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The Turn to Indigenization in Canadian Writing: Kinship Ethics and the Ecology of Knowledges

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Abstract: This article heeds the recent shift in cultural criticism and creative writing toward imagining "a functional ecology of knowledges in Canada" (Coleman, "Toward" 8) that takes its conceptual lead from Indigenous epistemologies. Through close reading Thomas King's novel *The Back of the Turtle* (2014), Wayde Compton's short story collection *The Outer Harbour* (2014), and Daniel Coleman's nonfiction book *Yardwork: A Biography of an Urban Place* (2017), the article connects Indigenous notions of kinship to the turn to trans-systemic epistemologies in contemporary Canadian literature and criticism. My analysis draws on Indigenous theories of kinship underlying Indigenous resurgence and decolonization and sets them in conversation with King's reflections on storytelling and world-building, Compton's theoretical charting of African Canadian space as Afroperipheral within diaspora criticism, and Coleman's self-retraining to redefine settler belonging and knowledge. This analysis concludes that, by promoting an awareness of the interdependence between the natural environment, humans, and other-than-human beings that is central to Indigenous epistemologies, these works contribute to the shift toward the construction of an ecology of knowledges and hold the potential for renewed decolonizing efforts, social justice, and environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Indigenous kinship, ecologies of knowledge, epistemicide, cultural indigenization, decolonization

The following analysis stems from the observation of a shift in contemporary Canadian literature and criticism toward developing "a functional ecology of knowledges" (Coleman, "Toward" 8). As any ecological system, an epistemological ecology must necessarily rely on relationality and diversity. These two premises are at odds with exclusionist Euro-Western understandings of modern knowledge. At the same time, relationality and diversity are central to many Indigenous epistemologies based on the notion of kinship. Thus, the turn to an ecology of knowledges often takes its conceptual lead from Indigenous thinkers. I suggest that contemporary narratives such as the ones under analysis in this article are a fertile ground for envisioning "a system of distinct and diverse epistemologies" (7)—epistemologies that interact fruitfully with one another and work toward the decolonization of knowledge and power.

In their introduction to *Another Knowledge Is Possible: Beyond Northern Epistemologies* (2007), Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Joao Arriscado Nunes, and Maria Paula Meneses claim that "there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice" (xix). They hold that, beyond the more obvious economic, social, and political consequences of the exclusion, oppression, and discrimination produced by capitalism, there are also important epistemological ones that have not been sufficiently accounted for. They explain, for example, that the privilege granted to modern science from the seventeenth century onward, which resulted in the technological revolution that consolidated Western supremacy, was also instrumental in the suppression of other knowledges and the social groups from which they emerged. De Sousa Santos describes this as epistemicide, or "the murder of knowledge" (*Epistemologies of the South* 92). He understands the European expansion as one of the most extreme cases in which epistemicide was instrumental in the genocide of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas and Africa (*Another* xix; *Epistemologies of the South* 92).

Critiques of the paradigm of Western modernity and Cartesian thought by and within counter-hegemonic fields of inquiry—from postcolonial to feminist, globalization, Indigenous,[1] and environmental studies—become even more poignant in light of contemporary

political, economic, social, and environmental crises that evidence the flaws of Euro-Western models of thought and praxis, causing what de Sousa Santos identifies as "[t]he loss of epistemological confidence that currently afflicts modern science" (*Epistemologies of the South* 92). In turn, this loss of trust in modern science has helped to "identif[y] . . . the scope and gravity of the epistemicides perpetrated by hegemonic Eurocentric modernity" (92). Without rejecting modern epistemologies wholesale, de Sousa Santos, Nunes, and Meneses propose "replacing the 'monoculture of scientific knowledge' by an 'ecology of knowledges'" that may open the path to the "reinvention of social emancipation" (xx).

This article aims to illustrate the central role of Indigenous notions of kinship in the shift toward an ecology of knowledges in Canadian writing and criticism. It does so by close reading three contemporary works by authors who come from distinct Indigenous, Afro-diasporic, and Euro-settler cultural backgrounds, respectively, and who are also influential critics and scholars in the fields of Indigenous and diaspora studies. Thus, this article is divided into four parts. The first section offers a survey—by no means exhaustive—of the centrality of kinship in Indigenous epistemologies and scholarship. The second section analyzes Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle* (2014) vis-à-vis the Indigenous notions of kinship embedded in traditional stories that the author uses to counter the destructive effects of Cartesian knowledge, affirm Indigenous cultural sovereignty, and show the way toward the restoration of ecological balance and rebirth. The following section discusses Wayde Compton's fictional weaving of a network of alliances between various ethnic groups in *The Outer Harbour* (2014) as an intervention that both encompasses and expands his previous thoughts on diaspora, "Afroperipheralism," and Indigeneity. Finally, the fourth part focuses on Daniel Coleman's nonfiction book *Yardwork: A Biography of an Urban Place* (2017) and his decolonial strategy based on an ecology-of-knowledges approach to learning about the land he inhabits in Southern Ontario. I argue that the centering of Indigenous kinship ethics in these texts constitutes a throughline exposing, resisting, and overcoming epistemicide and setting the foundations for a new approach to social justice and equity based on connectivity, alliances, and collaboration.

I. Indigenous Kinship and Ecological Balance

The concept of Indigenous kinship appears as a consistent throughline linking Indigenous knowledge systems across time and space. After working at the United Nations with Indigenous people from around the world, Mi'kmaq scholar Marie Battiste and Choctaw legal philosopher James (Sákéj) Youngblood Henderson conclude in their groundbreaking study *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage* (2000) that one concept shared by many Indigenous epistemologies is the interdependent kinship of all beings, not just human ones (93–94).[2] This understanding of kinship recognizes that everything has spirit and knowledge and that all beings are responsible for the harmony and sustenance of ecological existence (59, 90). The awareness of interdependence enhances place-specific knowledge and the centrality of the land in Indigenous epistemologies to the extent that people are seen as inextricably linked to their land[3] and the land becomes the law ruling all life, an ethos best expressed by Kombumerri and Wakka Wakka elder Mary Graham as "the Land is the Law" (105–18), in contrast to the anthropocentric "the law of the land."[4]

The titles of several key works published during the past thirty years by Indigenous scholars from both sides of the forty-ninth parallel and from different epistemic positions corroborate the centrality of kinship for Indigenous cultures on Turtle Island (or North America). In the realm of literary criticism, King has consistently drawn attention to the expansive understanding of interconnectivity in Indigenous thought. In his introduction to the anthology of Native American fiction *All My Relations* (1990), he explains that the Native phrase "all my relations" goes beyond the reference to family to encompass relationships "to all the animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined" (ix). The Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice draws attention to the relevance of imagination in King's figuration of kinship, for "[h]ow we understand kinship will shape how we abide in the world" (Justice 90). Imagining that other-than-human beings are kin, he argues, makes it more difficult "to engage in practices that result in wholesale environmental degradation, mass extinctions, destruction of vulnerable habitat, or extractive exploitation" (89). In her book *All Our Relations* (1999), which speaks to the ravages of corporations and United States

government activity on the reservations, Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) writer Winona LaDuke similarly affirms that "Native American teachings describe the relations all around—animals, fish, trees, and rocks—as our brothers, sisters, uncles, and grandpas. Our relations to each other, our prayers whispered across generations to our relatives, are what bind our cultures together" (2). More recently, in her Massey Lectures collection, *All Our Relations: Finding the Path Forward* (2018), Anishinaabe journalist and author Tanya Talaga links the alarming rise of youth suicide in Indigenous communities in Canada to the severing of connections caused by colonization: "The historical separation of Indigenous people from their land, the separation of children from their parents, the separation from their traditional culture and ways of living—all of these things have contributed to a spiritual emptiness that has resulted in generations of children's deaths" (4).

Notwithstanding the evident damage of colonization, Indigenous sovereignty challenges the idea that Indigenous experience is mostly shaped by the colonial encounter. It reinforces instead the notion of kinship "with one another as Indigenous peoples, with our human and other-than-human kin, with our ancestors and those beings of worlds beyond our own, including those of the future" (Justice 158) while defending an understanding of relationship "based on deep reciprocity, respect, noninterference, self-determination, and freedom" (Simpson, *As We Have* 8).

Therefore, the notion of kinship relations also underpins a history of Indigenous resistance, resilience, refusal, and civil rights activism that unites Indigenous Nations in what the Nishnaabeg writer and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes as a series of "radiating responsibilities" (9) constituting nationhood.[5] In *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (2018), Justice connects the call for responsibility inherent in the Indigenous concept of kinship to the social, political, and legal structures that rule Indigenous lives, arguing that it is this sense of responsibility for all beings that establishes "a roughly if not entirely horizontal model of relationship" and makes it impossible to accept the monolithic settler colonial vertical authority that justifies "the widespread exploitation of land, plants, and animals, as well as humans . . . because we recognize our implication in these relationships and their

health" (90). Furthermore, besides noting that Indigenous resurgence must come "from *within* Indigenous thought systems, intelligence systems that are continually generated in relationship to place" (Simpson, *As We Have* 16; emphasis added) and existing alongside the colonial worlds, Simpson calls for the creation of "constellations of coresistance" (9, 211–32). This concept stresses the possibility of creating coalitions, mostly among Indigenous people but also with nonwhite settlers who share a history of colonization and resistance. Rita Wong coins the term "(un)settler" (89) to refer to racialized Canadians like herself who occupy a fraught position in Canada. Malissa Phung explains the contradictions in this position, which is marked by the fact that nonwhite settlers "occupy Indigenous lands and benefit from the displacement of Indigenous people" while at the same time are figured "as perpetually *foreign* or *alien*, unsettled settlers posing an invasive threat to the livelihood of *Indigenized* white settlers" (295; emphasis in original). On the other hand, (un)settlers show a willingness to engage with Indigenous activism as allies as a result of their awareness of their own legacy of complicity with and benefit from colonization.

For Simpson, Indigenous resurgence refuses to center whiteness as the key to social transformation and turns instead toward Indigenous knowledge and alliances with other racialized and minoritized people involved in parallel struggles against the dispossession and oppression of settler colonialism, capitalism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy. Since "liberal white Canadians . . . uphold all four of these pillars" (Simpson, *As We Have* 228), Simpson claims that "there is virtually no room for white people in resurgence" (228). However, she is also confident that "our real white allies [will] show up in solidarity anyway" (231), once the construction of "constellations of coresistance within grounded normativity" (231) is underway. Simpson's concept of "grounded normativity" alludes to Indigenous-centered standards based on a network of "relationships of deep reciprocity, intimate and global interconnection and interdependence, that spirals across time and space" (24). Grounded normativity, therefore, highlights Indigenous notions of kinship. Other Indigenous thinkers, like Battiste, stress the collaboration with "the allied work of white feminists and anti-racist and social activists, as well as ecologists and friends of the earth" (Battiste 91). Stó:lō writer, poet,

and scholar Lee Maracle, too, links Indigenous self-determination to the development of trans-systemic knowledges. Like Simpson, Maracle turns inward to the Indigenous communities for decolonization and rematriation. In her discussion of Indigenous feminism, she underlines the specificity of this movement, which seeks decolonization and the restoration of the matriarchal structures that are crucial for the preservation of Indigenous epistemologies (149). However, Maracle also acknowledges the benefits of allying with Western feminism to fight the violence of ongoing patriarchal settler-state structures against women. In her quest for "equality between the genders outside the home" (151), she affirms, "[m]y feminism does not contradict Western feminism. If we choose to engage with the outside world, we will need Western feminist approaches, but the restoration of our nations is going to require a deeper kind of feminism" (152)—i.e., one that restores female authority and governing structures within Indigenous nations.

This opens up Simpson's "constellations of coresistance" to a trans-systemic approach to knowledge—an approach that is multi-directional even though it underlines the turn to Indigenous epistemologies on the part of both Indigenous people and non-Indigenous allies working toward decolonization. This trans-systemic approach is particularly suitable for an analysis of my selected texts by King, Compton, and Coleman, in which the restoration of kinship networks brings to the fore the epistemicide perpetrated against Indigenous and other marginalized cultures. In so doing, these texts help envision the possibility of an ecology of knowledges that works toward social and environmental justice and equity.

II. Centering Indigenous Knowledges: Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle*

> What . . . Native writers suggest is that there are other ways of imagining the world, ways that do not depend so much on oppositions as they do on co-operations.
>
> Thomas King, *The Truth about Stories* 110

King self-identifies as Cherokee, German, and Greek and has earned a reputation for his poignant—though often humorous and sardonic—

insights on the Indigenous experience in North America. *The Back of the Turtle* won him the Governor General's Award for English-language fiction in 2014. The novel's chapters shift between the city of Toronto, presented as a key node in the global network of international trade and scientific and technological knowledge production, and the peripheral regions of British Columbia and Northern Alberta, where modern knowledge translates into destructive capitalist practices of tourism and the exploitation of natural resources, threatening Indigenous forms of kinship and ecological epistemologies.

The book opens with Gabriel Quinn, a brilliant Indigenous scientist from Lethbridge, Alberta, walking into the polluted waters of Samaritan Bay. His acculturation via a life-long education in Cartesian thinking, one of the pillars of Western civilization, has resulted in his thorough alienation from his family and community values, as well as from mainstream society. By Western standards, however, Gabriel is a successful man who has mastered scientific knowledge and become Head of Biological Oversight at Domidion, a Toronto-based transnational agribusiness conglomerate. The corporation's production of agricultural chemicals and its investment in the oil industry signal the modern understanding of civilization and progress as dependent on the taming and exploitation of nature. Placing science and technology at the service of economic profit, Domidion rises as a centre of cutting-edge research and knowledge. However, Gabriel's discovery of its implication in and mismanagement of several environmental catastrophes deeply disturbs him. In particular, he is utterly distraught by his belated realization of the part that he has unwittingly played in the massive Kali Creek environmental and human disaster: this tragedy was caused by the mishandling of GreenSweep, a powerful defoliant product that he helped develop in his belief in the unlimited power of science. In the rationale of the Greco-Roman tradition—at the core of Western tenets—Gabriel is punished for his hubris with the deaths of his mother, sister, and baby nephew, which unleash his own determination to commit suicide.

However, from the first chapter, King sets the stage for a resurgence of Indigenous epistemologies as a counterpoint to the deathly effects of Western epistemologies and ethos. Thus, Gabriel's preparations for

self-annihilation actually signal his reconciliation and reconnection with his ancestral beliefs, symbolically represented by the items that he takes with him as he walks into the ocean. Besides his father's drum and leather jacket, which he associates with the powwows of his childhood, he carries a photograph of his now-deceased family. Moreover, his thoughts of death and apocalypse are paired with those of renewal and rebirth, as his walk on the beach brings to mind the Haudenosaunee creation story "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky" (King, *Turtle* 4).[6]

This ancestral cosmological narrative appears with variations in multiple Indigenous North American cultures and has become a leitmotif in King's oeuvre. In *The Back of the Turtle*, it foreshadows some of the novel's crucial themes as it is taken up by several of its characters: Gabriel; his mother, Rose; an Indigenous artist called Mara who returns to her birthplace in the Smoke River reserve after her mother's and grandmother's deaths; and the story-lover Nicholas Crisp, who perceptively observes that the Sky Woman story is "a story that comes with the land, and the two are forever wedded" (222), alluding to the interconnection and interdependence between place and Indigenous thought and experience. In the story, a pregnant woman falling from the sky is rescued by the birds and water animals of Earth and placed on the back of a turtle for lack of any other available dry place. The animals engage in a contest to dive to the bottom of the ocean to get some dirt in which to plant the seeds that the woman took with her in her fall and which are the only guarantee for her survival and that of her twin sons on the back of the turtle. Finally, one of the animals manages to come back to the surface with a handful of earth—Gabriel "tried to remember which of the diving animals had brought up the first lump of earth" (4)—and this marks the creation of the world as we know it on Turtle Island. Simpson points out that the story's collaborative ethics make it "profound and transformative" ("Dancing" 9). With its focus on collaboration, the story acknowledges the interconnections between humans, non-humans, and the natural elements, fostering respect and responsibility for the preservation of ecological balance. For King, this creation story stands in stark contrast not only to the modern narrative of progress and its emphasis on anthropocentric Cartesian individualism

but also to another foundational narrative underpinning Western civilization: the Biblical Genesis, in which God creates the world single-handedly. King points out that in contrast to the violence and competitiveness that mark the human condition after the Biblical Fall and our expulsion from Paradise (King, *Truth* 24), life in the Native story is "determined by co-operation" rather than competition (25). By juxtaposing the cosmological story of Sky Woman with the story of creation in the Book of Genesis and the narrative of modern progress, King's novel draws attention to the importance of story-making and storytelling as relevant mechanisms underlying the epistemological and ontological systems we live by and leads us to imagine and, consequently, create our reality. Thus, after recounting "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky" in *The Truth about Stories*, King wonders what the world would be like if instead of modern-progress and Biblical narratives, the Sky Woman story had prevailed: "What kind of a world might we have created with that kind of story?" (28).

The collaborative kinship ethics of the story materialize in the Samaritan Bay sections of *The Back of the Turtle*, conveying the resilience of Indigenous epistemologies and their potential to address the destruction of ecological and social relations.[7] The novel not only reads as a warning about the pernicious effects of severing human knowledge from the recognition of our interdependence and kinship with the natural world but also offers the collaborative ethos of the Sky Woman story as a promising path to restore balance in a damaged world. King ends the Sky Woman tale with an urgent message in *The Truth about Stories*: "It's yours. Do with it what you will. . . . But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now" (29).

III. Indigenous Land Rights Activism and (Un)Settler Allies: *The Outer Harbour*

In "Indigenous Place and Diaspora Space: Of Literalism and Abstraction," Coleman argues that although the cultural formations of Indigeneity and diaspora appear to share experiences of uprooting and displacement, they result in almost antithetical cultural and political

projects with regard to their commitment to place. While the traumas of diaspora make those who experience it suspicious of land, Indigenous people claim their continuing link to the land of their ancestors and to place, even in the face of their forced estrangement from it because of colonization, contemporary capitalist extractivism, and displacement. If the former group resorts to either a politics of inclusion or a politics of unbelonging, Indigenous peoples turn to a politics of separatist sovereignty.

I suggest that Compton's speculative short story cycle, *The Outer Harbour*, bridges these tensions by opening a kind of dialogical space between diasporic and Indigenous positionalities that responds to what Coleman calls "strategic binarism" ("Indigenous" 61). Within this ethical space between polarities, "Indigenous and diasporic differences can mutually inform one another" (61). If diasporic suffering from nativism can lead Indigenous people to imagine "sovereignty without essentialism" (76), Indigenous understandings of kinship and belonging may inspire members of the diaspora to envision an existence "unwarranted by the sovereignties of nation, race, or state" (76). Thus, Compton's charting of African Canadian space as Afroperipheral rejects the "redemptive drive of Afrocentrism, which iterates everything but a narrow set of perceived traditions as inauthentic and culturally ersatz" (Compton, *After Canaan* 15) and reclaims the local as the site where the symbolic legacies of the black Atlantic are translated, transposed, and remixed with First Nations, Asian Canadian, and European Canadian cultures and rewritten into "a northern actuality" (17) that stresses interconnectivity and kinship. Simultaneously, the collection underlines the possibility of multidirectional alliances, among which those in support of Indigenous land claims stand out. Indigenous characters get the limelight more often in this collection of stories than anywhere else in Compton's oeuvre.

The title of the collection plays on the historical settlement of the city of Vancouver around its inner harbour (Burrard Inlet). Emerging in the Canadian imagination as Canada's gateway to the Pacific, it was also a white space for imperial expansion that erased black history from the official accounts of the region and obliterated from the national imaginary the Indigenous presence on what remains to date unceded

territory. Compton's collection expands his previous conceptualization of Afroperipheral Pacific culture as one "at the outer rim of black centres" and "outside the diasporic master narratives" (Compton, *After Canaan* 14). This conceptualization offers the opportunity to control one's own enculturation, since, he argues, "[i]n the periphery, where there are fewer local expectations of what 'the black experience' ought to be, radical experiments of identity can be tried . . . [and] new systems of thought against racism might be expected to emerge" (13). The collection also uses the symbols of the ship and the island, which are central to Compton's reassessment of the African diaspora and his elaboration on kinship connections across ethnic boundaries and cultural histories.[8]

Compton's rendering of the entanglements of Indigenous place and diaspora space—roots and routes—is nowhere more evident than in the sequence of stories about Pauline Johnson Island. In the book, this fictional geological oddity that is a result of a recent volcanic eruption in Vancouver's outer harbour links the short stories in the cycle. The island also stands paradoxically as both an isolated place—a myth conspicuously present in colonial narratives where islands appear as "a laboratory for political, sociological or economic experimentation" (Cuder-Domínguez 210)—and as a place of connectedness among disparate cultures, a "contact zone" that, as Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey points out, bonds land and sea (1–48). Moreover, the island emerges in the literary imagination as a mirror to society, reflecting the main concerns of specific eras and cultures. Facing the city of Vancouver and through its successive transformations over a span of time from 9/11 into the future—transmuting from ecological reserve to luxury settlement, residential area, immigration detention center, and finally, a shelter for the ghosts of the excluded and the site for the potential reactivation of resistance—the island of Compton's collection mirrors some of the main anxieties that are staged not only on the city's urban space but also on the national and global scales. Thus, the island, named "Pauline Johnson" after the famous nineteenth-century Mohawk poet, becomes the fraught site of contemporary tensions emerging from the interconnected discourses on the environment, Indigenous land claims, white settler entitlement, racialization and racism, technology,

biopolitics, surveillance, security, human rights, and asylum policies. For instance, although the name given to the fictional island seems to acknowledge First Nations' entitlement to this new piece of land, the choice of Pauline Johnson's English name instead of her Mohawk one—Tekahionwake—prefigures the state's continuing colonial, assimilationist thrust, which is made more blatant in Compton's speculative story when the Parliament declares the island "a restricted ecological reserve" (Compton, *Outer* 36), de facto disentitling First Nations.[9]

"The Lost Island"—the second story in the collection—features the strategic alliance between Indigenous and black people, as Jean, who is "pretty much black" (34), joins a group of Indigenous friends who plan to claim as "Indian land" (34) the newly emerged volcanic island in Vancouver's outer harbour. Her decision is grounded in her recognition of shared experiences of racialization, alienation, and resistance affecting both Indigenous and black peoples in Canada. As a result, her activism in favor of Indigenous land claims is an act of personal resistance against the racism that precludes belonging, "a kind of retort to the Vancouver she has known: The school teacher she loved, who one day out of nowhere called her a golliwog; all the where-are-you-froms and all the where-are-you-really-froms; being looked at or looked through, depending, while being summed up, appraised, pre-emptively estranged" (37). In her role as an (un)settler ally who understands the intertwined histories of exclusion and obliteration of black and Indigenous peoples in Canada, Jean is wary about collapsing difference: "I'm not Native" (35), she states from the start, respectfully asking whether her Indigenous friends might accept her support. Jean enacts what Larissa Lai calls "kinship in difference," a challenge to establish relation "through difference and disagreement" (102). Jean's kinship in difference exposes her conflicted position as both a colonized member of the African diaspora in Canada and as complicit in the colonization of the land and the resulting perpetuation of Indigenous peoples' disenfranchisement. Underlining these tensions are the distinct approaches to place deriving from the histories of the African diaspora and Indigenous people, what Coleman identifies as "Indigenous commitments to literal places as compared to diasporic distrust of nativism and its reputed essentialism"

("Indigenous" 61). Accordingly, Jean sees herself as "a starfish rotating in the untouched shallows, near, but not of, the rippled land, circling around and around it" (Compton, *Outer* 38). Nevertheless, the end of the story emphasizes her kinship in difference by revealing that she is pregnant with the child of the Indigenous activist leader Fletcher Sylvester, who was killed by the Canadian police in Jean and her friends' failed attempt to claim Pauline Johnson island. While Compton avoids the conflation of difference, he presents Jean, about to be the mother of an Indigenous child, as related, as kin. The characters' vision of a "New Pan-Indigenous Territory" (40) extends to other stories in the collection, like "The Boom," in which local activism against the rezoning of the island to turn it into a residential area commemorates Fletcher's death and previous Indigenous activism.

The ship, a central symbol of connectivity in theorizations of diaspora such as in Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, also appears in Compton's collection as a powerful image to prompt kinship relations among various diaspora and settler constituencies. Replacing the slave ship that figures prominently in the black Atlantic with contemporary examples of sea transport, Compton redraws and expands previous hegemonic configurations of diaspora to bring the Pacific experience of global trade and human mobility into view. In "1,360 ft^3 (38.5 m^3)," the story that opens the collection, the activist-performer Verŝajna impersonates an undocumented immigrant. Found in a shipping container in Vancouver's harbour, she is detained by the authorities as her elusive racial appearance and the made-up language she speaks prevent any identification and her deportation. When her hoax is found out, it prompts public debate about British Columbia's immigration policies, which are contextualized in this fictional story within an actual infamous history of racist discrimination that includes the Chinese head tax—first levied after the Canadian parliament passed the Chinese Immigration Act of 1885 and meant to discourage Chinese people from entering Canada—and the rejection in 1914 of South Asian immigrants on board the Japanese steamship *Komagata Maru*. Verŝajna's performance not only exposes Canada's ongoing "pheneticizing" biopolitics[10] and its anxiety about security, border control, and race but also prompts kinship connections

across racial and ethnic lines. As I explain elsewhere, these interconnections are best represented by Riel Graham ("Afroperipheralism" 183). Riel not only embodies the convergence of various histories of struggle and resistance in Canada by being the son of African American and Euro-Canadian parents and being named after the Métis revolutionary leader Louis Riel but also extends kinship feelings to refugees and immigrants of all origins when he decides to join Verŝajna in her political activism.

The book closes with new references to the island as an oxymoronic place of both isolation and connection and the ship as a symbol of affiliative itineraries. "The Outer Harbour," the last story in the collection, focuses on a group of undocumented immigrants who, after arriving on board the *Ocean Star*, have been retained for two years at the Pauline Johnson Island Special Detention Facility, marginalized and made invisible. Morphing from science fiction into a ghost story, "The Outer Harbour" signals a renewal of kinship in difference as the spectres of Fletcher, a deceased refugee girl, and a hologram composite that looks like the son that Riel and Verŝajna might engender in the future return to Pauline Johnson Island and, looking at the city of Vancouver from the shore, wait for a new dawn. The spectres make "plans to rendezvous with those yet to come. They will discuss what it means to regroup" (Compton, *Outer* 194).

Thinking through the theme of kinship is often a concern in Indigenous theorizing—as Justice articulates in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* when he poses the question in the title of an essay, "How do we behave as good relatives?" (71). Compton's collection aligns with Justice's observation that "relationships are storied, imagined things; they set the scope for our experience of being and belonging" (74). By stressing the potential for kinship in difference, the stories in *The Outer Harbour* represent the kind of strategic binarism that bridges difference without collapsing it. As a result, Compton's characters open a space of engagement between Indigeneity and diaspora. This in-between space challenges current ways of thinking that either underline essentialism or fall prey to colonial attempts at assimilation and homogenization that result from "disavowing the Indigenous/settler binary" (Coleman, "Indigenous" 62).

IV. Learning to Listen to Indigenous Peoples and the Land: *Yardwork*

Coleman's scholarly work has focused extensively on Western, Indigenous, and diasporic epistemologies as they adapted to the settler Canadian context. His influential book *White Civility* (2006) "was about Canada being based on bulldozing other forms of civilization" (Mulkewich)—any forms that diverged from the British model adopted by the early Scottish settlers. Refusing the dehumanizing and unethical position of complicity with the violent history of colonialism, Coleman's *Yardwork: A Biography of an Urban Place* attempts to build a respectful relationship with Indigenous ontologies and ways of knowing—in particular, how to relate to the land and other human and non-human beings. In the author's words, the book advocates "new kinds of awareness settler Canadians are needing to learn if we are to live in good relations with the ecologies and the Indigenous neighbours who have dwelt in these places for centuries" ("Daniel Coleman"). To Coleman, this necessary step of living in peace and reciprocity requires Canadians to retrain their "Western Enlightenment minds to consider the many forms of sentience and liveliness that are making their own decisions and working out their lifeways in any urban plot" ("Daniel Coleman"). As he puts it in an interview, "[o]ur settler society has some major learning to do, and it's about land. It is about valuing each other's knowledge without appropriation" (Mulkewich). In *Yardwork*, therefore, Coleman sets out to educate himself under the guidance of Six Nations' thinking about the history of the place where he lives, convinced that Canadian citizens are compelled "not only by historical justice to turn to Indigenous guidance on how to think toward an ecology of knowledges, but also by Indigenous people providing excellent resources for doing so at the present time" (Coleman, "Toward" 8). This move may result in reversing "the exclusion of Indigenous thought from the 'economy of credibility'" (8). Coleman urges non-Indigenous people to work as allies in support of decolonizing and re-indigenizing efforts in the understanding that, as Wong puts it, "this is not only a responsibility but also a viable and desirable path to a future that materializes peace and justice, act by act, relationship by relationship, place

by place, working from the ground on which we live, work, dream and play" (Lai and Wong).

As the son of Canadian missionary parents, Coleman was born and raised in Ethiopia. He begins *Yardwork* by locating himself "in a spiritual diaspora" (8) and explaining that, as a result of this diasporic experience, he was "not accustomed to belonging" (8). However, he has developed "a fondness" for the place in which he currently lives, the post-industrial city of Hamilton, Ontario, that "looked like an environmental disaster" (9) at the time when he and his wife moved there from Alberta so he could take up the position of English professor at McMaster University. He asserts that the Six Nations' thinkers he has encountered in Hamilton and "their understanding that all creation around us is alive and actively trying to teach us" (10) has deeply influenced his current perception of, respect for, and attachment to the place in which he lives. In particular, Coleman recognizes that he owes his awareness that "places are alive, have spirit and are providing us with everything we need to live" (10) to the "place-thought" theorizing carried out by his Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe friend and colleague Vanessa Watts. Heeding the centrality of listening and attending to the land in Six Nations' thinking, Coleman opens himself up to be taught about belonging by paying "real attention" (10) to the bounded but complexly and globally interconnected space of his backyard. Thus, *Yardwork* explores belonging and un-belonging, crucial concerns of both diaspora and Indigeneity, through the Indigenous notion of kinship as interrelatedness. In addition, Coleman's book emphasizes the radical distinctiveness of those who experience kinship in difference.

Coleman conveys a sense of place, as King and Compton do, by privileging story-making and storytelling. Wondering where to start to understand place, he—like King—resorts to the Bible and to the Sky Woman story of origins as told by the Haudenosaunee and compares them to the scientific account established by geologists about how life on the planet earth came into being, out of water (17–39). Coleman is conscious of the problems that his telling of the sacred Haudenosaunee story raises: it voids the story of its sacred function and uses names that he has gathered from "books by Hodinöhsö:ni people who speak different languages, from outsiders, from the internet and from the beginner's

class in Mohawk language" (23) he took years ago. However, his awareness of First Peoples and their stories precludes the settler myth that considers the precolonial space that we call North America as a blank slate and highlights the "culture killing" (24) and epistemicide that "was part and parcel of land theft" (24). Like Crisp's emphasis in King's novel on the intertwining of the Sky Woman story and place—"It's a story that comes with the land" (*Turtle* 222)—Coleman asserts that "[t]he longhouse stories grew out of this land" (*Yardwork* 24) and are particularly attuned to the ecology of the place: "These stories reconnect us to the laws and agreements by which the natural system works" (24) and "dramatize nature's laws of equality and interdependence" (25). Citing Battiste and Henderson, Coleman reminds us that these stories are "the cumulative result of a large number of historical contracts, which create reciprocal obligations of kinship and solidarity among all the species and forces which co-exist in that place" (Battiste and Henderson 45).

Coleman argues that the North American ethos has been shaped by the intertwining of Biblical stories of exile and the idea of modern progress. In this sense, looking for the Promised Land goes together with the belief "that through science, democracy and technology, we are gradually bettering our conditions and creating a better future" (Coleman, *Yardwork* 32). Moving—as in the Manifest Destiny ideology—means improvement. However, Coleman wonders, "What happens to the place itself, if every generation is just a-passin' through? If every generation chops down the trees, exterminates the Canaanites, clears a farm, then a strip mall, dumps chemicals in the water and moves on?" (34). His words echo King's environmental and social concerns in *The Back of the Turtle.* As in King's novel and Compton's collection of stories, *Yardwork* advocates a balance that pays attention to the stories emerging from all the parties involved in an ecological system—such as his own backyard. This requires work—*yardwork*—and he ends the first chapter in the book, "Holy Land," proposing to track all the stories that make up the place, or at least, as many as he can: "the ones that started here . . . and the ones that landed here more recently" (39). "Maybe," he ventures, "this is what ecology means; maybe it means attending to a whole and holy ecosystem of stories" and "their interdependencies" (39). *Yardwork* achieves the sort of collaborative thinking that he advocates.

V. Conclusion

Battiste writes that "[a]round the earth, Indigenous peoples continue to feel the cognitive conflict created by Eurocentric educational systems that subjected them to forced assimilation and cognitive dissonance" (83). Despite this, Indigenous peoples' reappraisal of traditional knowledges and openness to the creation of alliances based on kinship in difference are guiding the way to a much-needed epistemic transformation, one that is grounded in an ecology of knowledges that displaces Eurocentrism and aims to preserve and improve life for all on planet Earth. This transformation, Battiste insists, is evidenced in the Indigenous "re-engagement with their Indigenous knowledge and traditions (IK) and their helping others rethink how we can interact with the earth and with one another" (83). The alliances and cooperation between Indigenous thinkers and Western scholars resulting from this shift find an important platform in narrative fiction and nonfiction that probe the limits, challenges, contradictions, and possibilities of Indigenous notions of kinship for the creation of ecologies of knowledge.

King's novel, Compton's stories, and Coleman's biography of a place envision the restoration of ecological kinship with the land and its human and nonhuman interdependent beings through an engagement with Indigenous land rights and epistemologies. The stories they tell help push the boundaries of conventional Western thinking, contributing to the emergence of what Battiste calls a new story to live by, "one that involves a conscientization about the limits of colonial society, its foundations and assumptive values, and about the integral role Indigenous peoples have played in an interdependent world" (88). The potential effects of this move go beyond the realm of Canadian literary production and consumption and toward the decolonization of Western thought through cultural Indigenization.

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Notes

1 Indigenous critics have often decried the imbalances caused by the pervasiveness of the idea that Western thought is the foundation of knowledge. Owens, for example, complained in 2001 that critics and teachers of Native American literature are expected to "exhibit a crucial knowledge of canonical European and Euro-American literature" and criticism in order to be taken seriously, but there is no reciprocity (12). Alfred discerns an increasingly "postmodern imperialism that is more difficult to target" (25–26), which may take the form of an "insidious *inclusion* within the dominant academy's dominant paradigms" of Indigenous studies (Allen 377; emphasis in original). Adopting an Indigenous sovereigntist stance, Simpson argues along similar lines that "[w]e cannot allow . . . our intelligence to be co-opted and *processed* into the structure that is at the root of all of our problems" (46; emphasis in original) and suggests,

> we need to make a shift from *Indigenizing the processes* that maintain the structures of settler colonialism, and expand, deepen, and reactualize the processes and knowledges of grounded normativity [meaning an Indigenous-centred normativity] to structuralize Indigenous nationhood and resurgence and mobilizations as a mechanism to dismantle the structure of colonialism in all forms. (46–47; emphasis in original)

2 See Coleman's "Toward an Indigenist Ecology of Knowledges for Canadian Literary Studies" (10–12) for a perceptive summary and analysis of Battiste and Henderson's critique of cognitive imperialism in *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage*.

3 See Hill and McCall's *The Land We Are*.

4 "The Land is the Law" posits the law to be in the land. In Graham's articulation of this understanding, the law "is not made up of doctrinal text or historical precedent, but rather is 'actualised' from the land itself" (Morris 1). This view of jurisprudence situates Indigenous peoples as the "*voice of authority* when defining the jurisprudence of their law" (Morris 2; emphasis in original).

5 See my introduction to *Glocal Narratives of Resilience* for a discussion of Indigenous thinking about the agency of stories of resilience and resurgence.

6 Haudenosaunee (sometimes spelled Hodinöhsö:ni) is the Seneca term for the Iroquois Confederacy, also known as the Six Nations, Iroquois League, People of the Longhouse, or People of the Extended House. In this article I use the more common spelling (Haudenosaunee), and keep Coleman's preferred version of the word (Hodinöhsö:ni) when quoting from *Yardwork.*

7 For a reflection on how many Indigenous epistemologies understand water to be sentient and knowledgeable, see my close reading of King's novel in "'Who's going to look after the water?'"

8 For a reading of these symbols in the collection, see Cuder-Domínguez's "*A mari usque ad mare*."

9 King's *The Back of the Turtle* similarly portrays the instrumentalization of First Nations historical figures in the naming of Tecumseh Plaza at Domidion's world

headquarters in Toronto. After organizing an Indian confederation to oppose European expansion, Tecumseh was killed in the War of 1812 when the British deserted him. Naming the plaza after him strikes Dorian as "ironic" (King, *Turtle* 16). This irony is magnified into hypocritical political correctness through Domidion's use and abuse of Indigenous lands and their disregard for Indigenous peoples' lives and wellbeing.

10 Compton coins the neologism "pheneticizing" to refer to the phenomenon of "racially perceiving someone based on a subjective examination of his or her outward appearance" (*After Canaan* 25), thus correcting the misleading implications of the term "passing"—which "grammatically absents the person who reads someone's race" (22)—and shifting the racializing gaze from the viewed to the viewer.

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