the wall.

My mushroom spew led to both Tamara and Tanya following suit and pretty soon the entire dining room was full of our vomit. It took us almost an hour to clean it up, because as we cleaned we kept gagging and getting sick. To make it even worse, our dog kept trying to come in there and lick it up, which made us all really mad and disgusted.

Sometimes I wonder who in the world was the first person to think that eating a mushroom would be a good idea.

I remember being young and sometimes finding mushrooms among the clover on the acreage. Many hours were spent trying to find a four-leafed clover to bring myself good luck. When I finally would find one, I would run back to my room and find my heaviest book. I would put the little clover underneath the book and hope that it squished the leaves properly. After a few days, I would take the book off from the clover and wrap the leaves in plastic wrap from the kitchen; I was always careful that Mom didn't see me taking her wrap. This little bit of luck would live in the pocket of my pants or in my shoe every day until it got gross or I lost it. I never had any luck come to me from it, but maybe that was because I was using the wrong plants for the wrong reasons.

Sometimes I would find frogs among the clover, and I often wondered if it was because the mushrooms were there, or if maybe the mushrooms only showed their nasty selves because the frogs came to visit.

Moonlight

Many nights I laid awake listening to the sound of their fighting. A lamp crashing on the floor, family photos shattering on the wall, chairs being overturned. They always got like this on nights when they went out drinking. I was the only one left in the house because both of my older sisters had moved out; they couldn't stand living here anymore and quite frankly, I wasn't quite old enough to be out on my own and I didn't want to live with Tanya and her drug-dealer boyfriend or join Tamara in the big city. Tanya hated Dad and hated Mom even more and couldn't understand how I could want to live in such a shithole. She told me when her and Tamara were taken away it was the best thing that ever happened to them, and she was mad that she was ever made to come back home. I don’t think she actually meant that, we both know that she had it better here than out there. Even after they both left me, I stayed because I felt too guilty to leave.

I would lie in my bed under my old, tattered blanket and listen to them yell obscenities at each other. Dad would tell Mom she was a whore, Mom would accuse Dad of cheating, and he would say that it’s no wonder he would cheat on her when she was such a whore. This would escalate more and more and culminate in broken walls, broken furniture, and sometimes broken skin and bones.

One night I tried to come in between them because I couldn’t handle it anymore. I rushed out of my room and confronted them.

“What the hell do you think you have business telling *me* how to live my fuckin’ life?” Mom slurred at me.

“Go away, Tierra,” Dad said.

“You know what, little bitch? You were an accident. Did you know that?” Mom laughed. She gestured toward me with her two-six of whiskey, took a swig and swallowed, booze dribbling down her chin.

“Tierra, just go back to bed,” Dad said, his red hair mussed and his five o’clock shadow coming in thick.

“Don’t tell her to go back to bed she needsta know! She’s nothin’ but a trash can. You hear me, girl? You. Ain’t. Worth. Nothing.” Her words were glass, cutting me up.

“Shut the fuck up. Tierra, we love you.” Dad always got extra loving when he was drinking, at least to us girls.

"Speak for yourself. I ain't never loved this bitch. Should aborted you and save myself a trouble!" She whipped her bottle at my head, narrowly missing. It smashed and she lunged at me, falling in the process. Dad tried to stop her but fell with her and the two of them began punching and grabbing at each other on the floor, ripping at each other's clothes and kissing between blows to the face and body.

I didn't know what to do or think. I could feel each sliver of my heart, my entire being, breaking, cracking, shattering like the picture frames on the wall. I ran out the door and into the night, into the light of the full moon in an April sky. It was cold outside but I didn't care. I ran until my lungs started to hurt, which wasn't very far considering the cold and my lack of physical fitness. I trudged up a hill and lay in the grass, crying. The moon seemed so far away from me, seemed so cold and distant. I was alone in the world. In the distance I could hear the frogs singing and I yelled at them, told them to shut the fuck up and that I hoped their pond dried up.

After a while I came back home. My parents were passed out on their bed, naked, with the door open. I shook my head in disgust and closed the door, heading to my room to try and get some sleep.

The next day I started to clean up the house, like I always did after their big drunken blowouts. After about ten minutes of doing so, I gave up and had a shower then tried to curl my hair to make myself feel better. Around two in the afternoon they finally roused out of bed. Mom asked me how I slept and I said nothing, just glared at her through hollow eyes. She nodded, her hair stringy and her left cheek swollen. Dad walked briskly out of the bedroom in his favourite jeans and a black muscle shirt, grabbed a garbage bag from under the sink, and went back into their room. Mom was silent and stared up at the ceiling.

"I'm leaving," Dad said as he walked out.

“What do you mean, leaving?” I asked.

“Leaving. As in, I can’t take anymore of your mama’s shit and I’m sorry. You’re better off without me anyway.”

“No, Dad, you can’t leave me—”

“Sorry. I’m leaving.”

“Mom, stop him!” I yelled at her. She remained motionless and said nothing.

I was screaming, crying, begging him not to leave. He slung his shitty garbage bag over his shoulder, and yanked it out of my hands when I tried to grab it. He unceremoniously tossed it into the cab of his shitty F-150 and drove away out of our yard, out of our lives. It was the last time I ever saw my father.

After he left, Mom went off the deep end in a bad way. Her bed became a merry-go-round for men of all kinds: men who tried to sneak into my bed and touch me, men who fucked her and then snuck out after, men who stayed for weeks and ate our food or kept her high. I started to hope that maybe she would OD so I wouldn’t have to listen to her moaning in bed every night. My sisters tried to get me to leave again, but how could I leave the house we had grown up in? What if Mom actually did die and no one found her for weeks? I couldn’t live with myself if something like that happened.

Eventually Mom’s trysts began to take place outside of the house. She would leave for days on end and come back only to grab clothes. Whenever she came back, she looked thinner, sicker, less alive. She would ask what I was still doing here, and then leave. On her last visit, she told me she was never coming back.

Many nights I lay awake remembering the sound of their fighting. How I longed to hear them yelling, to hear glass shattering in various rooms of the house, to wake up to the evidence of a fresh fight and start to clean it up. I would give anything for one more night of agony.

The mess from Mom and Dad’s last fight was still evident throughout the house. The lamp that had been smashed was still sitting where it had landed on the floor, the picture frames on the wall were still shattered. The stench of their absence filled every room. The fridge was empty of food and the cupboards were bare. All that was left in the house was brokenness. I was alone in a house of nothing. There was no one here but me and an empty house full of bad memories.

One night I walked into the living room and looked around at the mess. I started to cry, and my tears turned to anger, which turned to rage. I tipped over the couch, kicked the TV stand and the TV screen until it broke, ripped apart the blanket on the chair and screamed my pain into the emptiness. It was no longer just about them, it was about me too. I threw the broken lamp at the window, cracking it but not breaking it. I ran into the kitchen and emptied all of the dishes and silverware and cups, breaking them all over the floor and throwing the drawers as hard as I could into the wall. I tipped over the garbage can, sending putrid trash all over the floor and kicked it violently. The washroom was my next victim, and I broke the mirror, pulled the shower curtain down, ripped the lid off the toilet seat and knocked over anything on the counters. I went into their bedroom and screamed over and over how much I hated them as I ripped my mother’s clothes with a nail file I had found on her dresser.

When I was finished, I collapsed in a heap on the living room floor.

“I don’t want to live anymore.” I said out loud to no one.

“I hate you!” I yelled it over and over again, not sure if it was directed at them or at myself.

Before I really knew what I was doing, I scrambled over all the broken mess into the kitchen and grabbed a knife. I walked back into the living room, sat down on the broken mess on the floor, sat down on the remnants of my broken life. I angled the knife into my chest and took a few deep breaths. This was it.

As I took my final breath before I plunged the knife into my heart, the clouds in the sky shifted, causing the light of the full moon to shine through the cracks of the window. I gasped. The moonlight refracted through the cracks to create what looked like a bird spreading its wings over the broken room, over my broken life. The knife dropped from my hands and I released all of my pain through my tears. I cried until I had nothing left to cry. In that moment, I knew that someone or something was watching out for me. I stood up eventually, grabbed a few things that were not ripped or broken from my room, and walked to the door. I didn’t know where I was going to go, but I knew that I couldn’t stay here any longer.

As I walked out the door I could hear the sound of the frogs singing in the night.

First Love

When I was twelve years old, I went to a party at Amanda’s house. Amanda was my very best friend from school, and I thought that she was the prettiest girl in class. I was very happy that she was my friend, because that must mean I was also pretty. She had her own boombox that she brought downstairs for our party, which upped her coolness to like level 800.

Our other friend, Danielle, wasn’t invited to the party.

“So, yeah, I didn’t invite Dani because I just found out that she’s like…a lesbian?” Amanda said. She had a way of turning every sentence into a question.

“Woah, really?” I asked.

“Yeah, she told me about it and then I was like um, ew? What do you mean? And she was like well I girls how you like boys, and I was like wait so you like girls like, want to kiss them and shit? And she was like yes.”

“Wow, I had no idea,” I said.

“Yup! So I just felt like really weird about inviting her over since the girls are all sleeping over after. Because like, she’s seen us in our underwear—what if she tried to like, I dunno, touch us?”

I was pretty sure that wouldn’t happen, and Dani was a really good friend of mine but I nodded in agreement.

Amanda’s parents were home so we couldn’t bust into their booze, so we just hung out in the basement and listened to the radio a bit. I grew up on classics like Haggard, Patsy, and Cash when Mom was around and Zeppelin or Queen when Dad had control of the station. I guess you could say I had a classical upbringing. I would never suggest country here, and hoped that turning on classic rock would make me look cool. One of the guys, Nathan, finished off a bottle of Coke and suggested we play a game of spin-the-bottle with it.

“Spin-the-bottle?” I whispered to Amanda. I really didn’t want to play the game.

“It’s this game where you kiss. Like a kissing game, but like, you don’t know who you are going to kiss every time!” She said.

I blushed a deep red. Heart crooned in the background, singing of kisses for everyone and the irony was not lost on me.

"We sit in a circle and whoever has the bottle spins it, and whoever it lands on, they have to kiss, dimwad."

"I know what the game is," I mumbled. I begrudgingly joined the circle.

We all gathered in the circle and the game began. I had to kiss a few of the boys, first freckle-face Keith and then buck-toothed Brady. Two boys had to kiss each other and they wigged out. We called foul so they pretended to kiss by putting their thumbs over their lips and kissing the opposite sides of the thumbs. Someone suggested that we make it more interesting by rolling two dice; whatever the dice said was how many seconds you had to hold the kiss for.

It was Amanda's turn and the bottle spun all the way back around and pointed at her.

"Spin again, Amanda, you can't kiss yourself," Nathan said. From the way he was smiling at her, you could tell that he was hoping that Laura was going to spin to him. I rolled my eyes. He was pretty cute, but he wasn't hot.

The bottle spun round and round and round and when it finally came to a stop, it was pointing at me. I laughed and so did everyone else and the boys insisted that we had to kiss.

"Why is it okay for us to kiss and not you?" Amanda teased.

"Because you're chicks! It's hot!" Someone yelled. Everyone laughed. I wondered if it would be hot if Danielle were to kiss a girl.

Amanda crawled across the floor to me, giggling the whole time.

"Oh my god I'm so nervous!" She laughed.

"Don't forget the dice!" Nathan said. He handed them to her and she rolled them. Double sixes.

"Twelve seconds!"

Amanda laughed again and we sat up on our knees facing each other. She leaned in and then pulled back, saying I can't do it and other girly excuses. Finally, we decided to count down from ten and then just do it.

Our lips touched. What happened next was not at all what I expected to happen. As the other kids were counting down the seconds from twelve, I was feeling shockwaves throughout my body. Her lips were soft and tender, and the feel of her body close to mine made my pulse quicken. She made a little exhale sound and I felt my lips relax into hers even more. My one hand reached up and caressed the side of her face and I was lost in the smell of her cheap perfume and the warmth of her breath against my nose and cheeks and the feel of her hair in my fingers, and I could feel the space between my legs begin to pulse and a rush of energy flow through my stomach and it felt so good, but in a good way.

"What the fuck?" Amanda pulled away from me, ripping me away from our moment.

"What?" I asked. The boys in the group hollered their approval.

"That was like, a real kiss, T!"

"Pffft, no it wasn't. Just giving the boys a show!" I laughed. Everyone laughed then; even Amanda, and I hoped my cover wasn't blown. I spun the bottle next and it landed on Nathan. I hammed it up and made it funny and everyone forgot about my kiss with Amanda. I didn't forget. I could never forget that.

When Nathan spun the bottle next, he landed on Amanda, because of course he spun to her, and I would be lying if I didn't say I had a pang of jealousy in my stomach when I saw how much they *both* seemed to enjoy the kiss. They continued to make googly eyes at each other for the rest of the evening, and she told me excitedly later that they had made out outside when he was leaving.

Later that night during the sleepover portion, I noticed the way her just-developing chest looked without her bra on under her white ribbed shirt and I wondered if I was some kind of sicko. I mean, I had noticed how good-looking she was before, but now I was really noticing it. I couldn't help but pay extra attention to her laugh, why didn't I notice how great her laugh was before right now? When she fell asleep next to me, I stared at her for a long time, matching my breath with hers and wondering what her mouth would taste like if we were to have a real kiss like in the movies with tongue and all that, like the kiss she said she shared with Nathan.

I wondered if she would like to play leapfrog with me sometime, but thought I would probably have better luck with Danielle, who I just wasn't really in to.

Duck, Duck, Goose

The first time I ever had sex was with a guy named Seth. He was decent looking and honestly, I just wanted to get it over with. We shared a couple of Canadians at a bush party and one thing led to another and the next thing I knew we were playing tonsil hockey in the bed of his truck.

"You should take your pants off," he said with a sly smile.

"You first," I replied.

He obliged. I tried not to laugh at it; this wasn't the first I had seen.

"I'm a grow-er not a show-er," he said, adding, "if you take off your top it will perk up more."

I was pretty sure it wouldn't but I took off my shirt and let him play around with my boobs a bit, leaving hickeys on the left one. The grow-er did not grow at all, but I pretended like it had and he nodded and said he told me so.

After I slid my pants off, he fumbled with a condom, somehow got it on, and climbed on top of me. All in all it wasn't as painful as everyone made it out to be, but maybe that was because he was not a grow-er or a show-er. I looked up into the dark sky, lit only by the stars as it was a new moon, and listened vaguely to him grunting away and asking me if I like that. A few minutes later he was done and I told him he was pretty good.

◊◊◊

I don't remember her name; I only remember that she was a good kisser. She kissed me up against the wall in the bar and it felt so good I let her take me home. We kissed and kissed and kissed until I felt like my lips were going to fall off and then we kissed some more. She took off my dress and kissed my body from head to toe, sliding her tongue in and out and around and telling me how much she liked it and how she couldn't get enough of my body and how she wanted me so bad but I passed out and I woke up in the morning to her telling me she thinks she loves me, and I freaked out and got a cab the hell out of there.

◊◊◊

We had been dating for about two months but we weren't calling it that because we didn't want a label and because like fuck I was going to let any man actually get close to me. The first time we hooked up, we were both drunk and I remember thinking I was just like my mother. The sex was good, so I kept going back and he took me out for Chinese food and bought me drinks and we met each other's friends but we weren't dating.

One night we were cuddling in his bed, smoking a joint, and I said something about being Métis, I don't even know what I said or why I said it.

"You're Native?" He asked.

"Yup, not like I have been hiding it, bud," I joked as I took a deep inhale.

"So does that mean I should go hide my Lysol then? The mouthwash too?"

I paused, wanting to throat punch him but refraining. I took another deep inhale, handed the joint back and said, "I mean, you could stand to bring them out because maybe I will clean this shithole of a house you're living in."

He laughed, thinking all was fine. I ghosted him after that. We weren't anything anyway.

◊◊◊

Peter and I dated for two years. I don't know why I stayed that long, but I guess that is what happens when you find yourself in the comfort of the shitty life you knew as a kid. He was never good to me, I was half as terrible to him, and it was a train wreck from the beginning.

"Come over here, squaw," he would say to me when he was in the mood for love.

I would steel myself against his hatred, against his continued colonization of my body. He would fuck me without love, without concern for me, and I let him do it because feeling nothing with him was better than feeling my pain.

"I want to shake things up," he said one night, bottom shelf vodka on his breath. "I got us these sex dice. I wanna try them. Come over here, squaw."

I sat down on the bed next to him and he rolled the dice. Lick. Elbow.

He laughed more than necessary and I licked his elbow like it was an ice cream cone.

I rolled next. Nibble. Nipples.

He grinned with an evil twinkle in his eye and began nibbling on my nipples, only to increase the severity of his nibbles into bites, causing me to cry out in pain, but not the good kind of pain.

He rolled again. Kiss. Neck. I kissed his neck, thinking about how one night I wouldn't mind slicing this neck open.

My role. Caress. Thighs. It did not take long until my thighs were covered in red marks from where he was smacking them, and then progressing up my body until he slapped me across the face and entered me. The next day when he went to work, I gathered the few things I cared about from our shared apartment and went to stay with Tamara.

◊◊◊

My beautiful, brown friend was my second love. He was tall and handsome and quick-witted and pissed me off like no one else ever has or ever will. I was enamored with him before I even understood that I would always love him.

He held me through leaving my abuser, poked fun at my sisters in the way only brown boys can, and was an excellent kisser.

The first time we kissed he was dating someone else but I didn’t care because I didn’t know her. The second time we kissed he was dating a different someone and I kind of cared because I felt a bit guilty because I did know her. The third time he was back with the first one and I forgot about it, and when we kissed we were both so hung-over it didn’t matter if we had wanted to go further because the very act of kissing took too much energy. The fourth time we kissed, it was perfect and it led to something more and I felt a bit bad because he was back again with that first one but I was here first and he wasn’t faithful to her anyway.

I was lying on his chest afterwards when his phone rang. It was her.

“Hey babe, what’s up?” He said into the phone. I buried my face in his chest, guilty. “Yeah I’ll come over in a little while, just finishing up some things at home. Ok cool, talk to you later. Bye.”

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god I’m a terrible person!” I said.

He just laughed at me and made a face.

“You know what? No. I don’t feel bad, you know why? Because *you* are the one in a relationship, and so you’re the bad one because this isn’t even the first time you have cheated on her! You cheat on her all the time! You’re the bad person here.”

“Well we already knew that,” he said quickly, “what we didn’t know, is that *you* are a home wrecker.”

I gasped, punched him and stood up. He laughed, chased me, pulled me back into the bed, and started all over again.

Two years later I watched him watch her walk down the aisle and I was happy for him, but I know that he and I will always be connected. We’re stuck to one another, forever caught up in the frog song of our Peoples, drawn together in a way no one else would ever understand. Sometimes I dream of us together, his hair long and hanging down his back in a braid, our brown babies running around in the prairie in front of us, the smell of sweetgrass in the air, the sound of frogs singing in the distance.

Ayîki-Pîsim

The moon of April is ayîki-pîsim. She is called the frog moon in English. She is the moon that calls us into new life, gives cadence to the songs of the frogs that herald in the thunderbirds; she is the moon of spring.

With the light of the April full moon streaming through the windows, I gave birth to my first child, a boy. When he came out he was so tiny and small, and he liked to keep his legs tucked up close to his body like a little frog for a month afterwards. My tiny frog child, my perfect Ayîki, the drumbeat and heart of all my rituals, my ceremony.

I ready my smudge and my tobacco, head outside once the clouds part and I can see the moon in the sky. I offer my tobacco to the earth, to ayîki-pîsim, light my smudge and cleanse myself as I commune with my ancestors, with my lost parents, with my sisters, with my lovers, my memories, my dreams, my hopes, my body, my pain, my relations of every size, shape, and form. I spread out my arms to ayîki-pîsim and say, “Nah, otinah nitahkosowinah, here, take away all my sickness, inadequacies, and unhealthiness. Cleanse my being, make me whole.”

Until We Meet Again: Êkosi

Both the creative and the academic are necessary to form a decolonial framework based in relationality and wâhkôhtowin; what is considered to be theoretical is not only from western forms of thought and theorizing. In order to find a language of critique befitting of Indigenous stories, it is imperative to utilize a Two-Eyed Seeing approach, to engage in both an Indigenous understanding and a western understanding together. Both Nations languages must be honoured and used together in order to decolonize sexualities, animacy, and ultimately relationality. Relationality is complex, is animate and tangible. The ways in which we are all interconnected through wâhkôhtowin have long been embedded within our languages, within our ceremonies. In order to best engage with relationality, I have used nehiyawewin as best as I have been able; it is important for me to honour the language, to learn from it, and to form my entire basis for “Indigenous Relationality: Sex, Women, and the Animate” from within nehiyawewin.

I chose to include not only my academic analyses, but also my creative work as it is important to tell our stories and histories; for as Paula Gunn Allen says, “in relating our separate experiences to one another, in weaving them into coherence and therefore significance, a sense of wholeness arises, a totality which, by virtue of our active participation, constitutes direct and immediate comprehension of ourselves and the universe of which we are integral parts” (117). Tierra learns about her place with/in the universe in part through her intimate connection to frogs. The frogs are a constant in her life, guiding her, teaching her, reminding her that even when things are difficult or she feels broken, the water is good, the water is healing. She learns from grandmother moons—most specifically from ayîki-pîsim in the excerpts included—to accept moonlight healing during a moment of suicidality. She gives birth under the light of the full moon, is connected to moontime teachings even when she feels disconnected from the world around her. Her story is not simply a story or account. Her story is animate, is relational; Tierra's experiences speak to the heart and urge the reader to listen with theirs. Her experiences, her interconnectedness to those beings around her, literally embody the theoretical framework I have discussed throughout. By telling her story and including it as equal value with my academic scholarship, I do my part in passing on my knowledge in a good way. Through engaging with Tierra's experiences, readers can begin to understand more about themselves, about their place within relationality, about wâhkôhtowin.

There can be true understanding and validating power found in the Indigenous relationality I have discussed throughout "Indigenous Relationality: Sex, Women, and The Animate," in academic, creative, and other approaches to relatedness and textual forms. Through the telling of our stories, through our beadwork and dance, by allowing for and maintaining relationship with ourselves and with the universe of beings in which we are but one part, the transformative power of relationality—which includes but is far from limited to sex and sexuality—from within an Indigenous framework can decolonize the imposed settler sexuality into the necessary plurality of sexualities and modes of relating, into Indigenous relationality; this plurality makes the most sense when discussed through the use of my language.

Through nehiyawewin, I have been able to engage with a discussion of Indigenous sexualities. Sexualities as a plural emerge when imposed settler sexuality is abolished, when heteronormative, binaried thinking is no longer attached to Indigenous women's bodies; our bodies, our gender identities, our sexual preferences, our ability to be Two-Spirited are all a part of decolonized sexuality into relational sexualities. Our sexual relationships necessarily include human, other-than-human, other-than-animal, (non)bodied, and unseen beings, and these relations must be understood as normal; Indigenous persons have long understood that our relations and interconnections with all our relations are the norm rather than settler imposed straight, heteronormative, Christian sexuality. Both Fleur and Charlene are excellent examples of Indigenous sexualities from within relationality: trans-being/multi-bodied sexual acts via dessert medicine and sexual connections with a lake spirit are just as legitimate as sex between two human beings. Sexualities are a plurality, are non-static, are animate and relational. Tierra's non-heteronormative sexuality and sexual acts are legitimatized and accepted through a Two-Spirit lens; while Tierra is not a Two-Spirit individual, it is best to take a Two-Spirit approach to her shame of her bisexuality, and to her eventual acceptance of who she is—regardless of her sexual identification—as an iskwêw under and related to akîyi-pîsim. Her personhood is reclaimed through her connection to the other-than-human, other-than-animal, (non)bodied, and the unseen she engages with, and also through her connection to her language.

Animacy is best described through the use of nehiyawewin: a language based not on gender but rather on that which is and that which is not animate. Within an Indigenous approach to animacy are included human, other-than-human, other-than-animal, (non)bodied and unseen beings, but also dreams, memories, cultural teachings, and the ways in which we are all interconnected through wâhkôhtowin. As I have heard from Elders, the place that we need to get back to *is* wâhkôhtowin; we must situate ourselves in the teachings of wâhkôhtowin and immerse ourselves in relearning our languages, engaging in ceremonies, and doing all that is necessary in order to make sure that we are doing our part in passing on teachings to the next generations in a good way. We must listen not only with our ears, but also with our heart. From this framework, we can better understand the energy that is felt, the emotions that come forth, and the cleansing of our wounded bodies, minds, and spirits that takes place when a group of women from many different nations join together and drum and sing the Women's Warrior Song. We can better understand how a young girl is able to learn from a mother dog from within a dream, how a woman is able to learn from snowshoes, trees, and wolves. We can understand how a young Métis girl navigating her life through her connection to frogs is theory, is part of healing.

This research has been a healing journey for me; it has been a smudging of my assumptions and deeply-rooted fears, has been a tool for me to grab onto and to accept my own body and self and my dreams as part of my being an iskwêw. Through the relationships that I have made and the guidance that I have received, I was able to navigate both academic theory and the theory of the creative in order to blend the two together and write something that serves to heal. It is my sincere hope that what I have written here is received in a good way and that my words embody my responsibility to pass on teachings to the next generation. While there are many things that I wish I could have included, I was unable to do so due to the page count constraints of a thesis and my necessary narrowed focus. From here I plan to continue this work in my doctoral research, to continue to learn through ceremony and interactions with Elders and Knowledge Keepers, to continue learning nehiyawewin and writing both academically and creatively so that my words are passed on to the next generations of writers, scholars, mothers, aunties, fathers, uncles, sisters, brothers, kokums, and moshoms. Êkosi.

Works Cited

Acoose, Janice. *Iskwewak—Kah'ki Yaw Ni Wahomakanak: Neither Indian Princesses nor Squaw Drudges*. U Saskatchewan Press, 1992, Print.

Allen, Paula Gunn. *The Sacred Hoop*, Beacon Press, 1986.

Anderson, Kim. *Life Stages and Native Women: Memory, Teachings, and Story Medicine*. U Manitoba Press, 2011, Print.

Baker, Emerance. "Loving Indianness: Native Women's Storytelling as Survivance." *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture, & Social Justice*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2005, pp. 111-121.

Bear, Tracy L. *Power in My Blood: Corporeal Sovereignty through the Praxis of an Indigenous Eroticanalysis*. U Alberta, 2016, EBSCO*host*.http://eds.a.ebscohost.com. login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/eds/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=a24881f8-0e64-4965-ae45-c5622b45b48a%40sessionmgr4008&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%3d#AN=alb.7655497&db=cat03710a

Beidler, Peter G. and Gay Barton. *A Reader's Guide to the Novels of Louise Erdrich*. vol. Rev. and expanded ed, University of Missouri Press, 2006.

Chen, Mel Y. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*. Duke U Press, 2012, Print.

Cruz, Louis Esma. "Medicine Bundle of Contradictions: Female-man, Mi'kmaq/Acadian/Irish Diasporas, Invisible disAbilities, masculine-Feminist." *Feminism for Real: Deconstructing the Academic Industrial Complex of Feminism*, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2011, pp. 49-60.

Driskill, Qwo-Li. "Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances between Native and

Queer Studies." *GLQ: A Journal Of Lesbian & Gay Studies*, vol. 16 no. 1/2, 2010, pp. 69-92.

Emberley, Julia V. *Defamiliarizing the Aboriginal: Cultural Practices and Decolonization in Canada*, Toronto University Press, 2007.

Erdrich, Louise. *Tracks*, HarperCollins, 2004.

"entropy." *Oxford English Dictionary*. https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/entropy. Accessed 16 May 2017.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1. Vintage, 1990.

Giffney, Noreen and Myra J. Hird. "Introduction." *Queering the Non/Human*, Ashgate, 2008, pp. 1-16.

Gokiert, Rebecca J., et al. "Wâhkôhtowin: The Governance of Good Community – Academic Research Relationships to Improve the Health and Well-Bring of Children in Alexander First Nation." *International Indigenous Policy Journal*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2017, pp. 1-20.

Hunt, Sarah, and Holmes, Cindy. "Everyday Decolonization: Living A Decolonizing Queer Politics." *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2015, pp. 154-172.

Hopkins, Zoe. *It Takes a Village*. Illus. Amancay Nahuelpan. The Healthy Aboriginal Network, 2012, Print.

Iwama, Marilyn et al. "Two-Eyed Seeing and the Language of Healing in Community-Based Research." *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2009, pp 3-23.

Johnson, Brittany. "Frog Songs," 2017.

Justice, Daniel Heath. "Indigenous Writing." *The World of Indigenous North America,* Ed. Robert Warrior, Routledge, 2015, pp. 291-307.

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Milkweed, 2013, Print.

LeClaire, Nancy and George Cardinal. *Alberta Elders' Cree Dictionary*. U Alberta Press, 1998, Print.

Maracle, Lee. *I Am Woman*, Press Gang, 1996.

McLeod, Neil. *Cree Narrative Memory: From Treaties to Contemporary Times*. Purich Publishing Limited, 2007, Print.

Morgensen, Scott Lauria. "Queer Settler Colonialism in Canada and Israel: Articulating Two-Spirit and Palestinian Queer Critiques." *Settler Colonial Studies*, vol. 2 no. 2, 2012, pp. 167-190.

—. "Settler Homonationalism." *GLQ: A Journal Of Lesbian & Gay Studies*, vol.16, no.1/2, 2010, pp. 105-131.

O'Reilly-Scanlon, Kathleen, et al. "Pathways to Understanding: 'Wâhkôhtowin' as a Research Methodology." *Mcgill Journal of Education*, vol. 39, no. 1, Dec. 2004, pp. 29-44.

Power, Susan. *The Grass Dancer*, Berkley, 1995.

Reitz, Jennifer Diane. "What Exactly Is Transsexual?" *Transsexual,* n.p: 1998.

Salmon, Amy. "Aboriginal Mothering, FASD Prevention And The Contestations Of Neoliberal Citizenship." *Critical Public Health,* vol. 21, no. 2, 2011, pp. 165-178. *EBSCOhost*, doi: 10.1080/09581596.2010.530643. 5 Dec. 2015.

Sayers, Naomi. "Why We Need Indigenous Feminism." *Kwetoday.* Oct. 8, 2012. https://kwetoday.com/2012/10/08/why-we-need-indigenous-feminism/

Shorter, David Delgado. "Sexuality." *The World of Indigenous North America*, Ed. Robert Warror. Routledge, 2015, pp. 487-505.

Simpson, Leanne. "Land as Pedagogy: Nishnaabeg Intelligence and Rebellious Transformation." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2014, pp. 1-25.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous* Peoples. 2nd ed. Zed, 2012.

Stacy Hekman, and Susan Hekman, "Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory." *Material Feminisms*, Indiana U Press, 2008, pp. 1-19.

Suzack, Cheryl. "Indigenous Feminisms in Canada." *NORA: Nordic Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2015, pp. 261-274.

Tatonetti, Lisa. "'Tales of Burning Love': Female Masculinity in Contemporary Native Literature." *Indigenous Men and Masculinities*, University of Manitoba Press, 2015, pp. 130-144.

Te Punga Somerville, Alice. "Kupu rere kē." *Facebook*, 18 November 2014, 5:28 p.m., https://www.facebook.com/notes/alice-te-punga-somerville/kupu-rere-kē/10152910880595786/. Accessed 2 August 2017.

"The Laws of Thermodynamics: first and second laws of thermodynamics as they apply to biological systems." *KhanAcademy*, https://www.khanacademy.org/science/biology/energy-and-enzymes/the-laws-of-thermodynamics/a/the-laws-of-thermodynamics. Accessed 2 May 2017.

Vermette, Katherena. *The Break*. Anansi, 2016, Print.