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“The Currency That Is Reconciliation Discourse in Canada”: Contesting Neoliberal Reconciliation

HANNAH WYILE

IN HIS 2011 BOOK *Anne of Tim Hortons: Globalization and the Reshaping of Atlantic-Canadian Literature*, Herb Wyile paints an incisive portrait of the effects of globalization and neoliberalism on Atlantic Canada, highlights the role of literature in portraying and resisting these effects, and in so doing invites critical reflection on the region’s sociopolitical and economic future. This essay is inspired by *Anne of Tim Hortons* and seeks to extend the analysis in Wyile’s chapter on writing by Indigenous, Black, and women writers. Wyile cautions that contesting neoliberalism cannot simply seek a return to the “good old days,” for as the work of these writers reminds us, those days were not good for everyone (135). Indigenous people’s persistent calls to address ongoing colonial injustices highlight that these not-good days are also not-old days; our sociopolitical context has changed significantly — the neoliberal project that Wyile describes is central to this change — but important historical continuities remain, and the intersections between the two merit our attention. Efforts to grapple with historical and ongoing colonial injustice take place in a context shaped by both centuries of colonial thinking and the logic of neoliberalism. Within discussions about transforming the harmful relationships that these forces have moulded in ideological, symbolic, and material terms, it is also critical to ask how colonial thinking and neoliberalism shape efforts *at* repair and not just the histories that people seek *to* repair. Given this special issue’s focus on Atlantic Canada, I contemplate these politics in the context of Mi’kma’ki by exploring the work of Mi’kmaw¹ spoken word poet and former Halifax Poet Laureate Rebecca Thomas. Thomas, along with other Indigenous writers across Canada, such as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Thomas King, Janet Rogers, and others,² challenges the implications of neoliberal reconciliation, highlights the dangers of extractive capitalism, and envisions more transformative forms of

decolonization. Through the aesthetic power of poetry, Thomas advances a vision that, alongside the work of Indigenous scholars, opens up other relational possibilities. The thoughts offered here reflect what I, as a non-Indigenous Canadian, have learned from reading Indigenous literature and scholarship, particularly about decolonizing relationships and the problems with certain approaches to reconciliation.

Wylie describes neoliberalism as “a highly contested concept” that gets accused of “conceptual diffuseness” and of being “a kind of catch-all term” (“Canadian Literature” 894-95), and he notes that “neoliberalism has ascended to the status of a kind of international common sense, and its prescriptions inform decisions about an increasingly dizzying array of walks of life” (894). Many scholars have said similar things about reconciliation, arguing that the concept “suffers from an astounding lack of clarity” (Meierhenrich 196) and is widely appealing “because its promise is virtually infinite” (Daly and Sarkin 12). Despite this conceptual confusion, reconciliation, like neoliberalism, has become “a kind of international common sense” in divided societies — including Canada — that are grappling with historical injustices. Much like neoliberal globalization, reconciliation “has proven to be so seductive and resilient . . . because it is rooted in principles that, at least superficially, seem attractive and beneficial,” and “its advocates have cleverly deployed a strategic and euphemistic discourse that situates its imperatives and its accomplishments in a positive light” (Wylie, “Canadian Literature” 894). If neoliberalism’s “familiar battery of terms” includes “*mobility, efficiency, austerity, restructuring, downsizing*, and so on” (894), reconciliation’s slate of words and phrases might include *healing, moving forward, walking together, forgiveness, closing a dark chapter*, and so on.

In this context, it is key to engage critically with the logics of both neoliberalism and reconciliation, and how they interact with each other and with colonial histories, in contemporary efforts to reform relationships between Indigenous and settler peoples in Canada. Drawing on the work of scholars who initiated this critical investigation, I suggest that the result is a constellation of redress politics that might be understood as “neoliberal reconciliation” and argue that the literary resistance to neoliberal globalization in Atlantic Canada that Wylie highlights is mirrored by a similar resistance to neoliberal reconciliation in contemporary Indigenous literature. This is by no means to suggest an equivalency between Indigenous peoples’ struggles against colonialism (in its

earlier iterations or its contemporary neoliberal forms) and the struggles of Atlantic Canadians against neoliberal globalization. Rather, I follow Wyile's analysis of literary forms of resistance and the vicissitudes of neoliberalism to consider the broken relationships lying at the foundation of Canada and contemporary efforts at repair.

Wyile notes that perceptions of Atlantic Canada "tend to be conveniently uninformed, assessing the region's fortunes primarily in fiscal terms and not bothering to ask the question of how this state of affairs came to be" (*Anne* 3). The same is too often true of understandings of the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples and the lands that they share. Contrary to neoliberal visions of reconciliation that aim to be more inclusive of Indigenous people within the Canadian polity as presently structured, decolonizing approaches require recognizing and meaningfully grappling with the reality that "The political economy of the Canadian state is underwritten by Indigenous dispossession" and working to transform relations without further perpetuating dispossession and assimilation (J. Green, "From Colonialism" 20). To this end, Thomas's poetry challenges the narrowness of neoliberal reconciliation, offering a vital path to stepping away from oversimplified misunderstandings and toward empathy and to collectively exploring more just ways of (re-)establishing healthier relationships between peoples and between people and the land.

Aesthetic Action in the Face of Settler Colonialism

In her poems, Thomas engages with the four questions that Daniel Heath Justice argues constitute the central concerns of Indigenous literatures: how do we learn to be human, behave as good relatives, behave as good ancestors, and learn to live together (28)? These questions underpin Thomas's explorations of how humans on these lands relate to the beings around them, how these relationships have shifted through the ravages of colonialism, and the detrimental effects that result when they take the forms of exploitation and domination. For non-Indigenous audience members, Thomas puts in stark relief the implications of capitalist and colonialist modes of being and of failing to be good relatives to the Indigenous peoples who were already here and to the land on which all people depend. She also pointedly reminds her audience that it is not ethical behaviour for ancestors to destroy the lands and waters that future generations need to survive.

In *Anne of Tim Hortons*, Wyile describes how neoliberalism’s “glorification of fluidity” often results in disdainful attitudes toward attachment to place, painting it as “stubborn refusal or even incapacity to get with the times and be realistic” and thus devaluing the concerns of those who remain attached to place and “position[ing] them as people to be dictated to” (244). He suggests that “the continuing attachment to place exhibited by Atlantic Canadians and reflected in the literature of the region can instead be viewed as evoking a resistance — whether conscious or not — to the deracinating, liberal individualist logic of post-industrial capitalism” (246). This holds perhaps even more true for Indigenous people, who hold the longest-standing connection to place in this land, have long been dictated to by non-Indigenous people, and still all too often face ill-informed and disdainful attitudes. Resistance to the logic that Wyile describes is certainly evident in the work of Indigenous writers. Thomas, for instance, reminds her audience of Indigenous history and collectivity, of treaty obligations, and of extractive capitalism’s dangerous ramifications. By doing so through poetry, she speaks in what Justice calls “a particularly compelling literary form for confronting the ruptures of history and the fragmenting of settler colonialism” (60). Her words resonate with Indigenous scholars’ work on decolonization, but her poems and performances³ provide different ways of reaching people and helping to shift understanding.

Whereas other Mi’kmaw poets, such as Rita Joe and Lindsay Marshall, have written for the page, Thomas works in the medium of spoken word (though a couple of her poems have been published by *The Coast*, and one in the collection *Surviving Canada*). She credits the creative and activist influence of El Jones (Gloade-Raining Bird). Jones describes spoken word as “a tool of liberation” (vii), and an “embodiment of [political artists’] commitment to justice for [their] people,” both honouring their ancestors’ struggles and resisting contemporary oppression while seeking transformative change (viii). Thomas thus draws on an art form that developed out of the parallel struggles of Black people and can also be seen as emerging from longstanding Indigenous traditions of oral poetry and storytelling.

The purpose of oratory, Lee Maracle explains, “is to create a passionate feeling for life and help people understand the need for change or preservation as the case may be” (165). Maracle describes the poet’s role as facilitating a “process of concatenation” within the commun-

ity and between humans and the world around them by carefully and artfully expressing “thought, emotions, law, philosophy, and spirit” in order to move the audience toward “community-based thought” (171-72). As Justice notes, “poetry is most powerfully experienced in person, embodied, and in shared, vocalized, breath-filled performance with other humans present,” and Indigenous poetry in particular grapples with questions about the meaning of being human, struggling against colonialism, and revitalizing Indigenous ways of being “in a more visceral way than other forms, a powerful distillation that lingers long after the initial experience” (60, 61).

In presenting her audiences with lively and engaging performances that ask them to reconsider their preconceptions about Indigenous peoples and to reorient themselves toward more just relationships, Thomas can be understood as presenting a form of “aesthetic action,” whereby artistic media “have social and political effects through our affective engagements with them” and thus enable certain kinds of political and cultural work (Robinson and Martin 2, 8). Her contributions are especially interesting since she has performed these aesthetic actions in institutional political spaces as well as in arts-focused spaces.⁴ In her performances, Thomas rhythmically and dynamically conveys messages emphasizing Mi’kmaq historical and contemporary presence, charting historical and contemporary harms in Indigenous-settler relations, challenging “the way in which neoliberalism encourages the displacement of environmental concerns by economic ones” (Wyile, “Canadian Literature” 899), and offering possibilities for new ways of living together.

Theory and Context: Reckoning with Colonial Injustice and Neoliberalism

The relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada is marked by centuries of colonial violence, as poignantly and evocatively detailed in Thomas’s “A Creation Story”:

Then one day, a new creature came to our shores. . . .

Once it took a form, its hunger could not be sated. Its endless greed consumed all the trees, hunted the animals and fished the rivers until they only knew scarcity. It cracked open the body of

Mother Earth and bled her black veins. Choked out father sky with smoke. It always picked the first plant, every time.

. . . It confined us to the tiniest portions of our land. . . . This creature fed on the languages of our children. Separated families to weaken us. It thrived, nameless, until a dozen generations ago when it was finally given a name.

Canada.

This violence goes to the core of the nation-state since the country's political and economic institutions are rooted in dispossessing and assimilating Indigenous peoples. Colonial policies aimed to impose European and Christian values and to assimilate Indigenous people into the capitalist market system.⁵ The reserve system in particular both enabled colonizers to appropriate vast swaths of Indigenous lands and inhibited Indigenous peoples from "liv[ing] off of traditional economic practices" (Gordon 72). Paired with racist and exclusionary immigration policies, these processes were central to establishing Canada as a white settler colony (Abu-Laban 265-66). As Dalie Giroux argues, the Canadian legislative framework maximized capital accumulation for private gains, and the individual and collective rights granted to Canadians generally and to Indigenous peoples specifically are those that could be appended to that framework without challenging its foundations (22).

In recent decades, the economic system that envelops Indigenous-settler relations in Canada — and the social and political systems with which it is intertwined — has been profoundly moulded by neoliberal ideology and practice. Neoliberalism is most commonly understood as an economic program aimed at "[p]romoting (selective) deregulation, the diminution of social programs, liberalized trade, and (selectively) reduced government intervention in the economy" (Wyile, "Canadian Literature" 892), and it is rooted in a "missionary faith" in free-market ideals of "competitiveness, efficiency, choice, and consumerism" (Connell 23; Abu-Laban and Gabriel 21).⁶ Many scholars stress, however, that neoliberalism is not simply an economic ideology or a set of policies but a project to remake society and polity in the image of the market (Connell 27; Million 17), to the point where it has become "a normative order of reason" governing virtually every facet of human life (Brown 9, 10). Thus, neoliberalism has significant social, political, and economic consequences for our individual and collective lives, rooted in its push to individualize and depoliticize. This project manifests

a particular relationship with the politics of difference and historical injustice, both of which are central themes in Thomas's poetry.

Indigenous peoples have long challenged the entire colonial project. Increasingly, debates and policies on the grievances of Indigenous peoples have come to be assembled under the banner of "reconciliation."⁷ Significant critical work has been done on the limitations of state discourses of reconciliation in Canada and other settler colonies and on how neoliberal logics of individualism — trauma, healing, and self-improvement; individual and state competitiveness; and free-market participation — shape these approaches. In a neoliberal context in which people are rendered as human capital (Brown 33, 36), diversity becomes "little more than something that can be consumed . . . or a feature to be capitalized upon and marketed," jeopardizing the possibility of substantively addressing discrimination and inequality (Abu-Laban and Gabriel 173). Neoliberalism, characterized by what Meg Luxton calls "perverse individualism," denies the realities and consequences of social structure (171-73, 175). Its "systemic focus on short-term profitability" (Connell 32), intertwined with its individualistic ethos, seems to be mirrored by a short historical memory. Although diversity, taken as a marker of both individuals and businesses, is regarded as a boon where it increases competitiveness (Abu-Laban and Gabriel 12), demands for justice by groups based upon difference often get dismissed as "special interests" seeking unfair advantages (166).

Indigenous concerns about justice, land, and self-determination frequently receive this treatment. Maggie Walter terms this the "race bind," wherein the "merging [of] newer discourses of individualism and free market capitalism with older colonial discourses on Aboriginal peoples" results in a "discursive paradox [that] denies the concept of race itself, blaming or crediting racially differentiated life trajectories on individual choices, while contradictorily but simultaneously justifying racially differentiated social and political positioning" (44). Neoliberal economic narratives about equality of opportunity discursively divorce historical injustices from their social contexts, propagating the myth that we live in a "postracial society" while "[l]egacies of colonialism repeat themselves in the seemingly neutral garb of economic necessity and market neutrality" outsourced from the sphere of public responsibility through extensive privatization (McCready 163). Even attempts to combat racism can contribute to these problematic constellations of neoliberal individ-

ualism and racism, for combatting stereotypes by celebrating members of a group for their successes reaffirms “neoliberal imaginings of prosperity” in the process (McLeod 10). Although neoliberal governance can involve granting certain rights to distinct social groups and thus be understood to produce difference, they tend to be cultural rights carefully circumscribed to “pos[e] little challenge to the neoliberal project” (Altamirano-Jiménez 70). Thus, diversity *as embodied in individuals* is celebrated when it is seen as advantageous for business, whereas diversity *of collectives* is maligned as contradicting the individualizing, depoliticizing neoliberal project and as unfairly advantaging some individuals in the market. Diversity is also celebrated as a characteristic of the nation-state, but again the nation-state is taken as singular. Part of the depoliticizing agenda of neoliberalism involves the “remaking of a public sphere devoid of critical dissent” (James, “Neoliberal” 37), such that diverse demands for social justice are framed as threatening national unity (Abu-Laban and Gabriel 166). Neoliberalism recognizes cultural difference or historical injustice only in terms that reinforce rather than challenge the nation-state’s structures, thus further privileging individuals already empowered within those structures.

Contesting Neoliberal Reconciliation

Leanne Simpson (*Dancing*), Dian Million, and Jennifer Henderson all detail the particular ways that injustice and reconciliation become framed in such a context, demonstrated for instance in how they are often reduced to the issue of residential schools, made comprehensible to the non-Indigenous population through the lens of personal injury. As Henderson explains, this rendering comes at the price of “discursively dis-embedd[ing]” the schools “from the broader framework of colonial policy” (“Residential Schools” 11). The personal injury framing engages Canadians primarily as taxpayers linked to survivors through compensation payments while ironically ignoring the schools’ connection to the creation of the settler economy and the simultaneous disruption of Indigenous economies (12, 22). Although there are many reasons for state inaction in redressing the breadth and depth of Indigenous peoples’ grievances, neoliberal distaste for state spending is a significant obstacle (Abu-Laban 268), and Henderson notes that “financial reparations for residential schooling can be individualized and contained in a way that land claims cannot” (“The Camp” 67). This narrow focus is temporal

and spatial, since the historical injustices eligible for redress are not only limited to matters that can be individualized and contained but are also discursively framed as over and thus as something that victims can and should be able to overcome, while perpetrators are distanced from contemporary Canadians (Coulthard 108-09). Thomas's poems challenge multiple dimensions of this neoliberal framing: the individualistic and anthropocentric focus, the narrow scope of acknowledged injustices, and the divorcing of historical injustice from contemporary reality.

Although Thomas sometimes speaks in the first person, or references particular Mi'kmaq such as Donald Marshall Jr., Grand Chief Gabriel Sylliboy, Rita Joe, Grand Chief Membertou, Anna Mae Aquash, or Daniel Paul, her frequent invocations of "we" assert the collectivity of Mi'kmaq as a people and not merely a collection of neoliberal individual subjects. Thomas asserts the long history of the Mi'kmaq in Mi'kma'ki and their longstanding resistance to colonial efforts at erasure. In "Etuaptmumk," she notes the irony of Atlantic Canadians labeling others as "come from aways" (00:12:24),⁸ and in "North America Rehashes Dating History with Discoverers" she highlights the damage of this arrival from Mi'kma'ki's⁹ perspective:

My veins are shot.
 All of my fish have been caught.
 My friends hardly come around.
 They've been evicted from their grounds and stick to their own
 parts of town.
 Some lady said they had to! "By order of the crown."
 Now, I'm left with scars on my face and oily blemishes that con-
 tinue to grow. (56-61)

The poem's very title emphasizes historical continuity and ongoing relationship, and Thomas simultaneously personalizes colonial injustice without individualizing it, while highlighting a wide range of injuries and their impacts on entire webs of relationships. Although Thomas characterizes the result of this treatment as Mi'kma'ki "needing serious therapy" (55), she also challenges the neoliberal paradigm's individualistic, therapeutic conception of healing, embodied in the narrow fixation on residential schools, which prioritizes individual self-improvement and becoming a "more effective, vital, or productive" neoliberal subject (Million 149). To the contrary, Indigenous conceptions stress healing as an ongoing process rather than a treatment resulting in a definitive

moment of cure, shift “tropes of ‘pathology’” from the colonized subject to the colonial project, and embody a more holistic understanding that links social, political, economic, and environmental well-being with mental, physical, and emotional well-being (R. Green 138). Thomas’s reference to therapy could be read as irony in the face of neoliberal discourses of healing that fail to grapple with the colonial violence of environmental damage and dispossession.¹⁰

Further, by poetically personifying the land, Thomas emphasizes the land as a web of relations, highlighting the interconnectedness of land, fish, and Mi’kmaq. In so doing, she invites those of us with a different worldview to hear the perspective of a relation that we are not accustomed to perceiving as a relation.¹¹ This portrayal differs significantly from depictions of the land as wild and terrifying, something to be feared and/or dominated, that have frequently appeared in Canadian literature (Ruffo 138), and it pushes back against a pattern whereby, “as urbanization and, especially, industrialization increase, and as humans become more alienated from the land upon which we depend, personhood becomes more narrowly confined to the human” (Justice 89). As Rachel Yacaaʔaʔ George notes, a focus on healing interpersonal human relationships is not only insufficient but also produces ongoing harm, for perceiving lands and waters as resources rather than as relations perpetuates their exploitation (56-57). Thomas illustrates these effects in the pain and devastation of overfishing, environmental contamination, and severed relationships. She thus evocatively reminds all of us to “approach the world as a network of peoples, many of whom are related to [us], and to whom [we] owe reciprocal and respectful obligation” (Justice 89).

Thomas challenges narrow visions of reconciliation with poems that address a broad array of issues, encompassing cultural appropriation (“RedFace”), relationships with lands in the face of dispossession and environmental devastation, missing and murdered women (“Rebecca Thomas — Pennies”), the violence of honouring genocidal figures such as General Cornwallis¹² (“Poet Laureate”), and epistemological differences (“Etuaptmumk”). In “Reconcile Your State of Mind,” Thomas criticizes the idea that “[w]e are reconciled” when our society is still rife with discrimination, residential school survivors continue to grapple with trauma and grief, and Indigenous people are disproportionately incarcerated (7-22). Similar themes are raised in “Just Another Native

Poet,” which highlights Canadians’ resistance to hearing these injustices called out and individualistic narratives about “special interests” fomented by neoliberal thinking:

“Here we go again,” they’ll say to themselves.
 She’s probably going to talk about water quality and mental health.
 Twenty years of boil orders and contaminated wells.
 Or one hundred and forty attempts in two weeks to kill themselves.
 But if you live on reserve, Chief and council will give you a free
 house.
 So it can’t be that bad, though we took status away from your
 spouse.
 As a tax paying citizen,
 I don’t believe we should continue to support them.
 (“Incoming Poet” 00:04:25-00:04:49)

In “Reconcile Your State of Mind,” Thomas troubles the distinction between contemporary Canadians and historical injustices against Indigenous peoples. Moreover, she clearly associates what she sees as a problematic narrative of reconciliation with narrow economic thinking, presenting alternatives to “a budget and a timeline for reconciliation” (32), and concluding,

Canada has spent enough money,
 Checked all the right boxes,
 All of our accounts have been compiled,
 Our “perks” and “benefits” beguiled.
 Congratulations, Canada,
 You have finally reconciled this nation’s state of mind
 So that in the face of our suffering
 You will always turn a blind eye. (48-55)

Here Thomas highlights the hypocrisy characterizing a reconciliation that, as Justice describes, has been divorced from a more robust and complete understanding of “truth and reconciliation” (158). Her wry description of Canada’s version of reconciliation also reflects an approach to addressing historical injustice that Matt James calls “neoliberal heritage redress,” wherein histories of racist injustice are “reinscrib[ed] . . . as signposts of national progress and triumph” (“Neoliberal” 37-38). Celebrations of transformed attitudes are accompanied by neoliberal logics that inhibit possibilities for exposing and

challenging present racist wrongdoing by dismissing the reality of structural inequality and redefining social ills as the purview of the private sphere.

At the same time, processes established to address Indigenous peoples' grievances that are touted as increasing self-determination and self-sufficiency, such as the devolution of child welfare policy (MacDonald), skills training programs (Gordon 102), or land claims agreements (Coulthard ch. 2), can actually run counter to "meaningful autonomy for Indigenous peoples" and even create additional obstacles to achieving such autonomy and new forms of marginalization (MacDonald 257-58). These processes, however, are often lauded as reconciliation in action, showing proof of the progress of a society thus marked as distinct from the one responsible for the harms that necessitated such processes in the first place — an example of what Henderson labels "neoliberal auto-critique" ("The Camp" 73). The result, Pauline Wakeham suggests, is an approach to reconciliation that "works to secure a belief in a national imaginary of Canadian civility that overwrites power asymmetries and gross inequities" as it "sidestep[s] material compensation and structural change with vague rhetorical gestures that pronounce national healing" (210, 211). Justice points to the gap between Indigenous conceptions of reconciliation as meaningful transformation through "an active and ongoing relationship" and a version of reconciliation as "a one-time process that made financial amends, a few good speeches, and then moved on to business as usual," noting that the rhetoric of reconciliation has been particularly skewed when it is used to promote exploitative resource extraction or hard-right religious agendas (158-59). For Justice, "Without truth . . . reconciliation can only be a surrender to the status quo, as it's devoid of the accountability that comes from hearing, embracing, and answering to the truth" (158). Thomas's poem embodies this critique by positioning a bureaucratic box-checking, account-settling reconciliation as justification for the continued denial and ignorance of ongoing injustices against Indigenous peoples and lands.

Thomas's poems also highlight that integration into a capitalist economy premised on resource extraction is not a solution to past injustice, violates Indigenous understandings of and relationships with land, and will only lead to calamity. In "#WaterIsLife," Thomas stresses, powerfully punctuating her message with rhyme, that

Grandmother water knows the severity of where we are at.
 Because a simple shift in syntax has a dramatic impact.
 From kin to resource and earth to shale,
 There is a common misbelief that our future is somehow up for sale.
 Stale promises of job creation and economies,
 Have taken precedence over easy facts like if you cut us we bleed.
 (4-9)

This theme reappears often in her poems. Thomas draws an unambiguous line between the wellness of Indigenous lands and the wellness of Indigenous bodies,¹³ as she writes in a 2015 poem entitled “What Am I Supposed to Think?”:

And while our sinister Prime Minister bathes in the oily black,
 He fracks behind our backs,
 Polluting the waters,
 Leaving nothing for our sons and daughters.
 It's our life's blood flowing through an artery, once sliced can't be
 cautered. (00:00:32-00:00:44)

The perspective presented in these poems resonates with the above critiques of how states might support Indigenous culture as a source of healing when doing so decreases dependence on a neoliberal state that seeks cost reductions but not healing or culture that asserts Indigenous jurisdiction and self-determination or challenges the free-market economy and its resource development agenda. Rather, the neoliberal state favours a construction of Indigenous cultural rights wherein, by participating in resource extraction or in other forms of marketizing land through conservation and tourism, Indigenous people are integrated into the market (Altamirano-Jiménez 81).¹⁴ For Million, this approach is more about adapting to capitalism than about moving out from under the forces that caused the trauma: “This healing would occur while capitalist development might still displace one or require one's land — a little like accepting being bandaged by your armed assailant while he is still ransacking your house” (106). Meanwhile, neoliberal reconciliation asks non-Indigenous Canadians to cast aside stereotypes about Indigenous people but not the colonial system from which these stereotypes sprang and in which they remain embedded (George 53; McLeod 18). Although reconciliation can have other, more substantive, meanings for repairing relationships, Coulthard argues that championing a reconciliation aimed at making Indigenous nationhoods compatible with the

sovereignty of the Canadian state and its attendant neoliberal agenda undermines reconciliation within and between Indigenous communities and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (106-07). As it stands, “The healing narrative within reconciliation and the nation-state’s actual agenda do not coincide” (Million 163), and our visions of the forms that our relationships with each other and the land could and should take are produced and constrained by the logics and workings of neoliberalism (McCready 165).

Reimagining Relationships

After highlighting the dangers of neoliberal reconciliation, Thomas points to an alternative that is amenable to decolonization where neoliberal reconciliation is not. Turning from our misdeeds as relatives and ancestors, she contemplates Justice’s fourth question, about “living together within the context of autonomous identities in relationship” (158). Thomas emphasizes that there are other ways in which we could live together:

We have a right to this land.
 And so do you.
 It’s true.
 But it’s not ours, you see?
 Nor is it our majesty’s.
 To our kids it belongs.
 And their kids.
 And their kids’ kids,
 Seven generations strong.
 Meet the challenge head on,
 So we can experience a new dawn.
 A dawn on a day where peace and friendship is the way
 We interact,
 React,
 When we enact our right not to crack the earth open.
 (“Rebecca Thomas — What Am I” 00:01:27-00:01:52)

For Thomas, meaningful change comes not from integrating Indigenous people into the neoliberal economy and allowing them to benefit more fully from resource extraction, but from respecting their right to refuse such initiatives. There is a reconciliatory vision here, but one rooted in treaty, not in assimilation, or in whichever neoliberal euphemism it is

currently couched. She concludes, “So let me tell you what I think. / It’s time to act out the treaty ink / And link / Our futures” (00:02:58-00:03:08). This is a call for concatenation, but as Maracle notes, the stories and structures of colonialism continue to stymie the possibility of enacting such linking (248-49). In concluding “A Creation Story,” Thomas reinvokes the invitation to reimagine and renew, stating that Canada, which she describes as blind to anything but its own outlook, “continues to pull power from the broken body of Mother Earth. It continues to feed off our spirits through neglect and hopelessness. But all is not lost. Because it is blind, it can be led to where we want to take it. The story is not over. Will you help us write the next chapter?” She reminds the audience that, in addition to being a physical space and a legal-political apparatus, Canada is a narrative, and stories can change direction. Indeed, it is vital that they do so, for “*the dominant colonial stories about kinship are designed to destroy Indigenous peoples’ ties to our homelands, to one another, and to our other-than-human relatives, and ultimately serve to transform those lands into exploitable resources and diverse peoples into memories*” (Justice 84). Indigenous people often emphasize that stories are gifts accompanied by reciprocal responsibilities (Robinson and Martin 4-5). Thomas invites her audience not to be passive recipients of the story that she is telling but to become active participants in writing the story and ensuring that it takes a different turn. However audience members choose to respond to this story and this invitation, Thomas King’s oft-repeated phrase from *The Truth about Stories* is pertinent here: “Do with it what you will. . . . But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (29).

Reconciliation as neoliberalism runs counter to what Indigenous scholars have laid out as requirements for decolonization. The colonial history that underpins Canada has relied simultaneously on processes of forced exclusion and forced inclusion of Indigenous peoples, and decolonization requires reckoning with the legacies of both policies and their ongoing forms. The project of neoliberal reconciliation presents a response, from one ideological perspective, to one aspect of colonial wrongdoing — social and economic exclusion — but ignores the other. As Joyce Green explains, limiting our understanding of equality to inclusion is tantamount to advocating assimilation, for it rests on assumptions that the “economic, political and social frameworks” of set-

tler-colonial states “contain the conditions *to which* Indigenous peoples are to be equal” — a recurrent rationale for “legitimat[ing] the colonial predations of settler states and their subsequent objectives of elimination of Indigenous peoples via assimilation” (“From Colonialism” 27; emphasis added). This is particularly problematic because the reconciliatory inclusion on offer is inclusion in a capitalist economy rooted in resource extraction from Indigenous territories, which, as Indigenous scholars and activists constantly emphasize, violates Indigenous understandings of relationships between people and land and is complicit in Indigenous dispossession, thus continuing the colonial relationship in a new form (Coulthard 6; George 53-54). This runs counter to the assertion that “decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted” (Tuck and Yang 7). Reconciliatory approaches “that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all,” constitute “settler moves to innocence,” which not only are not innocent but also work in opposition to substantive efforts toward decolonization (10). Thinking through how to remedy the two prongs of colonial policy, forced exclusion and forced inclusion, must involve engaging with the determinations of Indigenous nations about how and when they will exercise autonomy and how and when they will seek inclusion within the Canadian polity (MacDonald 267). A neoliberal agenda — perpetuated by state or private actors — should not be allowed to usurp these determinations. These are the considerations that Thomas asks the parties to reckon with in imagining and enacting a transformation of relationships, a reconciliation that is not about turning the page on past harms while turning a blind eye to ongoing injustices but about Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples being good relatives to each other and the lands that we share and good ancestors to future generations.

Conclusion

Contesting neoliberal reconciliation requires interrogating the conceptual confusion clouding the term “reconciliation,” the structures and pressures of neoliberalism, and the interactions between the two. In *Anne of Tim Hortons*, Wyile notes that “any consideration of the his-

tory of Atlantic Canada must be attentive to the structures of power within which the political, economic, and social achievements of the region took shape: the larger context of colonialism, the history of slavery, and the dynamics of global capital” (234). He also asserts that such reconsiderations of history “compel us to look to the present and future with a similar attention,” to “address the continuing presence of racism and bigotry in the region, [and] to confront the implications of its settler-invader heritage” within efforts to understand and resist the pressures of neoliberal globalization (234). This kind of critical politics is also imperative for engaging with the debates and processes that fall under the aegis of “reconciliation” in Canada today. As we consider the profound questions raised by Indigenous peoples’ claims for redress and what is required to enact a meaningful transformation of relationships, it is important to reflect critically on what Jonathan Dewar has called “the currency that is reconciliation discourse in Canada” (163). If the language of reconciliation and its attendant logics is a kind of currency — it is current, it has purchasing power — then what is it buying? For whom? At what cost?

Far from enacting a substantive transformation of relationships and relational structures away from the structural domination and systemic discrimination that gave rise to past historical injustices, the discourse of reconciliation — when paired with neoliberal logics of individualism, economic supremacy and a fixation on capital accumulation, depoliticization, and the denial of social structure — can in fact be complicit in perpetuating harmful structures of assimilation and exploitation in new forms. In response, non-Indigenous Canadians ought to reflect on what individual and collective healing is required in order to be capable of stepping away from neoliberal reconciliation and of engaging in a more substantive form of decolonization. Decolonization requires changing institutional and social power relations in order to redress physical, structural, and epistemological violence, support Indigenous cultural and political regeneration, end ongoing colonial violence, and foster and maintain accountability of the perpetrators and collective beneficiaries of historical injustice and settler colonialism toward Indigenous peoples and lands (Simpson, *Dancing* 22-24). The path toward decolonization is not simply, then, as Altamirano-Jiménez shows, through commodifying Indigenous peoples’ relationships to the land, whether through resource extraction or through tourism. As Thomas emphasizes, the model for a

path toward a good relationship lies in the framework offered by treaty relationships.

Neoliberalism and its attendant assumptions about individualism and private property, as McCready notes, “like the imperial modes of dispossession that came before it,” are not compatible with, and cannot meaningfully make room for, other epistemologies and modes of political and economic governance (184). As Simpson puts it, “we’ve all been bathed in a vat of cognitive imperialism” (*Dancing* 32). She is referring to being Indigenous in the contemporary context, but non-Indigenous people have also been steeped in colonial thinking and the logics of neoliberalism. Challenging these logics in thought and deed includes, but is not limited to, asking how the pressures of neoliberalism shape the lives of non-Indigenous people — not just with respect to their adverse impacts within the context of a Western capitalist liberal democracy (on which there is extensive scholarship) but also with respect to how neoliberalism constrains settler relations to Indigenous peoples and lands. Settler colonialism might “deriv[e] its reproductive force . . . from its ability to produce *forms of life* that make [its] constitutive hierarchies seem natural” (Coulthard 152), but it is not in fact natural. Colonialism and neoliberalism are choices, and not incontestable ones, but contesting them requires understanding how they work and how they work on people. To repair relations, it is important to understand how the relationship — as it is and has been — has affected and is affecting those with whom we are in relation (people and land).

Indigenous art and literature,¹⁵ like Thomas’s poetry, offer some critical first steps by connecting readers with stories of Indigenous people’s experiences as well as with their understandings of relationality and with non-neoliberal understandings of decolonization. Thomas’s poems invite her audience to consider these elements and their implications for life together in Mi’kma’ki. As Maracle writes, “Relationship between listeners and the subjects of story becomes possible if the listeners can study the story, see themselves in the story, and transform themselves or their society” (245). In the face of an individualizing neoliberal society that pressures us all to be concerned above all with our own competitiveness, Thomas’s poems invite consideration of the limitations of neoliberal reconciliation for Indigenous peoples, for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples’ relationships with each other and with the land, and of the dangers that our society’s current trajectory poses to

the well-being and continued survival of all who live here. With enough courage, humility, and dialogue, it might be possible to determine and challenge the ways in which Canadian thought has been steeped in colonial and neoliberal logics, turn away from neoliberal reconciliation, and look for a path toward “a future that accommodates us all on terms we freely choose” (Green, “Introduction” 13).

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NOTES

¹ My understanding of Mi'kmaw spelling comes from Trudy Sable and Bernie Francis's *The Language of This Land, Mi'kma'ki*. Sable and Francis explain that “The word Mi'kmaq is plural and is also used when referring to the whole nation. . . . Mi'kmaw is the singular and adjectival form of Mi'kmaq. . . . It is also used to refer to the language itself” (16). I am still learning the nuances though, and any errors are my own.

² For a few recent examples, see King, *Back*; Rogers; and Simpson, *Islands* and *This Accident*.

³ Videos of Thomas's performances can be found on YouTube.

⁴ For example, Thomas performed her poem about General Cornwallis, “Not Perfect,” at Halifax City Hall in an effort to persuade city council to reconsider how he is memorialized in public spaces (Boon).

⁵ See the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Accounts of Indigenous-settler relations specific to Mi'kma'ki can be found, among others, in J. Battiste; M. Battiste; and Paul. For a literary engagement, see Marshall.

⁶ For more on neoliberalism, see Abu-Laban and Gabriel; Braedley and Luxton; Brown; and Saad-Filho and Johnston. More generally, see the work of Janine Brodie, Henry Giroux, Jane Jensen, and Susan Phillips, among others.

⁷ On the ascent of the term in Canadian media discourse, see James, “Changing.”

The term “reconciliation” also features prominently in the rhetoric of the current Liberal government (CIRNAC 2018).

⁸ With one exception, all of the poems referenced in this article come from online sources, and as such, all of the citations for the poem excerpts refer to line numbers in the instance of text versions and time in the case of videos. I have likewise cited line numbers for “Reconcile Your State of Mind”; the page numbers for the poem can be found in the Works Cited. Text versions of the poems are no longer available on Facebook; however, performances of most of them can be seen on YouTube.

⁹ “Mi’kma’ki, the territory of the Mi’kmaq, includes the island of Newfoundland, all of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, much of New Brunswick and the Gaspé, and part of northeastern Maine” (Sable and Francis 16).

¹⁰ My thanks to Jennifer Henderson for sharing this observation.

¹¹ I am also grateful to Jennifer Henderson for suggesting that I consider the role of personification in this poem.

¹² For historical context, see Tattrie.

¹³ See Women’s Earth Alliance and Native Youth Sexual Health Network.

¹⁴ For a critical analysis of the problematic characteristics and asymmetrical power relations underpinning tourism, see the chapter “Rebuffing the Gaze” in Wylie, *Anne*.

¹⁵ It is important, however, for non-Indigenous readers to have a foundational understanding of the history of colonialism. As Jennifer Hardwick details, lacking such context weakens the receptivity of non-Indigenous people to different epistemologies and challenges to the colonial histories that they have been taught and heightens the risk of them misconstruing the substance of Indigenous literary works.

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