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Locating Illicit Empathy: The Extractive Ecology of Marian Engel's *Bear*

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Abstract: This article demonstrates the indissociable role of empathy in sustaining the systemic violence of extractivism, a term describing the global drive to exhaustively extract resources. The article contends that empathy, as depicted in Marian Engel's *Bear* (1976), not only fails to serve as a corrective for settler colonial guilt but also reinforces extractivist logic. Although Engel has not been widely recognized as one of the Canadian authors addressing colonial dispossession and ecological depletion, her novel offers a witty exploration of the Canadian natural world and Indigeneity through the way that Lou, the protagonist of the novel, practices empathy. After Lou attempts to form a romantic relationship with the eponymous bear, the animal strikes her on her back, leaving a painful wound that is often interpreted as a symbol of her repentance and personal growth. However, its significance in the context of racialized empathy becomes more pronounced when compared to the strikingly similar slashed upper torso of an Indigenous woman in Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore's photograph *Fringe* (2007). Engel's novel suggests that while empathy toward Indigenous people and animals can catalyze ethical action, it can also re-enact an extractivist ideology. In Lou's case, empathy causes her both to appropriate Indigeneity while exploiting access to resources unavailable to Indigenous people and to instrumentalize her own sexuality.

Keywords: Marian Engel, *Bear*, extractivism, empathy, colonialism

I. Introduction

On 17 April 1979, writer and English professor Rudy Weibe wrote a letter to Canadian author Marian Engel: "[W]hy the heck are they [his

excellent students of literature] all women? Do only women have the nerve for imagination? It seems dreadful, all the world reading only women while the men are all ransacking the physical world for more oil and uranium" (qtd. in Verduyn and Garay 189). Wiebe's complaint resonates with today's concerns about the economy of extractivism, a term recently coined to articulate the tendency across the globe to extract land-based raw materials to near exhaustion, whose logic has since been applied to analyze parallel forms of exploitation in human labor and relations between people. The letter reveals Wiebe's implicit assumption that literature is a product of the imagination, while resource extraction is at the other end of the scale, a matter of real-world politics. However, literature has often been integral to the rise and expansion of extractivism. As Elizabeth Carolyn Miller observes, "literature itself was a crucial print mediator or 'carrier' of extractivism" because the rise of fossil fuels "was part of a larger social transformation to an extraction-based life that had cultural, aesthetic, and discursive elements as well as environmental, economic, and technological elements" (6).

Little is known about Engel's response to Wiebe's letter or her interest in the problem of resource depletion. A correspondence with the novelist Margaret Laurence a few years later provides an additional, evocative piece of information. In a letter dated 12 January 1985, Laurence explains how her furnace "r[a]n out of fuel," apparently exemplifying a "Canadian-type crisis" that "make[s] us Canadians feel we are PIONEERS" (qtd. in Verduyn and Garay 275; emphasis in original). Engel's response has not survived, but she might have agreed with Laurence because a similar "Canadian-type crisis" appears in Engel's novel *Bear* (1976). A passing anecdote describes a settler population struggling with resource shortages. Readers learn that an old Mrs. Bird and her eleven children nearly starved to death and "survived the winter on turnips" while Mr. Bird "had gone out across the ice for supplies [but never returned because he] must have fallen through" (Engel 27). The need to extract resources to survive in extreme conditions results in settlers' uneasiness about the Canadian natural world. In *Bear*, the result of settlers' failure to bridge the chasm between themselves and the natural

world is catastrophic—you literally fall through the gap if you don't understand the land.

At issue here, then, is the critical lexicon of extractivism, which has been a central mode of production for settler colonialism ever since the rise and expansion of capitalism. So far, scholars have not recognized Engel as exploring colonial dispossession and ecological depletion, even as there have been a handful of scholars in animal studies who have written about her most widely acclaimed work, *Bear. Bear* tells the story of a woman named Lou, a lonely and repressed archivist sent to a remote Canadian island to catalog the library of the late Colonel Jocelyn Cary. On the island, she discovers a bear kept chained in a shed, a secret left behind by the Carys. Lou forms an unconventional bond with the animal and tries unsuccessfully to copulate with him. As she explores bear-related myths and histories in Colonel Cary's library, Lou begins to blur the distinction between the island's real bear and the legendary ones. This conflation, without clear differentiation through possessive determiners or definite articles, highlights the bear's dual nature as both tangible and symbolic in Lou's journey of self-transformation. According to Paul Barrett, "Engel insist[s] that animals signify in ways not always intelligible to humans and thematize the problems of writing and reading animals" (125). Stacy Alaimo claims that Engel "radically reconceive[s] the body and nature in such a way as to confound the [Cartesian] dualisms" and destabilizes the nature/culture divide (145). In Tania Aguila-Way's view, *Bear* challenges "the context of 1970s nationalist discourses that instrumentalized animals in the service of settler-invader fantasies of both national belonging and national individuation from the United States" (6). Despite the significant contribution of these critical works, Engel's experimentation has been neglected in recent conversations around environmental humanities in the age of industrial extraction.

Moreover, the discourse on extractivism has largely relied on scientific language that frames the global overexploitation of resources as rational and objective. As a result, the emotional dimensions of extractivism have been obscured, and this gap has only recently begun to receive

attention. Stephanie LeMenager rightly argues that emotion has been insufficiently discussed in the climate discourse, a field closely related to the discourse of extractivism, because of the existing critique that it does not lead to action toward the environmental crisis (7). However, as Axelle Germanaz and her co-authors point out, "resource extraction is only seemingly a sober and rational affair. . . . There are, in fact, deep affective attachments and dependencies that have long undergirded these developments" ("Introduction" 15). Among affects, empathy remains ripe for further exploration in environmental humanities, given its ability to reshape cultural attitudes toward ecological degradation and social injustice caused by extractivism. If we agree with Miller's assertion that "discourse makes environment as environment makes discourse" (3), then it stands to reason that the extractivist imagination—a worldview that frames nature as a resource for exploitation and normalizes the extraction of resources, labor, and even cultural elements—is circulated through the medium of literature. It is likely that empathetic responses to popular literary and cultural knowledge would amplify the practices of exploitation, regardless of the reader's willingness to empathize with the victims of extraction.

Bear offers a vital understanding of the ironic role empathy can play in sustaining the systemic violence of extractivism. Because Lou reads for a living, the novel articulates a question about the relationship between empathy and reading. Lou's unspectacular work (reading and cataloguing historical documents) leads her to encounter texts that reflect colonial and extractivist ideologies, which allows Engel's readers to observe how Lou thinks about extractivism. In the following pages, I provide an overview of the discourses on extractivism and empathy as separate fields of study, synthesizing these distinct bodies of research to form the foundation for my argument. Then I turn to the recurring language and ideas in *Bear* that depict capitalist extractivism. The story unravels the mechanisms of extractivism when the protagonist's compassionate attempt to reclaim a language of love inevitably induces a new mode of dispossessing animals and Indigenous peoples. *Bear* is less a love story involving a woman and a bear than an experiment involving empathy, the Canadian natural world, and Indigeneity. To this end, I examine

how Engel's illicit imagination vivifies the oxymoronic nature of extractive empathy and subverts extractivist norms. The novel suggests that while empathy can catalyze ethical action, it can also exacerbate exploitation by appropriating Indigeneity and instrumentalizing sexuality. Investigating Engel's novel allows one to understand how empathy can be a central, extractive technology of settler colonialism that reinforces ideological investments in more literal forms of extraction like those of mining industries.

II. Empathy in the Global Economies of Extractivism

Scholarship on extractivism originated in the South American context of land-based resource extraction of raw materials for the global market, but the concept has evolved beyond its initial focus on specific economic sectors like mining, forestry, or oil and gas production to encompass broader theoretical and geographical applications (Chagnon et al. 761). Because of the growing scholarly and public awareness of sustainability issues, extractivism raises much concern about its tendency to commodify and exploit the deeply interdependent relationships between mind, body, land, and culture—an inseparable chain central to many Indigenous and ecological worldviews. Some voices reasonably caution against the indiscriminate use of this new term. Imre Szeman and Jennifer Wenzel argue that the use of extractivism as "a conceptual umbrella term" should be limited to material forms of extraction in "the realm of economic production" (511).

While defining the term with precision is important, doing so may unintentionally reinforce the ideology of extractivism by dismissing the immaterial layers like emotions that help constitute the materiality of economic production. The exploitation of territorial resources cannot be divorced from the violation of the local community's way of living. According to Métis scholar Max Liboiron, to see land only as a source of profit is itself a colonial way of thinking (39). Meanwhile, the Indigenous concept of land emphasizes "relations between the material aspects some people might think of as landscapes—water, soil, air, plants, stars—and histories, spirits, events, kinships, accountabilities, and other people that aren't human" (Liboiron 43). From this

perspective, resource extractivism is a depletion of relations between the land and its interconnected ecosystems that extends beyond the material extraction of minerals and fossil fuels. It is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine extractivism outside of its emotional, spiritual, and historical relations.

Recognizing emotions as especially central to the discourse of extractivism is crucial to restoring the disrupted chain of reciprocity. While exploitation and greed are often seen as the drivers of global resource injustice, benevolence and care can also sustain the system of extraction. Contrary to common beliefs regarding how empathy undergirds benevolence and care, I argue that it can constitute and perpetuate a systemic violation of life. I suggest empathy has become an affective resource that is central to capitalist tenets of profitability.

The definition of empathy itself is a matter of debate because there are "many forms of empathy, ranging from emotional resonance and contagion, to cognitive appraisal and perspective taking, and to an empathic concern with another that prompts helpful interventions" (Lanzoni 259). I understand empathy primarily as a cognitive and emotional process carried out through imagination and perspective-taking to understand another's situations and feelings. I also draw on works that articulate the affective dynamics of empathy. According to Sara Ahmed, "emotions circulate and are distributed across a social as well as psychic field" (120), functioning like capital in that their value is produced through circulation rather than residing inherently in any individual or object. This idea parallels Karl Marx's critique of capital, wherein commodities derive value through exchange. Ahmed further argues that emotions shape social power dynamics by accumulating affective value over time and creating boundaries in the world, such as fear of outsiders reinforcing social divisions (121). Following Ahmed's ideas about affective economies, I consider empathy an affective commodity, produced through individual cognitive and emotional processes as well as social circulation, where collective narratives coalesce into colonial thinking and perpetuate systemic violence.

Recent criticism on the meaning and scope of empathy prompts questions about empathy's potential for ethical intervention in social

problems. The public understanding of empathy most closely aligns with the conceptualization suggested by Martha Nussbaum, Martin Hoffman, and Steven Pinker, all of whom deem empathy as crucial for aiding moral decisions and fostering good citizenship.[1] In contrast, a growing body of criticism addresses what these scholars see as empathy's adverse outcomes. For instance, empathy-induced altruism can be more detrimental than self-interest: "[W]halers and loggers stand up to the public outcry over depletion of natural resources" because "[t]hey are not using these resources for themselves, but to care for their families" (Batson et al. 459). While caring for one's family might seem self-interested, it is also an altruistic extension of empathy toward loved ones, prioritizing their welfare over environmental concerns. Other critics suggest that empathy has become a neoliberal technology for accruing profit. Carolyn Pedwell argues that empathy, "when cultivated appropriately, translates into collective competency to produce economic, cultural, and political value" (289). For Pedwell, empathy in the capitalist and postcolonial setting "can be made to work as a powerful mode of biopolitical governmentality" (30), meaning it operates as a tool to manage populations by shaping behaviors to align with political or economic objectives. This form of governance turns empathy into a marketable skill for politicians and business people in that emotional appeals mask systemic inequalities under the guise of care or ethical action (Pedwell 32). Likewise, Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl suggest that even when empathy is promoted as an affective skill for moral education, "what exactly constitutes good citizenship often remains nebulous" and empathy may only preserve "the *status quo*" of social hierarchies (5; emphasis in original). These perspectives indicate how empathy's purported promise for fostering genuine understanding and solidarity can be undermined within particular power structures.

This critique of empathy sees it not only as an intangible resource that can be depleted (which happens in emotional labor, through which one's capacities for care are easily exhausted) but also a potential instrument for economic, cultural, and political exploitation. Seen this way, empathy exposes the tensions within Szeman and Wenzel's conceptualization of extractivism. Szeman and Wenzel describe extractivism as a concept

rooted in land-based resource extraction but caution against expanding the term too broadly to include all forms of capitalist value production. They acknowledge, however, that "the metaphoric or rhetorical use of extraction" (Szeman and Wenzel 515) is acceptable when it refers to specific instances or aspects of economic production and their "implications for labor, value, and profit" (510). From this perspective, affective forces like empathy may initially seem to overextend the metaphor of extraction, but I claim they serve as a form of economic and cultural production that is central to the structural violence of material extractivism. Extractivism cannot be disentangled from its affective dimensions.

What is more, understanding empathy as a mode of extraction is closely tied to the complexities of racialized empathy. While this connection has received limited attention in discussions of extractivism, anti-racist critics have illuminated the connection by addressing the relationship between empathy and dispossession. For example, Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III theorize how civil society in the United States denies recognition to Black bodies. Empathy is not extended to racialized bodies because of the constructed dynamics of "racist optics," which frame Black flesh as opaque and unreadable, "a surface inscribed by violence" (Hartman 57). In a similar vein, Wilderson claims that empathy is not neutral but embedded within a broader system that discriminates against Black people. Blackness remains ontologically bound to Slaveness even after formal emancipation; this persistent condition positions Black individuals as non-human, excluding them from the empathy-mediated realm of civic relations (Wilderson, "Raw" 184). Wilderson places Indigenous peoples in a liminal space between Black "Slaves" and white "Humans" (*Red, White & Black* 23), drawing a sharp distinction between Black experiences and those of other groups. However, I propose there are elements of Hartman's and Wilderson's arguments concerning empathy and race that can be applied to settler-Indigenous and human-animal interactions.

This expansion corresponds to Indigenous artists' and intellectuals' critiques of settler colonialism's structural violence. As Sherene Razack claims, the legal system often obscures ongoing state violence under the guise of benevolence and generosity (80). The settler state's feigned

ethics of care leads to the cultural exhaustion of empathy that legitimizes a "killing indifference" in institutions like hospitals and prisons, where care for Indigenous bodies is seen as "wasted" (Razack 112). Razack's reference to "wasted" care reflects an extractivist framework, which treats empathy as a finite resource to be strategically allocated. This exposes how the settler state is built on the bedrock of extractivism and reinforces a hierarchy of disposability when it comes to both resources and people. In the next section, I will illuminate the entanglement of empathy and extractive violence. This is not to dismiss empathy altogether but to highlight the slippery dynamics of empathy, which risks, even with the best intentions on the part of the empathizer, sliding into extractive logic.

III. Thinking about Thinking of Extractivism

Bear tells the story of a settler, Lou, who empathizes with Indigenous peoples and who carries a historical burden of shame because of settler colonialism. The conditions of Lou's life show how deeply the mode of extraction is embedded in settler institutions. As a bibliographer at the Historical Institute in Toronto, Lou's life reflects a form of systemic extractivism—the underlying logic of extractive practices structurally embedded within social systems—that erodes her sense of autonomy and identity. She understands her reading as a way of excavating hidden meaning from its original source. This process becomes extractive when her interpretation incorrectly represents the object of study to the extent of damaging it.

Liboiron describes extractive reading as "unidirectional, assessing texts solely for my own goals and not approaching them as bodies of work, events, gifts, teachers, [and] letters" (35). Extractive reading defined Lou's former lifestyle. She quit her job as a journalist when she felt ashamed about living off of other people's truths. However, her current position is no better. Lou mines literature in search of historical truths and settler-colonial meanings, a process that depletes her. She is trapped in a cycle of attritional violence, a form of extractivism like Rob Nixon's "slow violence," which gradually undermines the condition of human existence without being noticed (Parks 354).

If Lou's work tires her, her sexual life completely drains her. Lou is mistress to a number of men, with one ex-lover forcing her to have an abortion, highlighting her lack of bodily autonomy. The pattern of unacknowledgeable, childless relationships reflects her inability to produce lasting meaning or value in both her personal and professional life. This feeling leads her to instrumentalize her sexual resources to compensate for the lack of heteronormative productivity. For example, Lou receives help with tasks from Homer, a neighbor who runs a nearby grocery store, by agreeing to "pay him with sex" (Engel 93), even though he is married with nine children.

Yet Lou partly enjoys her work and desires erotic pleasure, which makes her willing to participate in the exploitative labor economy, which commodifies bodily capacities, particularly sexuality, to make up for her insufficient productivity in and beyond the workplace. Similar to her transactions with Homer, Lou and the Director of the Institute resort to sex due to their failure to extract meaningful value from archival materials: "The Director fucked her weekly on her desk while both of them pretended they were shocking the Government and she knew in her heart that what he wanted was not her waning flesh but elegant eighteenth-century keyholes, of which there is a shortage in Ontario" (78). Lou's genitalia becomes a surrogate for the historical artifacts ("keyholes"), serving as a resource to justify the Institute's unfulfilled work.

The pervasiveness of extractivism in *Bear* aligns with Travis Fast's argument that resource extraction and Indigenous exclusion are "the leitmotifs of Canadian socioeconomic development" (31). Lou's world is a broken ecosystem of exhaustion and waste, which are byproducts of extractivism just like toxic industrial waste and resource depletion. Lou's workplace, the History Institute, is a site for recycling historical value from mundane artifacts, artifacts that nobody cares about anymore and that people would "throw . . . out" if the Institute did not take them (Engel 1). However, the recycling rate is low, and most of the relics are nothing but a pile of rubbish. The Institute shows how Engel uses the lexicon of mining to describe Lou's work.[2] Lou derives meaning from textual resources at the price of producing even more waste, including insignificant historical items and unproductive time. She is "buried

deep in her office, digging among maps and manuscripts" and "wasting no time" (1). As Mishuana Goeman notes, maps of colonial space and the manuscripts the colonizers produced reflect "a systematic practice of confining and defining Native spaces from land to bodies" (296), which could be described as extractivist modes of collecting knowledge. Lou's life in Toronto shows that "digging" (Engel 1) for meaning in the historical texts she works on is equivalent to vainly extracting value from "detritus" (2), much like her earlier work in journalism, which reproduced "ephemeral" (75) biographies at the expense of a holistic understanding of the source. To avoid extractive reading habits like the kind Lou practices, Liboiron emphasizes how important it is to recognize one's interconnectedness and interdependence with others while reading (30). Based on the Indigenous concept of relations, which encompass connections among all elements of existence, "keeping the specificity of relations in mind" is ethically essential (31). Lou's work fails to enact the reciprocity Liboiron discusses; instead, reading exhausts both her body and her archival materials in the pursuit of commodifiable use-value.

The situation shifts when the Institute inherits an estate, including an island and its buildings, originally established by a settler named Colonel Cary, which was then passed on to his descendant, Colonel Jocelyn Cary: "For once . . . something of real value had been left them" (Engel 2). Lou describes Cary Island as a geographical repository that may hold important materials that have "real value" in illuminating settlement history. For Lou, this value depends on abundant expenditure and energy consumption: "If [Colonel] Cary had had enough money and enough energy to build a house that far north, and fill it with books, he was unusual. It was up to her to find out how unusual he was" (4). Money and energy are expected to guarantee success in developing the wilderness, with colonial ideologies introduced through imported texts further driving this transformation. Lou's high hopes for extracting archival meaning from Cary's library soon fade, however, when she finds the books have minimal commercial value.

Her frustration as a reader of the Cary family's records mirrors the frustration that the first Colonel Cary may have felt when he arrived at his estate. By 1834, when the colonial trade of timber was on the rise,

Colonel John William Cary "obtained the charter . . . to settle Cary's Island, having promised to build a lumbermill and provide a sailing ship for trade in the region" (5). Colonel Cary obtains the land so he can extract natural resources and export them to England. The promise, however, is unfulfilled. While the chartered island "was a likely-looking place on a map . . . the river, for all its wide mouth, petered out to a stream further up, so that [Cary's] marshy haven was more isolated than a cartographer would have reason to expect. His lumbermill had failed . . . because the elegant, English-looking river supplied only enough water to turn the wheel a day a week" (10). There was not enough hydropower to produce a profitable amount of timber, so the land did not meet the initial purpose of exporting natural resources.

From the start, then, Cary's "sandbar" was a wasteland without any commercial value (64). This initial depiction of the island establishes that the settlers value nature solely on the basis of the presence or absence of resources. Lou, disappointed, thinks that Cary is an "old wastrel" (40). Homer also scorns the whole business as a waste of money for which Cary has "thrown away a fortune" (64).

This resource-based way of determining value suggests how Indigenous land supports settlers' fantasies of abundance. For the settlers, the value of land is determined by the marketability of its resources, while the land rights of the actual residents are disregarded and their traplines violated. As shown by the historical analog of the James Bay mega-dam project launched in the 1970s (around the time of *Bear*'s publication), undeveloped land such as "northern Quebec was regarded by many primarily as a 'bush' wilderness, holding the potential for yet another Canadian chapter of economic growth through natural resource exploitation" (Warner and Coppinger 20).

The settler-colonial relationship with the Canadian wilderness reflects the extractive economy of tourism.[3] By the early 1970s, "[t]he [Canadian] wilderness . . . [was] invaded by tourist roads bringing weekend fishermen and hunters" (Howells 26). In *Bear*, Homer's reference to a nearby tourist spot also illustrates a case of cultural consumption in tourism that undergirds extractive logic. The singular architecture of Cary's house—an octagonal building popularized by American

phrenologist Orson Squire Fowler, who thought its eight-sided design resembles and is "good for the brain" (Engel 25)—metaphorically embodies the colonial mind: a supposedly cerebral structure that houses a library of colonial texts. However, tourists ignore the building and instead "gaggle at that house [that Henry Wadsworth] Longfellow was supposed to have written that Indian poem in" (12). It is not Cary's but Longfellow's house that attracts their attention because of the fame of the poet's *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), which was based on the ethnographer Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's unreliable writings taken from Indigenous stories.

Fenn Elan Stewart claims that *Hiawatha* appropriates Anishinaabe narratives "to foreground the links between different forms of colonial appropriation and resource extraction" (164). In the early twentieth century, the Canadian Pacific Railway used Longfellow's text to establish "racialized constructions of wilderness [as an attractive resource] in the creation of Canadian national identity" (Stewart 166). The poem subscribes to the stereotype of the noble savage, which originated with Enlightenment philosophers; Philip Deloria describes the stereotype as "a flexible ideology" with which "one [can either] emphasiz[e] the noble aspect . . . to critique Western society" or "[put] more weight on savagery [to] justif[y] a campaign to eliminate barbarism" (4).

Given *Hiawatha*'s use in attracting settler tourists to the Canadian wilderness, Lou's concerns about the tourists' access to the region articulate the deep chasm within her settler identity. Lou's ambivalent relationship with the landscape is characterized by her sense of complicity in appropriating Indigenous lands and lifestyles. She holds a secret fascination with (borrowing Deloria's book title) "playing Indian." Lou feels "violated" when the summer season brings "the tourists, the water-skiers and the cottagers" to the island and "decline[s] the honour" when "[a] family . . . asked if she could show them her house" (Engel 85). Lou is keenly aware of the possibility of being seen not as a permanent resident of Canada but as one of the tourists, which may expose her unwanted liaison with a settler-colonial approach to nature.

Bear unfolds the unjust distribution of natural resources caused by colonial violence, which produces poverty and other forms of precarity.

Lou recognizes her uncomfortable advantage over the Indigenous peoples of the region in terms of access to profitable resources. She recalls a childhood memory of meeting an Indigenous woman (presumably Anishinaabekwe, given the location) "who used to peddle bittersweet on the street . . . [selling at] ten cents a bunch, and Lou bought it and her mother said it was a waste of money, a form of begging" (36). The woman's plant has no value for Lou's mother, although it might be the only natural resource from which the Anishinaabe woman could profit. In contrast, Lou learns that some plants are more valuable during her childhood cruise trip to a small island believed by Indigenous peoples to be haunted: "Her parents were looking for fringed gentians and grass of Parnassus," both of which are rare plants native to North America and valued for their economic and aesthetic benefits (8).

The contrast in these childhood experiences shows how the commercial value of plant resources is inaccessible to the unnamed Indigenous woman. She may not even see the capitalist value of the plants in the first place because, from Indigenous perspectives, the plants are the "oldest teachers" of a reciprocal way of living (Kimmerer 213). As Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard writes, the ongoing process of colonial dispossession of Indigenous land reflects the "violent transformation of noncapitalist forms of life into capitalist ones" (8). Lou's recounting of her parents' aim of collecting plants while being tourists reveals her guilt about the dispossession of Indigenous communities, despite which she eventually becomes an active participant in the extractive world system.

IV. Empathy as a Mode of Extractivism

In *Bear*, empathy is an accumulative resource that a person acquires through reading texts from the past, which makes empathy a sociohistorical construct shaped by the circulation of social values. Lou learns from the past not only facts but also her emotional ties to and complicity in colonial exploitation. The potential of empathy to support extractive ways of thinking is revealed when Lou tries to understand two distinct mindsets: that of a colonial settler and that of a colonized Indigenous woman. At first, Lou puts herself in the shoes of the first Colonel Cary, whose collection of books indicates how he subscribes to

stereotypes about Indigenous groups and his ensuing desire to develop a European garden in the new world: "When [Lou] turned [away from Cary's portrait] to look out his window, she thought his eyes followed her and for a moment she was Cary advancing boldly on the new world, *Atala* under one arm, *Oroonoko* and the handbooks of Capability Brown under the other" (Engel 40).

Engel has carefully curated this list: Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) and François-René de Chateaubriand's *Atala* (1801) feature the trope of the noble savage like Longfellow's poem does to show the white settlers' longstanding fascination with "Indianness," a fascination that fuels their exploitation of Indigenous groups. Lou envisions Cary's desire to tame the Canadian wilderness. By imagining Cary's colonial dream, Lou reveals her awareness of her settler heritage, which develops her interest in reconstructing the sparse historical records of Canada's colonial settlement.

Lou's work of reading Cary's books leads her to imagine a colonial mindset, especially when she finds some handbooks of Lancelot Brown, an influential English gardener in the eighteenth century, more commonly known as Capability Brown. Brown's design of garden landscapes was avidly adopted by the English aristocracy of his time, who "did not maintain courts [but] lived privately on their country estates and liked to see their domains from their windows" ("Lancelot Brown"). According to Janet Fuller, "Brown designed his lakes to be tranquil bodies of water that reflect the mansion, the sky and the surroundings," and these so-called "mirror-lakes" were "a focal point of views from the mansion and in set-piece views as part of the circular tour of the estate" (90). This emphasis on the landowner's panoramic view implies that gazing was a key means of exerting control over nature. Unsurprisingly, the aestheticization of the English countryside required constant labor. Adapting English methods to domesticate the colonial landscape was thus economically impractical.

Nonetheless, finding Brown's handbooks from Cary's library allows Lou to envision Cary's unspoken yearnings to construct an English landscape in the Canadian wilderness when he arrived at his island. Lou's reading inadvertently involves affective mimicry of Cary's perceptions.

As she reads Cary's books and follows his imagined gaze out the window, she undergoes what Alexa Weik von Mossner calls a process of "embodied cognition" that "plays an important role in the simulation of social experience and moral understanding" (3). Despite Cary's inability to turn his land into a site of extractive industry as discussed above, his library is still able to produce a colonial mode of thinking in the reader's mind (including both Lou and the readers of *Bear*). In other words, the novel demonstrates how readers become attuned to, and perhaps even learn to adapt, extractive mindsets from the books they read.

Despite the rich and multifaceted experiences that reading provides, Cary's texts inevitably reinforce an extractive ideology by allowing the reader to internalize the logic of exploitation. Narrative empathy is a complex cognitive operation, "responding simultaneously to the depiction of a person-like existent's thoughts and feelings, that character's role as an actant (sending, helping, opposing, or receiving the narrative's object), and, in intersection with plot developments or stylistic techniques, the aesthetic emotions that arise from narrative art" (Keen, "Narrative Empathy" 362–63). Because of the complexity of narrative empathy, the impact of reading fiction "is considerably more unruly than advocates of narrative ethics would lead us to believe" (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* 68). In this sense, empathy extends beyond simple identification with human beings or characters, positioning even abstract concepts and inanimate objects as worthy of empathetic concern. Hence, Lou's allusion to colonial narratives is potentially "an attempt to find someone else's language . . . as a means of relating to bear," which is "an attempt to incorporate her relationship with the bear into a settler-colonial, settler-subject dynamic" (Higgs 124). Although it is unlikely that a reader will become a colonizer simply by reading a book about one, narrative empathy may unknowingly circulate a colonialist worldview.

Caused by the books in Cary's library, Lou's empathy manifests in conflicting ways. Lou enjoys playing the dominant position of a settler at the estate, but she also yearns to get rid of her deep-seated guilt. She feels an acute sense of shame, "for the image of the Good Life," as the novel explains, is quite different from the lonely life she was living

before arriving at Cary Island (Engel 2). At the root of Lou's shame is her realization of how much her life owes to colonial extraction, which forecloses respect for the rights of Indigenous peoples. However, her shame ultimately generates more extraction. To overcome her guilt, Lou tries to derive aesthetic, intellectual, and economic value from the colonel's library. She plans to index and annotate the items she finds, expecting to "find a structure, plumb a secret" of the region's settlement history from the textual resources she compiles (69).

Although everything "seemed beautiful" at first, after listening to Homer's story about the Cary family she thinks her work is "a heresy against the real truth" of the island (69). The guilty act of historical "plumb[ing]" leads her to acknowledge that Cary's books lack a direct connection to the Canadian landscape: "Colonel Cary was surely one of the great irrelevancies of Canadian history and [Lou] was another. Neither of them was connected to anything" (69). Lou becomes increasingly aware that she is taking someone else's place as if appropriating a foreign land and identity. She "wondered by what right she was there, and why she did what she did for a living. And who she was. . . . She also felt guilty, as if she had revealed to Homer some secret which was not hers to reveal" (68). Lou recognizes herself as a trespasser on an already inhabited territory.

Possibly as an attempt to stop herself from empathizing with Colonel Cary and relieve her settler-colonial guilt, Lou furtively desires to empathize with Indigenous peoples and simulates their love of the bear. Lou's yearning for empathy manifests when she identifies with Lucy Leroy, a Métis woman described as "totally withered" with age, her body carved with "creases and weatherings" (36). The similarity between Lou's and Lucy's names might signify emotional affinities. However, Lou is unsuccessful in reenacting Indigenous life. She tries to follow Indigenous methods of fishing but decides not to eat the fish she catches because of complex reasons. On the one hand, she "fe[els] she ha[s] done a frightful thing" by removing the fish "from its kingdom" (83); on the other, "she might get Minamata disease and be arrested for a drunken Indian" (84). The reference to Minamata disease, a neurological disorder resulting from methylmercury contamination in wastewater, indicates the

pollution of the Ontario river system in the 1970s by Dryden Chemical Company. Extractivist disasters such as this one adversely impacted Indigenous peoples' ways of life through the closure of fisheries, exponential growth in the unemployment rate, and a heavy rise in cases of drinking and violence (Jago).

As Lou's initial excitement for fishing transforms into remorse, she not only feels disgusted by the idea of cleaning and gutting the fish but also experiences a sense of guilt. In this context, her fear of being "arrested for a drunken Indian" suggests her empathetic distress, or excessive empathy, for the suffering Indigenous body and land. In other words, Lou aligns herself with the derisive frame of a drunken Indian after eating contaminated fish. Self-identifying with the stereotype is unnecessary if she is simply worried about pollution. There seems to be compassion behind her brief reference to the stereotype of "the drunken Indian" because she positions herself under the threat of arrest (following the typical process of putting oneself in another's shoes when empathizing) as if her guilt secretly seeks legal punishment. At the same time, however, this act reinscribes the existing racist stereotypes surrounding Indigenous peoples. In such circumstances, Lou's empathy fails to compensate for the disaster caused by an extractivist ideology that is part of her settler identity.

In her continued pursuit of empathy toward Indigenous peoples, Lou finds herself mimicking Lucy's physical approach to befriending the bear, which involved defecating with the bear to help him recognize a human smell. Lou seeks to relate to both Lucy's Indigenous way of interacting with the natural world and the bear's animality. However, her appropriation of Indigenous methods translates the bear's individuality into a collective representation of the bears in the myths and legends from Cary's notes. While reading these notes, Lou often omits definitive or possessive articles, blurring the distinction between her bear, Jocelyn Cary's bear, and other bears in Cary's notes. Lou's growing empathy toward the bear ironically makes her efface this animal's particularity and replace him with narratives from elsewhere. She turns him into a symbolic representation of the bear species and even of nature itself.

Lou's bear thus becomes a totality of stories, especially stories about extraction and instrumentality.

For example, Lou is shocked after reading a note about the Ainu tribe of Japan, whose people loved and raised a bear cub for three years and then killed it to eat its flesh (99). As Patrick Hogan explains, "[s]acrificial plots [in Ainu epics] often raise issues about . . . the conflict between the human need to consume nature and the ethical imperative to respect or revere nature" (199). Lou's ecological sensibility urges her to offer a reverse, penitent performance of what the Ainu tribe does; she puts honey on her body to seduce the bear into eating her: "Tear my thin skin with your clattering claws. . . . Claw out my heart, a grub under a stump. Tear off my head, my bear" (Engel 103). Here, eating is not merely a metaphor for sexual intercourse; instead, Lou is imagining the literal acts of killing and devouring flesh. The scene upends the power dynamic between the human perpetrator and the animal victim in the Ainu legend. Lou's imagination transforms her body into an insect, equating her with "a grub under a stump" that the bear ate earlier while they were foraging together. By imagining her body's transformation into a grub, Lou enacts a sacrificial ritual in an attempt to redeem herself on behalf of the murdered animals depicted in Cary's notes so that she can resolve the shame of colluding with the colonial legacy of extractivism.

A problem arises, however, when Lou begins to seriously court the bear. Despite her earlier promise that she would want nothing from him, Lou becomes demanding as time passes, reinforcing the extractive pattern of white settlers—not merely because of her pursuit of erotic pleasure but more because of her desire for penitence, her desire to cleanse her colonial guilt through visceral identification, initially with the Indigenous people and eventually with an animal. By turning herself into an edible resource that she honeyed in a sexually suggestive way, Lou voluntarily associates her body with consumption, reflecting how systems of resource extraction exploit both land and feminized bodies. Arguably, Lou's pursuit of sexual pleasure, despite how it allows her to exercise bodily agency, is more about objectifying herself sexually under the guise of empowerment. Her pursuit of love is a form of extractive

violence. By turning her body into a consumable commodity, Lou can pay off her sense of indebtedness, similar to how she paid Homer with sex. Lou gradually exposes her back to this wild (albeit domesticated) animal and surrenders all attempts at self-defense. Lou's egotistic desire to make love with the bear is undeniably human-centered, given the animal's natural lack of interest in such interspecies contact. Her extractive empathy is punished when bear strikes her in the back. This blow leaves a painful mark—a kind of parodic stretch mark on her back instead of her stomach—which seems to hold the promise of the regeneration of her selfhood and reconciliation with the colonial past. Yet the novel leaves it ambiguous about whether this happens. Initially, the blow seems to unburden Lou from her guilt about Canada's history of settler colonialism: "She remembered guilt, and a dream she had had where her mother made her write letters of apology to the Indians for having had to do with a bear, and she remembered the claw that had healed guilt. She felt strong and pure" (121). In the closing pages, her guilt is supposedly healed as she prepares to enter a new phase of life. Lou welcomes the recovery of her bodily agency, feeling younger and renewed. Her letter of apology acknowledges her wrongs, but she is aware that the harm, the pain she received from the bear, cannot be undone. She embraces her scar (115) as a cautionary reminder against reading through an exploitative lens to appropriate Indigenous modes of living.

Nonetheless, Lou's poignant awakening is not enough to break the system of extractivism in which she finds herself. For instance, Lou takes two valuable books from Cary's library but discards her notes on bears, which are the most fraught with meaning yet lack market value. Lou justifies her theft as an act of care because the books, if left unattended, could be harmed by future tourist-trespassers: "Against the regulations, she wrapped both the first edition of *Wacousta* and the Bewick in *Times Literary Supplements* to take away. Some winter, snowmobilers would break in. . . . Well, let the world be smashed. . . . The bear was safe [with the Indigenous family]. She would make these two books safe" (120). Care becomes a principle for claiming cultural assets. This resembles the removal of the (raw) material from its reserves, not unlike the dislocation of relics from former colonies to the museums of the colonizers.

Lou's well-intended empathy for the bear, transposed to her logic of care for books, ultimately imitates and intensifies extractive ideologies.

In taking these books, however, Lou defies the regulations of the History Institute. This may be seen as a willful decision to become a *bad citizen*. If, as stated earlier, *proper* empathy fosters good extractive citizens, Lou's unlawful behavior guides readers to imagine an illicit empathy that circumvents conventional measures of propriety. Similarly, Lou's bestiality is a witty experiment in illicit empathy—even when she cannot escape extractivist patterns, her quixotic attempts to communicate with racialized and non-human bodies allow her to taste and relish her failures, because despite being attacked by the bear, Lou renews her old, "gangrenous" life (78).

In this light, Lou's sexual play with the bear and her theft of the books indicate the agency achieved by transgressing regulatory rules. Lou learns that Colonel Jocelyn Cary was also an aberrant figure whose inheritance of the island is a result of her parents' legal workaround: "It was in the will that the estate had to go to the child who became a colonel," so when her parents had a girl, they "christened her—Colonel" (61). Similarly, at one point in the novel, Jocelyn sells a lynx (despite not having a license) to a dealer who "pick[s] up anything unusual" like "protected species" or animals caught by "accidents" (66). This one-time sale also points to the potential of laws to be interpreted in unintended ways and the gap between the law and its practice. Additionally, the elusiveness of Jocelyn Cary's gender suggests her transgression of order. She is described as "an imitation man," fiercely skillful in everything (67). Jocelyn "kept herself with a trap line" (65), a way of sustaining oneself that was so difficult that one had to "be part Indian to put up with" the work (65). As a de facto beneficiary of the Cary estate, Lou comes to resemble Jocelyn Cary. She challenges the institutional order and defies the boundaries of race and species.

From this perspective, Lou's failure in the practice of empathy (a catastrophic breakup with her bear) is significant. Her relationship with the land changes through her gradual understanding of the uncertain ownership of an animal that can move beyond national borders, which culminates in the bear migrating south with the Indigenous family at the

end of the story. Clearly, the bear is nationless and belongs only to itself from the start. Homer doesn't know whose bear he is—the Cary family always had a bear, but this one did not belong to Jocelyn Cary, who "paid no attention to it" (66). In addition to the uncertain ownership of the bear, he does not legally belong to the Cary estate and is excluded from the estate's catalog because Homer and the Indigenous family (Lucy and her nephew Joe King) who serve as the estate's informal caretakers could not explain his existence to the lawyer. The language surrounding the bear's ownership is unmistakably nebulous, indicating the ungraspable nature of the animal resource within the extractivist economy. In fact, from the start, the bear fascinates Lou because of an ineffability that escapes intellectual scrutiny: "There was a depth in him [Lou] could not reach, could not probe and with her intellectual fingers destroy" (102). Because of him, Lou begins to unlearn the extractivist-colonial mode of thinking about the value of the bear. She feels "a strange peace to sit beside him. It was as if the bear, like the books, knew generations of secrets; but he had no need to reveal them" (56). He is a resource that cannot be fully known and thus refuses extraction.

The implication of the bear's remaining outside laws and regulations is ambiguous. On one hand, one could argue that the bear suggests that the Canadian wilderness should be neither tamed nor itemized by the state or capitalist logic. On the other hand, the bear suggests the racialized bodies that are unrecognized and deprived of legal rights in the settler state. Cinda Gault notes that Engel intentionally left the novel's conclusion open, allowing readers to interpret whether her repentance and regeneration are genuine or not, given her return to Toronto (38). Has Lou learned, to use Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's wording, how "to establish and maintain relationships of deep reciprocity" (16)? One way to recount what happens in the novel is this: Lou's initial yearning for a new relationship with the natural world causes her to appropriate Indigenous ways of life. She then instrumentalizes her sexuality in order to repent for her earlier relationship to the natural world, in the process draining the bear of individuality. In this light, Lou's taking some of Colonel Cary's valuable

books for herself shows that she favors commercial assets over affective and relational ones.

Lou's reiteration of extractive practices born of her yearning to cleanse colonial guilt seems to anticipate contemporary debates following the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) in 2015, which suggests a state-level acknowledgment of how the Canadian government violated Indigenous peoples' human rights. Despite the initial hope that the TRC's report would repair the harm that Canada's residential school system did to Indigenous communities, the implementation of systemic change remains slow.

In fact, the TRC discourses may extract forgiveness for the settlers and allow the settler state to proceed, as the term reconciliation "evokes a kind of easy kumbaya moment in the wake of unspeakable tragedy, leaving victims to feel they may have to take on the additional burden of forgiving perpetrators, or that perpetrators will escape accountability, for the sake of the larger community" (Kirby). Amy Fung notes that the TRC report silences the settler state's ongoing racism and extractivist pursuits. However, without the "real social, political, and economic change" that the TRC mentions (184), acknowledging the abusive past is pointless. Furthermore, substantial changes cannot occur if the "dispossession [of Indigenous peoples of their lands] continues to play in the reproduction of colonial and capitalist social relations" (Coulthard 9). Apparently, it is hard not to remain pessimistic about the discourse of extractivism and (post)colonial dispossession.

But before we despair, let us consider an artwork produced thirty years after the publication of *Bear*. Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore's photograph *Fringe* (2007) (see Fig. 1) imagines an Indigenous woman's slashed upper torso that has a surprising yet rarely noticed similarity with Lou's scarred back. In its portrayal of a woman's semi-nude body lying on her side, with her back turned to a viewer, the photo presents an aestheticized depiction of violence. We see that a long diagonal incision from the top right to the bottom left of the woman's back has been sewn up. The viewer can almost feel the coarse scarlet fiber threaded through the skin. There is a tragic sense of beauty in the contrasting

Fig. 1. Rebecca Belmore, *Fringe*. 2007. Transparency in light box (one of three), 96.25" × 32.75" × 6.5". Photograph by Henri Robideau. *Minneapolis Institute of Art*, gift of funds from Donna and Cargill MacMillan Jr., 2010.56, collections.artsmia.org/art/109315/fringe-rebecca-belmore.

colors of the red strings and the antiseptic whiteness of the woman's surroundings—a bedsheet, a small pillow, and a blanket over her buttocks. The tight suture suggests that the moment of abuse has passed. The bloodlike threads, arranged to resemble trickling liquid from the stitched line, might still be painful, but the wound is securely closed.[4]

Fringe suggests the interconnected exploitation of body, land, and culture. The empathy the photo evokes from its viewer is thus intimately tied to racial violence and the pain of extraction. The work compels viewers to consider the wound beyond personal suffering in its reference to European artistic traditions that display "the female [nude] body as a metaphor for the land" (Smetzer vii). As a trope for Mother Nature, this Indigenous woman's body's once-open wound signals a reversed Cesarean section—it *unnaturally* produces value, as if working backward to deliver a child. The woman's incision parallels the procedure of resource extraction from the earth, which leaves an irrevocable mark on the environment after the painful unearthing of the body/land. Moreover, the woman acts as a metonym for the body of Anishinaabe culture. As signaled in the title, the photograph highlights the woman's blood, which resembles fringe, a decorative embellishment that is often alluded to in Indigenous aesthetics. Here, the fringe signifies the woman's blood, which is stitched onto her body (that is, imposed from the outside) rather than seeping through the skin. This blood, rendered as

fringe, highlights how Indigeneity, despite being framed by the settler as a genetic or biological marker, has in fact been a cultural construction since contact. Belmore critically depicts this cultural landscape that frames Indigeneity as historical souvenirs, "reminders of a place, an occasion, or . . . a mythic past" (Beard 494). Such a reductive understanding of Indigeneity is coterminous with an extractivist psyche that circumscribed the geographical and cultural space of Indigenous people. On a symbolic level, therefore, the bloodlike threads in *Fringe* are the traces of resource extraction, be it the sexual violence experienced by Indigenous women or the extraction of natural and cultural resources.

The provocative aesthetics of *Fringe* illustrate how depictions of violence may not be as effective as the artist would hope regarding the artwork's impact on the real world. Belmore's photograph invites viewers to feel the Indigenous woman's wound, which evokes the violence of settler colonialism. However, the photo simultaneously demonstrates the voyeuristic dilemma of racialized empathy. The complex responses from the viewers to such a violent image might only substitute their experience of pain for another's suffering. As Hartman argues, the aesthetics of violence may allow the empathizer to "feel for himself rather than for those whom this exercise in imagination presumably is designed to reach" (19). Despite Belmore's presumable intention, *Fringe* demonstrates both the call for and the frustration about the possibility of empathy to address Indigenous dispossession.

From this vantage point, it is unclear what Lou has achieved through her mere acknowledgment of the enduring dispossession of racial minorities and non-human species or through her empathy. Aguila-Way argues that the novel's "critique of settler colonialism remains incomplete" because it fails to "redress the ongoing displacement and dispossession of Canada's First Nations" (26). Lou's wounded flesh might only further erase already marginalized Indigenous bodies by centering herself.

Nonetheless, Engel's story does suggest Lou has made progress, as evidenced by her doubt about the legitimacy of extraction and the normative system of propriety. Lou's romantic relationship with the bear, as well as her stealing of the Institution's intellectual property, indicate the

novel is interested in imagining new paradigms for the relationship between settlers, Indigenous people, and the wilderness through illicit empathy. Lou reaches the painful realization that, in the end, one cannot have sex with a bear and escape unscathed. Her journey thus makes the readers realize that feeling regret about extractivist, settler-colonial devastation might, ironically, arise from another extractivist mindset, an appropriation of Indigenous and animal identity. Regardless, *Bear* demonstrates that reconciliation with colonial history is a continuous project, and Lou has only begun.

Notes

1 Nussbaum, Hoffman, and Pinker present related views on empathy and its connection to ethical action. For Nussbaum, empathy is an "imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience, without any particular evaluation of that experience" (302). Nussbaum argues that empathy is not entirely neutral because it requires recognizing another's experiential world, yet its ethical importance emerges most clearly when it leads to compassion (333). Similarly, Hoffman describes empathy as "the involvement of psychological processes that make a person have feelings . . . more congruent with another's situation than with his own situation" (30). Hoffman's definition involves moral judgment, and he underscores "empathic distress" as "a prosocial motive" (30). Pinker aligns with these views, seeing empathy as a stepping stone to compassion, which in turn motivates altruism (175). These perspectives converge on the idea that empathy, when supported by compassion, naturally leads to ethical action.

2 Szeman and Wenzel question the appropriateness of mining metaphors for reading and interpretation because meaning may not be "a finite, non-renewable resource, whose production depletes the source (and immiserates those at the site of extraction)" (513). However, Engel's mining metaphors describe how Lou's reading "depletes the source" text and her life alike.

3 A growing body of research over the past decade has elucidated the inevitably productivist logic behind tourism in developing countries, disappointing earlier expectations for sustainable development (Loperena; Aristil et al.).

4 *Fringe* is open to contradictory readings, as indicated in the diverse interpretations of the historical event that catalyzed Belmore's imagination. Huhndorf suggests that the wounded body in *Fringe* was created "in response to the arrest of [the infamous serial murderer] Robert Pickton [in 2007] and his confession to killing forty-nine women" (561), many of whom were Indigenous. Skelly, meanwhile, offers a completely different story: "[I]n 1980, a . . . surgeon inserted two glass beads into the ends of a suture [as a *joke*] after completing a lung biopsy

on a . . . Cree woman from Shamattawa" (86). This exemplifies "the centuries of material violence enacted upon Indigenous women's bodies" (86), a systemic pattern that may culturally intersect with Belmore's work. Despite these different interpretations, it is commonly understood that Belmore's central concern lies in the structural violence experienced by Indigenous women, which is juxtaposed with eruptions of direct, often sexual violence against them.

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