**ariel: a review of international english literature**
Vol. 56 No. 2 Pages 55–87


# Creative Groundedness: Life through Brokenness and Breaking Through in Michelle Good's *Five Little Indians*

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**Abstract:** This article offers a reading of Michelle Good's novel *Five Little Indians* (2020) with an emphasis on its representation of what I term "creative groundedness," or the capacity to generate a sense of collective and personal balance through communal and land-based forms of creativity. It draws on contemporary Indigenous scholarship by Glen Coulthard, Daniel Heath Justice, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, among others, to examine the characters' reinvention of their broken lives through solidarity, respect, and mutual support. The analysis also builds on the work of feminist scholars of affect Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant to explore how Good's message is often predicated on the creative power of the affective. Ultimately, I argue that the novel moves beyond proposing strategies of resilience and survival and promotes the value of situated, relational, reciprocal, and community-based practices to heal Indigenous lives on urban and rural land.

**Keywords:** *Five Little Indians*, groundedness, kinship, land, urban Indigeneity

## I. Introduction

In a 2021 conversation with Mohawk scholar Kahente Horn-Miller, Cree writer and lawyer Michelle Good discussed her debut novel, *Five Little Indians* (2020), and explained the importance of conveying how broken, challenged, and unprepared Indigenous children were when they were released from residential school. Good insists on this point in many interviews and asserts that her novel is

> not about the schools per se, but about the children, and about the tremendous burden of psychological injury that they left the schools with; and how they were so profoundly challenged to even accomplish a modest life. . . . It's not only dealing with that psychological injury but trying to deal with it in the face of profound racism and the fact that they were not welcome in this world whatsoever, and that they had no support. None. ("A Conversation" 11:20–13:12)

Her multi-award-winning novel[1] follows the enmeshed lives of five residential school survivors who find themselves in that situation. Kenny, Lucy, Maisie, Clara, and Howie were partly inspired by real stories that Good's mother told her as well as her own experience in foster care trying to survive in Vancouver in the late 1960s. The characters also embody five types of harm that, after reading many psychological assessments of residential school survivors, Good identified as representing the scope of injuries suffered ("A Conversation" 14:00–14:20). She claims that, while many accounts dwell on the experiences children had in the schools, "[w]hat is not sufficiently established and what [she] believe[s] is standing in the way of meaningful reconciliation is understanding the impact" ("These Characters" 4:42–5:45). Her novel's focus on her characters' post-school life is thus meant to increase readers' awareness of the extent to which this cruel history has impacted Indigenous individuals and communities to the present. Moreover, *Five Little Indians*—published in the wake of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the implementation of its Calls to Action[2] and in the midst of multiple findings of unmarked graves on the sites of former residential schools across the country[3]—is a vivid reminder of the lethal and pernicious effects of colonial violence. The novel speaks powerfully to non-Indigenous Canadians about the true meaning of reconciliation. Good convincingly argues that "unless there is truth, there can be no reconciliation" and states that the articulation of that truth should be seen as an opportunity for non-Indigenous Canadians "to reconsider what they think they know about the impact of residential school" (Good, "These Characters" 12:00–13:00).[4]

*Five Little Indians* depicts the characters' struggles to overcome their traumas in the midst of deep internal brokenness and rampant external hostility. Good's masterful storytelling exposes the unbearable suffering inflicted upon Indigenous individuals as well as their subjection to systemic political and social cruelty. At the same time, however, the novel's true and honest language invites readers to see that, as Good asserts, "these characters are more than their trauma" ("These Characters" 14:00); they also experience love, joy, solidarity, hope, strength, and the determination to build a better life for themselves ("A Conversation" 15:10–15:23). As reviewers such as Larissa Page note, there is a tremendous power in "[t]he way these characters created a family where they had none, the way they were linked together by trauma but stayed together by love and friendship and mutual understanding, even when they needed to escape their pasts" (Page).[5] Moreover, the novel succeeds in capturing the revolutionary atmosphere of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a time when, estranged from their original communities, Indigenous youth found comfort in the incipient urban scene across the country and became involved in different forms of activism that strove for the recognition of Indigenous rights. This was "a magical time," Good observes, an unexpected opportunity paradoxically spinning off from the residential school experience ("A Conversation" 7:35–8:45). Drawn by my interest in how such a transformation occurs, I aim to examine how Good's novel imagines the possibility of alternative forms of happiness for her characters or expresses, to borrow Sara Ahmed's words, "the kinds of worlds that might take shape when happiness does not provide a horizon of experience" (*Promise* 14).

This article offers a reading of *Five Little Indians* that focuses on the representation of moments of what I call "creative groundedness," or the characters' capacity to generate a sense of collective and personal balance through communal and land-based forms of creativity. Drawing on contemporary Indigenous scholarship, my reading looks beyond the resilience of survival and into the characters' attempts, with different degrees of success, to reinvent their broken lives through solidarity, respect, and mutual support. My use of the term "grounded" is meant literally in its sense of "rooted" or "landed" and is inspired by Yellowknives

Dene Nation Glen Coulthard's notion of "grounded normativity." Coulthard's phrase refers to "the ethical frameworks" produced by "Indigenous place-based practices and associated forms of knowledge," which are always "based on deep reciprocity" and "inherently informed by an intimate relationship to place" ("Grounded" 254). My use of "creative" in the phrase "creative groundedness" draws on Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's proposal of land pedagogy, or the capacity to retain a sense of "intelligent Nishnaabeg relationality" ("Land" 8) against past and ongoing forms of colonial dispossession. In a similar context, Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice reclaims kinship as an "active practice" that generates positive, "uncolonized models of identity that reside in the active attention to the rights and responsibilities of each person to the rest of Creation, among both humans and other-than-human peoples" ("Rhetorics" 245). The three scholars propose similar strategies to fight colonial impositions and regenerate Indigenous lives. My interpretation of Good's novel is informed, inspired, and shaped by these ideas.

In an effort to counter the absence of critical work on Good's novel, I offer a two-way, reciprocal reading that explores how Indigenous scholarship illuminates the novel and how the novel engages with, expands, and enriches Indigenous scholarship, especially through my focus on the possibilities of restoring a sense of groundedness in urban contexts. My analysis also borrows key insights from feminist affect theory, particularly Sara Ahmed's critique of normative understandings of happiness, what she calls "happiness scripts," and Lauren Berlant's articulation of the precarious conditions of contemporary social life. Ultimately, I argue that the novel promotes the value of situated, relational, reciprocal, and community-based practices and foregrounds their potential to create what affect theoreticians term positive attachments. These are strategies that help subjects navigate social, economic, political and emotional crises.[6]

## II. The Magic of the Ordinary, or the Fabric of Life

*Five Little Indians* provides many opportunities for readers to reconsider what they think they know. Its truth-telling exercise relies on Indigenous

modes of collaborative communication, while its focus on the ordinary lives of the characters highlights the power—both political and affective—of weaving reciprocal forms of care. Crucial to the implementation of this double strategy, I argue, is the question of creativity, which Simpson links to relationality and endows with great agentive power:

> Nishnaabeg life, Nishnaabeg worlds are hubs of relationships through time and space. That's the world we built and that's the world we live in. In times of political tension, or upheaval, or in times of transformation, we sink increased presence into the relationships that will sustain us individually and collectively through that transformation. . . . This movement, this relationality, [is] the fabric of life. ("On Idle No More" 78)

Good's novel enacts this relational strategy through its "sinki[ng] increased presence into the relationships" that are "the fabric of life." Built on a five-legged scaffolding, the story focuses on one character at a time and modulates the sense of intimacy between readers and characters by shifting between third- and first-person points of view and switching the angle on the relationships between Kenny, Lucy, Maisie, Clara, and Howie. It is through this multivocal, polymorphic narrative perspective that the story moves forward and prompts the characters to make sense of their own conditions and try to rebuild their world from the ruins of colonialism. It is also through this narrative strategy that readers are compelled to listen to the characters' voices, reflect on the characters' lives, and consider themselves in relation to the characters.

Moreover, the novel's decrying of colonial violence against Indigenous peoples is entangled with a discussion of affective modes of resilience and survival. Justice writes: "[O]ur families' stubborn refusal to disappear has vexed and perplexed colonial apologists for centuries, for, in spite of all their hopes and ambitions, policies and practices, laws and customs, and assaults and editorials, our peoples are still here, as are our relations, as are our stories" (*Why Indigenous* 5). Simpson similarly lauds the power of ordinary life, built as it is upon embodied affective relationality, to overcome colonial disruption.[7] For her, the survival of Indigenous peoples is evidence of their "tremendous amount

of brilliance, mobilization, organization, and resistance" ("On Idle No More" 77). Good's characters strive not only to survive but to create life where there was none. And they do so collectively, as they encapsulate the situation of post-school Indigenous youth stranded in Canadian cities in the late 1960s, who, faced with the absence of a community for them anywhere, wove profound and life-long relations of friendship, solidarity, and support amongst themselves. Just as individual trauma was felt collectively, so too were the possibilities for healing approached through that lens. "We are collective in nature," says Good, elaborating that "[o]ur communities are collective communities going way back to the beginning of who we were on Turtle Island" ("These Characters" 10:20–10:33).

Central to these questions of resilience and survival is also a view of life as a constant struggle. Simpson claims that "the creation of the world within Nishnaabeg thought comes from struggle. . . . from a being or beings, fully engaged in a creative process that was a process of struggle" ("On Idle No More" 81). *Five Little Indians* shares this conception of the creative process and reflects the centrality of the struggles that the characters come from and go through in order to reinvent their lives. Yet the novel's pan-Indigenous approach, which inspires my analysis, suggests that what brings the characters together is the shared traumatic experience of the Mission school. In a conversation with Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars about the potential of pan-Indigenous approaches to literature, Cree-Métis scholar Deanna Reder argues for their usefulness. Rejecting a return to monolithic notions of Indigeneity, Reder claims that "such approaches hold within them possibilities to theorize aspects of common experience and common aesthetics, especially given the growing presence of urban Native populations with little connection to home communities, languages, or cultures" ("The Strategic Potential" 58).

*Five Little Indians* implicitly reflects Reder's view. The novel's five characters come from different Indigenous communities: neither Lucy's nation nor her family connections are mentioned except for her estranged brother, Wilfred, and neither are Clara's; both Kenny and Maisie are originally from coastal villages in Northern British Columbia,

although their nations are not named. Howie is the only character who identifies himself (proudly) and is, like Good, a Red Pheasant Cree, a circumstance that, as I argue below, determines his outcome in the story. Although the novel focuses on the characters' lives once they are released, the specters of the systemic physical, sexual, and psychological abuses they suffered at the hands of "Father," "Brother," and "Sister" seep through the narrative via flashbacks and traumatic returns. These past experiences paint a tragic background to their everyday lives and create both a shared source of damage and a paradoxical bond among them: "It was an unspoken agreement between [Clara and Lucy]: the past was the past. It's hard to run from the past, but once stuffed away, it couldn't be allowed to poison the present" (Good, *FLI* 100–01). Throughout, the present is haunted by the "ghosts lurking in corners" for Howie (178); the "thirst on ya" (81) and "the old restlessness" for Kenny (210), who struggles with alcoholism; and a profound sense of shame for all. Clara and Howie reveal that "[t]hey couldn't look at each other, thinking of that place, the air heavy, the silence awkward" (227), but the shame suffuses all the main characters' relationships with each other.

Thus defined by a systemic crisis that ultimately comes from their shared trauma, the characters' everyday lives could be seen as governed by what, in a different context, Berlant calls "crisis ordinariness" (10). A traumatic event, Berlant writes, "force[s] people to adapt to an unfolding change," and this circumstance is "better described by a notion of systemic crisis or 'crisis ordinariness' and followed out with an eye to seeing how the affective impact takes form, becomes mediated" (10).[8] Good's characters face a constant need to navigate their dire circumstances and channel the affective intensity of their everyday lives in ways that echo Berlant's description. As they do so, they also strive to rebuild their world and make sense of their lives, intuitively searching for meaning in ways that resonate with Simpson's approach to meaning-production as a material relational process that works through the recognition of difference and rests on individuals' responsibilities ("Land" 11).

True to that emphasis on relationality, the narration advances through a relay strategy that, shifting between characters' points of views and first- and third-person narration, determines the story's rhythm and flow. The

novel opens with Kenny's attempt to escape the Mission and provides the first ugly particulars of life in such an institution. Eventually, Kenny manages to escape and makes it home to his original village only to find an alcoholic mother whose mournful wordlessness he struggles to break:

> Finally, he whispered, "What's the matter, Mom? Aren't you glad I'm home?
>
> She looked at him and tried to speak but could find no words. Kenny reached for her hands and held them in his. They sat, mute, watching the sun begin its lazy descent into the sea.
>
> "I don't know what to do." Bella squeezed Kenny's hand. "It's like most of me is gone and I can't get it back." (Good, *FLI* 25)

Sad and disappointed, he leaves to take many odd jobs before ending up in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, where he tracks Lucy down. Kenny and Lucy developed a secret connection while at school, but by the time they meet again, Kenny's inner rage has turned him into an alcoholic constantly on the run.

Released from school on her sixteenth birthday with little but a bus ticket in her purse, Lucy travels to Vancouver. After escaping a sordid episode in which she naively falls into the hands of a pimp, she locates her former schoolmate Maisie, who gets her a job as a cleaner at the Manitou, a seedy sex motel on the Eastside. Lucy channels her constant fear into an obsessive-compulsive need to count and tidy things up and goes back to school to obtain her high school certificate. By the time she finds Kenny waiting for her outside her apartment, she is planning to enroll in a nursing program.

The novel exposes how the profound damage that these characters carry with them and the precarity of their previous residential school existence are such that they find themselves challenged by the most ordinary accomplishment. Hence Lucy is highly impressed to find out that Maisie, who had been released only a year earlier, has rented an apartment, found a job, and gotten a boyfriend, things people have "in the real world" (51). From the apparent privilege of her position, Maisie is able to help Lucy start a modest life. Yet, despite her prudish "[n]ice

girl" (61) appearance, she lives a dangerous double life, which I will discuss below, governed by a post-traumatic self-disgust.

Clara, who was also released from the school at an earlier date, works with Maisie and Lucy at the Manitou. She is generous, compassionate, and highly protective of Lucy, with whom she later ends up sharing a house on the Eastside. Enraged about her school experience and unable to shake off a sense of guilt about the death of her friend Lily that occurred here, Clara gets involved in the American Indian Movement (AIM) and puts her life at risk before she begins to understand how to heal through the traditional Indigenous practices of an elderly Cree woman named Mariah.[9]

Finally, Howie seems to be the most brutally abused of all. Like the rest of the characters, he is subjected to physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in the school, but in his case, Brother seems particularly obsessed with him. Once he almost beats Howie to death and, as a result, the boy ends up in hospital. Soon after this visit to the hospital, his family manages to rescue him and take him away. As an adult, he comes across Brother and beats him ferociously. By the time he enters the narrative, he has just been released from prison after serving time for that assault. He is tormented by nightmares about his nights at the Mission and fails in his attempt to build a new clean life in Vancouver. He is close to going back to jail when he meets Clara, who saves him from the prison loop.

If the alternating focus on each of the characters underlines the specific struggles of residential school survivors, the novel's title generates a larger thematic meaning by alluding to an old nursery counting-out rhyme in which "Ten Little Indians" gradually disappear from the song until there are none.[10] I argue that this title, in echoing the nursery rhyme, sets the novel up to dismantle its racist frame and reverse its sinister logic in both the global context of colonialism and the specific setting of the novel. On the one hand, the assumed familiarity of the nursery rhyme increases the emotional impact of the story by highlighting the perversity of colonial discourses. On the other, the characters struggle to counter their colonial predicament and, by creating possibilities for life through and beyond survival, they reverse the script the

traditional rhyme follows and transform its violence through grounded practices of empathy and solidarity. As I discuss below, these unexpected break-throughs produce and are produced by a politics of the ordinary that circulates in the relationships between the characters and between them and the mostly urban spaces in which they live. In that sense, Good puts into practice Simpson's decolonial proposal on the creative potential of grounded relationality ("Land" 7). In the remainder of this article, I focus on the powerful agency found in that web of ordinary affects, to use Kathleen Stewart's term to describe the way people are often moved by everyday events, that Good's characters build through their attachments and how those attachments often take shape through the practice of the related Indigenous values of kinship, groundedness, and respect for the land.

**III. Kinship and Happiness**

Given the characters' traumatic estrangement from land relations, their possibilities of regeneration are inevitably enmeshed with the difficult process of reconstructing their community. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed explains the enduring or "sticky" nature of affects that derive from a traumatic experience (160). These affective residues, which are often deeply embodied, can overwhelm the subject's life to the point of preventing them from moving forward. Sticky affects can be collective, imprinting the emotional landscape of whole generations or communities (11). In her subsequent study of the notion of happiness in contemporary Western thought, Ahmed cites the family as one of the crucial ambivalent sites that she calls "happy objects" (*Promise* 21). After comparing unhappiness and wretchedness, Ahmed moors the word "wretched" in its etymological reference to "a stranger, exile or banished person" (17). "The wretched," she notes, "is not only the one driven out of his or her native country but is also defined as one who is 'sunk in deep distress, sorrow, misfortune or poverty'" (17). Applying these ideas to Good's novel, one wonders what happens to Ahmed's happiness scripts when the subject has been forcefully estranged from their family as well as from their place, language, and culture of origin. In this section, I explore the stickiness of unhappy attachments in the novel

and the possibilities for the characters to balance their deep sadnesses through the Indigenous practice of kinship.[11]

The achievement of modest forms of happiness in the novel is inversely related to the stickiness of the characters' negative attachments, and these are distinctly embodied. Following their forceful removal from their families, the novel shows how the children were ironically subjected to a perverse logic by which the abusers became their surrogate "Sisters," "Fathers," and "Brothers." Their adult lives are marked by ambivalent attachments to the source of their trauma, with the ghostly appearances of their abusers haunting their everyday to the point of governing it for some of them. This is indeed the case for Maisie, whose self-destructive impulses overpower her desire to live a good life. However glad she feels when she is reconnected with Lucy, the presence of her school friend in her Vancouver apartment unleashes disturbing memories "like the endless clicking of Sister's rosary beads, slapping against the stiff folds of her rustling habit" (Good, *FLI* 51). Ultimately, it is her inability to disentangle herself from the traumatic legacy of her school abuse that decides her fate. The ambivalence of her sordid attachments repels her, and the clash between necessity and repulsion becomes lethal, as shown in her hideous sexual encounters with "the Old Man": "I smelled his old man smell and stared at the age spots, the white hairs in his knuckles, just like Father" (62–63).

Lucy's reintroduction to Kenny is described in similar terms: "[H]er head [was] reeling. Images and sounds rattled around her. The nun's rustling habits and clicking rosary beads; Father and his insidious invitations" (100). The scene signals the disruptive force of trauma and uses a potent mirroring device to show how it is deeply and literally embedded in their bodies: "She ran her hand through her hair, expecting to feel the stubbles and scrapes left by Sister Mary's handiwork. . . . She wondered if he thought he would see those scab trails on her head again too. . . . Kenny ran his fingers through his hair, his face suddenly warm" (100). Still, in contrast with Maisie, Lucy's obsessive compulsion to count things somehow shields her from the lingering tyranny of sticky affects as she strives to keep her memories in check. She believes that "[t]hey couldn't be who they were now, with their lipstick,

paycheques and rooms, if they were also those children, or the children who'd left the other children behind" (101). While trauma eludes direct language, it imbues the text with the weight of the unspeakable, expressing itself through the bodies of the characters and marking them as sites of disruption and pain.

Since Good's characters are forcibly estranged from their families, they are also "wretched" in the above-mentioned connection of the term with a lack of a sense of belonging. Because they were violently stripped of their families at the ages of five or six, they have no place to call home. Once released from school, Lucy and Clara travel to Vancouver for lack of other options. Howie follows later, after the death of his mother and the completion of his prison term. Only Kenny and Maisie attempt to go back to their villages in Northern British Columbia and resume their lives with their families, but the weight of colonial violence is too heavy. In Maisie's case, her distress is such that it overruns her attempt from the start. Much as she needs "to be little again, living without fear and brutality," she knows that "no one gets that back. All that's left is a craving, insatiable empty place" (60). Predictably, when Maisie reencounters Lucy, she cannot help feeling "the pressure building, the need to get out" (55). Maisie narrates: "As much as I wanted her there, her presence seemed to suck the air out of the place. . . . Those crowded dorms weren't easy to forget. I didn't want her to feel unwelcome, but I had needs" (55). These details, provided early in the story, construct Maisie as irreparably damaged and anticipate her tragic end.

Heartbreakingly, Kenny tries hard to return to his past life with his mother by working with her in their smokehouse. He longs for their time spent there together, where "the salmon, like red ribbons, h[u]ng, cured by breeze and smoke. His mother, singing to him in the old language, smiling and putting him to work, carrying the little load of kindling he was strong enough for. *Mom*" (18; emphasis in original). However, when he arrives at Port Simpson and runs toward the smokehouse, "his feet remembering a long-ago path," he is shocked to find it wrecked, "empty and cold" (18). When he reunites with his mother and smells alcohol on her breath, he begins to realize the impossibility of returning to the idealized childhood of his dreams: "She kissed him on

the top of his head. It was then that he smelled it for the first time–that sickly sweet smell. Just like Brother would smell when he came for him in the night. He looked up at her with a question in his eyes. She had never smelled like that before" (19). The disturbing link drawn between Kenny's mother and his abuser discloses the extent of the damage done to his family; the irreversible disruption caused by colonialism is signaled through its impact on his mother's body.

Given the weight of this irreparable loss, is there a possibility for happiness, however small, for these characters? For Kenny and Maisie, who die in the course of the novel, the answer to that question is clearly no. However, as if heeding Ahmed's view of the subversive power of "unhappy archives," or all those stories that challenge "the very appeal of happiness" (*Promise* 18), the account of their wretched lives contributes to the novel's message and impact. Notably, Maisie's section of the novel is narrated in the first person, as are the final moments of Kenny's life. Ahmed contends that listening to the wretched is an exercise in solidarity and empathy that shakes the listeners' (or readers') position "because it might estrange [them] from the very happiness of the familiar" (*Promise* 17). In her examination of Indigenous testimonial practices in Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, Julia Emberley argues for the power of such practices to unsettle the white settler to the point of creating "an epistemic shift" (70). Borrowing Shoshana Felman's term, Emberley claims that this shift places the non-Indigenous reader in the position of an "accidental witness" (70). She writes that "the listener or reader pursues the truth of a traumatic event and then finds her or himself pursued by something else, a type of haunting, that urges the reader on yet is oftentimes something that the reader does not want to know, because the knowledge itself is painful and overwhelming" (70). Both Ahmed and Emberley approach the act of reading as an affective encounter in which the intense proximity to the pain of others leaves the reader uncomfortably exposed and unsettled. Through the characters of Kenny and Maisie, Good achieves this haunting effect.

Also confronting colonial scripts, the rest of the characters strive to overcome their constant distress. As I discuss below, Clara and Howie attempt to subdue their sadness by going back to Howie's ancestral

land. Lucy's happiness is curtailed by her childhood trauma and the continuation of colonial violence in the present. The novel emphasizes how every tiny moment of enjoyment experienced by Lucy is sabotaged by the friend group's disrupted past and the presence of racism in the present. The girls' celebration of Lucy's passing her high school certificate exam is undercut by a fight with Harlan, their boss at the Manitou, and being fired from their cleaning jobs as a result. Harlan dismisses Lucy's attempt to improve her employment options and tells her that "Indian chicks are good for two things, and both of them happen in motel rooms" (97). There are moments in Lucy's life when she glimpses a modest form of contentment, as when she finds Kenny: "Her happiness at seeing him alive, grown and free, eclipsed the sadness that followed him into the kitchen like a roiling wave" (102). Still, as if anticipated by the second part of the sentence, these moments are often short-lived, and Lucy's cautious joy is soon overrun by the more familiar feelings of misery and grief.

And yet the novel insists on building languages with which to address the crisis ordinariness that defines the characters' lives. Despite the fact that some are too damaged to build healthy relationships, let alone find happiness, they all assist one another regardless, weaving a web of relations based on reciprocity. Maisie generously helps Lucy get on her feet when she first arrives in Vancouver. Kenny protects Howie in school and teaches him about edible plants in the surrounding thicket where Howie hides "[j]ust to get a break from the constant fear" (238). He also dares to support Lucy when they are both being humiliated at school. After Kenny dies, Lucy discovers that he named her as his life insurance beneficiary. She also tells their daughter, Kendra, that he sent money to Lucy and his mother for years (262). Lucy helps Kenny through her unconditional love and her acceptance of his irreparable damage. After Kendra is born, Clara and Lucy rent a house and the three of them live together as a family in mutual support and respect. Later on, Lucy helps Clara to prepare for the exam to become a Native Courtworker (222–23) and, when Clara gets her license, she acts as Howie's defendant and saves him from going back to jail (182–83).

I argue that the strong bond between the characters develops through the active Indigenous practice of kinship, which, according to Justice, is a fluid, expansive, and inclusive model of relationship:

> Kinship is posited on one's behavior—if you've been accepted as family and maintain your obligations as a family member, then you're recognized as being family. It is qualitative in scope, potentially ever-expansive and inclusive, attentive to the different strengths, talents, and commitments of those participating in the circle. It is also attentive to a broad constituency, only some of whom are human, as the animals, plants, elements, and spirit beings are participants in the relationships that define kinship. Yet it's also more conditional, more intimate, more dependent on actual relationships that are harder to legislate, monitor, or articulate as one moves beyond the immediate community in which such relationships are articulated and realized. As such, kinship is very much embedded in both a local and localized matrix of relationship, one that isn't much suited to distance, large scale, or national policy. ("Rhetorics" 245)

If kinship, as Justice suggests, offers "uncolonized models of identity" in its articulation of material and site-specific relations, Good's building of a sturdy local network of relations among the characters through solidarity, empathy, attentiveness, and commitment can be read as a decolonial practice. Lucy and Clara's relationship is a prime example. They dodge the system by giving a false address and escaping the hospital when Lucy suspects that social services is planning to take her baby away. For a while, they receive welfare under forged names and live "under the radar," convinced that the authorities "don't care enough" to track them down (Good, *FLI* 126). Significantly, what prompts them in that direction is their experience of motherhood. In the context of the critique of settler colonialism that the novel enacts, Lucy's pregnancy seems invested with implicit decolonial significance inasmuch as it defies the colonial project of erasure of Indigenous bodies from the land in a literal sense. In *Truth Telling,* Good qualifies the settler colonial

enterprise as "a relentless, genocidal" operation against Indigenous peoples (26). In a similar vein, the work of other Indigenous scholars like Simpson ("Land") or Coulthard (*Red Skin*) examines how the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of their traditional lands went hand in hand with the erasure of their cultures and histories, which resulted in the decimation of Indigenous populations. In order to combat the enduring effects of these actions, they put forward the value of decolonial strategies that bring Indigenous bodies back to the land, in a cultural but also physical sense. Building on this idea, Kendra's birth is a turning point in the story and, as if intuitively aware of its larger significance, the two women feel determined to make the most of this gift; Lucy whispers, "Were we ever allowed anything good?" (122). But it is Clara who plans and spells out the details of their strategic survival and paves the road to reverse their situation:

> "Look, we're going to the welfare office tomorrow. You're my sister-in-law. Your husband died while you were pregnant. I'm here to help you with the baby. We're going to get on welfare."
>
> "What? You hate those welfare people."
>
> "Yeah, well." Clara motioned to the baby. "I love her more." (129)

Kinship here explicitly challenges the governmental structures of white settler Canada and questions, to use Justice's formulation, "the broader colonialist body" that is intent on curtailing the power of traditional Indigenous practices through social and economic legislation ("Rhetorics" 246). As I argue in the following section, the very presence of Indigenous bodies on urban land contests that hostile legislation and defies racist attitudes and the ensuing containment efforts by urban planners.

In spite of many obstacles, Lucy and Clara manage to rent a small, rundown house in East Vancouver. Promising "a few beers and some Chinese food in return" for their cleaning help, they recruit "a whole gang" (Good, *FLI* 131) from the Friendship Center, and, through a memorable collective effort, turn the place into their home:[12] "Within a week, the little house no longer felt like a stranger's place. Loose

doorknobs were tightened, and the bathroom was so clean you could eat off the floor. The kitchen was even cheery, with Clara's tiny table and two lawn chairs scooped up from a laneway giveaway. . . . The walls were painted with scrounged leftover paint, so no two walls were the same colour. Clara liked the oddness of it. Lucy got used to it" (132–33). Endowed with rich symbolic weight, the conversion of the rental house on Frances Street from a decrepit building into a livable home is a graphic example of place-based collaboration and kinship. As such, the house becomes a peaceful and relatively happy place not only for Lucy and Kendra, who begin to make a home there, but also for the profoundly unhomed and unsettled Kenny and the restless Clara, for both of whom the home provides a warm, nurturing, and welcoming place to return to after precarious labour and binges (Kenny) and hazardous missions (Clara) (219). True to that modest form of happiness, at the end of the novel, Lucy uses Kenny's life insurance money to purchase a home in the neighborhood but ultimately refuses to move from the Frances Street house, gifting the new one to Kendra: "I'm staying here. . . . This is my home. I will stay here with [Kenny]" (269). Lucy's decision emphasizes the interconnection between different forms of life. Her attachment to the house that is her home is based on grounded practices—that is, rooted in her personal and collective life experiences there but also in her respect for the land on which the house sits and in her cultural and spiritual beliefs and values. In the following section, I will discuss how the characters transform colonial violence and reappropriate urban land through these grounded practices.

**IV. Urban Pedagogies**

Good's novel claims urban land as Indigenous land. In doing so, it implicitly dismantles the false binaries established by colonial doctrines and confirms that "[a]ll Canadian cities are on Indigenous lands" (Simpson, "Land" 23). The relationship between Indigenous communities and the urban, Coulthard notes, was "fraught with tension" from the start because in the colonial imagination, "Canadian cities were originally conceived of . . . as explicitly non-Native spaces—as civilized space" (*Red Skin* 173–74). Drawing on Sherene Razak's work, Coulthard explains

how such colonial distinctions began to falter in the 1960s, when the arrival of non-white people to the cities forced urban planners to modify their segregation strategies to ensure the whiteness of certain areas while creating controlled racialized spaces for the poor. Inner cities became "racialized space, the zone in which all that is not respectable is contained. Canada's colonial geographies exhibit this same pattern of violent expulsions and the spatial containment of Aboriginal peoples to marginalized areas of the city, processes consolidated over three hundred years of colonization" (Razack qtd. in Coulthard, *Red Skin* 174–75).

*Five Little Indians* documents this 1960s shift in the history of Canadian cities and denounces the ghettoization of the Indigenous population in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside that was enforced through active racism on the part of white settler residents and the collaboration of the police who patrolled the imaginary boundaries between neighbourhoods. Revealingly, the characters are often stopped by the police and asked where they are going for no apparent reason. The first mention of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside in the novel takes the form of prejudiced advice that sounds like a warning: the boatman who takes Lucy to the bus depot tells her to "go down to East Hastings. Lots of your kind there" (Good, *FLI* 34). Later, when Walt, a pimp, tricks her into going with him to his apartment, she is disgusted by the conditions of the area with "its unique and acrid smell, a stupefying fog of urine, vomit and car exhaust" (41). Adding to her shock, Walt tells her "that's the city *for you*" (41; emphasis added), which makes her realize her spatial containment even before she settles in. Instances of hostile, sexist, and racist actions by white Canadians against Indigenous peoples abound in the novel. Yet it places equal emphasis on the dismantling of "colonial dissections" (Simpson, "Land" 23) of urban space through the implementation of a politics of the ordinary, the representation of the characters' embodied movements across the city and their situated pedagogies, that often derives from Indigenous place-based practices of kinship and groundedness. The parallel strategies of contesting colonial violence and re-appropriating urban spaces append the story and signal its narrative intent.

Good's characters claim urban land in a spatial, material sense; they refuse to be contained in a particular area of town and walk freely up and down the Downtown Eastside and beyond, around Stanley Park (which the characters are drawn to when they first arrive in Vancouver), Queen Elizabeth Park (where they go to celebrate Lucy and Kenny's wedding), Kitsilano (where the Friendship Center is located), the West End (where Clara lives for a while), Chinatown (where they go for comfort food), and East Van (where Clara, Lucy, and Kendra end up living together in their rented house). Through their everyday embodied relationship to one another and to these areas of town, the city is produced as "a zone of convergence of many histories, where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine" (Berlant 10).

It is notable that when the characters arrive in Vancouver, they are drawn to Stanley Park, the most popular of the city's landmarks and the traditional home of Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples before they were evicted and their settlements destroyed to build the park's ring road in 1887.[13] Given this history, the characters' presence there claims a part of the city that retains the original shapes of the land, is mostly free of buildings, and is still inhabited by Indigenous remains, some original trees, and wildlife. Howie ends up there by chance, when after wandering up and down East Hastings looking for work, he instinctively jumps on a bus that wends its way through wealthier areas of town before arriving at "the rich greenery" of the peninsula (Good, *FLI* 172). He states: "I felt as though I had been holding my breath all this time and finally, in the sanctuary of the park, I could let go and breathe easy" (172). This scene, in which the natural setting of the park is set in sharp contrast with the hostile city as experienced by Howie in this moment, endows the park with sacred qualities ("sanctuary"), suggesting the possibility of spiritual and emotional restoration through contact with nature and anticipating the character's sense of renewal at the end of the story.

Additionally, against the image of a ghettoized area where Indigenous residents are controlled by patrolling police, their neighbourhood is

positioned as a place that offers kinship, solidarity, and mutual help. For example, the Downtown Eastside branch of a bank is the only location where Howie can cash the cheque he has been given upon his release from prison (169–70). The novel also reclaims urban land by depicting a neighbourhood in constant motion that is real, livable, and likeable. In this context, the mention of several of the area's historic culinary and commercial landmarks grounds the story in a very particular time and place and endows it with social and affective resonance. The characters shop at the now-shuttered Woodward's department store (93, 106), an icon of the once-flourishing economic life of that part of town and the heart of Vancouver's shopping scene during the first half of the twentieth century. They also meet in two popular historic cafes for inexpensive comfort food. Lucy's first breakfast in town is at the Two Jays Cafe, where "[a] buck and a half gets you two eggs, toast, hash browns and coffee" (55). Howie also heads to the Two Jays to calm his nerves after the tension at the bank and eat for the first time in two days; he immediately perceives the place as welcoming: "The bell sounded as I opened the door, but the proprietor and patrons were equally oblivious to me. I knew I'd found the right place" (170). For dinner, the characters favour the Only for the "[b]est soup ever" (53). Maisie observes that "[t]he spicy smells of Chinese food were still foreign to [her] even though [she and] Jimmy . . . came here at least once a week. It really was the best soup ever, and so cheap" (53). The now-vanished historic restaurant, one of the hot spots of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside in the 1970s, is the center of social life for the characters and fosters their sense of belonging:

> Lucy waited while Clara changed out of her smock, and the girls walked as they had so many times before through the broken heart of the city. The hookers and addicts and runaway teens, johns and predators scouting their prey, all roamed the core. The hotels had all gone to seed and were nothing more than flophouses rented by the hour and week for those who needed to be within staggering reach of the beer parlours on their main floors. The girls didn't give any of it a second thought; it was their neighbourhood, with dangers and comforts like any

> other. They slid into their regular booth at The Only, silently devouring their steaming fish soup. (107)[14]

The characters' interaction with the urban space they live in is both affective, through their weaving of personal relationships, and material, as expressed in the description of the decay of that part of the city and the mention of specific restaurants.

It is through the novel's description of the characters' comings and goings that the city is produced in movement and thus is claimed, transformed, and endowed with affective and agentive power. In depicting Vancouver this way, Good both evokes and departs from Simpson's ideas about the role of the urban in Indigenous resurgence:

> The beauty of culturally inherent resurgence is that it challenges settler colonial dissections of our territories and our bodies into reserve/city or rural/urban dichotomies. . . . Indigenous presence is attacked in all geographies. In reality, the majority of Indigenous peoples move regularly through reserves, cities, towns and rural areas. We have found ways to connect to the land and our stories and to live our intelligences no matter how urban or how destroyed our homelands have become. While it is critical that we grow and nurture a generation of people that can think within the land and have tremendous knowledge and connection to aki [the land], this doesn't have to take away from the contributions of urban Indigenous communities to our collective resurgence. Cities have become sites of tremendous activism and resistance, and artistic, cultural and linguistic revival and regeneration, and this too comes from the land. ("Land" 23)

As noted above, Simpson's focus is on Nishnaabeg thought and, regardless of her recognition of the contribution of urban communities to the process of the resurgence of Indigenous cultures, her proposal is mostly directed toward the achievement of that objective through land-based practices that come from and connect to the traditional Nishnaabeg territories (aki). I would argue that Good's view differs slightly from

this perspective. *Five Little Indians* inscribes deep relationality as a form of urban pedagogy and, in doing so, vindicates creative reinventions of kinship in urban contexts. The city is thus posited as a site of value and potential healing, providing a home for the forcibly unhomed. At the same time, it must be noted that the urban narrative is mostly anthropocentric and, with the exception of a few moments like Maisie's and Kenny's deaths, there seems to be no place for a spirituality that the characters have been deprived of and lost connection with. I argue above that the novel addresses that disconnect and spotlights the need to recover that spirituality through grounded urban practices like the ones described and analyzed in this section. In addition, Good explores the possibilities of reconnecting with Indigenous knowledges through a return to the land in a traditional sense of the word. In concluding this article, I examine the space of that possibility.

**V. Conclusion: Land/Groundedness**

How does *Five Little Indians* approach the prospect of Indigenous resurgence through a return to the land? Good is well aware of the irreversible effects of colonial uprootedness. Yet the question remains crucial in the novel, and it seems no coincidence that, despite its mostly urban setting and the characters' enforced estrangement from traditional ways of life, the novel starts and ends on rural land, away from the city. It is in rural settings that Clara, Howie, and their extended family of Kendra, Mariah, Lily (in spirit), and Clara's dogs, named John Lennon and Billie Holiday, practice a form of kinship that recalls Justice's "broad constituency" ("Rhetorics" 245). This form of kinship includes the idealized settings of the characters' childhoods with their respective mothers as well as Mariah's cabin and Howie's traditional land, both of them in Saskatchewan. To conclude, I will investigate the way the novel opens and closes in the two latter settings and highlights traditional practices that bring the characters together, connect them to the land, and create a sense of much needed groundedness.

Set in a future moment, the prologue takes place at Mariah's cabin in the bush, where Clara, Kendra, and Mariah have met for Lily's burial. This setting, which Clara visits several times throughout the novel, is

endowed with great spiritual significance and provides Clara the stage for her retrieval of Indigenous traditions and the possibility of healing through them. Crucial to this recovery is the character of Mariah, a Cree Elder who, having managed to dodge residential school, is a carrier of Indigeneity and facilitates Clara's grieving by providing Clara with traditional medicine, food, and ways of life in harmony with the land. Imbued with a sense of calm, this opening scene mentions traplines, the sweat lodge, the smudge bowl, and ceremonies. Mariah, Clara, and Kendra pray together to the rhythm of the drums (Mariah in Cree, the others in silence): "They opened their eyes, relaxed, an air of peace beautifying the simple cabin" (Good, *FLI* 2). The lulling effect of their prayers is disrupted only by the story of Clara's childhood friend Lily, whose remains are being buried and whose death at the Mission school is detailed later in the novel. But, even so, the moment is marked by the tranquility that comes with closure: "We found you, Lily," Clara says. "We finally got to go home. You and me both" (3). Resuming this sense of serenity, the novel's final chapter takes place in Saskatchewan, where Howie and Clara make their home and are surrounded by "defiant poplars dancing ever so slightly, the wind playing in the new spring leaves as though to say, *we see you, we are with you, dance on*" (292; emphasis in original). These words, evoking the setting of Clara's memories of her childhood with her mother, which were previously described in the novel (118), reinforce the importance of the natural setting in her process of healing. The dancing poplars are foregrounded as agents that help her retrieve a sense of spiritual reconnection and personal balance.

In "Land as Pedagogy," Simpson explains that Nishnaabeg knowledge stems from the spiritual realm. "This makes sense," she writes, "because this is the place where our ancestors reside, where spiritual beings exist, and where the spirits of living plants, animals and humans interact. In order to gain access to this knowledge, one has to align themselves within and with the forces of the implicate order through ceremony, ritual and the embodiment of the teachings one already carries" (10). In *Five Little Indians*, only Howie and Clara (and perhaps Kendra, gesturing to a brighter future for the new generations) regain access to that world, although perhaps only partially. Furthermore, that partial access

involves a painful process of unlearning and relearning. Clara travels a thorny path from her childhood memories through residential school and her life in the city before she approaches a similar sense of spiritual reconnection. The moments in the story that lead to her awakening are characterized by the production of kinship in its "broad constituency." The process starts when Clara is thrown into what the police refer to as the "drunk tank," to which she has been "escorted" by the patrolling police (116). Once there, she sees the apparition of an elderly woman with long gray braids who draws her attention to a small birch tree outside the jail's window and tells her that "[t]he power of Creation is everywhere. In the tree, in you, in all of them" (117). This magic moment marks a turning point in the story because it leads Clara to the Friendship Center, where she meets George and Vera, activists who introduce her to the AIM. Significantly, this change in Clara's life coincides with the introduction of John Lennon, Clara's warm, wonderful dog from whom she is inseparable and whose important role in her healing process Mariah is quick to recognize: "I can see the medicine between you," she tells Clara (192), suggesting the importance of establishing strong relations between human and nonhuman animals. Clara's long stay at Mariah's cabin in the bush, where she slowly and at first reluctantly learns how to walk back into a long forgotten Indigenous spirituality, provides her with a sense of groundedness that is produced through deep reciprocity between the two women, as well as between humans and non-human elements, including the land. The generosity of Mariah's relational practice is evident in her farewell words to Clara: "Remember, this is a place of healing. I am your family now and this place is yours forever. When things get tough, remember the medicine and never forget, you will always have your angels" (203).

Importantly, and further underpinning the role of creativity in the recuperation of a sense of belonging, the characters' paths to reconnecting with the land, both urban and rural, are made possible through the practice of telling each other about their lives. In his study of the practice of life-telling in Indigenous cultures, Métis author Warren Cariou asserts that "[f]or an Indigenous person, to tell one's story is to affirm, against the genocidal history of colonialism, 'We are still here'" (2). In

Clara's case, the process of physical and emotional healing gets under way when she overcomes her reluctance to talk and tells Mariah the story of Lily, which is also her own story (198). Shortly after, Mariah invites her to the sweat lodge. Good is careful not to disclose the details of this traditional purification ceremony but instead emphasizes Clara's radical transformation when she emerges from it:

> There are no English words to describe how one woman walked into that lodge and another walked out. All Clara knew was that it took her back. . . . Back to who she was before Sister Mary, before the school, before they tried to beat her into a little brown white girl. She felt a certainty, from then on, that all the ones who had come before walked with her. Life was no longer just survival. (Good, *FLI* 199)

In my reading of this crucial moment, the absence of a description of the ceremony that takes place inside the sweat lodge points beyond the limits of translation ("there are no English words"). It implicitly heeds Indigenous views that there must be "boundaries to some forms of knowledge" and it is essential to not replicate "colonialist privilege" by revealing ceremonial practices (Justice, *Why Indigenous* 25).[15] Clara's transformation is prompted by her life-telling, enacted through a spiritual ceremony, and described in terms of reconnecting with the trees ("back to the birch grove") and her community ("all the ones who had come before")—all of which align her changing perception with traditional Indigenous knowledges.[16] Her resulting sense of protective kinship equips her with the tools she needs to articulate her trauma and help others to do so as well.

Scholars such as Cariou and Reder argue that, in Indigenous traditions, the practice of life-telling is firmly predicated on truth and trust: the speaker is committed to veracity and the listener believes the speaker (Cariou; Reder, "Recuperating"). The novel demonstrates the restorative power of sharing life-stories and highlights this contract between speaker and listener, which undergirds Clara and Howie's telling binge. "Remind me to tell you about Mariah," Clara says after listening to Howie's sad and intense account of his life; Howie responds, "Tell

me now" (244). It is this telling that initially makes them avoid each other's eyes, "thinking of that place, the air heavy, the silence awkward" (227), and eventually brings them together and nurtures the possibility of their reconnection with the land. Howie claims the land by following his mother's planting pattern: he plants "rows of potatoes and corn, beans and squash in their own mounds, peas reaching for the sun as they crept up their supportive netting, carrots with their delicate green tops swaying in the prairie breeze" (274). Howie, the only one of the characters who identifies himself as Cree, often dreams of going back to his traditional land. He reveals that dreaming was like medicine for him when he was trapped in jail or lost in Vancouver. His grounded sense of identity endows him with the strength to testify in the collective lawsuit about residential schools. Fittingly, his return to the land prompts his brave decision to break his silence and engage in his ultimate act of life-telling, his public testimony in front of his lawyer and the decision-maker: "My name is Howard James Brocket and when I was five years old, my mother took me on the train to visit my auntie in BC. I was not able to come home until last year" (279).[17] The text implies that Howie's decision to share his personal story is cathartic and allows him to release his grief. Since his deposition is part of a collective lawsuit, the scene also hints at the value of life-telling as part of a collective healing process.

*Five Little Indians* draws readers' attention to the urgent need for and possibilities of social transformation; it spells out the struggles the characters experience because of colonial violence while simultaneously proposing creative modes of breaking through to healing for Indigenous communities. If, as scholars demonstrate, settler colonialism is predicated on the physical, social, and spiritual dislodging of Indigenous peoples from their lands, the novel's reconnection of Indigenous bodies to that land, both urban and rural, is an active practice of resistance and resurgence. In *Red Skin, White Masks*, Coulthard proposes the notion of "grounded normativity" to redefine Indigenous decolonial thought in land-based terms that draw on traditional Indigenous relations, values, and self-determined ways of life. "Grounded normativity" refers to a "place-based foundation of Indigenous decolonial thought and

practice," including "the modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time" (13). Echoing Coulthard's words, Good affirms the role of traditional collective practices in renewing land-based connections and recreating a sense of groundedness. But I claim that her story also has the capacity to transcend the immediate context of Indigeneity, resonating with Woodland Cree scholar Blake Charles' words that "[w]hile we may never go back to living in teepees, there are hidden teachings in traditional Cree origin stories, which are linked to sustainable thinking and being and that are beneficial to all humans regardless of culture and race" (28). While Good's focus in the last part of the novel is on the restorative possibilities of a return to the land, her proposal seems more expansive than that and includes, as I argue, the recreation of a sense of groundedness in the cities where many Indigenous communities live today. This echoes Simpson's claim that all land is Indigenous land ("Land" 23). Ultimately, *Five Little Indians* challenges the spatial dichotomies imposed by white settlers and reimagines Indigeneity beyond the trauma of colonial violence. In doing so, Good demonstrates the crucial role of Indigenous narratives in understanding contemporary crises and resignifying ordinary life.

**Acknowledgements**

The research carried out for the writing of this article has taken place within the framework of the research project "The Premise of Happiness: The Function of Feelings in North American Narratives" (PID2020–113190GB-C21), which is funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation. I wish to thank the participants of the II Narratives of Happiness and Resilience International Research Workshop, which took place at McMaster University in June 2023, especially Daniel Coleman and Susie O'Brien for their hospitality and valuable feedback.

**Notes**

1 *Five Little Indians* was a National Bestseller and the CBC Best Book of the Year in 2021; it also won the 2021 Governor General's Award for English-language fiction, the City of Vancouver Book Award, and the 2022 edition of Canada Reads.

2 Although the Final Report was published in 2015, the implementation of the Commission's results has been sluggish. For a discussion of the process of implementation of the TRC Calls to Action, see pp. 33–56 of Good's *Truth Telling*.

3 In a public apology issued soon after the discovery of unmarked graves near the former Marieval Indian Residential School in Saskatchewan in June 2021, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau recognized that "these findings only deepen the pain that families, survivors, and all Indigenous peoples and communities are already feeling, and that they reaffirm a truth that they have long known" (qtd. in MacDonald). Trudeau added: "The hurt and the trauma that you feel is Canada's responsibility to bear, and the government will continue to provide Indigenous communities across the country with the funding and resources they need to bring these terrible wrongs to light. While we cannot bring back those who were lost, we can—and we will—tell the truth of these injustices, and we will forever honour their memory" (qtd. in MacDonald). See Luo for a timeline of the discovery of unmarked graves up to September 2022. For a fuller, updated picture, see the University of British Columbia's *Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre* website.

4 For a similar approach to the need for truth telling, see Maracle 133–68. For the role of non-Indigenous Canadians in this process of reconciliation, see Regan 54–82.

5 Many other reviews of the novel make this point. See, for instance, Kaye and van Koeverden.

6 I approach Good's novel from my position as a non-Indigenous, non-Canadian scholar. I have lived in Canada and continue to do research in Canadian universities. My interest in the literatures coming from this country started when Indigenous literatures were a very small part of the field and before they "broke up" with Can Lit (Whitehead 191). I strive to be careful with, attentive to, and respectful of ideas, histories, and cultures that are very different from mine but with which I am involved as a European subject and a settler of the Canary Islands, where I was born and still live and work. This settler history leads me to feel a part of Good's intended readership. Good set out to "demonstrate the tremendous psychological burden that [residential school children] carried with them when they left the schools, and how that continued to impact their lives [and] the lives of their families as well" ("These Characters" 1:22–1:41). Bound by the constraints of my reading position, I feel compelled to pay attention to these fictional lives, to learn from and interact with these words.

7 For an illuminating discussion of Simpson's approach to empathy in the context of decolonial agency and Indigenous resurgence, see Martín-Lucas.

8 As the explicit targets of colonial violence, Good's characters are subjected to what, in their feminist critique of capitalism, Berlant calls a "slow death," or "the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a

defining condition of its experience and historical existence" (95). According to Berlant, the targeted subjects endure "collective physical and psychic attenuation from the effects of global/national regimes of capitalist structural subordination and governmentality" (95). While the novel is unmistakably site-specific, Berlant's approach opens the text to global connections. This type of analysis, however, is beyond the scope of this article.

9 Founded in Minneapolis in 1968 to improve the situation of urban Indigenous people, the American Indian Movement (AIM) soon decided to fight for the rights and against the dispossession of Indigenous communities across North America. One of the most prominent leaders of the Indigenous Movement in Canada was George Manuel (1920–89), whom the character of George in *Five Little Indians* may be partly inspired by. See McFarlane and Manuel (2020 edition) for Manuel's fascinating biography of AIM, including the role of women in the movement.

10 It is possible that the song was adapted from "Ten Little N———," a popular piece performed in late-nineteenth-century blackface minstrel shows. Christie borrowed the title for her 1939 story about ten murders on a remote island, which was changed to the last line of the rhyme, *And Then There Were None*, for the American edition and 1965 film adaptation. Alexie's 2004 collection of short stories of that name offers an ironic take on the song's racist frame. To read the entirety of the lyrics, see pp. 333–34 of Opie and Opie.

11 Although highly relevant in this context, an examination of the relationship between settler colonialism and Indigeneity vis-à-vis what Ahmed calls the "happiness scripts" is beyond the scope of this article. In 1999, Vizenor coined the term "survivance" to highlight the creativity of Indigenous cultures beyond the unhappy scripts allotted to them by settler colonialism. See Horáková for an insightful analysis of urban Indigeneity and the figure of the "unhappy Indian" in Tommy Orange's *There There.*

12 Founded in 1954, the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre Society continues to provide social and cultural services to the Vancouver Indigenous community (see *Vancouver Aboriginal*).

13 The road workers dug up an important shell midden close to the village of Whoi whoi (X̲wáýx̲way), which, unaware of its archeological value, they re-used to pave the road. There is evidence that this village had been used as a seasonal residence by Coast Salish peoples for thousands of years. The workers also paved under an ancient burial ground. Along with the Indigenous presence, there were labourers, mostly Chinese and Portuguese, who had made their home in the park in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The eviction process lasted until the 1930s, when the Park Board won the last of a series of legal cases against park residents (see Barman for a history of this site). Today, and mostly as a result of the TRC Calls to Action, the park is trying to decolonize this history and resignify the site (Johnston).

14 The Two Jays Cafe used to occupy the lower level of the Arco Hotel building, a landmark heritage building on the border between Chinatown and the Downtown Eastside. The Only, which was demolished in 2021 to make room for the gentrification of the area, was located at 20 East Hastings Street. The legendary seafood restaurant was a hot spot "where you could find the downtrodden dining beside the well-to-do, chowing down on clam chowder, Alaska cod and salmon fried in the house specialty, lemon butter" (MacKie). According to Campbell, the novel captures "the feel" of Vancouver during those decades: "It's a proprioceptive sense, a sense of being located in a certain place, that lingers with everyone no matter what they are up to."

15 For further discussions on the safekeeping of Indigenous knowledge and the question of limiting access to Indigenous rituals and ceremonies, see Charles 29–30 and Battiste and Henderson 9–17.

16 According to Waegemakers and Pelech's preliminary study of the healing power of the sweat lodge ceremony, "[o]f the many Indigenous ceremonies that have a spiritual component, few are as immediate and powerful in restoring a balance of spiritual, emotional, mental and physical well-being as the sweat lodge" (71).

17 Howie's testimony would have been part of the legal campaigns started in the 1980s by thousands of residential school survivors for recognition and compensation, which resulted in the largest class action settlement in Canadian history to date. In the novel, Howie is surprised that the hearing takes place in a hotel (Good, *FLI* 279), which indicates he is going through the Alternative Dispute Resolution, an out-of-court process accepted in 2003 to determine compensation (for further details about this real-life process, see de Bruin).

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