

# (Re)Envisioning Childhoods With Mi'kmaw Literatures

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[See table of contents](#)

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## (Re)Envisioning Childhoods with Mi'kmaw Literatures

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**Key words:** Indigenous children's literature; Indigenous futurities; posthumanisms; the ontological turn; speculative childhoods

### Storying the (re)emergence of Mi'kmaw literatures

Very old stories envision very old futures—futures that are often forgotten and relegated to the past. But those futures speak loudly today. They offer visions of the *not this*, the *not yet*, and the *what if* (Ashton, 2020a) made uniquely tangible through their having been. This paper engages these very old stories brought to life in contemporary children's literature and points to the value of those very old futures to theory, literature, and pedagogy. Before that, however, there are stories that must be told and spoken back to—the once upon a time (King, 2003) of settler colonialism and Indigenous erasure as manifest in literature and theory.

In the Winter 2018 issue of *Atlantic Books Today*, a foreword by Jon Tattrie is titled "The Emergence of Wabanaki Literature." This title holds a certain accuracy as there has been a recent surge in the

number of published titles by Wabanaki authors—authors who represent the five eastern nations of the Wabanaki confederacy, "the people of the dawn": the Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqey, Abenaki, Peskotomuhkatiyik, and Penobscot. Among these books, I think of Peter Clair's 2017 *Taapoategl & Pallet*, Daniel Paul's 2017 *Chief Lightning Bolt*, and Shalan Joudry's 2019 play *Elapultiek*. There are also several works aimed at younger readers, including texts by Allan Syliboy (2015, 2019) and Rebecca Thomas (2019, 2020a).<sup>1</sup>

It is undeniable that Indigenous literatures, and the study thereof, both within educational contexts and beyond (e.g., Coupal et al., 2020; Hanson, 2020), have proliferated in recent years. Yet, when I initially read the word "emergence" in Tattrie's title, I stifled a chuckle. In some ways, the use of that word precisely enacts what can be thought of as the colonial logic of the new—the colonial obsession with discovery and short memory for the origin of ideas. This criticism has also been levied at so-called new materialisms and posthumanisms (Gerrard et al., 2017; Todd, 2016). The word emergence suggests a coming to presence but lacks an acknowledgement of what happened before that presence. To suggest that Wabanaki literatures are emerging erases a history of literature that, in the case of Mi'kmaw language, extends back long before contact with Europeans (see Gespe'gewa'gi Mi'gmawei Mawiomí, 2016).

In her 2017 book *The Homing Place*, settler scholar Rachael Bryant meticulously draws a line between current Wabanaki literatures and the literatures that have always been present in this territory. In following this line of thought, it is helpful to remember Mi'kmaw scholar Marie Battiste's doctoral work. Battiste (1984) highlighted precontact forms of literacy among the Mi'kmaw and other Algonquin nations, specifically the capacity to read and *speaking through* notched sticks, wampum belts, pictographs, and petroglyphs. She also pointed to the hieroglyph system as a form of literacy specific to the Mi'kmaq, one historically used to facilitate the rote memorization of Catholic prayers (Battiste, 2013, 2016), but which has also recently been taken up by Mi'kmaw poet Michelle Sylliboy (2019) in her art and poetry. Battiste (2016) refers to precontact and hieroglyphic forms of literacy as symbolic literacy. I read symbolic literacy as a sort of personal interpretation of symbols based on a shared cultural understanding and epistemological positioning; as Battiste (2016) writes, "most symbols were never precisely defined or fully explained ... since their purpose was to stimulate a dialogue rather than resolve the paradoxes of life concretely" (p. 131). Bryant (2017) moves from literacies to literature and gestures toward the idea that these pictographs, petroglyphs, notched sticks, and wampum belts, as well as oral storytelling, form a part of Atlantic Canada's canon of literature that has been pushed aside—unseen—by generations of scholars and readers alike.

Though never mentioned beyond the opening, the prominence of the word emergence in the aforementioned editorial's title is a marker of this literary erasure, suggesting that the current wave of Wabanaki writers are sharing their stories for the first time, when these stories have been told and retold in this place for thousands of years—the only shift that has occurred is in the audience. Peter J. Clair, the only Indigenous author mentioned in Tattrie's piece, acknowledges this when he says, "I wrote *Taapoategl & Pallet* to make a contribution to Mi'kmaw literature, which I call *Migmagoigasig aatogaaen*" (as cited in Tattrie, 2018, p. 7). Here, Clair positions himself in relationship with a long literary history ignored by the editorial. Like many settler readings of Indigenous literatures, past and present, this editorial seems unable or unwilling to see the brilliance and longevity of Indigenous knowledges.<sup>2</sup> In that, Indigenous absence—erasure—from settler consciousness continues.

The erasure of Indigenous intellectual and artistic contributions is certainly not limited to Atlantic Canadian literature. Unangax̂ scholar Eve Tuck and Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández (2013) suggest that curriculum theory has systematically worked at replacing marginalized scholars and their contributions in favour of white voices, who repackage the same ideas in less overtly political and/or "more academic" terms. Here, curriculum theory can be taken as a stand-in for Western academia broadly. Indeed, Fikile Nxumalo and Stacia Cedillo (2017) identify similar issues: "There is a marked paucity of work in both early childhood education and early childhood studies that firmly centers land as Indigenous in place-based and environmental education in settler colonial contexts" (p. 103). While the authors also note exceptions to this erasure, the general trend stays true. Historically, at every turn the intellectual contributions of marginalized scholars have been minimized and replaced by those of white settler scholars (see also Todd, 2016).

As alluded to above, the current wave of theories associated with the ontological turn can be critiqued for their complicity in and complacency with this erasure (Todd, 2016). The central tenet shared by these theories is that matter is agentive and, when put in vitalist terms (Bennett, 2010), alive. While there are nuances beyond this central axiom, they can mostly be traced back to the idea that all that exists is capable of acting and being acted upon (Massumi, 2015). There is, of course, nothing new about any of this (Gerrard et al., 2017). Notions of a pervasive life/animacy and of interconnectedness among all life are present in many Indigenous worldviews (Murriss, 2018; Stonechild, 2016; Todd, 2016; Whitehead, 2013) and form the basis of many contemporary Indigenous scholarly contributions as well (e.g., Mika, 2019; Sheridan & Longboat, 2006).

In an enactment of what amiskwaciwiiniwak/Papaschase Cree scholar Dwayne Donald (2009) refers to as the

colonial frontier logic symbolized by the fort—the pervasive separation of Indigenous and settler folks within settler colonial society—Indigenous scholars and posthumanists<sup>3</sup> rarely have sustained conversation with one another in public academic discourse. Some Indigenous scholars have broken up with the Deleuzian thinking that informs posthumanisms (Tuck, 2010), others remain critical of the settler colonial logics endemic to the paradigm(s) (Todd, 2016), while others still are rightfully more concerned with the ever-growing list of issues immediately concerning Indigenous peoples (e.g., LaDuke, 2020; Palmater, 2020). On the posthumanist side, there are a few honest attempts at understanding Indigenous thinking<sup>4</sup> (e.g., Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017), but more discussion is still needed between situated, place-specific Indigenous knowledges and the “emerging” work with/on/in posthumanisms.

All this may seem like a digression or line of flight away from the topic of this special issue, *Speculative Worldings of Children, Childhoods, and Pedagogies*, but I have begun this paper by sharing these two intra-active stories of Indigenous erasure in order to highlight the complexity of writing about Indigenous texts in relation to concepts like posthumanism, compost, and SF<sup>5</sup>, which emerge from the Western scholarly vernacular. Honestly, I want nothing more than to write about the beautiful worlds envisioned by these Mi'kmaw children's books, but I cannot do so without highlighting that Mi'kmaw literature began in such a world. That world was erased, submerged in violent and ongoing settler colonialism, and whenever it bubbled to the top, it was ignored or squashed with violent military force. Wabanaki literatures are not emerging. They are (re)emerging<sup>6</sup>, and what they are (re)emerging from is not some innocent slumber but 500 years of colonial occupation, violent military capitalism, and forced dispossession of traditional lands. They are (re)emerging from the apocalypse (Justice, 2018).

For me, the path forward cannot be one of separation. Indeed, according to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC, 2015), reconciliation is about building and sustaining meaningful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. That will require change and discomfort and involves the giving away of privileges and powers held by the settler elite (especially crown land), but ultimately “we are all in this together, [though] we are not one and the same” (Braidotti, 2019, p. 52). We *are* all in this together, and that means learning to think and feel across socially constructed boundaries, logics of the frontier (Donald, 2009), and/or iconoclast barriers (Bryant, 2017). However, we are *not* all the same. We have lived histories of privilege and penalty, and as we journey across those barriers so deeply entrenched in scholarly circles and cultural ethos, it must be on the terms of the original residents of this territory—wherever that may be.

My belief in the possibility of a political and philosophical mutuality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (on Indigenous terms) is deeply connected to my positionality. My ancestors were Mi'kmaq, French, and Irish, and today my extended maternal family are all members of the Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nation (QMFN). Between 2012 and 2018, I was also a member of QMFN, but I lost membership and Indian status because of political processes well beyond the scope of this paper to explain. Before, during, and after those years, I have attempted to understand my relational obligations as someone in an “in-between” identity position. A recent article by journalist Justin Brake (2021) has given me cause for reflection on these understandings and has led me toward an acknowledgement that “my truth is not my own” (Brake, 2021, para. 112), but rather that it is situated within the struggles of the Mi'kmaq people for nationhood and sovereignty. Personally and professionally, then, I am seeking mutuality, within myself, within my work, and within the place I live, and that mutuality *must* be built on a foundation of Mi'kmaw sovereignty.

In this essay, I am working at the intersections of posthumanisms and Indigenous thinking toward envisioning something beyond what is. I am doing so in conversation with Mi'kmaw children's literature. As complicated and contested a terrain as this is, I think it is *the* terrain upon which we must tread if we are to trudge forward

in the trouble of the Anthropocene. I am specifically interested in the way very old knowledges (Styres, 2017),<sup>7</sup> literatures, and literacies are (re)emerging in contemporary Mi'kmaw children's literature. I am also interested in the response this (re)emergence offers to the Anthropocene, and the resulting imminent societal collapse, through the very old futures it envisions. I focus my conversation around two books by Allan Syliboy and two books by Rebecca Thomas. Though none of these texts would generally be called speculative fiction, they do envision something different than what currently exists. As I highlight throughout this paper, these stories, whether very old, contemporary, or somewhere between, speak back to settler futurities by asserting Indigenous ones. In that, they are both speculative and instructive and stretch the many meanings of SF beyond their Western understandings across the aforementioned barriers toward a place of mutuality between Indigenous and Western ways of knowing and being.

In the remainder of this paper, I discuss these texts and the ways they speak in the conversation around speculative fictions and (re)imagining childhoods and pedagogies. First, I address Allan Syliboy's texts, which work with very old stories (re)imagined and (re)told in contemporary contexts. Second, I discuss Rebecca Thomas's recent books, which speak more to contemporary Indigenous issues yet still acknowledge the lineage of Mi'kmaw literature into which they venture. Through each of these discussions, I draw on posthumanisms and Indigenous thinking toward deepening a reading of the future speculated/envisioned/dreamed through these texts. In a third section, I address some of the frictions at work within this thinking and suggest a value in playing at the edges of Western theories—stretching meanings to deepen conversations. I conclude this essay by highlight the need to (re)turn toward the very old futures envisioned in very old stories.

## Allan Syliboy and mythopoetic futures

### *The author and the texts*

Allan Syliboy<sup>8</sup> is a well-known Mi'kmaw visual artist from Millbrook First Nation. Syliboy's style is explicitly informed by the petroglyphs, pictographs, and hieroglyphs named earlier as part of Mi'kmaw symbolic literacy (Battiste, 2016). Syliboy's artwork is, to my eyes, a proficient enactment of Mi'kmaw symbolic literacy; he speaks visually, through the symbols, telling new stories in conversation with very old knowledges and texts.

Recently, Syliboy has brought his visual style and knowledge of Mi'kmaw symbols and stories to two texts for children: *The Thundermaker* (2015) and *Wolverine and Little Thunder* (2019). *Thundermaker* is a retelling of a traditional story. It follows Little Thunder, a child-figure of ambiguous human/more-than-humanness, as he learns what it means to be a Thundermaker. Along the way, he learns a variety of lessons reflective of Mi'kmaw knowledges from his immediate family, the larger community, and the Earth itself. Ultimately, Little Thunder is tasked with striking the Red Earth with three lightning bolts so that Glooscap, who is sometimes named "the teacher" and can be thought of as the first Mi'kmaq (Augustine, 2016), can be born and teach the Mi'kmaq how to survive. As he throws the bolts, several go astray, and he quickly receives a scolding from various animate environmental forces. He tries again, and his bolts strike true. The text closes with Little Thunder showing himself as the Thundermaker.

*Wolverine and Little Thunder* takes place sometime within or before the events of *The Thundermaker*. It follows the story of Little Thunder and Wolverine, who is something of a trickster, as they fish for eels. Wolverine bites off more than he can chew when he spears a giant eel, thinking enough of himself to be able to best it. The eel and Wolverine fight, and eventually Wolverine triumphs because of his trickster immortality. Wolverine and Little Thunder pull the eel to shore and ask an Elder to help them clean it. In the end, the community is happy because the giant eel will provide them with enough food for winter. The story concludes with a reminder that they use every part of the eel: skin, meaty flesh, and bones.



*The mythopoetic tradition as SF*

Both of Syliboy's texts take elements of the Mi'kmaw mythopoetic tradition as their starting point (see also Whitehead, 2013). My use of the term mythopoetic is drawn from the work of Tewa scholar Gregory Cajete (1994, 2017). Cajete suggests that the mythopoetic traditions of Indigenous peoples are a sort of "speaking 'poetically' through of the structures of myth" (2017, p. 124). By continually breathing life into a variety of traditional stories, characters, and symbols, Indigenous mythopoetic traditions "are connected to the living expressions and continuity of Tribal life, past, present, and future" (Cajete, 2017, p. 126). Thus, although they are set long ago rather than in the future, I argue that these stories by Alan Syliboy can be read as speculative fictions. As was pointed out in the call for this special issue, "whenever we envision a world without war, without prisons, without capitalism, we are producing speculative fiction" (Imarisha, 2015, p. 10). In that regard, both of Syliboy's texts can be seen as speculative. They gesture back to a moment before industrial militarism, before forced incarceration, and before capitalism—before any of those things arrived on Turtle Island. Just as Syliboy's artwork draws the past into the present through Mi'kmaw symbolic literacy, so too does the use of traditional Mi'kmaw characters, plot structures, and settings allow the past to speak in "the now." In a current moment marked by neoliberal capitalism, such a past is a radical alternative, one replete with the unique possibility of its having been. If it could have been, then it can be again. In that, these contemporary (re)imaginings, (re)workings, and (re)tellings of Mi'kmaw myth/story speculate radically different futures.

One shade of the future dreamed in these texts is found in the lessons of sustainability and consent—concepts related to *netukulimk* in Mi'kmaw (Robinson, 2016)—embedded throughout. The most explicit example of this is in *Wolverine and Little Thunder*, where the moral of using every part of the animal is clearly stated, but there are others as well. In *Thundermaker*, Little Thunder's father teaches him that caribou, bear, and human beings are all part of the same great circle of life. Obviously, the notion of sacred ecology (Cajete, 1994) is not uncommon in Indigenous storytelling, traditional or contemporary. Its presence in this text, however, challenges the tacit normativity of the current dominant Western societal project of neoliberal capitalism and ideological obsession with economic growth and development at the cost of environmental degradation. These stories resist settler futurities and (re)assert Indigenous futurities (Simpson, 2017; Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013). Looking to the past, particularly in Indigenous contexts, is a way of envisioning a possible future, and indeed speaks back loudly to what is. As stated above and below, very old stories give us very old futures—futures worth (re)turning toward.

The term fiction deserves to be tempered slightly. Syliboy's is not a simple fictitious (re)imagining of a past for which there is no historical evidence. Rather, Syliboy draws on pictographs, petroglyphs, and the oral tradition to make the textual world as true as possible. Additionally, it is important to remember in reading the Mi'kmaw mythopoetic tradition as SF that many settler readers of traditional Indigenous stories render them fantastical, when for many Indigenous people they are a true reflection of reality (Coleman, 2016; Deloria, 1994; Justice, 2018). To put it more succinctly, the mythopoetic is ontologically real within a relational framework. While it might be easy to point to certain mystical elements of these very old stories as a justification for their consideration as speculative fiction, I would not be so presumptuous. Rather, I would gesture toward Western literalism as a contributing factor to the romanticizing and marginalization of Indigenous thinking.

In staring at trees, one often misses the forest. Such is the case when trying to parse what is real and what is metaphor in very old stories. Everything is real, and everything is metaphor. When Little Thunder throws his lightning bolts at the Red Earth and Glooscap is born, we are reminded of the relationship between humans and the Earth, that we are physically like the soil. For some readers, this idea may evoke Haraway's (2016) thinking

around compost. Where posthumanisms might view the earth-human relationship as an assemblage (Braidotti, 2019)—a network of intra-active actors (Barad, 2007)—Haraway (2016) blends the barriers together, articulating the divisions between beings as a sort of porous humus. Indeed, the humus of compost—the bleeding together of beings—calls into questions where “I” begin and where “other” stops. The implications of the first human, Glooscap, being born from energy and earth likewise begs the question of where human beings begin and where the Earth ends. Are we not humus, bleeding together at the edges, oozing together through life and becoming one? The idea of compost and the concept of *netukulimk*—and perhaps the interrelated concept of *m’sit no’kmaw*, “that everything is alive and everything is my relation” (Henderson, 2016, p. 31)—both emphasize a unity and a community between humans and the natural world—a oneness among all life. These two thoughts move in the same direction, but each carries its own nuance and implication for how one should walk in the world. They can be read in the same text, and both—including their frictions—can inform our thinking-practice.

### *Consensual childhoods and pedagogies*

Toward suggesting a mutuality between Indigenous and posthumanist concepts, I now turn to childhoods and pedagogies. Little Thunder’s becoming Thundermaker can be seen as a child-becoming-adult (Ashton, 2020a), and his particular path of becoming evokes both Indigenous and posthumanist pedagogies in early childhood education (e.g., Nxumalo, 2017; Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015). In a well-known article from 2014, Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson shows the way Land<sup>9</sup> can be thought of as pedagogy in Indigenous worldviews (see also Hanson et al., 2020). Simpson shares a story where a young girl learns the wonders of the sugarbush. Much as I have above, Simpson reminds us that these stories should not be imagined in the past, where their possibilities become romanticized and relegated to the categories of history or historical fiction, but rather that they be alive in the moment so as to ensure their possibility for the future. Throughout her article, Simpson calls back to the story, showing the way that the Land itself is a teacher. She highlights that the adults in the story respect the young girl’s autonomy and encourage her to offer gifts in thanks to the Land, emphasizing the consensual nature of these pedagogical moments. The girl is leading the experience, and we can imagine she could opt out at any point. The obvious contrast here is the dominant model of Western schooling, where pedagogies are coercive and attendance is compulsory. Nonconsensual pedagogies, Simpson suggests, teach more than just the stated learning objectives of the lesson; they teach that nonconsensual relations are acceptable, even normative. The Canadian government’s interpretation of their duty to consult with First Nations proves her right—consent means being able to say no, but apparently not when it comes to pipelines (Palmater, 2020).

Many of the same themes present in Simpson’s article can be found in the Mi’kmaw creation story (Augustine, 2016) and the concept of *netukulimk* (Robinson, 2016). There are also clear examples of consensual, relational pedagogies in Syliboy’s texts. Throughout both texts, Little Thunder sets out into the world without much parental supervision or instruction. In *Thundermarker*, although Little Thunder does learn directly from his parents at various moments, his journey toward becoming the Thundermaker is ultimately undertaken alone (save Wolverine, who is more of a peer). When mistakes are made in the process of becoming, Little Thunder is corrected, not by the adults around him, but by animate forces of Land. While one could read these environmental forces as teacher-like figures, it is perhaps more in line with the ideas of *netukulimk* (Robinson, 2016) and *m’sit no’kmaw* (Henderson, 2016) to see this as a building of accountable relationships between Little Thunder and the other forces/actors copresent with/in/on the Earth. Those relationships, and encounters within those relationships, are pedagogical moments built on reciprocity and mutual accountability. They are consensual in that they happen in relationships with a mutual understanding of what it means to be accountable to one another. As Cherokee literary scholar Daniel Heath Justice says, “we can hold each other to account as we hold each other up—they needn’t be mutually exclusive practices” (2018, p. xxi). Land holds us to account for our actions, and when human beings fail to live up

to their relational obligations, the Earth speaks back. While within story this principle is usually direct, it is also true on a larger scale as witnessed through the Earth's reaction to the human-led destruction of the Anthropocene. As Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk), English, and French-descended scholar Sandra Styres puts it, the "Land is our first teacher" (Styres, 2017, p. 50), and the foundation of Land's pedagogy is consensual relationships with mutual accountability. We learn these lessons through intimate encounters with Land.

While many engagements with nature in early childhood education and early childhood studies are still rooted in the bifurcation of human and nonhuman worlds (Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017), Indigenous land-based pedagogies and posthumanist pedagogies are steeped in an ethos of relationality and a desire to provide direct encounter/relationship between the student and their environment, embracing the mutual entanglement of children and nature (i.e., childhoodnature, see Cutter-Mackenzie, Malone, & Barratt Hacking, 2018). The role of the educator is diminished for many posthumanists, rather viewing the student as an assemblage of forces within and outside of the classroom space. For an ecological example, I think of Harwood, Whitty, Elliot, and Rose (2018) and the encounters with death their students found in natural environments. What can an animal corpse teach if it is left to its own devices? How might young children be affected by and affect (Davies, 2014; see also Massumi, 2015) these forest deaths? The answers will be individual and boundless if we can get ourselves out of the way and let students build their own relationships. In a less ecological example, I think of Kuby's (2019) redefinition of the social after observing a second-grade classroom. The social became less about human interactions and more about the intra-actions between agentive others—stuffed animals, children, books, desks, and papers. Here, there is a common opening-up of what could be with regard to the pedagogical. Both Indigenous and posthumanist pedagogies are consensual more than they are coercive and position the environment (e.g., Land, classroom) as teacher; adult humans are there only for support and guidance. In my reading, Syliboy offers an example of these modalities of consensual pedagogy. Based on that reading, I gesture toward a childhood and an education that is "not yet" but imminently possible. I read the text as a speculative reminder of what a childhood within a society built on consent might look like—again, a society that was and can be again, albeit changed by the having been.

## Rebecca Thomas and becoming(s)

### *The author and the texts*

A second set of texts, by Rebecca Thomas, offers a vision for the future rooted in the present rather than, but inclusive of, the past. Thomas is a Mi'kmaw poet connected to the Lennox Island First Nation. She is well known for her spoken word poetry (Thomas, 2020b), and her two recent entries in the world of children's literature have yielded rich texts that cross over thematically with her poetic work.

*I'm Finding My Talk* (2019) is an illustrated version of Thomas's poems of the same title. It picks up a generation after Rita Joe's famous poem *I Lost My Talk*, which details Joe's experience in residential school of being punished for speaking Mi'kmaw. Thomas's *Finding My Talk* explores the reasons why she, like many others, never had her language. Residential schools, separations from parents, and parental aspirations of success in the Western world all factor into the general equation, if not the specific instance of the author. *Finding My Talk* goes on to detail the ways the author is seeking out her language today. Here, the "talk" in question extends beyond language into identity—she is not just learning to speak but reclaiming what it means to be Mi'kmaq. Indigenous identity can be deeply rooted in language, as language carries intimate understandings of Land and ancestral knowledge (Armstrong, 1998; Styres, 2017, 2019). This connection to Land is acknowledged in *Finding My Talk*, as are other aspects of Indigenous identity such as family, ceremony, and community.

The theme of identity is also the focus of Thomas's more recent text, *Swift Fox All Along* (2020a). *Swift Fox* follows



a Mi'kmaw child-figure, Swift Fox, who lives outside of community, as she encounters her extended family for the first time. At first she is excited, but when her family asks her to smudge and she is not sure how, she feels ashamed and runs away. The adults do not appear overly concerned and say she will come back when she is ready, but Swift Fox overhears several of her cousins expressing shock that she does not know how to smudge. This upsets Swift Fox, but another cousin soon arrives. This cousin seems more like Swift Fox; he is unsure about entering the house with so many people he has never met. Swift Fox approaches and introduces herself, and they go in together. Bolstered by the feeling that she is not alone in not knowing how to smudge, Swift Fox tries and discovers smudging is not that hard. Everyone is happy, and Swift Fox learns that being Mi'kmaq was in her all along.

*Futures, becoming(s), and literacies of the land*

Just as Allan Syliboy's texts seem aware of the cultural, literary, and artistic tradition toward which they contribute, *Finding My Talk* picks up on the literary thread of perhaps the most well-known poem by a Mi'kmaw poet, *I Lost My Talk*. Once more, the texts' awareness of the previous generations of literary work serves to displace the notion that the current (re)emergence is in any way new. Thus, in much the same way that Syliboy's texts function to disrupt the settler colonial erasure of Indigenous intellectual and artistic contributions by way of the colonial obsession with the new, Thomas's poem asserts a presence in the present informed by the past. As I have already suggested, Indigenous presence in the present is a way of envisioning and ensuring the possibility of Indigenous presence in the future (Simpson, 2017). Presence thus becomes a futurity—a way through which the future is rendered (potentially) knowable in the now (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013).

*Finding My Talk*, however, also works at envisioning a future through a desire for an almost Deleuzian becoming. The verb tense "finding" as an active, present continuous search suggests that this is an ongoing endeavour. What is being sought through the finding is the author's talk, which, as previously discussed, extends through language into other, interrelated aspects of Indigenous identity. The finding of talk, then, is a search for personal meaning, connection, identity, and/or subjectivity. Likewise, Deleuzian becoming is reflective of the fluid state of the universe, in that everything is always becoming; nothing is ever set or finished, including the subject (May, 2003). Indeed, the Deleuzian notion of becoming itself is less of a *what* and more of a *when* (May, 2003)—although it can be generally characterized as "the unfolding of difference in time and as time" (May, 2003, p. 147). To me, the Deleuzian notion of becoming has always sounded as though it were trying to articulate a verb-based understanding of the world. Many Indigenous languages, including Mi'kmaw, have this verb-based quality, which seems a tangible acknowledgement of the changing nature of the world at large (Sable & Francis, 2012; Whitehead, 2013). The default setting in verb-based languages is transition rather than stasis (Whitehead, 2013), much like Deleuzian becoming. Deleuze's notion of becoming sets the stage for posthumanisms, where the subject is not a unified, unitary psychic space but rather an assemblage of techno/geo/biological actors (Braidotti, 2019). The subject assemblage is never fixed, suggesting an infinite potential of what it might become.

Thomas's poem also can be read as suggesting the intra-activity and interconnectedness of the subject in myriad ways but perhaps most tellingly through her reference to the relationships among Land, language, and identity: "I'm finding my talk, / how its written across the land, / learning to take only what I need. / *Netukulimk* helps me understand" (Thomas, 2019, p. 20). Rather than reiterating my points on *netukulimk* and consent, here I gesture toward the recent literature around literacies of the Land to deepen my reading of the texts' vision for the future. Styres (2019) summarizes Indigenous literacy eloquently: "Indigenous literacy is based on reading the cosmos—it is about reading all the things around us that are not necessarily the written word but nevertheless contain valuable information" (p. 25). I see this reading the animacy of the world—this attentiveness to the actions of all the very small beings around us (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015)—as a common thread between posthumanist and

Indigenous literacies. The latter becomes more specific in the context of Land: “Storied Landscapes form spatial and temporal tracks left by our ancestors that can be read ‘with as much care as one reads the narratives of classical history’ (Kulchyski, 2005, p. 18)” (Styres, 2019, p. 28). Land is alive with narrative, and the Indigenous languages of specific places carry with them the teachings of those places (Armstrong, 1998). Centering place-stories—or the search for them—in pedagogical contexts can serve to disrupt the erasure of Indigenous bodies/stories endemic to Western education (Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017). Being able to read Land and place, however, is also a way of deepening an understanding of oneself (Downey, 2020) and of one’s positionality (Downey et al., 2019). In my reading, Thomas’s narrator is actively working toward becoming literate in reading Land—as are many others. The future envisioned through *Finding My Talk*, then, is of personal understandings of identity, community, and positionality. Given the form of this text as a children’s book, however, the future envisioned is one where this literacy in place, Land, language, and identity is normative rather than exceptional. It is a future where learning to read means not just learning the words on the page or engaging in a developmental process, but also learning to listen to Land and letting it teach you about you. Implicit in that knowledge of Land is an attentiveness to nonhuman and more-than-human others, beings both very big and very small (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015).

### *Swift Fox, lateral violence, and (re)envisioning childhoods*

In my reading, *Swift Fox* likewise offers a new vision of childhood, this one aimed at remaking social and familial bonds between human beings rather than with the more-than-human. As I understand it, the term more-than-human is used to describe those things normatively deemed inanimate or less-than-human as a way of speaking back to and displacing the hierarchies of life embedded within the colonial language of domination. Many thinkers, Indigenous and otherwise, have critiqued the hierarchies endemic to Western thought (e.g., Braidotti, 2019; Stonechild, 2020). Hierarchies between different forms of life translate quickly into hierarchies between different groups of human beings, especially when certain human beings are viewed as a form of fauna. Here, I am referencing the history of nonhumanity ascribed to Indigenous populations (Wilson, 2008). Hierarchies between groups of human beings both necessitate and contribute to the separation of groups from one another. Hierarchy is also an explicitly nonconsensual relationship, and within dominant Western society, several hierarchies are transmitted to children in both covert and explicit ways.

In *Swift Fox*, we can see allusions to the way hierarchical thinking has infiltrated Indigenous communities and led to what some have called lateral violence (Wingard, 2010). Lateral violence is a term used to describe when members of the same marginalized group find ways of subjugating one another (Wingard, 2010). Often, this lateral violence is the result of a perceived hierarchy between individuals of the same group. In Indigenous communities, the hierarchy is often built around the perceived authenticity of Indigeneity (Wingard, 2010). The term *apple*, for example, is considered a heavy insult, implying that someone is “red on the outside and white on the inside,” or that they have internalized the logics of the colonizer and lost touch with their Indigenous identity. Folks in liminal or in-between identity spaces—folks who occupy “those racial shadow zones that have been created for us and that we create for ourselves” (King, 2003, p. 92)—can also be the subject of hierarchies of authenticity and lateral violence. Although there may have been some hierarchies among Indigenous communities before contact with Europeans, many sources reference the egalitarian nature of traditional Indigenous societies (e.g., Paul, 2006; Stonechild, 2020). The sort of lateral violence seen today seems to have more to do with the colonial logic of separation and the social Darwinist notion of racial purity than with traditional Indigenous worldviews (Stonechild, 2020). Indigenous thinking is often relational in nature. In this, there is commonality with posthumanism. Both Indigenous thinking and posthumanism envision a future of relationality among humans and more-than-humans. Socially, this means a future where we are aware of our positionalities and the unique assemblage of our subjectivity. It is a future where we are attentive to those beings with whom we are in relationship. I would also suggest there is an appreciation

of the uniqueness of each being and each relationship at work in both Indigenous thinking and certain strains of posthumanism, particularly Braidotti's (2019) critical, subject-centered posthumanism.

In my reading, Thomas seems intimately aware of the way hierarchies of authenticity and lateral violence get played out in Indigenous communities, and she appears invested in envisioning a future—and a childhood—without them. Through *Swift Fox*, she offers a more relational foundation to human interactions. Although *Swift Fox* only depicts one very minor instance of lateral violence—the two cousins who comment on Swift Fox's inability to smudge—the shadow of these hierarchies of authenticity are clearly present in Swift Fox's internal monologue. Indeed, if personal experience is any indicator, struggling with the authenticity from in-between identity positions is a common, ever-ongoing phenomenon—and, in cases such as mine, an ethically important one (see also Brake, 2021). Through *Swift Fox*, Thomas addresses these internal dimensions of colonization by way of the acceptance of self. On the second to last page of the text, Swift Fox tells her cousin that “it is inside of you. Sometimes it is just hard to find” (Thomas, 2020a, p. 31). I think the “it” here can be taken as broadly as “talk” was in the previous section—it is identity, belonging, community, and knowledge. This self-acceptance is, I think, radically different than the current dominant developmental vision of childhood. Rather than focusing on the process of becoming, today there is a great emphasis on what one becomes—careers, skills, and specific knowledges still dominate K–12 schooling, if not education more broadly (Kumar, 2019). Thomas, Indigenous thinkers, and posthumanist early childhood educators all seem more interested in the fluid processes of learning, infinitely constant becomings, and mutual entanglements than in an arbitrary end goal based on models of child development and socialization. In this, there is a vision for the future and a childhood (re)made through becoming-with ourselves and the world around us rather than becoming as directed through the bureaucratic apparatus of the state education system—a becoming-who-we-want-you-to-be. Indeed, it is a childhood and a future upon which many of us might agree.

## Mutuality and frictions

Through this paper, I suggest that scholars and educators take seriously the often erased intellectual and artistic contributions of Indigenous scholars, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, authors, and students. I am not alone in this suggestion (Todd, 2016), and many have enacted it already (e.g., Ashton, 2020a)—particularly in considerations of place (e.g., Nxumalo, 2017; Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017; see also Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). In some conversations, however, the engagement can be superficial or overly focused on the social dimensions of inclusion and recognition. It sometimes feels like the fact of Indigenous knowledges means more than their content in scholarly conversation (i.e., a checked box). Since the TRC (2015) released its final report, there has been a broad, sweeping cultural shift in academia toward including Indigenous knowledges and people in the conversation. What has been far less common, however, is specific, respectful scholarly engagement by non-Indigenous scholars with local Indigenous knowledges and contemporary Indigenous scholarship. There appears more breadth than depth, and I think we need more of both. Cree scholar Willie Ermine (2007) states that superficial conversation is not enough to cross boundaries as deeply entrenched as those between Western and Indigenous knowledges:

At the superficial level of encounter, the two entities may indeed acknowledge each other but there is a clear lack of substance or depth to the encounter. What remains hidden and enfolded are the deeper level thoughts, interests and assumptions that will inevitably influence and animate the kind of relationship the two can have. (Ermine, 2007, p. 195)

There is more to be gained through mutuality within specific scholarly and local contexts. When we hold posthumanist concepts next to Indigenous ones, interconnections and intra-actions become clearer and resonate more deeply (see also Nxumalo, 2017). When we play at the edges of SF—stretching science to include Indigenous knowledges, stretching fiction to include the ontologically real mythopoetic, stretching speculation to include the

recursive return of a future that has already been—the conversation becomes infinitely more complex. Through this mutuality in literature and theory, that which was erased is gradually etched back into being, being-with, and normativity.

The sort of mutuality between posthuman and Indigenous thinking toward which I gesture is not without its frictions. Nxumalo and Cedillo (2017), who suggest Indigenous place-stories as a way of disrupting colonial relationships with place in early childhood education, highlight the imminent tensions emergent from settlers' use of Indigenous stories in pedagogical contexts: "certain stories might act to situate non-Indigenous educators as the transmitters of Indigenous knowledges" (p. 104). But they also gesture toward a willingness to "[stay] with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016) of this mutuality as essential to disrupting the normativity of settler narratives of place: "Both research and educational engagements with place stories require an ongoing critical engagement with what stories of place are made visible, which stories remain invisible, as well as the whys and hows of these obscurances" (Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017, p. 104). Place stories are one manifestation of Indigenous knowledges, and they can be an effective pedagogical intervention in complicating the dominant colonial narratives of place. Indeed, I hope that by writing about four Mi'kmaw stories and highlighting the ways they can be read in the current moment I have contributed to the disruption of settler narratives of the place where I live—Mi'kma'ki. The call for ongoing critical engagement, however, can also speak to the specific instance of Indigenous and posthumanist thinking. When new materialisms are presented as new without the acknowledgement of their presence in the world's wisdom traditions and Indigenous knowledges, "what stories of place are made visible [and] which stories remain invisible" (Nxumalo & Cedillo, 2017, p. 104; see also Todd, 2016)? How might *netukulimk* and compost appearing in the same sentence deepen our understandings of each? What might Braidotti have to say to Grand Chief Membertou and, more importantly, vice versa? What sort of future might be envisioned when "this deeper level force, the underflow-become-influential, the enfolded dimension ... [is] brought to bear in the complex situation produced by confronting knowledge ... systems" (Ermine, 2007, p. 195)? Here, I remember Braidotti's statement that "we are all in this together, but we are not one and the same" (2019, p. 52). We are all here on this shared land, and neither of us are going anywhere: We are all in this together. But we are not, nor do we desire to become, the same. We are not looking for assimilation of any of us, only a conversation—a conversation that drives our understandings to new levels based on respect for the validity of one another's intellectual, artistic, and cultural traditions and contributions within our shared place(s).

### Very old stories, very old futures

At the beginning of this article, I set out to discuss Mi'kmaw children's books as SF texts, but in the process of doing so, I have had play at the edges of the definitions and concepts of SF and posthumanism. Speculative fiction needed to be stretched to include the Mi'kmaw mythopoetic tradition; compost needed to be stretched to include *netukulimk*. I do not think there is as much resistance to this kind of playful creative theorizing in posthumanisms as there is in other academic paradigms (Braidotti, 2019; Haraway, 2016). There is, however, an important lesson in this stretching: If we want to have meaningful dialogue, we need to be open to both affecting and being affected (Davis, 2014; see also Massumi, 2015). Any time we converse with another, we open ourselves up to the potential of being changed. That is admittedly terrifying, but it is also exciting and generative. In conversation, our ideas will also change, deepen, grow, and become otherwise, and that is the generative potential of posthumanism and SF scholarship in the current moment, particularly as they are brought into respectful, thoughtful, and intentional conversation with place-specific and locally situated Indigenous knowledges and stories.

If my above speculations are any indication as to what this conversation might bring, it is a radically different future—one built on a foundation of consent taught through pedagogies of sensitive encounter and attention: a



society where Land is viewed as alive, sentient, sovereign, and agentive and where Land helps us understand who we are and where we fit in the world. It is a society where the full history of a place is understood, rather than just the parts deemed of most worth by a particular group—a future where reading brilliance in other another’s literature, studying it carefully and thoughtfully, is normative. It is not educational utopia; it is educational possibility, and the possibility is assured through its having been. Very old stories yield very old futures—futures toward which we can (re)turn.

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- 1 In this paper, my engagement is with Mi’kmaq texts because of my own ancestral background (Mi’kmaq, French, and Irish) and their relevance to my current location in unceded Mi’kma’ki—the ancestral lands of the Mi’kmaq.
  - 2 Like Cree scholar Margaret Kovach, my use of Indigenous knowledges—which are both contemporary and traditional—“acknowledges both the shared commonalities and the diversity of many Indigenous ways of knowing” (2021, p. 19).
  - 3 Throughout the rest of this paper, I will use the term *posthumanism* to encompass the theories of the ontological turn. Related terms encompassed within my meaning include agential realism (Barad, 2007), vital materialism (Bennett, 2010), compost (Haraway, 2016), “new” materialism, and the ontological turn (Todd, 2016).
  - 4 My use of the term *Indigenous thinking*—which I understand to include Indigenous teachings, scholarship, storytelling, literature, and artistic creation—should be understood to include feeling and sensing.
  - 5 Haraway (2016) invites multiple meanings within the sign SF, many of which are evoked by the call for this special issue (Ashton, 2020b). The primary meaning of SF used in this paper is speculative fiction, but I invite the haunting resonances of other meanings as well: “science fiction, speculative feminism, science fantasy, speculative fabulation, science fact, and also, string figures” (Haraway, 2016, p. 10).
  - 6 I use the prefix re- as a way of disrupting doxa or commonly held thought and as a way of emphasizing the circular nature of Indigenous thought—showing that the past is not destined to stay historical but rather is enacted in the present through us and our stories (see Kuby, 2019; Styres, 2017).
  - 7 “Very old” is a linguistic marker to remind the reader that these knowledges and literacies have a life well beyond the temporal scope of Western society (see Styres, 2017).
  - 8 <http://www.alansyliboy.ca/>
  - 9 Land with a capital L refers to the onto-epistemic foundation of Indigenous thought. Land with a lowercase l refers to the environment in a more physical sense (see Styres, 2017).

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