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Re-storying trauma through decolonial care in Tracey Lindberg's *Birdie*

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ABSTRACT
Tracey Lindberg's *Birdie* (2015) tells the story of Bernice Meetoos, a Cree woman with a troubled past, who undertakes a healing dream journey in which she revisits experiences of abandonment and abuse rooted in intergenerational trauma caused by colonialism. In this paper, I suggest that Lindberg's text reclaims care as a decolonial praxis that generates Indigenous resurgence. Situating care ethics within decolonial and Indigenous relational frameworks, I posit that the forms of care represented in the novel enact re-embodiment, reconfigure kinscapes, and tether personal healing to collective well-being and ecological responsibility. Drawing on Eva Jewell, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, and Glen Sean Coulthard, the article shows how Birdie aligns care with the regeneration of traditional knowledge and the refusal of heteropatriarchal-capitalist logics. Ultimately, *Birdie* models resilience as an adaptive, land-based capacity sustained through ceremony and reciprocity, demonstrating that decolonial care foregrounds Indigenous resurgence.

KEYWORDS: Colonial trauma, ethics of care; gender, healing, Indigenous literature, Indigenous resurgence, resilience, Tracey Lindberg, *Birdie*

1. INTRODUCTION

The origins and history of the field known as *Ethics of Care* are profoundly gendered. During the 1970s and 80s, Carol Gilligan revolutionized the field of moral development by exposing the gendered assumptions embedded in the standard for moral maturity, which considered a developed sense of justice to be its pinnacle. She proposed an alternative moral framework that was grounded instead in care, responsibility and relationality (Larrabee, 1993, p. 3). Gilligan's *In a different voice* (1982) is widely considered as the foundational work of care ethics, yet it has also faced substantial criticism for advancing what many see as an essentialist vision of gender that "reifies femininity" (Heyes, 1997, p.143). By attributing to women an inherent preoccupation with care, Gilligan's framework risks justifying their confinement to domestic and private spheres. These critiques, however, have generated productive debates. Marilyn

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Friedman, for instance, highlights how the binary opposition between "an ethics of care" and "an ethics of justice" (1997, p. 260) implicitly severs the link between private, emotion-laden practices of care and broader questions of collective and global justice (1997, p. 267). Building on such interventions, contemporary ethics of care has evolved towards a more politically engaged orientation. It emphasizes relationality and interdependence while also insisting on care's political and global significance, thereby challenging the entrenched private/public divide that has historically relegated care work to the domestic sphere and undervalued its broader societal impact (Tronto, 1993, p. 175).

An ethics of care that, as Virginia Held theorizes, is simultaneously an ethics of global justice (Held, 2006, p. 17–18), is such because it recognizes "the inevitability of dependence and interdependence" (Whyte & Cuomo, 2017, p. 234) across political borders. It challenges the individualist imaginaries of liberal justice that rely on abstract equality by foregrounding the asymmetries of power and vulnerability produced by colonial histories, global capitalism, and neoliberal governance (Held, 2006, p. 165). It is here that care ethics intersects with decolonial thought: in its refusal of abstract universals and its insistence on relationality and situated responsibility. Indeed, many Indigenous epistemologies share tenets such as connectedness across species and responsibility for one another and the environment (Boulton & Brannelly, 2020, p. 70) that are central to the formulation of Western ethics of care. However, the application of a Western feminist model of care to Indigenous contexts risks erasing Indigenous epistemologies that already privilege relationality as a core value. As Lauren Tynan further elaborates, Indigenous relationality is not a metaphor for solidarity, nor is it merely a method; it is ontological: "(r)elationships do not merely shape reality, they are reality" (2021, p. 4). Within such a framework, care is inseparable from land, kinship, and time. This orientation profoundly reconfigures both the ethical subject and the structure of justice. Rather than originating from the individual and extending outward, as is often the case in Western liberal models, responsibility in Indigenous frameworks arises from embeddedness "in familial, social, and historical contexts" (Held, 2006, p. 15). As Boulton and Brannelly explain, "the moral boundaries of care and politics are intertwined rather than divorced into separate spheres" (2020, p. 70). An ethics of care that fairly engages with Indigenous epistemologies must then, necessarily, actively consider decoloniality as central: a dismantling of the structures of *coloniality/modernity* (Walsh and Mignolo, 2018, p. 4) that privilege resource exploitation and individual autonomy over relational interdependence, land-based knowledge, and collective well-being. This requires an epistemic shift: from viewing care as a personal or domestic responsibility to recognizing it as a culturally embedded, socially structured, and spiritually grounded practice. Care, in this context, is not a supplement to justice, but its foundation: a mode of responsibility that becomes a decolonial praxis and a mode of resurgence.

In *Birdie* (2015), As'in'i'wa'chi Ni'yaw Nation Rocky Mountain Cree author Tracey Lindberg depicts such care as a path towards decoloniality. The novel tells the story of Bernice Meetoos, a Cree woman with a troubled past, who undertakes a healing dream journey in which her dream-self revisits experiences of abandonment and abuse rooted in intergenerational trauma caused by colonialism. Guided by her *kohkom* (grandmother) and supported by her Auntie Valene, her cousin, Freda, and her white boss, Lola, Bernice spends days asleep. During her sleep, she revisits the wounds of her past, while reweaving ties to family, land, and Cree traditions. Her healing journey culminates in a ceremony of communal care enacted around the *Pimatisewin*[i] tree of life, where food, story, and ceremony converge to restore balance.

This article suggests that Lindberg's text conceptualizes trauma as a dissociation of body and spirit and a fragmentation of community, dramatizing how patriarchal structures, sexual abuse, and stereotyped visions of indigeneity compound the harms of colonization. Additionally, it foregrounds how Lindberg moves the cast of female characters from traumatic

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victimhood into resurgence through a notion of care that is gendered and sensuous, profoundly attached to spiritual and bodily nourishment, and intimately linked to communal caregiving and kin-making. Bernice's healing is presented as a re-embodiment of the self and re-configuration of kinscapes[ii] through acts of care that appear geared towards decoloniality, thus positioning Bernice's personal healing as inseparable from the healing of the wider Indigenous community.

2. COLONIAL VIOLENCE AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF INDIGENOUS WOMANHOOD

The consequences of colonialism upon Indigenous populations have been profoundly destructive at the level of both individual and communal subjectivities. The ongoing violent dispossession of lands, erasure of cultural practices, systematic undermining of traditional governance structures, and exploitation of natural resources have materially impacted Indigenous communities all over the world, even after the processes of legal decolonization that took place during the 20th century[iii]. However, as Daniel Heath-Justice explains, colonialism operates not only at the level of "the displacement of our physical presence" but also "on the symbolic diminishment of Indigenous peoples" (2018, p. xix). Indeed, Kate Walsh and Walter Mignolo explain how the colonial matrix of power (cmp) that emerged with European colonial expansion and continues to organize modern life manifests as an interlocking system "of controls—of economy, authority, gender and sexuality, knowledge and subjectivity—" that sustains coloniality long after formal colonialism ended (2018, p. 3). Under the enduring and multidimensional effects of the cmp, "Western epistemology has trickled down framing subjectivities, education, ways of eating, health, and destroyed conviviality" (Walsh & Mignolo, 2018, p. 108). Thus, the symbolic dimension of colonial violence includes the dehumanization and denigration of Indigenous identities and epistemologies, family structures, and gender roles, resulting in profound spiritual and emotional suffering.

Beyond the continued legal and material oppression, as Stef Craps underscores, trauma theory has frequently reproduced these very colonial dynamics, by privileging Western experiences of violence while ignoring or appropriating non-Western ones, thereby reinforcing hierarchies of whose suffering counts. This epistemic erasure devalues the consequences of colonial trauma, casting them as secondary to the traumas of modernity such as the Holocaust or 9/11, and thus perpetuates what he terms the marginalization of "non-Western and minority traumas" (Craps, 2013, p. 2). In the context of Indigenous communities, this dismissal compounds what Eduardo Durán describes as the "soul wound" of colonialism (2006, p. 16), a transgenerational psychic injury that manifests as disconnection, despair, and violence "rarely against the settler but against oneself, one's family, or one's community, and addiction as a form of self-medicating to temporarily ease the despair of personal and political powerlessness" (Episkenew 2009, p. 8). Within this framework of collective injury, Indigenous women and girls experience a heightened vulnerability, as colonial violence intersects with the imposition of both Western patriarchal ideologies and Christian values that enforce gender hierarchies and diminish women's traditional roles. The statistics are staggering: Indigenous women are three times more likely than non-Indigenous women to experience violence and sexual assault (Brennan, 2011). These intersecting forms of material, symbolic, and gendered violence reveal the ongoing harm colonialism inflicts upon Indigenous women and girls, specifically targeting their bodies, identities, and relational roles within their families and communities.

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Tracey Lindberg addresses this terrible situation in the preface to *Birdie*, which she dedicates "(t)o all the mothers and little mothers, sisters and cousins who are murdered, missing, disappeared or who feel invisible", in recognition of the ongoing impacts of colonialism upon Indigenous women. The following words, "We are one. We are with you. We are family" affirm interdependence, relationality, and kinship as the foundation of community resilience and healing, establishing shared vulnerability as a source of empowerment. This relational perspective underscores that trauma and healing are never purely individual experiences; they are community concerns, interconnected with larger cultural, social, and environmental contexts. The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG2S+), launched by the Canadian government in 2017, emphasizes that "violence against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people is not an individual problem, or an issue only for certain communities. This violence is rooted in systemic factors, like economic, social and political marginalization, as well as racism, discrimination, and misogyny, woven into the fabric of Canadian society" (2019, p. 56). Bernice Meetoos's journey in *Birdie* embodies this interconnection between individual trauma, its systemic context, and communal recovery: although the story closely follows Bernice's traumatic experiences from childhood (most notably, the sexual abuse she suffers at the hands of her uncle, Larry), her mature perspective as an adult allows her to acknowledge that such violence was tragically common, shared by many women in her family and community.

Growing up in Loon Lake, Bernice witnesses how colonialism and patriarchal violence manifest in the everyday lives of her mother, Maggie, her auntie, Val, and her cousin-sister, Freda, often through the absence or failure of male relatives. Sexual abuse and gender-based violence lies at the core of Bernice's trauma, and Lindberg refuses to veil its brutality. In the first pages of the novel, when faced with the fascination that her white boss Lola has towards Indigenous people, Bernice wonders "how fascinated she'd be if she knew that I'd been fucked before I was eleven" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 9). Lola's fascination with Indigeneity exemplifies Stef Craps's theories about the lack of acknowledgement of colonial and racialized violence, which is often overlooked or reframed through dominant lenses. This recalls Judith Butler's formulation of grievability, which asks whose lives (and by extension, whose traumas) are recognized as worthy of public mourning and recognition. As Butler explains, "those whose lives are not 'regarded' as potentially grievable, and hence valuable, are made to bear the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and differential exposure to violence and death" (2009, p. 25). However, Lindberg's narrative refuses to allow such harm to be read as natural or inevitable. Instead, she situates Bernice's trauma within a communal pattern of gendered violence experienced not only by Bernice, but also by the rest of the women in the community: "Having seen all of their fathers and husbands walk out the door (with booze or a brunette in hand), each woman understood most completely the nature of women's interconnectedness . . . There was some sort of over-responsibility that weighed on each one of them, as if carrying the load that the men had dropped cost them posture and emotional affluence that could not yet be counted" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 30). Thus, Lindberg conceptualizes systemic gendered trauma not only as a source of vulnerability, but also as a potential site of recovery, by emphasizing the sense of interconnectedness that emanates from a shared experience.

Lindberg's exploration of colonial trauma and recovery appears to be profoundly gendered, perhaps as an extension of the dynamics imposed by the colonial matrix of power, within which Walsh and Mignolo identify sexism as a central pillar (2018, p. 153). Lindberg situates Bernice's suffering not only in the direct harm of sexual abuse, but within a broader communal pattern of patriarchal disruption, where Eurocentric ideals of male dominance and female subservience were imposed while Indigenous men were stripped of their traditional roles as protectors, providers, and knowledge holders. As Brendan Hokowhitu observes,

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"Indigenous masculine formations" were reduced by colonial powers to caricatured archetypes of "patriarchal, backward, senseless, anti-change" (as cited in McKegney, 2014, p. 99), foreclosing relational and caring forms of manhood. Sam McKegney similarly notes how Indigenous men have long been confined to colonial tropes ranging from the noble savage to the violent brute (2014, p. 5), images that pathologize Indigenous male identity while erasing its relational foundations. Against these reductive constructions, McKegney reminds us that Indigenous masculinities are traditionally "rooted in reciprocity" (2014, p. 17) and conceived "relationally—not through dominance, but through responsibility to family, community, and land" (2014, p. 7). Lindberg dramatizes this tension by contrasting the violence and absence of the men in Bernice's family—"In her community, the men went away" (2015, p. 30)—with Bernice's idealization of Jesse, the "healthy, working, Indian man" (2015, p. 7) from *The Beachcombers*[v]. A life-long obsession of Bernice's, and the reason behind her move to Gibsons in British Columbia, "where TV Jesse worked" (2015, p. 9), Jesse functions as an alternative horizon of Indigenous masculinity, grounded in care, steadiness, and relational responsibility. Described as "a really nice guy. Like, getting his family parts on *The Beachcombers* whenever there was a need for more Indians" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 7), Jesse stands in sharp contrast to Bernice's uncles and the colonial scripts of Indigenous masculinity that Bernice has grown up with, enabling Bernice to imagine the possibility of restoring balance to herself and her community. By choosing to move to Gibsons, a step that takes her symbolically closer to Jesse and the version of relational responsibility he embodies, Bernice reorients her path away from isolation and towards healing and regeneration.

Once in Gibsons, Bernice seems to have reached a safe enough harbor where her complicated relationship with her own embodiment can be explored. The body/mind split that becomes central to the novel is a source of ambivalence: on the one hand, a dissociation from the body is a studied consequence of sexual trauma (Scheffers et al., 2017; Malkemus & Smith, 2021), and Lindberg explores Bernice's fraught relationship with her own embodiment as a symptom of both individual abuse and the wider colonial context that enables it. On the other hand, Bernice's absences from herself allow her to fulfil a dream quest that not only sees her come to terms with her own wounds, but also empowers her to trigger the healing of her community through traditional knowledge. Despite this, it is undeniable that Bernice's psychic and bodily fragmentation cannot be separated from the legacy of colonial violence. Bernice is harmed by relatives who themselves carry the weight of cultural and historical wounds, and her abuse emerges from cycles of intergenerational trauma within kinship networks fractured by colonization. Lindberg captures this ambivalent inheritance when she describes Bernice's home as "the place where she learned to love and the place where she learned fear . . . Where her youth mixed with her experience in a strange alchemy, leaving her self split like oil and vinegar" (2015, p. 233). The split between body and spirit is thus not only personal but cultural: a manifestation of colonial dislocation that entangles love with harm.

Bernice's dissociation between body and spirit is rendered as a colonial wound that is at once psychic and material. Read through Frantz Fanon and Glen Sean Coulthard together, the text makes visible how externally imposed identities fracture embodiment while contemporary politics of recognition re-entrench that fracture. Fanon describes the split of consciousness produced when the colonized are forced to inhabit the colonizer's gaze, manifested by an epidermal schema that alienates one from one's own body (Fanon, 2008, p. 84, pp. 150–53), while Coulthard adapts this theory to settler colonial Canada, arguing that forms of recognition frequently compel Indigenous peoples to accept worth on the state's terms, reproducing dispossession at the level of subjectivity (2014). Lindberg stages this dynamic precisely at the point where Bernice learns to "absent her body" after sexual violence

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(2015, p. 8), using dissociation as a survival strategy but accelerating her sense of fragmentation. This internal withdrawal intensifies during adolescence, when "she first began to feel the dissonance between her active life and her inner life" (2015, p. 75), marking the beginnings of a deep rift between her body and her sense of identity that is aggravated in school, through the gaze of white Canada. As a teenager, Bernice is taken to a "religious all-white girls' school" (2015, p. 64) in the city, where the nuns repeatedly seek to assimilate her into their vision of white, Christian femininity, evoking the years of colonial oppression caused by the Residential School System in Canada[v]. At one time, she is ordered to remove the medicine pouch she carries with her –"'Take that bag off!' Sister had ordered" (2015, p. 81)—exemplifying the epistemic erasure under assimilationist policy that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission unveiled. This moment mirrors the psychic fracture described by Fanon and echoes Coulthard's critique of recognition: Bernice's worth and identity are continually measured against externally imposed standards that estrange her from her own body and culture.

Thus, Bernice's body becomes a site of alienation: as a "chubby fine-boned Halfbreed girl" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 79), she faces rejection both from her own people and from white society, for failing to embody digestible stereotypes of Indigenous womanhood. The triggers for Bernice's fragmentation mirror Fanon's epidermal schema, a fracture originated by the colonizer's gaze, which is compounded by her sexual trauma and externalized in her body. Her observation that "no one like the fat Indian women. Well, the men sure did, but no one wants to put them on postcards and imprints to send back home. Maybe fat was not noble enough" (2015, p. 19) reflects Fanon's claim that colonized subjects are reduced to distorted, externally defined images that fracture their sense of self. Lindberg exposes here the colonial fantasy of the "noble savage", a commodified "postcard Indian" that conforms to settler expectations of stoicism, harmony, and beauty, while erasing the lived realities of Indigenous women marked by trauma, poverty, and resistance. As Dawn Martin-Hill argues, such stereotypes are "a construction born from the tapestry of our colonial landscape" (2003, p. 108), establishing hierarchies of representability that render invisible those bodies that bear the visible scars of violence. The daughter of a Hispanic man and her Cree mother, Bernice does not fit "the old pictures she has seen of Indian women in historical books and anthropological texts . . . dark, unsmiling and with two black braids, long and thick and hanging down her back (2015, p. 22).

Bernice's body, then, becomes both excluded and resistant: a living testimony to colonial harm and a refusal of the stereotypes that seek to erase her. Her detachment is further compounded by silence, shame, and the absence of sexual education: Lindberg notes that she "had no body knowledge" (2015, p. 75), and describes how the secrecy around abuse seeped into the household "like some sort of bad medicine—it made Freda skinny, Bernice fat, and Maggie disappear" (2015, p. 62). Bernice's compulsive eating after the sexual abuse she has suffered transforms her body into something unrecognizable, "like she had put on the suit of an artist's caricature of Bernice—blown up and expanded" (p. 217). In this sense, her fatness functions as what Fanon would recognize as embodied trauma: a corporeal manifestation of psychic fracture, simultaneously acting as a protective shield against further harm and a visible sign of alienation. Yet it also resists colonial scripts by refusing to conform to settler constructions of Indigenous womanhood. Read through Coulthard, Bernice's eventual journey toward re-embodiment through kinship, ceremony, and cultural resurgence can be seen as a movement toward self-recognition, a refusal of externally defined identities in favor of the relational practices that enable decolonial futures.

The accumulation of colonial oppression in the form of discrimination, material dispossession, sexual violence, and intergenerational trauma culminates in Bernice's physical and spiritual collapse. After living on the streets and being interned in a sanatorium, Bernice is increasingly "desensitized and disassociated with herself" (2015, p. 102). After her move to

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Gibsons, her "sinking" episodes—moments in which she dissociates from her physical body—become almost uncontrollable. However, they acquire an ambivalence that signals their function beyond a trauma response: an ability similarly shared with her *kohkom* to exist in the spiritual plane that will give her the possibility to re-story her experiences and heal from trauma. "Taking to her bed ('Her sickbed') was as easy as, or even easier than, breathing. Her un/conscious decision was one her spirit made. When it was time, and when the fury of her past began to race ahead of her future, she simply lay down" (2015, p. 18). In a little flat above Lola's bakery, where she works, Bernice sleeps for days without food or movement of any kind: the disregard for the material maintenance of her body shrouds the experience with the appearance of an ultimatum: either she will heal from her past trauma through her dream journey, or she will not survive. In this suspended state between life and death, Bernice's dream journey becomes the condition for transformation, where care is reconfigured not as mere survival but as the groundwork for resurgence, enabling her to return to her body and her community with renewed capacity to heal and nurture others.

3. DECOLONIAL CARE: RELATIONALITY, NOURISHMENT, RESURGENCE

As explained by Eva Jewell, Anishinaabekwe from Deshkan Ziibiing (Chippewas of the Thames First Nation), care has long operated as a colonial mechanism through which domination has been justified in the name of protection, benevolence, and improvement (2024, p. 176). Settler colonial logics render care as a paternalistic endeavor and its recipients as passive subjects devoid of agency. Under the regime of colonial care that set up many policies apparently centered on welfare –such as the Residential School System or the removal of Indigenous children from their families– care "is the site where we as Indigenous Peoples experience the violent denial to our intergenerational kin responsibilities. In care, we are bereft of the embodiments our ancestors ensured for us . . . [O]ur selves—when cleared of our ability to care for, receive and transmit our distinct knowledges, orders, languages, systems, sciences, technologies, and kinships—become empty vessels to be malleated" (2024, p. 169). Jewell responds directly to the early figurations of feminist care ethics, arguing that "unless it's actively and attentively anti-colonial, it is at the expense of the worlds that pre-exist and exceed this one" (2024, p. 169). I argue that the forms of care enacted in *Birdie* function as decolonial strategies: by grounding healing in relationality, nourishment, and kin-making, they restore fractured relationships and empower resurgence rather than reproducing dependency, reclaiming care from its paternalistic colonial history and reorienting it toward the resurgence of Cree cultural values. The forms of care that sustain Bernice and those which she performs, such as communal vigil, storytelling, food preparation, and the symbolic nurturing of *Pimatisewin*, the tree of life, do not position her as a passive recipient but empower her to re-embody herself and extend care to her community. Lindberg thereby demonstrates that care is not merely an affective disposition but a material, relational, and world-rebuilding force that resists colonial logics of dispossession and restores Indigenous ways of being and belonging.

Jewell further notes that care is inseparable from the project of world reproduction: it is "the site wherein culture is produced and reproduced in new generations, informing and reinforcing social norms" (2024, p. 182). When care is redirected away from colonial logic and toward Indigenous practices, it becomes a generative force for resurgence and decolonization, reproducing "our futurities as peoples with distinct, longstanding, and pre-existing relationality with our lands" (Jewell, 2024, p. 184). In Birdie, this decolonial reframing of care grounds Bernice's recovery in practices that extend beyond affect into the physical reproduction of Cree relational worlds. This vision resonates with thinkers like Coulthard, Mohawk political

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scientist Taiaiake Alfred, and Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who insist that resurgence must be grounded in the regeneration of those relationships that colonialism has attempted to destroy and emphasize that Indigenous freedom emerges from the revitalization of relational responsibilities beyond the nation-state, rather than accommodation with colonial power (Coulthard, 2014, p. 154; Simpson, 2017, p. 34).

Building on this framework, *Birdie* dramatizes how decolonial practices of care unfold through Bernice's healing journey. Her recovery is mediated through *pawatamowin*, dream-states that allow her to revisit and reconfigure the most painful experiences of her past, seeking "the space where her memory could live peaceably with her body" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 232). These dream sequences are not presented as unconscious escapes but as spiritual journeys with epistemological significance, consistent with Cree understandings of dreams as sources of knowledge and guidance. Within them, Bernice is visited by her *kohkom* and accompanied by the voices of the *iskwewak*, Cree women who whispered instructions for survival when she faced dangerous situations throughout her life. The novel alternates between the *pawatamowin* (dream sequences) and *acimowin* (storytelling episodes) at the beginning and end of each chapter. The *pawatamowin* offer fragmented, symbolic visions rooted in Bernice's subconscious and spiritual journey, while the *acimowin* transform her traumatic experiences into pedagogical oral narratives using animal characters drawn from traditional Indigenous storytelling. Bernice is often represented as a small owl (her "birdself"), while her uncle Larry is rendered as a predatory wolf. These stories narrate the little owl's gradual transformation, describing its speed and the power of her beak, and using humor and wit to reframe Bernice's suffering not as a static wound, but as the source of insight and strength for future generations, hinting at the interruption of chains of intergenerational trauma. This use of animal figures as spiritual and pedagogical guides is consistent with Indigenous epistemologies. As Umeek (Richard Atleo, Nuu-chah-nulth of Ahousaht First Nation) explains, animals are not separate from humans in spirit form, and their presence in traditional stories reflects a deep relational ontology in which animals are both kin and teachers. The symbolic interplay between animal and human figures allows these stories to transmit spiritual-traditional knowledge in accessible, living forms (Fitznor, 2012, p. 274).

The culmination of this process occurs in her ceremonial "reverse rebirth" in a sweat lodge, where Bernice is physically and spiritually reintegrated: "She squeezed herself in to the depth of her armpits, the ring of the doorway cutting into her like a too-tight casing on a sausage. Womanly hands grab her, smooth her belly with lambda olive oil and she is pulled into the lodge like a reverse birth" (2015, p. 231). This moment collapses linear models of healing and enacts an embodied renewal grounded in Cree ceremonial knowledge. By re-storying her trauma within a collective and culturally resonant framework, Bernice is not returned to a pre-traumatized self but re-embodied within relational networks of care. The passage underscores ceremony and traditional practices as the key to personal and communal healing while dramatizing how Indigenous epistemologies can transform pain into the groundwork for resurgence.

Understood as a form of colonial opposition, the concept of Indigenous resurgence decenters settler oppression and focuses on the revitalization of Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and relating. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains, radical indigenous resurgence is predicated on the generative refusal of "colonialism and its current settler colonial structural manifestation" (2017, p. 34). It calls for the creation of networks of organizing and activism that resist heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy, along with their structures of dispossession, while working to build Indigenous alternatives (2017, p. 35). In *Birdie*, Lindberg's depiction of resurgence profoundly resonates with Simpson's, foregrounding the restoration of relational accountability and the reassertion of Indigenous

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kinship as foundational acts of resistance. As Bernice gradually recovers, she feels an expanding sense of "obligation. To the past. To the *Pimatisewin*" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 213). This emerging sense of responsibility directly opposes colonial narratives of Indigenous deficiency and pathology –what Daniel Heath-Justice describes as internalized "stories of Indigenous lack" (2018, p. 2, p. 4). Through this reorientation, responsibility becomes an act of personal and collective agency that empowers the community to address intergenerational trauma, mend relational ruptures, and reaffirm cultural and political sovereignty.

This enactment of resurgence through relational practices is encapsulated by the concept of "rekinning", the active restoration and reweaving of kinship and communal bonds fractured by settler colonialism. Within the narrative, Bernice explicitly engages in acts of kin-making, defining and expanding her family relationships beyond colonial notions of the nuclear family. Freda is affectionately referred to as her "sistercousin" (2015, p. 23), while her aunt, Valene, is lovingly named "little mother" or "kee kuh wee sis" (2015, p. 38). Together, they constitute a "womenfamily" (2015, p. 245), an intergenerational network of care that includes Bernice's mother Maggie and her *kohkom*, who holds a critical role as the keeper of spiritual teachings and traditional knowledge. In coming together to care for Bernice, the "womenfamily" –who also integrates Bernice's white boss Lola– enacts the "rebellion of love, persistence, commitment, and profound caring" (Simpson, 2017, p. 10) necessary for Indigenous survival. Lindberg's portrayal of this expansive family structure aligns with what Lee Maracle has called the "re-matriating" of family and society, a process that involves more than dismantling patriarchal hierarchies and, according to Maracle, requires de-centering the Enlightenment values of modern rationality and objectivity and replacing hierarchical systems with relational ones based on kinship and balance (Fiola, 2017, p. 165). This vision disrupts the heteropatriarchal nuclear family model imposed through colonization and opens possibilities for resurgent, land-based models of Indigenous kinship. In *Birdie*, these re-matriated kinship forms are not abstract ideals but embodied, lived relationships that serve as the foundation for Bernice's healing and for the resurgence of community life.

The move from individual harm to collective healing is also achieved in Birdie through the *Pimatisewin* tree, which functions as a central metaphor for collective healing, cultural resurgence, and environmental responsibility. Representing the Cree concept of *pimatisewin*, loosely translated as "the good life", the tree appears in the novel as a living entity whose decline mirrors the damage inflicted by colonialism on Indigenous communities. There are four such ancestral trees in the novel: "two in North America and two in South America" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 24). The tree near Bernice's childhood home in Loon Lake is described as "in sad shape" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 24), while the other in British Columbia, near Gibsons, becomes the focal point of Bernice's healing retreat. The endangered condition of these trees reflects the broader deterioration of cultural, relational, and environmental balance caused by colonialism, capitalism, and environmental degradation. Therefore, their recovery is framed not as an individual task but as a collective, ceremonial, and community-driven process that underscores the interdependence of people and land, centering Indigenous resurgence as an indispensable condition for recovery from the wounds of colonialism.

Lindberg directly entwines the material and spiritual survival of the *Pimatisewin* tree with the wellbeing of those who care for it. In the novel, environmentalists, local councils, and members of Bernice's extended community all participate in efforts to revive the trees, demonstrating that Indigenous resurgence depends on reciprocal care and collaboration "between humans, the land and the more-than-human world" (Barker & Battell Lowman, 2024, p. 351). The tree's physical state is inseparable from the spiritual and cultural health of its human kin: while its decay signals the erosion of Indigenous communities around the world,

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its revitalization, in turn, requires the reactivation of Indigenous ethical frameworks centered on responsibility, kinship, and memory. Bernice's recurring visions of the *Pimatisewin* tree, often guided by the figure of the Frugal Gourmet, the host of a popular cooking show, link her own healing to its renewal. When Lola, Auntie Val, and Skinny Freda gather ingredients from Bernice's dream-lists to prepare a ceremonial feast, what begins as a death vigil becomes a ritual of regeneration for both Bernice and the tree. In the intensive labor of gathering, preparing, and offering food, the women model a form of embodied care that enacts relational healing across generations.

The role of food in this ceremonial process affirms the Cree understanding of nourishment as relational, spiritual, and ethical. As Robin and Hart note, "from a Cree perspective, food is not merely physical sustenance or a group of nutrients but rather a physical and spiritual connection to the self, ancestors, communities, and land" (2025, p. 7). This perspective is dramatized in Birdie through the meticulous attention given to the preparation of meals and offerings. The act of feeding the *Pimatisewin* tree is not metaphorical but a ceremonial performance of responsibility and renewal. In this convergence of land, kin, and spirit, Lindberg aligns with Cree ontologies that regard food, like story and ceremony, as a site of interconnection and healing. As Robin and Hart note, "spiritual understandings of food recognize that food contains relationships and that food is a relationship" (2025, p. 8). This principle is dramatized when Bernice's kin gather from across territories to join in the feast: "That *Pimatisewin* had been waiting for her. For all of them: Valene, Skinny Freda and Lola, the people who came from home, the people her friend Lettie and her old man brought from Sechelt. It was waiting to be fed, to have nations unite in one place" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 247). The meal becomes a gesture of reciprocity that both acknowledges the land's suffering and affirms the people's responsibility to restore balance, affirming a Cree ontology in which care for the land is inseparable from care for the self and the community.

Thus, *pimatisewin* signifies not only health, but a way of life grounded in reciprocal relationships with people, food, land, and spirit. As Priscilla Settee explains, the concept conveys "ancient knowledge for community life, well-being, and sharing of values" and emphasizes "reciprocity, responsibility, and the embracing of the stranger" (Settee, 2007, p. 10, p. 193). In this context, the feast offered to the *Pimatisewin* tree is not merely symbolic, but a restorative act that enacts relational obligations and affirms Indigenous practices of healing. Bernice's recovery is inseparable from the collective resurgence of her community and the land that sustains them, and by intertwining her physical reawakening with the renewal of the tree, Lindberg advances a Cree-centered ethic of care that challenges colonial models of health. Naomi Adelson notes that "from a Cree perspective, health has as much to do with social relations, land, and cultural identity as it does with individual physiology" (2000, p. 3). Health is therefore fundamentally inseparable from politics, identity, and the historical relation between Indigenous nations and the settler state. In *Birdie*, this holistic understanding is realized through the novel's attention to dream, food, and kinship as restorative practices. Healing is not depicted as an internal, individual process, but as a communal and embodied practice rooted in accountability and ecological stewardship, meditated by a return to traditional practices. The revival of the tree thus marks a return to Indigenous ways of being, positioning care for *pimatisewin*, or health-care, as both a cultural framework and a decolonial practice of resurgence.

4. CONCLUSIONS

At the end of her journey, Bernice "looks lovely. Like her body fits her spirit" (Lindberg, 2015, p. 234). This image of re-embodiment crystallizes the novel's holistic vision of health as the

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reintegration of body, spirit, land, and kin. Throughout the article, I have argued that *Birdie* conceptualizes healing not as a linear, private recovery from harm, but as a relational and ceremonial process: *pawatamowin* enables the re-storying of trauma; *acimowin* translates personal pain into shared teachings; kin-making rebuilds social worlds; and nourishment, through foraging, cooking, and feeding *Pimatisewin*, materializes care as labor, reciprocity, and interconnectedness with non-human others. In sum, Lindberg displaces biomedical and individualist frames of health and recovery with a Cree-centered ethic in which healing is a collective, land-tethered praxis of responsibility and reciprocal care. Bernice's re-embodiment is therefore not a return to an earlier self but the outcome of decolonial care: a recommitment to ceremony, kinship, and land-based obligations that reconstitute personhood and community together.

Extending beyond the protagonist, the novel insists that Indigenous healing is inseparable from decolonial resurgence and, by extension, from the demands of global justice. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains that "justice is a concept within Western thought that is intrinsically linked to settler colonialism. Indigenous thought systems conceptualize justice differently" (2016, p. 21). In the face of the damage caused by the colonial matrix of power, justice means "the return of land, the regeneration of Indigenous political, educational, and knowledge systems, the rehabilitation of the natural world, and the destruction of white supremacy, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy" (2016, p. 21). *Birdie* stages these imperatives through acts of care that restore Indigenous knowledges and traditions, undo patriarchal scripts, and renew reciprocal relations with the more-than-human world. By relocating "care" from a colonial *dispositif* of paternalism to an Indigenous praxis of relational accountability, Lindberg shows how the everyday work of storytelling, feeding, and ceremony becomes the ground of resurgent futures.

Therefore, the novel also articulates care as the condition for resilience, understood not as an individual trait but as a dynamic, adaptive capacity rooted in Indigenous relationality. This view aligns with the understanding shared by Elders and scholars that resilience is inherent to Indigenous identities and sustained across generations through culture, ceremony, and spirituality, despite systemic attempts at erasure (Lavallee & Clearsky, 2006, p. 5). As Onkwehonwe scholar Bonnie Freeman writes, "Indigenous-based resilience is innate, spiritual, and is relational to the land and environment" (2017, p. 65), not a static return to an idealized past, but a living practice grounded in traditional knowledge and everyday reciprocity. In *Birdie*, the protagonist's recovery is made possible by the guidance of ancestral voices, the labor of her women kin, and a ceremonial rebirth that binds her wellness to land-based and spiritual renewal. The novel thus affirms that to foster resilience is to restore and protect the practices that sustain Indigenous life. Ultimately, Lindberg's vision confirms the article's central claim: care, when it is collective, culturally rooted, and globally oriented, functions as a decolonial force that can work to repair the fractures of colonial violence and nourish the ongoing work of Indigenous resurgence.

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NOTES

[I] Lindberg translates *pimatisewin* as "'the good life'" and adds, "In this work, I have written it to represent a tree of life" (2015, p. 200). The capitalized *Pimatisewin* refers to the tree in the novel, while the lower case *pimatisewin* refers to the Cree concept of wellbeing.

[ii] De Finney et al. define *kinscapes* as "constellations of relations that implicate people with each other and with place and land" (2019, p. 91) and insist on the dimension of mutual responsibility and accountability inherent to the concept.

[iii] Walsh and Mignolo differentiate between *decolonization* (the struggles of the twentieth century to form independent nation-states after colonial rule) and *decoloniality*, defined as the ongoing work that questions the very terms and structures of the colonial matrix of power (cmp) rather than just its content (2018, p. 106).

[iv] *The Beachcombers* (CBC, 1972–1990), set in Gibsons, BC, was one of Canada's longest-running and most-watched television series. It is especially notable for featuring Jesse Jim, played by Pat John of the shíshálh Nation, one of the first recurring Indigenous characters on Canadian TV. Unlike the stereotypes common at the time, Jesse was portrayed as steady, reliable, and integral to the community, offering a rare alternative to reductive images of Indigenous men and marking a significant moment in media representation.

[v] The Indian Residential School System, operating in Canada from the 1880s until the late 20th century, was a network of church and state-run institutions designed to assimilate Indigenous children by removing them from their families, languages, and cultures. Conditions were marked by neglect, abuse, and high mortality rates. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), active from 2008 to 2015, documented survivor testimonies and released a six-volume final report, concluding that the system constituted "cultural genocide" and issuing 94 Calls to Action to address its enduring legacy (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015).

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