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Action, Feeling, Form: The Aesthetics of Care in Tracey Lindberg's *Birdie*

Kait Pinder

In her acclaimed first novel, *Birdie* (2015), Tracey Lindberg (Cree) examines how care shapes the lives of Indigenous women in Canada. Released in the same week as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's *Final Report*, the novel participates in the discourse of reconciliation through its critique of the ways in which colonial models of care regularly produce asymmetrical power relationships by emphasizing the compassion of settler Canadians and the suffering of Indigenous peoples.[1] As David Garneau (Métis) has argued, such models uphold the "scopophilic" tastes of the colonizing culture (23), which takes pleasure in looking at Indigenous pain.[2] The dominant colonial model also asserts the superiority of the "caring nation" (DeFalco 18), which defines itself through its compassionate response to the suffering it creates. Lindberg counters this limiting and harmful model with a fuller one that is a form of resistance and a generative force, a set of actions and feelings that create new networks of relations between family members and nations in the novel. After situating *Birdie* within the discourse of reconciliation in Canada and the wider field of the ethics of care, I draw on Ben Highmore's conception of "taste-feelings" and Elena Pulcini's arguments about the role care plays in the ethical work of world-making to analyze Lindberg's *aesthetics* of care as it is expressed in her attention to taste, affect, and form, as well as her use of original compound words, or "fullwords." Lindberg's aesthetics not only critiques the failings of colonial models of care and illuminates more generative alternatives to them, but also exemplifies how literature contributes to the ethics of care at the level of its form.

The ethical response to a person in need structures *Birdie*'s plot, invokes the wider cultural context of the novel's publication, and illuminates the complex feelings that link aesthetic experience and literary taste. In fact, Lindberg represents the generative habits and potential transformations that result from good care through images of food and fullness. The novel begins with a description of Maggie, Birdie's moth-

er who has disappeared, surrounded by celebrating spirits (1). Maggie "reaches out and touches one, is lit up, feels her littlebigwomandaughter/mother and knows the love by heart. The sensation is one of satiation: full and fed" (1). Maggie's contact with the familial love that leaves her full starkly contrasts with the image of a diminishing *Pimatisewin*, the tree of life, or the good life.[3] In the first dream of the novel, Birdie discovers the Frugal Gourmet in Vancouver, and "*He points outside to* Pimatisewin *and says to her in Cree, 'She needs some tiramisu'*" (3). The Frugal Gourmet's advice both prescribes care — feed the tree — and describes its effects through the compound word that names the Italian dessert: *tiramisu* — lift me up. Later, Birdie, seemingly unconscious, sunken into the memories of her traumatic young life (17), and remembering Maggie, is described as having a "palate for pain . . . [that] is well developed. She recognizes the flavour in her mouth as bitter and dull. It tastes like defeat" (41). Like the tree, Birdie needs some *tiramisu* to replace the pain that has caused her to sink. While these are only three of many similar images in the novel, they demonstrate the kind of attention Lindberg endorses, what that attention responds to, and its direction. Love between relations and its nurturing actions make life *full* and lift up the novel's characters. As the women who look after Birdie while she sinks demonstrate, care also enables her to go down and to recover a better story to tell, one that satiates a different palate, develops a different taste.

Birdie's recovery follows the arc of healing and growth outlined by Cree scholar Michael Anthony Hart: it foregrounds self-knowledge, individual responsibility, and interdependence in family and community as it aims for *Pimatisewin* (95-96). While Birdie lies "ragemember[ing]" (155) her life — her sexual abuse, homelessness, time in the care of a white family (142), her stay at a sanatorium — her aunt Val, cousin Freda, and Lola, a white woman who employs Birdie in the bakery above which she lives, gather to tend to the woman they believe is dying. Birdie's apparent illness thus creates a feminine network that accommodates her "shift" from a victim to an "*otâcimow*: a Storyteller" (241). Although Lindberg sets the ordinary care of "the women [Birdie] loves" (102) against the extraordinary circumstances of her illness, Birdie's recovery links their actions and affection to her new position as a Storyteller who has the power to help the tree of life return to fullness: Birdie awakes both with a recipe for "strong medicine" for

Pimatisewin (243), who has been "waiting to be fed, to have nations unite in one place" (247), and with "a story to tell" (250). In this image of a Storyteller's gathering of nations as a restorative for life, Lindberg's novel connects her vulnerable protagonist's recovery to larger questions about care between nations in Canada. Moreover, Birdie's transformation into a Storyteller with healing powers further underlines literature's potential to reimagine national narratives of care.

The Contexts of Care

The publication of *Birdie* in the same week as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)'s *Final Report* in 2015 has inevitably invited many readers to see the novel as playing an important role in Canada's reconciliation project. Although Lindberg has called the publication of the two texts in the same week a "coincidence" (qtd. in Fortin), her emphasis on care, relation, and storytelling nonetheless contributes to the ongoing discussion of literature's role in realizing the "compassionate and humanitarian society" (qtd. in TRC 20) that the Commission has emphasized as one of reconciliation's aims.[4] While the *Final Report* upholds the popular image of a caring Canada as it endorses reading Indigenous literature as a means of education, healing, and resistance (179), *Birdie* critiques that image and celebrates the healing and resistance that instead result from redefined aesthetic forms of relation and response.

The model of care offered in the TRC's *Final Report* remains tied to the powerful notions of pride invoked by Canada's reputation as a compassionate country. In the *Report*'s first chapter, "The challenge of reconciliation," its authors note the image of Canada as a nation-state with a "beneficent" history as one of the readily available "barriers to reconciliation in the twenty-first century" (19). Even as the authors acknowledge this image as a "challenge," however, they continue to rely on it to motivate "all of Canada" to participate in the process of reconciliation "not only to resolve the ongoing conflicts between Aboriginal peoples and institutions of the country but also to remove a stain from Canada's past so that it can maintain its claim to be a leader in the protection of human rights among the nations of the world" (19). The *Report*'s presentation of Canada's history of colonialism as a "stain" on an otherwise unsoiled claim of international humanitarian beneficence

upholds what Amelia DeFalco has called "the caring nation hypothesis" (18), which offers an ideological construction of Canadian identity built on the rather optimistic supposition that "collectivity and responsibility are deeply embedded within [Canadian] national history and culture" (17). As Sarah Ahmed has shown in her analysis of reconciliation in the Australian context, this hypothesis may remain consistent with a national identity even during a process that exposes the colonial violence that has been done in that nation's name: "national shame can be a mechanism for reconciliation as self-reconciliation, in which the 'wrong' that was committed provides the grounds for claiming a national identity, for restoring a pride that is threatened in the moment of recognition, and then regained in the capacity to bear witness" (109). This logic is indeed at work in the *Final Report*, which goes on to claim that "no Canadian can take pride in this country's treatment of Aboriginal peoples" (20). By mobilizing shame, pride's opposite, the authors invite Canadians to participate in the cycle of self-reconciliation that Ahmed outlines, by which the "stain" of Canada's history of colonialism is removed precisely by the ability of Canadians to see it, through their recognition of the colonial violence of the Residential School System as integral to Canada's history and their willingness to bear witness to the survivors' testimonies which are also included in the *Final Report*. In this test of the "caring nation hypothesis," evidence of its most obvious failure is transformed into a confirmation of its validity. Having removed the "stain" themselves, Canadians may now take a more intimate pride in their compassionate cultural identity. In this way the nation's pride in its own compassion reaffirms the superiority of the colonizing nation and its citizens.

As many of its critics have argued, for these and other reasons, reconciliation in Canada remains a colonial endeavour.[5] For example, David Garneau's attention to Indigenous art and the aesthetic dimensions of witnessing in the events held by the TRC uncovers the scopophilic character of "the colonial narrative," which sees the "public display of private (Native) pain" as leading "to individual and national healing" (35). As Garneau notes, such displays can perpetuate colonial oppression: "The public theatre of individual Indigenous people in distress is a familiar dominant culture trope designed to humiliate and contain all Indigenous people" (37). Garneau illuminates the relationship between the process of the nation's "self-reconciliation" that Ahmed outlines

and the *aesthetic* experience of witnessing suffering. It might be that, like Birdie, colonial nations such as Canada and Australia also have a well-cultivated "palate for pain," or an aesthetic taste for suffering, which perversely allows them to recover their compassionate national identities through their appreciation for the artistic representation of Indigenous pain.

In the place of an aesthetics of suffering, *Birdie* develops an aesthetics of care that is fuller, more reciprocal, and more generative than the scopophilic style of the colonial alternatives. As recent work on the ethics of care by Joan Tronto, Elena Pulcini, Sandra Laugier, and DeFalco, among others, illuminates, "care has many meanings" (Tronto ix) and takes many forms. Thus, while power relations emerge within any caring relationship, we should not feel bound to models that exploit pain in order to oppress the individuals or groups who suffer. As DeFalco notes, "in its broadest sense, care is affection, devotion, responsibility, even obligation; it is action, behaviour, motivation, and practice: care feels and care does" (5). Given that "care is not only a disposition, but also a practical and moral action inspired by emotions and feelings," we must interrogate the feelings associated with it, because different feelings will produce different models of action (Pulcini, "What" 65). Therefore, while the colonial narrative of reconciliation may produce feelings which, building into sentiments of national pride that rest on Indigenous suffering, recapitulate colonial power, attention to the intersections between *Birdie* and current work in the ethics of care illuminates the ways in which the novel develops alternative and more generative models of relation and responsibility through its focus on the feelings that both motivate Birdie's recovery and develop through it.

Moreover, Lindberg's recasting of care in her novel offers a crucial perspective on literature's potential to *move* its readers to moral action through an affective response. In fact, Lindberg has tentatively suggested that, like care, art (and narrative in particular) connects action and feeling. "Maybe that's what art can offer us, in term[s] of change," she said in Thunder Bay, "that we can change one heart at a time. Maybe we've been too mindful. We've been thinking about changing people's minds and dictating through law and legislation where people go. Maybe it's actually about changing the way people feel" (qtd. in Alex). Lindberg's attention to what "care does" as well as to what and how it "feels" for and in the lives of Indigenous women expands the

language of both feeling and relation, generating an aesthetic taste for fullness that attends to suffering without fetishizing it.

Formalizing Care

In their attention to the everyday lives of particular people, the ethics of care and the novel genre appear to be natural companions. As Sandra Laugier explains, the ethics of care "is not founded on universal principles but rather starts from experiences of everyday life and the moral problems of real people in their ordinary lives" (223). In fact, Laugier's description of her field as "draw[ing] our attention to the ordinary, to what we are unable to see, to what is right before our eyes and is for this very reason invisible to us" (218) also highlights the ethical work of Lindberg's novel, which illuminates the acts and sentiments of care that the abstract image of the "caring nation" renders invisible. Lindberg's revelatory aesthetic attention emphasizes the incredible stakes of the real invisibility of Indigenous women in one of its dedications: "To all of the mothers and little mothers, sisters and cousins who are murdered, missing, disappeared or who feel invisible. We are one. We are with you. We are family" (n.pag.). By attending to the all-too-commonplace invisibility of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls, Lindberg challenges the definition of care implicit in the dominant Canadian ideology, which, in the words of DeFalco, "obscures a serious legacy of exclusion, prejudice, and neglect" (20). The temporal orientation of this ideology, which focuses its concern on the historical injustices of the residential schools, obfuscates the ongoing and intergenerational traumas of colonialism.[6] In order to address care of and for Indigenous women in the present contexts of "the shared and infested boiling pot of colonization" (Lindberg, "Not" 351), Lindberg has taken a formal turn from the legal and academic genres in which she normally works to an everyday genre with a wider readership — the novel.

In fact, Lindberg has described her turn to fiction as an attempt to consider different questions: "What happens when [reciprocal obligations] are broken, and how do you rebuild? Well, that is a narrative" (qtd. in Keeler). DeFalco similarly argues that literature can offer a nuanced perspective on the ethics of care often missing in philosophical discussions, precisely because "literature . . . can convey ethical dilemmas more meaningfully infused with the subjectivity and particularity

that complicate straightforward 'right' or 'superior' moral reasoning" (24). In the case of Lindberg's novel, literature also exposes the malicious assumptions that can inform the good intentions of colonial models of care. Critical of these models and sensitive to the vulnerability of the Indigenous women who respond to the suffering around them, *Birdie* certainly complicates any easy promotion of care as a straightforward answer to the pain of Birdie and her family. Rather, care is often a burden that demands physical and emotional sacrifice: for example, the responsibilities the women in Birdie's family take on "cost them posture and emotional affluence" (*Birdie* 30). At other times, care workers of the state fetishize suffering, as when the paramedics who are called to help Birdie when she is homeless and displaying wounds from the fire that killed her uncle are disappointed to find that although she is Indigenous, she is neither in pain nor dead (98), or when Birdie's sympathetic, white foster family misunderstands her stockpiling of food in preparation for her future independence as evidence of her starvation in the past (143). While Lindberg brings out the complicated practices of care and their failures that are in play in Birdie's life, her novel nonetheless focuses on a positive redefinition of care as a feeling and an action that aids Birdie, and that through its revelation of new networks of relation and its patience with Birdie's complex affective states cuts against models that focus exclusively on sacrifice, fetishize suffering, or fail to recognize the negative emotions and actions that may be diffused within such relationships.

The literary representation of care further illuminates not only the complications (and failings) of "'superior' moral reasoning" (Defalco 24), but also the *formal* properties of care. That is, the revelatory ways in which care not only acts and feels, but also takes and gives *form*, shaping the very actions and feelings we have come to associate with it. Here, I am invoking Caroline Levine's recent definition of form as "all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of difference and repetition" (3), to examine how the literary representation of care can elucidate the details that remain obscure in both its philosophical representations and in the ideological image of a compassionate Canada. For example, the body is perhaps the clearest medium through which care (or its absence) takes and gives form: in the hunched postures of the women burdened by "over-responsibility" (*Birdie* 30); in Maggie's small, exhausted body "propping up" and "taking care" of the family around

her (88) until she disappears altogether; in Birdie's body, still and silent, but "filled with a mix of emotions and feelings: hurt, pain, longing, love and remorse" (39); in the shrunken shape of *Pimatisewin*, dying from a lack of benevolent attention. Furthermore, as Lindberg suggests in her explanation of her turn to the novel, narrative is a form in which other forms meet, conflicting with and potentially transforming each other. Borrowing the language of "affordance" — "a term used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs" (Levine 6) — from design theory, Levine explains that "what narrative form affords is a careful attention to the ways in which forms come together, and to what happens when and after they meet" (19). Reading care in its many forms can reveal how different models take shape and conflict with each other — for example, how the image of Birdie lying silent, receiving the attention of the women she loves, allows her to recall the past care that has contributed to her current condition. By adopting the "sensitivity to the 'details'" (Laugier 224) that both Laugier and Levine endorse, I hope to demonstrate that critical attention to these instances of care can become a form of care, one that may positively contribute to a shift in the literary tastes of the "caring nation."

Care Acts

For the women who look after Birdie while she "shifts," care is a protective and generative action: their labour reduces Birdie's pain and creates a new network of familial relations. It is also reciprocal, as each woman undergoes her own shift, changing through her relation to both Birdie and the other women. Birdie's recovery is possible because Val, Freda, and Lola sustain her while she confronts the traumas of her past. Their actions are ordinary: sharing her home and business with Birdie's family, Lola brings the women together; all three women bring Birdie food, they sit with her, talk to her; and Val rubs bear grease into Birdie's scars (*Birdie* 117). These actions not only nurture Birdie, they protect her: "The three women moving around her generate some sort of resistance that allows her to travel back and forth (Now and Then, Here and There) without much pain" (157). In this electrical image, Birdie's body functions as a circuit through which her spirit moves between the past and the present. The actions of the women around Birdie create a form of physical and emotional insulation, protecting

her from destructive outbursts of energy and pain. The relative safety this provides produces much of the content of the novel, allowing Birdie to recall the past. Measuring the opposition to an electrical current, resistance in a circuit controls the amount of energy flowing through it. In Lindberg's image, the actions of the women around Birdie generate resistance through their opposition to the pain and trauma flowing through her. Resistance, however, is not only reactive, it is also productive: the energy it creates through friction can light a lamp or heat a room, for example.[7] Here, the positive care of Lola, Val, and Freda counters the negative energy of Birdie's memories, making it possible for Birdie to illuminate the fullness of life for herself and, eventually, others. In the framing narrative of the novel, then, care takes the form of a circuit — here, Birdie's body, a form of apparent enclosure as it lies still and silent, transforms into a closed circuit, a form that is contained but not constrictive, bounded but also generative.

The women included in Birdie's circuit also become a "makeshift family" (205) as their actions and attention create not only resistance, but also a network of relations that acknowledges their shared vulnerability and reveals kindness. Although each woman changes through her relation to both Birdie and the others, Lola's inclusion in Birdie's "madefamily" (245) is notable in part because she is the only member who is not already part of Birdie's family. Lola is a type that Birdie has encountered before: "Sure, her name was different and sometimes she was even a he, but it was the same person. Lolas were almost always fascinated because they had never met an Indian before" (9). Lola's relationship with Birdie at first replicates a familiar power structure in which Lola, a settler who is also Birdie's employer and landlord, draws on racist tropes which cast Birdie as a suffering Other and affirm Lola's own position as superior in relation to her tenant's. For example, reflecting on Lola's stereotypical understanding of her, Birdie thinks: "*I wonder how fascinated she'd be if she knew that I'd been fucked before I was eleven. . . . That I smoked pot every day; that I have read every Jackie Collins novel ever written — even the bad ones. Nope, that dying savage thing is what floats her boat*" (9). Lola thus initially exemplifies a position that hollows Birdie's life into a fetishized image of Indigenous suffering — the "*dying savage*" — which in turn allows her to withdraw from knowledge of and responsibility to real Indigenous people. When Birdie seems to be fulfilling that dangerous cliché, however, it is neither

excitement nor smug satisfaction that rises from Lola, but the kindness of her "really big heart" (9). While Lola still habitually thinks about her guests in the racist images available to the settler imagination, Lindberg underlines how her care for Birdie brings out her kindness and love, and in turn reveals a deeper connection to both her tenant and her family. For example, Lola can sometimes (and unknowingly) speak to Birdie in Cree, a surprise that Birdie receives as a "gift" (55), and, hearing the drumming of the pow wow that Birdie is remembering, Lola appears connected to Birdie's "thinkfeeling" (66) state that her care for Birdie's body supports and sustains, even though she does not understand it. Lola's compassion thus transforms her, connecting her more deeply to Birdie and her family and allowing her to share in the power of Birdie's recovery.

Lindberg has said that "Lola is metaphorically Canada. . . . She is a little bit of a bigot at times, but she's loving and kind and well-intentioned and she's good" (qtd. in Alex). Through Lola's inclusion in Birdie's family, then, Lindberg also points to the potential transformation of settler Canada through a reciprocal caring relation among all survivors of what she has called the "bomb" of colonialism (qtd. in Keeler). Notably, once Birdie enters her shift, Lola tends to her in a way that is inspired by neither the pride nor the shame associated with the "caring nation," but by her acknowledgement of a similarity between Birdie and herself — "Lola . . . sees something in [Birdie] that reflects in both of their mirrors. Survivor" — and by her heartfelt obligation to "The Kid [who] touches on a place that she had forgotten existed" (*Birdie* 113). As Lola cares for Birdie, she also experiences a shift in her own self-understanding. Now she "sees [her white friends'] cruelty and deplores the mirror image in herself," favouring, instead, "the way she looks when she sees her reflection in how Bernice looks at her. . . . It moves her. A different woman. A different Lola. Quiet kindness and soft intelligence meets harsh observations and boiling wit" (112). If Lola may be read as representative of Canada, her transformation through her response to Birdie has important consequences for the perspective settler Canadians take toward Indigenous suffering. Lola's caring acts reveal her kindness, transforming it from a latent potentiality or a characteristic of her past into a positive affect that is shared between the members of her new family; it is not a trait of possession, something that belongs to Lola as compassion belongs to the nation in the colonial model, but

a gift that is created through and exists only in relation. In the hands of Birdie's family, care thus generates unexpected kinships and protective resistance; the women's ordinary actions hint at the extraordinary connections that can open through kindness.

Care Feels

> The words are frothy and full. Unintelligible and edible.
> — *Birdie* 245

The care of the women around Birdie also accommodates the affective register of her shift. Val, Freda, and Lola enable Birdie to develop her "sensepowers" (60), to "feel things as she needs to" (68), and, importantly, "to feel her past without experiencing it" (50). Lindberg's attention to the deep connection between Birdie's body, spirit, and emotions illuminates how care feels to the person in need. In fact, the novel positions care as structuring a particular form of *aesthetic* experience. Drawing on the work of Ben Highmore, Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō) and Keavy Martin return to Alexander Baumgarten's "earlier, pre-Kantian understanding of aesthetics as *sensory engagement*" (8-9). As Highmore explains, "for Baumgarten aesthetics was the field of sensate perception — the world perceived through what he called the 'lower cognitive faculties'" ("Bitter" 121). Furthermore, unlike "a Kantian definition of aesthetics premised upon the distanced judgment of the sublime and beautiful" (Robinson and Martin 9), Baumgarten's "aesthetics covers the terrain of both 'the vehement passions' (fear, grief, rapture, and so on) and the minor and major affects and emotions (humiliation, shame, envy, irritation, anxiety, disdain, surprise, and so forth)" (Highmore 121). Thus, while Kant's pervasive influence has accustomed scholars to thinking about aesthetics in terms of the fine judgements of a disinterested observer, Baumgarten's *aesthesis*, "sense perception" (Williams 31), returns to the very interested, sensory, and affective characteristics of our engagement with the world.[8] Indeed, such a return is necessary for a discussion of the aesthetics of care, precisely because care itself resists the disinterested character of the Kantian aesthetic experience and because Lindberg's aesthetics attends to the complex affective states — the co-mingling of the vehement passions with the minor and major affects — of Birdie's "shift" (168).

As Lindberg registers in her use of distinct neologisms to communicate her protagonist's growing "sensepowers," Birdie's "shift" — her

movement into the past and her eventual transformation in the present — is similarly sensory and affective. Birdie "thinkfeel[s]" (66) and "ragemember[s]" (155) her past; she notes the "fearanger" (61) of both her mother and Freda from within the shift and is moved by her "smell-memory" (89). Although Birdie's apparently unconscious state may suggest that she is "disconnected from the living," it makes her "even more intricately connected to life" (154), awakening her senses and preparing her to offer *Pimatisewin* the medicine it needs. Often synaesthetic — "she could . . . taste the colours of the sky" (83) — Birdie's "shift" "takes root in spirit first and body next. Her *kohkom* had mastered it as a woman, as one who could shift her shape and change her life. But for Bernice, the meaning is different. It's a shifting of yourself in your life" (168). As Birdie's transformation reconnects her body and spirit, it also allows her to "shift" within her life, to recover from her past abuses, to regain her body, to understand better the story that she has to tell, but not fundamentally to change her story's shape. Birdie's shift *within* her life thus suggests that while her recovery will result in her becoming a Storyteller, she will continue to feel a connection to her past, will even come to tell the story of that past. Lindberg's aesthetic description of Birdie's shift therefore emphasizes the very sensual character of recovery, privileging the feelings — made possible by the affection of the women around her — that aid Birdie in her understanding of her past without forcing her to relive it.

Lindberg's use of metaphors of taste to describe Birdie's desire for her shift further connects the physical sense of taste not only to the sustenance Birdie receives from her experience, but also to its historical association with aesthetic philosophy. At the beginning of her shift, Birdie "craves" the movement into the past itself: "the appetite she has is for the shift, and until that is met, she is pretty certain she will not need any more food" (26). From within the shift, Birdie feels hungry for the family that her condition will gather together; she is "hungry for . . . the women she loves. For the sounds of her language. For the peace of no introduction, no backstory, no explanation" (102). Later, she is "living through recall. Feeding herself memories" (162). As in the images of Maggie's "satiation" and *Pimatisewin*'s "*tiramisu*," Birdie's desire unites taste and healing. Birdie's spirit recovers through this diet of memory and family, and awakens with plans for a feast that will return the tree of life to its natural fullness. Put simply, Birdie's appetite for the shift

aids in her development of a taste for the process of her own recovery, one that counters her well-cultivated "palate for pain" with a desire for the fullness of life symbolized in *Pimatisewin*.

While Birdie's "taste" for her shift affirms the aesthetic character of her experience within it, it also points to the aesthetic judgement of Lindberg's novel. Because Birdie's shift accounts for much of the content of the novel and because Birdie's last word is that she "feel[s] like [she has] a story to tell" (250), we may read the story Birdie has to tell as the experience of her shift that the reader has already encountered, both in the primary plot of the novel and in the separate *pawatamowin* (dream) and *acimowin* (story) sequences that punctuate the present and past timelines. The connection between metaphors of taste and Birdie's story thus positions the novel to comment on the literary interests — the affects, attachments, and discernments that contribute to taste — of its readers, while Birdie's connection between taste and healing underlines the important role literary taste plays in the wider narratives of recovery associated with reconciliation in Canada.

Care crucially re-enters our consideration here, where Birdie's particular story becomes an allegory for the cultivation of literary tastes that will aid in a process of cultural healing — first because care has facilitated Birdie's own recovery, making it possible for her not only to undergo a "shift," but also to serve *Pimatisewin* and the family that has gathered around her, and second because the novel has been invoked by Lindberg and others[9] as a means of inspiring settler Canadians to shift their orientation toward Indigenous communities and issues. Recall Lindberg's suggestion that fiction in general and her novel in particular can provoke a change in how people *feel*. Similarly, she has also expressed her hope that the book "humanize[s] us, humanize[s] indigenous women, indigenous girls, so that in a way, we're thought of as relatives. Because you *care* about your relations. . . . You don't let your relatives get murdered or go missing" (qtd. in Keeler; emphasis added). Evoking care as both feeling — concern, affection — and action — to protect, to keep safe — Lindberg points to the controversial connection between the emotional involvement of the reader in fiction and her ethical action in the real world. Not only controversial, such a connection may be outright dangerous within the current ethos of Indigenous-settler relations, which, often invoking tales of Indigenous peoples' suffering to communicate the severity of their

oppression to non-Indigenous Canadians, may entice settler audiences to "over-identify with the other" and so to "collapse the distance that might otherwise . . . challenge their complicity in ongoing colonialism" (Robinson and Martin 12) or, to put it another way, may inspire audiences to "withdraw or rest within the easy space of empathy" (8), producing what Suzanne Keen has called "a cultural imperialism of the emotions" (148).[10] *Birdie*, however, theorizes a different kind of aesthetic response, not one of empathy — which, as Stephen Darwall explains, "can be consistent with the indifference of pure observation or even the cruelty of sadism" (261) — but one of care, which "underscore[s] the importance of relationships and interdependence" (Pulcini, "What" 64) without eliding concern for an other with identification with that other's subject position.

New scholarship in both aesthetics and the ethics of care interrogates the role feelings play in shaping not only our engagement with the world, but the world itself, and suggests that attention to these formative feelings can lead to more ethical relationships with people and the world. For Highmore, aesthetic taste "point[s] to the unfinished work of our own world-making" ("Taste" 560). Expanding on his earlier consideration of aesthetics as "sensate perception," in his recent essay, "Taste as Feeling," Highmore repositions taste to better unify it with affective experience and argues that it is "an agent that orchestrates sensibilities and that potentially alters our social environment . . . [,] generating new liberating possibilities and new 'coercive freedoms'" (548). "Taste-feelings" are thus "ways of attaching ourselves to sensorial worlds" (562). That is, in our orientation toward certain aesthetic experiences, we participate in making the very world that engages us. Precisely because tastes intervene in the world, "we need to examine the shape that [they] take; the way that they are freighted with feeling; the way that they are carried on the backs of particular 'ethoses' while simultaneously shaping them" (561). In his conclusion, Highmore turns to the ethical potential of his reformulation of taste, using its involvement in "world-making" to argue that we need now "to foster new taste-feelings that will require us to attune ourselves toward the world in less environmentally destructive ways" (563). Taste thus takes on a new ethical dimension, not in the Kantian terms of good judgement and transcendental reason, but in terms of attachment and engagement — care, in other words.

In her recent work, Pulcini similarly emphasizes care's ethical role

in "world-making" and, like Highmore, calls on theorists to attend to the affective shapes that, in this case, define different models of care. For Pulcini, "care of the world" has two components: "*preserving* life and guaranteeing survival" and "*creating* a world," by which she means (drawing on Jean-Luc Nancy and Hannah Arendt) a world in which meaning "lies in the interconnection of every person in a single humankind" (*Care* 13). Pulcini claims that care "is the effect of a capacity for *constant and meticulous attention* to the other with the aim . . . of preserving and repairing the world that surrounds us" (249). Like Highmore's definition of taste, Pulcini's formulation of care emphasizes the role of attention (or orientation) in affirming the attachments or "bond[s]" (250) that make a world. Moreover, Pulcini underlines "the affective dimension of the care relationship," arguing in suggestively aesthetic terms that "the quality and the shape of the relationship also depend on the different passions that inspire it" ("What" 70). Again like Highmore, Pulcini develops this argument in terms of the ethical response to environmental crises, which put future generations at risk; she argues that the emotional motivation of responsibility for those who do not yet exist is not "agapic and purely altruistic love" (66), but *fear* "for future humankind" (69). Highmore's and Pulcini's concern for environmental crises demonstrate the prospective ethical engagements that arise out of examining the feelings that shape the world that we make as well as how we care for it. Similarly, Lindberg's novel develops an aesthetics of care that breaks the constraining cycle of shame and pride implicit in the colonial image of the "caring nation" by introducing new (and more complex) taste-feelings that invite readers to attach themselves to and engage with a different world-(not nation)-making project.

Care Forms

> Too much, too few words to describe it and none of them adequate to explain it.
> — *Birdie* 228

Lindberg's original "compound" words, many of them quoted in this essay, exemplify the aesthetics of care that I have been describing: a set of feelings that shape our ethical attachments to each other and can, through the development of new tastes, change our orientation toward world-making. An aesthetics of care gives form to these feel-

ings and their diffusion throughout various acts of beneficence and responsibility, thus illuminating the shapes that caring relationships may take and, by drawing attention to their complex affects, suggesting fuller (and perhaps more liberating) models of caring. While the plot of Lindberg's novel affirms care's potential to help Indigenous women in Canada, to generate new networks of relation, and to protect vulnerable individuals so that they may heal more fully, Lindberg's poetics also importantly expand the vocabulary for describing the complex emotions surrounding care and that network of relations that it generates. *Birdie* contains a notable number of what some readers have called compound words and which, inspired by Lindberg, I call "fullwords." Lindberg forms these words by joining two or more distinct English words so that they become a new, single unit. These words aid in her expression of the networks of relations care creates, such as "littlebigwomandaughter/mother" (1), and the affective states care responds to and enables, such as "thinkfeeling" (66), "sleepingwake" (26), "fearanger" (61), and "ragemember" (155).

Evoking the fullness that Maggie feels at the beginning of her novel, Lindberg has explained that the words answered her desire to find a word that was "big enough to encompass what I was feeling or thinking and I would press them together and they made sense to me" (qtd. in Alex). In an interview with Clarissa Fortin, Lindberg emphasizes the relations that she aimed to illuminate through these "fullwords":

> Part of it was that on a very basic level I don't think that English allows the possibility of a full discussion about relationships within many communities. In this case, speaking of a Cree community, the English language didn't capture that there are shared, reciprocal relationships and obligations between, in this book, the women. (qtd. in Fortin)

In this way, the words capture something of the emphasis on relation in Cree law, as Lindberg explained to Emily M. Keeler: "one very important tenet is that all human beings treat each other like relatives, that we have a reciprocal obligation to take care of one another as if we were universally bound by family ties" (qtd. in Keeler). Fullwords are also examples of what Mareike Neuhaus has called a "relational word bundle," "*the* signifier of Indigenous rhetorics because it both *builds* discourse and *embodies* Indigenous notions of community, thus pointing to

the interdependence between Indigenous rhetorics and kinship" (127).[11] The form of Lindberg's fullwords thus communicates the complex relations and affective states that shape Birdie's experiences in the novel, while also representing, through the shape of the word itself, Cree law, language, and ideas about community that may be otherwise unavailable to a non-Indigenous reader.

Lindberg's fullwords mimic the very "ordinariness" of care that Laugier emphasizes. They are not jargon and require no allegiance to a theoretical school or system to be understood, only a "sensitivity to the 'details'" (Laugier 224) of the individual words and how their meanings are transformed through their unbroken connection to each other. Yet, by often bringing together seeming contradictions, such as "thinkfeeling" or "sleepingwake," Lindberg develops an ordinary vocabulary to describe the complexities of Birdie's affective experiences and the relationships she has with the women who surround her. In doing so, Lindberg challenges, at the level of poetic form, the national ideology of care at work in the discourse surrounding reconciliation, which, in its attempts to arrive swiftly at a point of healing and forgiveness, often fails to see both the relationships and labour underpinning care and the complex affective states diffused throughout them. These affective states include Birdie's "ragemember[ing]," a particular orientation toward the past that is infused with a negative emotion and suggests not only the continuity between the present and the past, but also the "moral protest," "political outrage," and "critical consciousness" Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) recognizes in the "reactive emotions like anger and resentment" (22). While the defamiliarizing effect of Lindberg's fullwords often works to illuminate and affirm what colonial narratives of care attempt to erase or overcome, it also points to different aesthetic possibilities, as readers encounter, in the very shape of the words themselves, new modes of relation and feeling, new ways of attaching to shared sensorial worlds.

One of the best examples of the transformative potential within Lindberg's fullwords occurs through her use of the word "makeshift" to describe Birdie's new family (205). Makeshift is already a familiar English word, but Lindberg's aesthetic attention to the affective states and relational networks connected to Birdie's recovery transforms this ordinary compound word meaning "interim or temporary" (*OED*) into a fullword that expresses the reciprocity both *between* Birdie's relations

and *in* the affective states of her "shift." In Lindberg's hands, the meaning of this commonplace English word also "shifts": neither "interim" nor "temporary," Birdie's family is "makeshift" because it both enables Birdie's shift and is produced by it. Lindberg's aesthetic attention to the "quality and shape" of the relationships of care not only makes Birdie's life visible to her readers, it reveals a set of affective states and networks of relation so that her readers may also see their fullness and complexity clearly, and maybe for the first time. Such a revelation also invites a shift in the "taste-feelings" of Lindberg's readers, who may orient themselves toward the feelings and relations of a fictional, "makeshift" family, and in doing so begin to create and protect a "changeworld" (*Birdie* 155) built on a fuller sense of care between individuals and nations in Canada.

Conclusion

In the current "era of reconciliation," *Birdie* offers a richer language to describe what care does, how it feels (to those who receive and those who give it), and, especially, how its actions and affects take and give form to bodies and relationships. Moreover, Lindberg's novel calls attention to the way the colonial nation's models of care, built on a short circuit between pride and shame, diminish life and conflict with the generative and resistant models of care Birdie eventually benefits from. When Birdie's "makeshift" family creates resistance and expands her otherwise short circuit, Birdie's closed form opens, slightly, to a more complex, inclusive, and creative shape. Similarly, Lindberg's "fullwords" contest the narrowness of the commonplace language of care. Including both negative and positive affects, as well as drawing on forms of Cree language, law, and kinship, these "fullwords" expand the representation of care to attend to the feelings, relationships, and cultural histories that have been obscured by the dominance of the colonial image of the "caring nation" — an image that often evokes celebration rather than solicitude.

Finally, Lindberg's representation of the sensory character of Birdie's experience develops an aesthetics of care that aims to satiate a taste for fullness — the fullness of interdependent relations, of affective experience, of the flourishing of the tree of life. Lindberg's aesthetics of care thus also points to literature's ability to produce new "taste-feelings,"

which may orient readers to world-making projects that "affirm and repeat the *value of the bond*" (Pulcini, *Care* 250). Just as Lindberg reminds her readers that care acts, feels, and forms, she also points to what considerations of care might offer literary studies at this moment. As we pay attention to care and to the lives it affects, we may also develop a better language for describing what *literature* does and what *literature* feels when it attends to care. Reading with and for such fruitful considerations of care can resist the "scopophilic" tastes that have produced and supported Canada's own "palate for pain," because, while care often begins as a response to pain, it is not predicated on suffering (Pulcini 249). A taste for the full care Lindberg imagines, therefore, also works to overcome colonial models of care that use pain to elevate the position of the apparently compassionate individual or culture. Birdie's story ends with the fullness and satiation her mother feels at the novel's beginning: as the care Birdie receives helps to "lift her up" from the traumas of her past, she becomes a Storyteller who in turn cares for *Pimatisewin*. Offering the tree of life a feast of the food she has dreamed about in her shift, Birdie also "feels some energy in her limbs, as if she has eaten the food herself, and stands up, the Cree on her tongue having flowed to the tree" (250). Now a "lifefull" Storyteller (103), in this final image of reciprocal care, Birdie, limbs lifting, helps the tree of life as it, in turn, continues to serve her. A closed circuit, a makeshift family, a flourishing tree: these are the fuller forms that may be produced through an aesthetic taste for care.

Notes

[1] *Birdie* was released on Tuesday, 26 May 2015. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its executive summary on Sunday, 31 May 2015.

[2] Garneau argues that "the colonial attitude is characterized not only by scopophilia, a drive to look, but also by an urge to penetrate, to traverse, to know, to translate, to own and exploit" (23).

[3] Lindberg provides the translation of *Pimatisewin* in the author interview at the back of the book (265). Michael Anthony Hart (Cree) notes that for many Indigenous scholars "*pimatasiwin*" [sic] "is the goal of healing, learning, and life in general" (96).

[4] The phrase appears in a quotation from Gerry St. Germain (Métis): "While we cannot change history, we can learn from it and we can use it to shape our common future. . . . This effort is crucial in realizing the vision of creating a compassionate and humanitarian society, the society our ancestors, the Aboriginal, the French and the English peoples, envisioned so many years ago — our home, Canada" (qtd. in TRC 20).

[5] See, for example, Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin, David Garneau, Glen Coulthard, Deena Rymhs, and Dale Turner.

[6] As Coulthard argues, "in settler-colonial contexts such as Canada — where there is no formal period marking an explicit transition from an authoritarian past to a democratic present — state-sanctioned approaches to reconciliation tend to ideologically fabricate such a transition by narrowly situating the abuses of settler colonization firmly *in the past*" (22).

[7] I thank my father, a licensed electrician and a great conductor of positive energy, for helping me understand electrical circuits. See also Tony R. Kuphaldt, "Resistance."

[8] Affect theorists have recently and significantly contributed to destabilizing Kantian aesthetic philosophy. Along with Highmore, see Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings*.

[9] Defending *Birdie* in the 2016 Canada Reads competition inspired Bruce Poon Tip to donate 10,000 copies of the book to high schools across the country. Poon Tip called the book "a powerful, transformative piece of literature that encourages all Canadians to take part in a national conversation we've put off for far too long" (qtd. in "Bruce").

[10] Recent controversies in Canadian literature — most notably Hal Niedzvieki's editorial in *Write* entitled "Winning the Appropriation Prize," and the efforts by some mainstream Canadian journalists to fund an actual prize by the same name (Kassam) — have revealed empathy's potential to affirm rather than contest cultural imperialism.

[11] Neuhaus defines a relational word bundle as "*an inventive and ordered concatenation of signs that forms the core of a complex idea* — that is, a figure — *and functions as a significant narrative unit*" (129). While Lindberg's fullwords often relate complex ideas, they do not usually function on their own as narrative units. For this reason, I have chosen to give the words their own name while acknowledging their similarity to the relational word bundles that are the topic of Neuhaus's careful rhetorical analysis.

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