

Women and Nature in Contemporary Indigenous Women's Poetry

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Abstract

Indigenous women experience a unique relationship with nature that is impacted by cultural beliefs, political and social contextual factors, and so on. Contextual factors impacting the female relationship with the natural world include higher rates of sterility caused by the current climate crisis. The gravity of the symptoms of the climate emergency felt by Indigenous women means that their day-to-day experience is affected by this relationship and its contemporary change. Female Indigenous health and creative actions such as writing are impacted by the climate crisis -- thus arising questions about how the female relationship with nature is shown in contemporary literature. To further examine the specificities of the female relationship to nature, I delve into a corpus of contemporary Indigenous women's poetry, namely *Corpse Whale* by DG Nanouk Okpik, *An American Sunrise* by Joy Harjo, and *Night is a SharkSkin Drum* by Haunani-Kay Trask. As a study of nature and Indigenous literatures, this thesis aims to better identify the Indigenous female relationship to the natural world and the manners in which the climate crisis impacts Indigenous women. Within intersectional ecocriticism, I make this enquiry by conducting close readings and entering the themes of exploration into confrontation with each other. Using these methods, I have identified main themes of interaction between women and nature within this corpus: body, culture, and creativity. As shown in my work, the relationship with nature presented within these collections is one of compassion, solidarity, and respect.

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Women and Nature in Contemporary Indigenous Women's Poetry

Introduction

“Knowledge itself is held in the relationships and connections with the environment that surrounds us.” (Wilson, 87)

In this epigraph, Shawn Wilson -- an Opaskwayak Cree scholar -- draws a connection between knowledge and the environment, which is part of nature. According to Wilson, knowledge itself is rooted within the means by which we relate to the natural world. The idea of knowledge being rooted within a meaningful relationship with nature is symptomatic of a desire to live alongside and in connection with nature, rather than use it as an exploitable resource in the generation of capital. The commodification of nature is a hegemonic principle within settler communities, whereas Indigenous cultures such as the Mvskoke, Iñupiat, or Kānaka Maoli were founded upon a concept of reciprocity with the natural world (*Braiding Sweetgrass*) (Maracle, 41).

The idea of reciprocity with the natural world is strongly connected to beliefs of kinship -- in which one views all parts of the natural world as family. For example, according to kinship beliefs, all humans are related, but they are also related in turn to the water, the trees, and so on (Salmon, 6). In viewing the world as a network of relatives, one would be less

inclined to cause harm to, or disrespect nature -- as it is family. Whilst not particularly widespread in western cultures, kinship is foundational in many Indigenous cultures, such as the ones mentioned previously.

An individual's relationship to the natural world is highly personal and therefore based upon a series of different factors, including belief in kinship, culture, connection to stories based in the natural world (Indigenous oral traditions, personal anecdotes, and so on.), and gender. Women, men, two-spirit people, trans people, gender non-conformative people, and so on connect to the natural world in different ways and through different gendered experiences. For this reason, retold experiences of relationships with nature differ based on the gender of the relationship holder. For example, literary retellings of the female relationship with the natural world are wildly different from accounts of the male relationship with nature, and so on.

The study of the relationship between women and nature can be undertaken in a wide variety of literary works written by Indigenous women. However this thesis focuses specifically on works of North American Indigenous women's poetry, namely *Corpse Whale* by DG Nanouk Okpik (Iñupiat), *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* by Haunani-Kay Trask (Kānaka Maoli), and *An American Sunrise* by Joy Harjo (Mvskoke). The geographical diversity of this corpus aims to better capture the non-uniform nature of female natural relationships across Indigenous North American communities, and draw

away from the stereotypical and harmful assumptions that all Indigenous communities and people can be homogenously studied.

Each of the previously mentioned poetry collections is demonstrative of a different worldview and relationship to the natural world. For example, DG Nanouk Okpik is an Inūpiaq Inuit female poet, born in Alaska. Given the poet's Arctic upbringing, her relationship with the world is centered around vastly different aspects of nature and is transformed by exposure to different facets of the climate crisis. Okpik published her debut poetry collection *Corpse Whale*, in 2012 and recently published a second collection in 2022, entitled *Blood Snow*.

Haunani-Kay Trask is a Kānaka Maoli activist and poet, who lived in Hawai'i throughout her life. Born in 1949, Trask knew her home lands as recently annexed by the U.S. Military. The poet's relationship to nature is informed by a Pacific landscape and military and tourist exploitation of nature (*From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai'i*). Trask is best known for her advocacy for sovereignty in Hawai'i, and for numerous publications criticizing U.S. occupation of her native island. Sadly, Trask passed away in 2021.

Joy Harjo is a poet, songwriter, and storyteller from the Mvskoke Creek Nation. Her Nation was a part of the Trail of Tears, in which Indigenous peoples were forcefully displaced from their ancestral lands towards new territories. The poet's relationship to the land is influenced by historical

displacements, as well as the natural landscapes in which she came to be the person she is today, which include Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, and Hawai'i . Harjo is the second ever Poet Laureate consultant to serve three terms and has published poetry collections that are heavily inspired by song and Mvskoke oral traditions.

The choice to include poets from diverse geographical and cultural spaces also comes with many challenges. These include the risk of homogenizing the cultures and practices that are unique to each individual poet included in this study. However, I feel that the widening of analysis and the broader depiction of the woman/nature relationship in Indigenous women's poetry justifies the navigation of such challenges. In future, this could be expanded in order to build upon this framework and add additional precision to the relationship between women and nature. From an ethical perspective, a whole roster of additional questions must be taken into consideration. I have an ethical duty to honor three cultures instead of one.

Whilst this corpus is geographically diverse, by design it features but one gender: female. The choice to study female poets can mainly be justified by the subject matter dealt with in my work: the female relationship with nature. I, therefore, feel that texts written by men -- or any other genders -- would not provide appropriate insight into my chosen subject of study. The use of a non-female corpus of poets in order to study an inherently female subject would promote the practice of silencing and speaking for Indigenous women, which entirely contradicts the subject matter at hand.

The corpus of study for this thesis features poets from largely different cultures. For that reason, questions surrounding the exact terms used to define individual peoples, and all three of the featured cultures together, must be posed. Each of the three cultures studied here is geographically and culturally distinct and has been colonized in a unique manner. Consequently terms such as “Native American” or “Turtle Island Native” do not allow for the level of sensitivity needed with regard to Alaska Native and Native Hawai’ian peoples -- given their geographic removal from Turtle Island, and forced integration of what is known as the United States. In mentioning each culture individually, I shall refer to them by name, and in referring to them collectively I shall follow Shawn Wilson’s use of the word Indigenous. According to Shawn Wilson, “ Terms such as Indian, Metis, Aborigine or Torres Strait Islander do nothing to reflect either the distinctiveness of our cultures or the commonalities of our underlying worldviews. Indigenous is inclusive of all first peoples -- unique in our own cultures -- but common in our experiences of colonialism and our understanding of the world.” (Wilson, 15-16)

In the study of nature and Indigenous women, a number of terms relating to the natural world come into use, all of which have varying meanings. The most widely used of those terms is “nature”, which refers to the all-encompassing concept of land, plants, animals, and natural phenomena such as wind, lunar cycles, and so on. In this thesis, “nature” and “natural world” are used interchangeably, as they refer to the same entities and

phenomena. Conversely “environment” and “environmental” refer to the land, and the flora found upon that land, without including animals or phenomena. “Land” refers to the earth’s surface, which may be clearly delimited or not. The former designates a specific territory, whilst the latter would refer to territory as a wider concept. For example, the phrase “Indigenous land managements” doesn’t reference a plurality of managements of one specific ancestral territory, but rather the different ways in which the entirety of possible territories may be managed according to different Indigenous knowledge systems and sciences.

The adjective “environmental” is widely used as an adjective referencing the entirety of nature. However, the specific themes treated within this thesis would render the generalized use of “environmental” confusing. When systematically used as an adjective describing relatedness to nature, rather than the environment, “environmental” creates the impression that the environment and nature are one and the same. While perhaps seemingly minute, this distortion of “environmental” pushes the perception that environment and animals are completely separate, when they are interconnected. For instance, the use of “environmental damage” when referring to damage that also impacts animals, implies that animals would not be affected by the damage, which is not always the case. For this reason, I shall be prioritizing the use of the adjectives “ecological” or “natural” throughout this thesis, when environment, animals, and natural phenomena are being discussed¹.

¹ The concepts of Environmental Violence and Environmental Racism are exempt from this reasoning. Both terms refer to a body of scholarship upon which this thesis builds, therefore

The study of women and their relationship with nature inevitably -- and rightly so -- poses questions of how other genders interact with nature. Whilst this is a compelling and important research topic, it is not one that I am able to treat in this project for several reasons. Firstly there is no evidence of other gender identities coming into play in the corpus of poems that this thesis examines. All of the collections of poetry being studied are written by poets who are undeniably present in their works, and who all identify as cisgender women. Their concern and consequently the concern of this thesis is with cisgender femininity as it relates to the personae these poets deploy. My choice to solely study AFAB² femininity does not contradict or invalidate other genders.

Similarly, the corpus of poems being studied does not show evidence of non-cisgender identification. For that reason, the study of a wider range of genders would not make sense in the specific contexts explored here. I do nonetheless feel that the study of trans/non-binary/gender fluid/two-spirit and their relationship to nature would be a fascinating and important endeavor, that would not be able to be treated fully or to the extent of its complexity within the scope of this thesis.

Specifically used in the study of the female connection to nature, ecofeminist theory is a typically western theoretical school that draws parallels between the capitalist exploitation of women, and that of nature.

the upholding of this particular use of 'environmental' -- even though it does not comply with the definition above -- is necessary.

² Assigned Female At Birth

Many of the motifs discussed throughout this thesis and in the works of study are echoed in ecofeminist theory, such as descriptions of women using elements of nature. Similarly, many of the ideas discussed within ecofeminist theory have existed in Indigenous communities for centuries -- such as a unique relationship between women and the natural world. As the origin of these founding principles of ecofeminism are rarely acknowledged in scholarship, Ecofeminism can be deemed appropriative of Indigenous knowledges. For this reason, the exclusive use of ecofeminist theory would be inappropriate in the context of a study of Indigenous literatures.

Nature as connected to women and other types of oppression can also be found in countless examples of Indigenous scholarship such as that of Leanne Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg), and the *All My Relations* podcast.³ In these works, colonial and capitalistic practices linked to nature -- such as extraction -- are defined as being interrelated with wider problems surrounding female oppression in an Indigenous context. Works such as these circulate ideas including bodily and natural healing being interdependent.

Environmental Racism encapsulates the link between the land and colonial violence and is essential to understanding the complexities of the relationship between Indigenous peoples and nature in a contemporary setting. To this day marginalized communities are more likely to be located close to polluted and exploited lands (*Conquest*, 58), thus meaning that the

³ Wilbur, Matika. Small-Rodriguez, Desi. Keene, Adrienne. "Healing the Land IS Healing Ourselves". *All My Relations*. May 2020.

communities living upon those lands -- that are often made up of people of color -- are more intensely affected by ecological issues. For this reason, residents of marginalized communities have a significantly higher chance of contracting illnesses and conditions linked to pollution -- such as cancers (Page and Daniels).

Environmental racism also comes into play through legislation and eco-activist organizations. Okpik's work specifically is colored by this type of environmental racism given the poet's connection to seal hunting traditions, even though they are not central to *Corpse Whale*. Eco-activist organizations such as Greenpeace have ongoing campaigns to protect seals from hunting, despite not being an endangered species. When put into legislation, the ban on seal fishing stripped countless communities of their primary source of revenue, regardless of Indigenous communities' exemption from this legislation (Arnaquq-Baril).

Marginalized peoples, including Indigenous women, are more impacted by climate issues, due to their proximity to polluted sites, and often financial inability to relocate to safer lands. In order to better adjust to climate issues, and to be able to regulate industry and government effectively, the extent to which people are affected must first be determined. Academic research is yet to extensively explore the relationship between women and nature in Indigenous literature. However, this topic is discussed within Indigenous scholarship such as that by people such as Leanne Simpson, and Vanessa Watts.

In a project such as this one, there is a myriad of ethical considerations that must be taken into account, such as my own positionality. I am a British citizen, referring to the lands of the Iñupiat, Mvskoke Creek, and Kānaka Maoli peoples. For this reason, primarily citing Indigenous authors and scholars who come from the cultures being discussed or who provide insight into the material is an ethical necessity. In doing this, I strive to uplift Indigenous voices as well as focus upon and include Indigenous knowledge systems. My focus on citing Indigenous authors and scholars is also an effort to promote and encourage listening as a part of decolonizing one's self and invalidate the practice of speaking for Indigenous and other marginalized peoples.

A series of questions guide my investigation of the female relationship to nature within this corpus: Through what themes does nature interact with the feminine in these works? How do oral traditions and traditional stories showcase the relationship between women and nature? How does the poet's identity influence this relationship?

Indigenous women and nature come into contact in numerous ways throughout this corpus, showing different aspects of their relationship. The female relationship to the natural world is revealed through several interfaces, namely body, culture, and creativity.

I. Body

“Everything connected to the land is connected to our bodies.” (Women’s Earth Alliance, 62)

Popular culture most commonly acknowledges the female relationship to nature through a natural link to the female body. Exploration of the female relationship to nature through the body is especially present in a literary setting, often manifesting itself through descriptions of both the female body and nature. To cite but one example, Haunani-Kay Trask draws a number of comparisons between the female body and different elements of nature -- that are often typical of her Native Hawai’ian landscape -- and that either compare the female body to elements of nature, or vice versa compare the landscape to the female form:

“No shadow falls across
those volcanic labia
of fern and spongy
cliff, flooded
by the sun
of revelation.” (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 25)

“the trembling breast of Pele” (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 3)

“These volcanic labia/ of fern and spongy / cliff, flooded/ by the sun / of revelation.” (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 25) compares the female body to nature. Here, labia are described as being volcanic, and sharing characteristics with fern -- a leafy plant often found in Hawai’i. The connection between labia specifically as part of the female body and the elements of nature described is not explicitly defined, but, the comparison appears to draw from the aesthetic parting of the summit of a volcano, giving way to its crater, which is comparable to the anatomical transition between labia and vaginal opening. In any case volcanos and fern, whilst yonic, are also typical of the Hawai’ian landscape and represent a brand of femininity that is closer to the poet as a Native Hawai’ian woman.

The use of volcanoes in order to describe labia is furthermore a powerful image that counteracts the idea of passive women, or women being at the mercy of their male counterparts. Given the yonic nature of the description above, it can be said that the female control described is exercised in all situations, including sexual contexts. Sexual assault is an important issue, especially in Indigenous contexts in which women are violated at rates that are disproportionately high in comparison to that of other groups. Therefore, the powerful nature of the imagery used speaks to a seizing of control over female sexuality.

Volcanic imagery -- whilst often associated with danger, heat, and destruction -- is used to describe women in Trask’s *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*. In this use of volcanic imagery, the subject is not widely considered

to be dangerous. Nonetheless, when described using volcanic imagery, women take on some of the same and potentially dangerous qualities held by volcanoes, giving them an equal potential to cause damage. By the same means, this quotation positions women as a force to be reckoned with. Much like a volcano, an extended build-up of pressure causes eruption -- much like the pressure felt by women stemming from hundreds of years of gender-based inequality and patriarchal oppression. While the use of volcanic imagery to describe women is not by any means a threat, it does speak to the violent potential of feminine anger, as if to warn oppressors.

In a similar vein, “the trembling breast of Pele” (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 3) also compares the female body to volcanoes, drawing thought-provoking parallels between the female form and nature. In this quotation, a volcano is described as Pele’s trembling breast -- Pele being both the creator of the Hawai’ian islands and the goddess of volcanoes and fire. Consequently, comparisons drawn between volcanoes and Pele’s breast draw from the natural elements harnessed by Pele, and the similarities to be found in the shape of volcanoes and breasts. Visual parallels between breasts and mountains are commonplace, giving way to mountain names such as the Grand Teton -- *téton* being the French word for nipple. Stone is widely associated with coldness and staticity, and thus paints a picture of aloof, cold, passive beings who can be modified and commodified in the same way as nature. The perception of both women and nature as malleable, exploitable, and commodifiable is deeply entrenched in misogyny and capitalist beliefs. In using this type of device to describe parts of the female

body, Trask is reclaiming the connection between women and nature and drawing power from it.

As we have established, there is a widely acknowledged connection between the female body and nature, especially in the arts. However, this connection is all the more real for Indigenous women for a multitude of reasons, including the objectification and assault of Indigenous female bodies, their greater exposure to harmful toxins, and their removal from ancestral lands. The connection between the female body and nature is not merely poetic for Indigenous women -- it is deeply political. Kahnawake Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson speaks about the meaning attributed to the Indigenous female body: "An Indian woman's body in settler regimes such as the US, in Canada is loaded with meaning - signifying other political orders, land itself, of the dangerous possibility of reproducing Indian life and most dangerously, other political orders"(A. Simpson, 7). According to this quotation, the female Indigenous body is linked to nature and its existence is inherently political. The existence or physical presence of a female Indigenous body can be perceived as indicative of a failure to completely colonize and eradicate both Indigenous bodies and spaces, as well as a potential for the continuation of Indigenous life and cultures. The mere existence of female Indigenous bodies can be met with hostility from settlers such as the critiques of Theresa Spence's body that are discussed in Audra Simpson's *The State is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders, and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty*.

The female body manifests itself within *Corpse Whale*, *An American Sunrise*, and *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* in a number of ways. The numerous evocations of female corporeality examine women's relationship to nature through motherhood, childbirth, and sexuality.

Mother-ly Nature

“When my first child Nishna came along, I started to understand. Nursing is ultimately about a relationship. Treaties are ultimately about a relationship. One is a relationship based on sharing between a mother and a child and the other is based on sharing between two sovereign nations. Breastfeeding benefits both the mother and the child in terms of health and in terms of their relationship with each other. All treaties must benefit both Sovereign nations to be successful.” (*Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, 106-107)

In this epigraph, Leanne Simpson establishes a connection between motherhood and treaties -- which speak to a relationship with the land as a part of nature. Both motherhood and treaties are perceived here as relationships of the same order, that involve two parties and are beneficial to each involved. Given Indigenous struggles surrounding land confiscation and unfair treaties, the choice to compare breastfeeding to a quixotic version of treaties-- rather than their reality -- is meaningful. A utopian description of treaties is given in this comparison, in which they are a symbiotic relationship between two sovereign nations. The optimistic nature of this

definition draws attention to the very different and perpetually unfair reality of treaties, such as Treaty 6.

The previous quotation also speaks to the relationship between a mother and their child. According to the author, the relationship between mother and child equally benefits both parties, thus challenging the widespread perception of motherhood. Generally, a mother is recognized as being essential to her baby's survival, as she is responsible for the baby's nourishment and protection from the elements. That same baby is a source of maternal joy for the mother but provides no tangible benefits on the same scale as those provided to the baby. It can be said that a baby is generally considered to be entirely dependent on and to be at the mercy of the mother, which directly contrasts with the statement made by the author. The contrast between the author's statement about motherhood and the general perception of a baby being taken care of by a mother adds another layer to our understanding of the passage found above. Simpson's description of motherhood could be another indication of the fallacy of treaty relationships being founded on principles of equality. Consequently, treaty relationships would be comparable to breastfeeding, in that they revolve around extraction and one-sidedness.

The image of breastfeeding is intriguing, particularly when thought of as a type of extraction. Babies can be seen as effectively extracting milk from their mothers, without giving anything back in a concrete sense. Here, the manner in which mother and child interact can be compared to the

extractive industry as a furthering of the colonial process. The baby character is exploiting the resources of the mother, changing and taking over the landscape of the mother's body. In this context, the baby's need for constant care can be perceived as a form of domination over the mother figure, which is not unlike the domination of Indigenous peoples that is reinforced by unequal treaties.

Contextually, it is important to remember how the Indigenous relationship between motherhood and the land has been altered by colonialism. As a furthering of the colonial process, Indigenous mothers have had and continue to have their children taken into child protective services at a disproportionate rate to other communities. The reasons stated for taking Indigenous children from their families vary but often revolve around abuse, unfit parenting, and addiction. "In Canada, 53.8% of children in foster care are Indigenous, but account for only 7.7% of the child population according to Census 2021 (*Reducing the Number of Indigenous Children in Care*, unknown). The idea that marginalized communities (people of color, economically disadvantaged people, trans people, and so on) are inherently more likely to abuse children is grounded in prejudice. The disproportionately high percentage of children to marginalized parents in the system can be attributed to the disproportionate level of scrutiny faced by marginalized parents compared to families that conform to patriarchal, capitalist, and white supremacist ideals. Marginalized people -- such as Indigenous women -- also endure more trauma, inflicted by the very systems of power taking away their children. The colonial process has

caused significant trauma for Indigenous peoples, which without equal access to mental health resources has gone untreated and impacts the following generations of children. Many of the problems that lead to the separation of Indigenous families have been caused by settler colonialism.

Forced or non-consensual sterilization is another devastating yet fundamental contextual link between motherhood and nature for Indigenous women. Andrea Smith discusses this topic in *Conquest*:

“While sterilization abuse in the U.S. has ebbed since the 1970s, state control over reproductive freedom continues through the promotion of unsafe, long-acting hormonal contraceptives like Depo-Provera and Norplant for women of color, women on federal assistance, and women with disabilities” (*Conquest*, 88). Medical misinformation of female patients -- that are often from marginalized communities -- contain marginalized populations and prevent them from having children and sharing their genetics, or socioeconomic circumstances with a new generation. Even though this issue does not solely affect Native peoples, it prevents the cultural continuation of Indigenous people and acts as a furthering of the colonial process.

Forced sterilization and the wrongful removal of Indigenous children from their mothers and families are not explicitly featured in this corpus.

However, the greater social and political context of the treatment of Indigenous women is essential to understanding the bigger picture of how these works were conceptualized. The ways in which the body, motherhood,

and womanhood are thought of not only by Okpik, Harjo, and Trask but by Indigenous women on a larger scale have been inevitably modified by acts of colonial violence such as those mentioned above.

The North American Indigenous female relationship to the natural world through motherhood manifests itself throughout *Corpse Whale*, *An American Sunrise*, and *Night is a Sharskin Drum* in different ways, such as through the use of “mother nature” and mothers being compared to nature.

Nature as a mother

The relationship between motherhood and nature is demonstrated through several commonplace tropes, sayings, or concepts, such as mother earth, mother nature, great mother, motherland, earth-mother, magna mater, and so on. This corpus particularly features mother nature and motherland.

The mother nature trope is heavily featured in ecological discourse, in which the earth is compared to a mother in order to reframe nature as being a familial relation and thus draw attention to the exploitative nature of the widespread relationship to the natural world. Mother nature also stems from a mother’s nurturing qualities and is thus aligned with the ways in which the earth provides. “The land is our mother, and we are her children. If we care for our mother, she will care for us in return” (*Feminism and Indigenous Hawaiian Nationalism*, 906). Mother nature creates an idea of family with nature and therefore encourages a feeling of connection or care for the

natural world. One might be more inclined to care for the Earth -- and subsequently nature -- if it is perceived as family, rather than subordinate to human life.

In the current day, this trope appears to have its limitations as ecocide continues to occur in spite of the Earth being widely associated with motherhood. Greta Gaard speaks about this limitation in her work and explains it by examining the role of a mother in the group of people responsible for the largest proportion of ecocide: White western society. “In white western culture, mothers are expected to be selfless, generous, and nurturing. Their very existence derives its sole meaning from tending to the needs of their children. Mothers are expected to give endlessly, even after their children are grown” (*Ecofeminism and Native American Cultures*, 302). To change the widespread stance on climate action, there would need to be a redefinition of what motherhood means to dominant settler cultures. All the while mothers are seen as endlessly giving and engaged in a one-sided relationship with their children, the perception of the Earth as a mother will perpetuate the cycles of ecological exploitation. The current one-sidedness of the relationship between mother and child is reflected in the incessant draining of the Earth’s resources. Consequently, the centering of reciprocity within our human and natural relationships would instill a greater sense of respect, and slow the rhythm of new acts of ecocide.

The mother nature trope is most commonly used in discourse to insist upon the idea of kinship with the natural world surrounding us. However, in its

literal sense, it also identifies nature as a mother. Most commonly associated with people of the female gender, the mother nature trope directly enters women into a textual relationship with the Earth, speaking to the relationship between women and nature. Featured throughout the collections of study for this thesis, the contact between motherhood and nature is striking, such as in the following example from *Corpse Whale* by DG Nanouk Okpik.

“Earth=Mother=Adopted=Blood=
Raven” (Okpik, 3)

In this unique line, the Earth is equated with a mother, the word adopted, blood, and a raven. There is a multitude of different interpretations for this deceptively complex and interrelated set of concepts. Firstly and crucially there is a connection established between the Earth and motherhood, which is followed by the words “adopted” and “blood”. For context, DG Nanouk Okpik grew up in an adoptive family, so the connection between mother and adoption appears to stem from the poet’s own life experiences. Therefore “Mother=Adopted=Blood” establishes an equality between adoptive and blood parenting, but intriguingly also with the Earth. Given that this passage appears at the very beginning of *Corpse Whale*, it inserts the poet’s experiences into the main themes of the book: the poet speaks a great deal about family, tradition, and nature throughout the collection.

In this quotation, a distinctive link between the Raven, the Earth, and the mother figure is established both through syntax and the contextual meanings of each of the terms used. It can be said that a mother is

responsible for raising children, regardless of biological connection. The Earth is responsible for providing sustenance and shelter for all life living in her realm, and the Raven is responsible for the creation of the Iñupiat people. As a major figure in oral tradition, Raven can also be seen as playing a role in spiritual and cultural teachings for Iñupiat people. Consequently Raven, the Earth, and the mother figure are responsible for vital stages in a child's development: creation, nourishment, and teaching -- all of which fall under the umbrella of care. Without each of these roles, children would not be able to grow into respectful and successful adults -- whatever your definition of success may be. The mother figure, Raven, and the Earth -- as they are mentioned in this passage -- are brought together by their caring and motherly responsibilities.

Given the syntax of the quotation above, the order of the words used could be modified while maintaining the same meaning. As Earth=mother, and mother=adopted, it can be said that Earth=adopted. This same statement would be true of any other words included in this line of poetry, given the equality that is conveyed through the means of an "=" sign. In conversational language, the assumption that mathematical equality is equivalent to the use of the third-person plural verb form "is" can be made. The statement Earth=mother can be read as the Earth is a mother, and also as the mother is the Earth. A multitude of statements can consequently be read and understood in this passage, creating a complex and layered reading experience. The relationship established between the different elements

making up this sentence also gives an impression of relationality between concepts and entities.

Motherhood is an integral part of the complex relationships that are discussed in the citation found above. Given that each element is connected to those around it, none can be removed without changing the entire equation, thus making this quotation a physical representation of relationality of sorts and establishing a web of interrelated entities. For this reason, mothers can not be dissociated from the Earth in this example, and by the same logic women and nature can not be dissociated either. According to this interpretation of “Earth=Mother=Adopted=Blood=/Raven” (Okpik, 3), women and nature can not be thought of entirely independently in this corpus.

Motherhood is similarly connected to nature through the use of the term “Motherland” within this corpus. A motherland refers to a territory that would be considered home, further embodying the connection between women and nature. Whilst “fatherland” also exists as a term, its meaning is slightly different from its matriarchal equivalent. Fatherland has more of a patriotic connotation, whereas motherland denotes a familial connection to the land. The choice to incorporate motherland rather than its patriarchal alternative into discourse is meaningful, especially within a body of texts that focus upon femininity, as it orients the reader towards more of an anticolonial and feminine perception of the natural world.

In *Corpse Whale*, Okpik writes: “In land flint
spears the motherland.” (Okpik, 25)

In this quotation, true to her poetic style, Okpik uses a layered syntax that encourages the reader to ponder the meaning and use of certain words. For example “land” is repeated twice -- as the word “land” and in “motherland” at the beginning and the end of the sentence -- acting as a frame for the remaining words. Land framing a sentence is thought-provoking and enters us into a dialogue with the concept of land as a framework for knowledge. Given the ambiguity of the remaining words in this quotation, their visual surrounding by a framework is intriguing and speaks to the bringing together of both women and nature through their violent oppression. Both women and nature endure continued acts of violence: nature is exploited and harmed, and women are affected by physical violence, unequal rights, and other forms of misogynistic oppression.

The repetition of the word “land” twice in the same sentence gives the impression of the text being unnatural and almost tongue-twister-esque, which is deepened through the recurring ambiguity of this passage when spoken aloud. For example, when spoken aloud it would be difficult to distinguish the word “inland” from “In land”. Furthermore orally it would be difficult to tell whether “flint” was an adjective used to describe the noun “spears”, or if “flint” was the subject of “spears” as a verb. In the case of the latter, “flint” would be a metonymic naming for a weapon. The ambiguity surrounding the meaning of specific words in this passage pushes the reader

to think further about the relationship between three main concepts:
motherhood, the land, and violence.

In both cases, this quotation establishes a relationship between the land, motherhood, and violence that may remind the reader of the colonial process. The mentioning of flint -- a material often used to make weapons and spears -- creates a direct area of contact between the land and a violent implement. Given the land-based motivations for a wide variety of large-scale violent strifes, such as those that took place during early colonization of Turtle Island, the juxtaposition of land and weaponry brings ideas of war and invasion to mind. The central role of land in past and current-day Indigenous issues --such as forced displacement, settler abuse of treaties, etc. -- intensifies the violent and belligerent connotations of the juxtaposition of land and spears. The specific mention of spears is especially violent in connection with Indigenous peoples, and how spears intervene as weapons in savagist discourse. Savagist discourse is often used as a justification for the oppression of Indigenous peoples, implying or outright stating that settler colonization was needed for Indigenous development -- which is of course false. The violence of this passage is therefore layered and speaks to the omnipresence and layering of colonial efforts.

The violence implied within this quotation also has a dual impact. The land is described here as being speared and consequently impacted by violence. However, the particular land affected is the “motherland”, which draws motherhood into the act of violence described, and consequently into those

impacted. The implicit violence inflicted upon the land is also violence inflicted upon the mother. In terms of the relationship between motherhood and nature, this quotation further highlights their proximity: they are both affected by the same issues. Here, when something affects the land, it also affects the mother figure.

Mother Compared to Nature

While this corpus features the Earth compared to a mother, mother figures are also compared to nature. For example, Dg Nanouk Okpik's *Corpse Whale* states: "Brother's crooked head atop mother's sucking barnacles" (Okpik, 51)

In this quotation, a mother's nipples are metaphorically referred to as sucking barnacles --which are arthropods and therefore part of nature. The comparison drawn between nipples and barnacles primarily stems from aesthetic similarities in shape. Barnacles and nipples also have a common association with suction: barnacles are widely thought of as using suction to attach themselves to surfaces under the water. Furthermore, infants feed themselves by sucking on their mother's nipples. The female body is thus described as being in part made up of beings from the natural world -- embodying the female relationship with nature. Through this embodiment, nature is described as actively intervening in an important and habitual task of motherhood: feeding their child.

In light of barnacle's comparison to nipples, they can be seen as sustaining the child featured within this quotation, in the same way that a child would be sustained by feeding from a mother's nipples. Intriguingly, the arthropods are described as "sucking barnacles", thus playing with the word "suck" and its different meanings. The infant is sucking upon the mother's nipples, and barnacles are commonly seen as using suction in order to attach themselves to a surface. Different meanings of the same word are in use within this quotation, yet they create a greater sense of proximity between the infant and the barnacles. Both the infant and the barnacles are using the mother as a means of sustaining themselves. The dual use of "suck" creates a thought-provoking relationship between the mother, barnacle, and infant, placing the mother in a position of feeding both the barnacles and the infant. In turn, the infant is feeding off of nature, and nature is supporting itself upon the mother's body. A mutually beneficial relationship between women and nature is created: the barnacles are sustained by the female body, and they also aid in the feeding of the infant. A reciprocal relationship, resembling a symbiosis of sorts is created between the barnacles and the mother.

Furthermore, this quotation features nature as a physical part of the mother's body -- her nipples are described as "sucking barnacles" (Okpik, 51). Atrocities aside, nature's place as a physical part of the mother's body means that they cannot be separated from each other. Given nature's direct intervention in the feeding of the mother's newborn child, nature's ties to the mother's body enter into the realm of biology, thus deepening their

connection and rendering them inseparable from an entirely new perspective. By the same reasoning, motherhood and nature can not be thought of independently from each other within the context of this collection, as they are one and the same.

Mothers are also compared to nature throughout the rest of the corpus of study for this thesis, such as in this quotation from *An American Sunrise*: “I uncover my mother’s legs./ I remember the varicose veins that swelled like rivers” (*An American Sunrise*, 33). In this quotation, the mother figure’s varicose veins are compared to rivers. Upon first reading, this comparison is aesthetic, relying upon the blue coloration of both varicose veins and rivers, the function of both veins and rivers: transporting liquid around a given mass, and the manner in which they might spread out when looked at from above. In light of this comparison, as veins are inseparable from the body, nature, and the female body cannot be dissociated, even in death.

The comparison drawn between rivers and varicose veins also expresses the mother’s physical discomfort, which is featured in this poem. Varicose veins are uncomfortable and swollen, and they often flare up after standing up for long periods of time. For example, in this particular mention of varicose veins, the mother figure works in a restaurant, involving long hours standing up and preparing food. It can be understood from this comparison that the character described is experiencing fatigue and overwork. Such work conditions are exploitative and have negative effects on employees. Similarly, ecological mistreatment might result in “swollen rivers”. The

term “swollen” is mostly used to describe the human body, however, it can also be used to describe flooding in bodies of water. In both of these uses of the word “swollen”, there is a connotation of physical pain and damage upon the described body. Flooding is symptomatic of ecocide and climate change, whereas human swelling would typically be indicative of infection, injury, or overuse. Flooding is suggestive of damage done to nature and climate change that is caused by the exploitation of the Earth. A parallel is therefore drawn between the mother’s discomfort and the Earth’s mistreatment.

Harjo defines human and natural suffering as connected through this quotation. It can be understood that human suffering parallels the pain felt by nature from capitalistic abuse of the natural world. Consequently, the healing of bodily pain is connected to that of nature: in order to heal bodily pain, one must also heal nature. From a perspective of the motherly relationship to nature, this quotation is demonstrative of the interdependence of motherly and ecological well-being.

As we have seen, nature and women interact through questions of motherhood in these collections. Women and nature come into contact in a wide variety of other contexts throughout these works, such as that of childbirth.

“Earth’s womb tightens with the need to push”⁴: Nature and Childbirth

Labor is an important area of contact between women and nature. Childbirth -- as a universal means of giving life for both humans and elements of nature -- transcends species, time, and generations. For this reason, labor can be considered core to the female relationship with nature. From this perspective, the act of birth insists on the idea that all of nature is interconnected, and linked together by participation in the cycles of creation and regeneration. In this way, birth is an illustration of relationality.

Birth is also an important act of ceremony. Whilst this may not be true in western societies, many Indigenous cultures have a wide tradition of ceremony during childbirth. For example, according to Navajo traditions, after birth, the placenta must be buried in the ground in order to protect the newborn child. Given the colonial context of North America, we cannot assume that birthing traditions are enacted in the same way and with the same frequency as before European settler intervention. Nonetheless, traditional ceremonies in connection with birth continue into the present day with groups such as The Changing Woman Initiative.

Whilst this chapter studies Indigenous women and nature through the lens of childbirth, it does not aim to essentialize this relationship or amplify the stereotypes placed upon Indigenous women. Leanne Simpson states that:

⁴ *An American Sunrise*, 72

“While I am not comfortable being confined to an essentialized version of Native womanhood defined by childbirth, I am also someone who has been profoundly transformed through giving birth, nursing, and mothering. I will not apologize for fully participating in those ceremonies and honoring the teachings given to me through those ceremonies” (*Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, 60). While Simpson recognizes that her birthing experience has been important to her, she acknowledges that Indigenous women’s experiences with giving life are often essentialized. The following sub-chapter aims to recognize the importance of childbirth in the relationship between Indigenous women and nature, but challenge the essentialized and harmful perceptions of Indigenous women.

Childbirth, women, and nature are also linked together in a very current context: of ecological issues. It is no secret that issues connected to nature and pollution have negative effects on the health of the general public. The reproductive health of women is no exception, especially in Indigenous and disadvantaged communities. Polluted and exploited sites can often be found in greater proximity to marginalized communities, or to groups of people from lower income brackets. Systematic discrimination against racially marginalized peoples means that these two groups of people often overlap. Kim Anderson (Cree Métis), Barbara Clow (Mayan), and Margaret Haworth-Brockman discuss the connection between nature and female reproductive health in their paper: “In a number of Aboriginal communities in Canada where water, air, and soil pollution are of serious concern, there is

evidence of reproductive health issues affecting women” (*Carriers of Water*, 12).

Occurrences of female reproductive health problems are one of the many consequences of ecological issues, or the abuse and resulting distress of the land. Women’s health and nature are thus connected, drawing a parallel between human and ecological suffering, which is mirrored in the idea that in order to heal people, you must first heal the land. “That work has shaped the core belief—Connected to Body, Connected to Land—that what happens to the land and the environment around us, whether good or bad, also happens to our bodies and to our communities” (Women’s Earth Alliance, 13).

Corporeal and ecological contemporary interdependent well-being are reflected in the concept of environmental violence. Environmental violence ties the conscious infliction of distress upon nature -- specifically on lands that are occupied by marginalized groups -- to the consequences of that mistreatment that can be felt upon the body. In this particular context, the current condition of the bodies of Indigenous peoples can be directly linked back to the knowing pollution of their lands, and the natural resources upon which communities are either close or reliant.

One of the most insidious ways environmental violence impacts Indigenous women is through the detrimental health effects of toxic contaminants, which often can’t be seen until years later or after

prolonged unknown exposure. These impacts include high levels of toxins in breast milk, placenta cord blood, blood serum, and body fat, as well as infertility, miscarriages, premature births, premature menopause, reproductive system cancers, and an inability to produce healthy children due to compromised endocrine and immune systems while in utero, and more (Women's Earth Alliance, 22).

The preceding text written by the Women's Health Alliance demonstrates the concrete nature of the relationship between women and nature in a contemporary setting. Environmental violence establishes a tragic yet tangible link between women, nature, and childbirth. For this reason, the relationship between women and nature has been irreversibly modified since the start of ecological exploitation to serve capitalist agendas.

Childbirth is explored by each of the poets that make up this corpus with varying frequency, and through the lens of their own experience, culture, and relationship with nature. Therefore, each and every person who discusses the subject of childbirth will do so in their own way, through the lens of their own relationship to the process. Labor is a deeply personal matter, and it is crucial that varying levels of comfort discussing ceremony, as well as the physical process of labor, can be detected within this body of work.

Mention of childbirth in connection with nature is extensive within the parameters of this corpus. Okpik, Harjo, and Trask explore nature and childbirth throughout their collections. These explorations fall into the

following categories: humans giving birth in connection with nature, and elements of nature giving birth.

Humans Giving birth in connection with nature

The collections of poetry examined in this thesis feature numerous descriptions of childbirth in which humans are grounded in and inseparable from the natural world. For example, Haunani-Kay Trask describes birth in her poem "Born In Fire" and juxtaposes it with the natural world, turning nature into a point of arrival of sorts for the newborn child, and connecting the birth experience with natural landscapes. Here, the newborn child finishes their journey into the world of the living and is welcomed by forests, sandalwood, and fern.

"Born in fire

you came through

the mountainous dead

to find sandalwood

forests, skeins of fern" (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 3)

Following the unborn child's journey into the realm of the living, they are welcomed by sandalwood, forests, and fern -- three elements of nature that are leafy, soft, and fragrant. Conversely, the poet describes the "dead" or the realm of the dead as being mountainous -- or hard and cold. The hard and

rocky texture of mountains is in direct contrast with and is also visually separated from the soft and fragrant sandalwood that describes the world of the living. The contrast created by the different elements of nature used to describe the realm of the living and that of the dead demonstrates a stark difference, thus marking the baby's birth through the nature surrounding them.

The elements of nature used to describe and differentiate the realms of the living and the dead are also all typical of the Hawai'ian landscape. Hawai'i is home to mountains, and volcanoes, as well as sandalwood, fern, and forests. The description of childbirth in this quotation is culturally specific to the Hawai'ian landscape. Furthermore, the poet uses the nature present upon Moku O Keawe⁵ as a means of mirroring the journey made by the unborn child. The poet mentions both 'fire' and 'mountains' within her description of the realm of the dead, which is suggestive of volcanoes -- a feature of the Hawai'ian landscape. As a significant characteristic of Hawai'ian topography, and accordingly cultural understanding of the world, volcanoes are featured in Native Hawai'ian oral tradition. Pele is the Hawai'ian goddess of fire and volcanoes -- who is also associated with creation. For this reason, it is fitting that an unborn child starts their journey in an environment that is suggestive and reflective of creation in Hawai'ian oral tradition.

⁵ Cultural name for Hawai'i

The recurring link between culture and childbirth through different elements of nature is noteworthy. Childbirth is essential to species and cultural continuation and therefore holds cultural significance within Indigenous cultures, much like nature. The juxtaposition of childbirth with natural elements that carry cultural significance -- either through oral tradition, or their use in cultural practices -- appears to indicate an insertion into Native Hawai'ian culture. The baby is being born into a proud and culturally rich environment.

The types of nature used to describe this particular act of childbirth reflect the stages of labor: the journey through the realm of the dead, and the arrival into the world of the living. The separation of these stages of childbirth is reflected in the poem's form. There is a clear visual and textual separation between the realm of the dead and the world of the living. In this context nature and childbirth are intertwined. Nature is described as being a part of the process of labor, as it appears to follow every step of the child's journey to being born.

The idea of nature following the process of labor is supported and explicitly stated in the rest of the poem. The poet describes the birth as being guided by lehua, a tree with bright red flowers that is Native to Hawai'i into a final destination that is referred to as "the trembling breast of Pele". This final destination is suggestive of volcanoes: a feature of the Hawai'ian landscape.

“Flickering *lehua*

guided you here.

Stay, now, within

the trembling breast

of Pele, streaming her

breath into the trees”

(*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 3)

The previous quotation once again shows not only a connection between nature and childbirth in general but also in a more specific sense. The parts of nature described are found within the landscape that the collection is based around. Connection to a local ecosystem is therefore demonstrated, rather than to nature as a whole. Whilst a connection to a local environment may appear evident, the use of local nature within the description of childbirth creates an idea of the process being inscribed within a specific ecosystem, like animals or plants. The act of childbirth, much like the women involved, is directly connected to the natural world.

The process of bringing children into the world is further explored within the rest of the corpus of study for this thesis. For example, DG Okpik’s *Corpse Whale* uses labor as a part of its literary landscape.

“I wait for the universe to turn

around

again,

wait for a reason to move the fetus in my womb” (Okpik, 19)

The juxtaposition of the two halves of the quotation above establishes a connection between the two main elements featured: labor and the universe.

“I wait for the universe to turn around again” and “wait for a reason to move the fetus in my womb” are not two separate sentences, but instead are separated by a comma, thus linking the grammatical structures together. It seems that there is a relationship of cause between the universe and labor: the turn of the universe is a catalyst for the childbirth that is described here. As the universe is undoubtedly a part of nature, nature is an integral part of the birth that is described.

The turning of the universe also parallels the “move” or the turn of a baby before birth. It appears as though the unborn child is imitating or copying the universe in order to be guided into the world. Such behavior resembles that of learning by imitation, which is typical in humans, as well as other natural species such as primates. This very visual parallel deepens the connection between labor and nature that has already been established. In this example, nature is guiding the child into the world, and acts as a source of knowledge for the baby. The example at hand does not specify or allude to a continuation of learning from nature, although there are a number of Indigenous healing practices that would suggest knowledge being drawn

from nature in later life. Indigenous natural healing practices demonstrate knowledge coming from nature in a very concrete manner. For example, the Iñupiat use medicinal plants and other parts of nature in their traditional healing practices, such as using Lemming skins to treat boils.

In *Corpse Whale*, *An American Sunrise*, and *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, nature is strongly connected to childbirth. The previous examples demonstrate that nature is even an integral part of birth, either as a point of arrival for the newborn child, or a catalyst for labor. Here, human procreation is established as being aided and supported by nature. In these occurrences, the constant presence of nature through labor can be compared to the support of a birthing partner.

Nature in labor

Joy Harjo depicts elements of nature as being in labor in *An American Sunrise*. For example “Earth’s womb tightens with the need to push” (*An American Sunrise*, 72) describes the Earth as in the process of giving birth, when typically it is considered to be a part of nature that would not go through the act of childbirth. Furthermore, the Earth is described as having a womb, an organ that is also associated with female mammals.

In this citation, there is a clear connection established between women and nature through childbirth. Nature is depicted as having female reproductive organs and in the process of a life experience that is deeply associated with the female gender. It can consequently be said that nature is both described

as female and put onto the same level as women. Through the means of her poetry, Harjo has bonded women and nature together through their similarities and their shared experiences.

The sentence “Earth’s womb tightens with the need to push.”(*An American Sunrise*, 72) draws from the parallel between the Earth and motherhood discussed previously and furthers the connection between women and nature. This quotation features a depiction of the Earth as in preparation for childbirth, therefore, including showing the planet giving life in the same way a mother might. Even though the Earth does not give life through the physical experience of childbirth, she provides a home for countless species living on her lands. Women and the Earth are brought together by their capacity to create life in a very direct sense.

The parallel between the Earth’s creation of life and human procreation is founded upon both humans and nature being living organisms on Earth. Both humans and other elements of nature are part of the life that is often considered to be created by the Earth, or in this context: what the Earth would be giving birth to. Thus humans and nature would be family or kin. This is reflected in a great deal of North American Indigenous oral traditions, such as the Mvskoke story of how Rabbit brought the people fire. In this story, the Rabbit trickster figure, who is often given the name Chufi, steals fire from the Weasels in order to bring it back for people. This story shows humans and nature as being equals in cooperation, which suggests that nature and humans are kin.

Harjo also describes animals as in the process of creating life. For example, the poet uses the sentences “She is thickening with eggs” (*An American Sunrise*, 84), and “Her body is stirring with eggs” (*An American Sunrise*, 72) whilst talking about personified birds. The act of depicting birds as pregnant creates a feeling of universal experience between females. To further this point Okpik also acknowledges that animals give birth as well by clearly stating “When animals give birth” (Okpik, 41) in her poem describing the activities taking place in Iñupiaq communities in the month of June.

The description of non-human elements of nature as giving birth reminds humans of the commonalities between themselves and the natural world. Given the prominence of discourse framing humans as entirely different from their surrounding environment, which serves as a basis for a widespread feeling of supremacy over the natural world, common points between humanity and nature are often forgotten. Here, Harjo describes a phenomenon that may initially appear to be unique to the human experience but includes nature in its description thus drawing humans closer to nature. The description of non-human nature giving birth acts not only as a reminder of the human relationship to nature but also of the specific and uniquely female connection to the natural world.

As we have seen, childbirth is an important zone of contact in the relationship between women and nature. The theme of childbirth deepens

our understanding of how women and nature interact in *An American Sunrise*, *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, and *Corpse Whale*. If we consider humans to be distinct from nature, women, and nature are of course two separate entities that engage in an almost symbiotic relationship in which both parties go through the process of procreation together.

In this corpus, nature and the female body interact through the discussion of childbirth and the giving of life. Another means of joining the female Indigenous body and nature together is through sexuality and love.

Nature, sexuality, and love

“Colonization of Native women signifies the absence of beauty, the negation of Sexuality” (Maracle, 20). In this quotation, Sto:lo writer Lee Maracle joins nature, women, and sexuality together. Women and nature are intertwined with a number of different things such as the sexual perception of Indigenous women, as is the case here. This perception is largely molded by a colonial agenda and has proved to be harmful to Indigenous women. One of the main stereotypes thrust upon Indigenous women by colonizers is that of promiscuity. “I was sickened by stereotypes of Indigenous women as promiscuous, drunken whores or sexless Mother Earth types.” (Akiwenzie-Damm, 98)

The creation of negative stereotypes surrounding Indigenous women and their sexuality is largely coupled with settler Christian values, and the desire

to extinguish Native peoples. To use the words of Nawash Chippewa and Saugeen Ojibwe scholar Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm: “Certainly they didn't want us procreating. That wasn't the solution to "The Indian Problem." We were supposed to vanish, to die, not procreate, for God's sake!” (Akiwenzie-Damm, 98). Therefore, the creation of negative stereotypes about the sexuality of Native peoples is a means of furthering the colonial and genocidal process.

“Sex is sex. Sex and love are not the same thing and they are not equal” (Maracle, 27). As Lee Maracle states here, sex and love; the two subjects of this chapter are not interchangeable words. Love does not signify sex and vice versa sex does not signify love. Making these two concepts appear to be synonymous would be somewhat reductive of the wide spectrum of emotions and feelings that make up the human experience. However, they are both an expression of sentiment. Love is an expression of amorous sentiment, whereas sex is an expression of sexual sentiment. For that reason, I shall be studying love and sexuality in parallel to each other.

Love exists in many forms and in infinite contexts and can be expressed towards a roster of different categories of beings, such as friends, family members, children, pets, etc. All of these types of love are equal yet immensely different. Here, we shall exclusively be examining romantic love in connection with nature. Whilst other types of love can be found in connection with the natural world in this corpus, I find it most appropriate to study romantic love in the same chapter as sexuality.

Sexual violence is not the central focus of any of the collections being studied, but assault features in the body of work examined for this dissertation and is essential to the context surrounding the writing of these works. For example, Joy Harjo's "Exile Of Memory" (*An American Sunrise*, 10) and "How to Write a Poem in a Time of War" (*An American Sunrise*, 47) mentions sexual assault and make the connection between land and sexual assault in the colonial process explicit:

"They kill what they cannot take. They rape. What they cannot kill
they take." (*An American Sunrise*, 47)

Sexual violence is tragically yet systematically intertwined with the taking of Indigenous lands and other acts of colonialism. Assault is unfortunately perceived as a continuation of the colonial process, and a natural extension of the seizing of territories. Andrea Smith states that: "The project of colonial sexual violence establishes the ideology that Native bodies are inherently violable -- and by extension, that Native lands are also inherently violable" (*Conquest*, 12).

Sexual assault in connection with nature brings us back to the idea of environmental violence that is looked at in the introduction to this dissertation. Environmental violence is particularly pertinent in this context as it is a means of explaining the extreme frequencies at which Indigenous women are sexually assaulted. The number of occurrences of sexual assault

upon Native women is multiplied upon the commencement of extraction in the community. “For example, in the region of North Dakota that encompasses the Bakken Formation, violent crime rose by 121% after the extraction of the formation began. Strikingly, rates of violence and rape against Native women tripled with the influx of non-native workers” (Grisafi, 512-513). Whilst this data has not been taken from any of the communities directly studied in this corpus, the correlation between extraction and sexual assault can be found throughout what is widely known as the United States.

The poets featured in the corpus for this thesis all live in states that are also occupied by the extractive industry. Extractive activities in these states include mining in Alaska, mineral extraction in Oklahoma, and gas extraction in Hawai’i. Whilst extractive workers may not necessarily live directly in the same communities as the poets of the collections studied for this thesis, these camps still occupy space in relatively close proximity and in numbers that are impossible to determine with certainty. Understandably, this presence can influence and alter Indigenous women’s perceptions of their bodies and their sexuality, either directly or indirectly.

In communities in which natural extraction is part of the daily goings on, the workers for such activities are housed in settlements that are known as Man Camps. The influx of men on Native lands increases the number of Indigenous women that are sexually assaulted, as well as trafficked, or even murdered. These settlements are described as “hot zones for disruption to

the safety of our women and a lot of it is in these places where there's a predominant source of extractive oils" (*Healing the Land IS Healing Ourselves*, 12:42-13:02) in the *All My Relations* podcast.

This section focuses on sexual violence in Indigenous communities, however, it is important not to center Indigenous men as responsible. While Indigenous violence against Indigenous people is a problem, its centering in discourse surrounding sexual violence places blame upon Indigenous people. When doing that, it becomes easy to dismiss the starting point of said violence: colonialism. Placing Indigenous men as responsible for violence against Indigenous women also pushes negative stereotypes of Indigenous people not being 'civilized' and brushes white violence against Indigenous women under the rug. Plains Cree, Salteaux, and Cowessess Métis scholar Robert Innes discusses this in his article "Moose on the Loose: Indigenous Men, Violence, and The Colonial Excuse": "Many Indigenous people do not want to discuss the issue of violence associated with Indigenous men. For many, this kind of discussion reinforces negative stereotypes attached to Indigenous men. Others believe that focussing on violence committed by Indigenous men wrongly shifts attention to them and away from the violence white men inflict on Indigenous women, while others see it as a means of relieving the government of its responsibility" (Innes, 3). In making the choice not to center Indigenous men in the discourse surrounding violence against Native women, in my work I aim to shift blame away from Indigenous peoples for the issues caused by colonialism. Violence committed by Indigenous people upon Indigenous

people is part of a bigger problem, whilst violence committed by caucasian people upon Indigenous people is symptomatic of colonialism and white supremacy. In focusing on violence committed by caucasian people, we are taking a step toward holding white perpetrators accountable for their actions.

In order to treat the subject of sexuality appropriately, I have decided to separate this chapter into two parts: one examining female sexuality and expressions of love described using nature, and one studying the perspective of the stories of love and sexual encounters described in the collections of poetry.

Female sexuality and expressions of love described using nature

There are multiple occurrences of sexuality and love being described using natural metaphors, especially in *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* by Haunani Kay Trask. For instance, the poem “Where is the Elegant Light” features sexual imagery that is intertwined with different elements of nature such as a rose, and the sea.

“where is the breast

of sea, tender

dark perfection?

where is the crevice

of rose, pleasure's

infinite sun?" (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 47)

In this quotation, the poet uses elements of nature to describe a female character in deeply intimate detail, including descriptions of her breasts, and genitalia. The level of description in his passage is indicative of a certain level of proximity between the character and the natural world. It can be understood that the character feels comfortable drawing nature into a facet of human existence that is generally considered to be taboo.

The connection to nature through sexuality can be culturally ingrained. For example, Trask's use of natural motifs in the description of sexual encounters is somewhat grounded in Native Hawai'ian cultural traditions. "Another friend, Haunani-Kay Trask, a Native Hawai'ian poet and Leader in the sovereignty movement, once told me that for Native Hawai'ians, the world is eroticized: often food, the land and all elements of the natural world are eroticized in Native Hawaiian song and poetry"

(Akiwenzie-Damm, 97). According to Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, Native Hawai'ian culture has a considerable erotic component -- bringing the erotic into everyday life, including nature. *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* extensively features nature within the erotic, such as breadfruit (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 48), fern (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 49), and blue-leafed taro (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 61). Whilst this intertwining of sexuality and nature is grounded within Native Hawai'ian culture, it also acts as a means of reclaiming the manner in which female sexuality contemporarily relates to

nature: through the lens of heightened sexual assault connected to the extractive industry. The use of natural imagery in accounts of consensual sexual relationships reframes and reclaims the interactions of sexuality, women, and nature.

The perception of the female Indigenous relationship with nature through sexuality and love is impacted by the extractive industry and its influence on the sexual assault of Indigenous women. While Indigenous people have experienced and continue to experience colonial atrocities, the disregarding of Indigenous joy is also reductive. Without the acknowledgment of Indigenous joy, communities become reduced to victims of sorts rather than self-determining people. Through the description of consensual Indigenous sexual activity, the poet draws focus to the positive aspects of the Indigenous relationship to nature. Furthermore, the use of nature to describe positive sexual experiences is an Indigenous definition of their own relationship to nature and how it is perceived and spoken about, rather than centering Indigenous land-based identities around settler colonialism.

The way in which sexuality is discussed in this corpus of poetry speaks to the relationship between women and nature. Here, nature is shown as a means of taking back Indigenous female sexuality, rather than letting it be defined by settler colonial populations. Nature is therefore a considerable part of Indigenous female self-determination. This study of Indigenous female sexuality and nature poses questions as to how love and nature are also connected in this corpus. One example of an expression of love that is

described using natural metaphors can be found in Joy Harjo's poetry. In this section of the poem, the persona describes the process of writing love poetry. In the process of this description, the persona compares love and emotion, to star and sunlight.

"star and sunlight to become words in
your mouth, in your kiss -- that kiss that will never die, you will
always fall --

fall way in love." (*An American Sunrise*, 89)

In a similar vein to the previous example, this extract demonstrates a degree of comfort around nature. In this case, nature is brought into the intimacy of a relationship. For many people, the verbalization of feelings would be considered something to be kept private or between concerned parties. However, here the poet has made the choice to bring nature into the deepest and most emotionally vulnerable levels of this relationship. To further this point, the poet states that the star and sunlight are actually in the persona's kiss. While this is first and foremost a metaphor for love, the placement of nature physically between the two lovers is intriguing. This placement almost introduces nature as a third party in the relationship that is described in this section of "Becoming Seventy" creating an interesting dialogue in the types of love spoken about. As an integral part of the relationship described, the metaphorical description of love using nature cannot be subtracted from

this expression of love, and can also be regarded as an object of love -- if not romantic love.

Elements of nature being used as a metaphor for love makes a clear connection between nature and love for our female persona. Nature, love, and women appear to be intertwined through a complex set of connections between the three subjects at hand. For example, initially, the female persona expresses love, and that love is metaphorically described using elements of nature. Therefore, there is a connection that is established between love and nature that speaks to the relationship between women and nature in this poem. These relationships are further influenced by the connotations associated with stars and sunlight. Light, fire, and warmth are all associated with passion and love, so it can be understood that nature is further connected to love, and women by extension.

As mentioned previously, passion is often associated with light, warmth, and fire. The use of stars and sunlight in reference to feelings of passion is thought-provoking when compared to similar descriptions in canonical works. In the western canon, passion would generally be referred to as some type of fire or flame. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, passionate love is referred to as “a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes”⁶ (Shakespeare 1.1). Between descriptions of love being referred to as light and as flames there is a significant difference in connotation. Light can be thought of in connection

⁶ Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*. Penguin Classics, 2015.

with life, and in opposition to darkness, whereas flames generate thoughts of fire, and often destruction, but also a certain uncontrollability.

Stars and the sun -- both of which are used to describe love in the passage above -- create a conceptual and temporal contrast when juxtaposed. Each of the two elements used in this expression of love is visible at opposite and relaying times of the day. The sun can be seen throughout the day, whereas stars can only be witnessed at night, thus creating a constant time in which the persona's love can be felt. The kiss in which starlight and sunlight are constants "will never die" (*An American Sunrise*, 89), in this passage female love and nature are inseparable and eternal. Nature -- like the love described -- is ubiquitous and constantly connected to the female persona.

Stories of love and sexuality retold from a female perspective

The descriptions of sexuality in these collections do not exclusively feature women, but in fact, mention men and women together or female personas with people whose genders are not specified. To cite but one example of sexuality between the persona and a man from *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*:

"Into Kāne's pendulous

breadfruit, resinous

with semen." (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 60)

In this extract, the poet describes a male figure engaged in a sexual interaction. In this description, the male character's gender can be identified using the comparison drawn between testicles and breadfruit. The foundation for this comparison is twofold and relies upon both aesthetic similarities and the potential for reproduction vested in each entity in its own right. Breadfruit houses a seed that would permit the growing of a new plant, whilst testicles accommodate sperm production -- which similarly permits the continuation of life. The character whose testicles are mentioned in this quotation is not labeled as belonging to a specific gender. Given widespread cultural norms regarding gender, the lack of an overt gender label placed upon a person lends to the qualification of that person as cis-gendered. For that reason, I assume that the character mentioned within this quotation is a cis-gendered man. Furthermore, the rest of the collection does not evidence presence of other genders.

Whilst this passage focuses upon a male character in connection with nature, "Into Our light I Will Go Forever" (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 60) is a recounting of a sexual encounter written from the perspective of a female persona so it also speaks to the female relationship with nature. From this perspective, the use of nature to describe a sexual partner is meaningful and indicative of the female relationship to nature being present throughout the female persona's life to the extent that even areas that would largely be considered private -- such as sexuality -- involve the natural world.

The use of a female Indigenous perspective in the descriptions of sexual encounters is meaningful given the general centralization of male desires in content surrounding sexuality such as erotica as well as the sexualization of Indigenous women. To use the words of Lee Maracle: “Sexuality is promoted as the end-all and be-all of womanhood, yet perversely it is often a form of voluntary rape: self-deprivation and the transformation of women into vessels of biological release for men. Or bodies become vessels for male gratification, not the means by which we experience our own sexual wonderment” (Maracle, 24). In this quotation, the poet features a female perspective on a sexual encounter thus describing a partner according to the female gaze. By that same means, the poet decentralizes male sexual desires and uses nature in a reclaiming of female Indigenous sexual identity. The use of natural imagery in descriptions that center the female gaze is thought-provoking and connects female pleasure to nature. While one would not give way to the other, nature lends support to the expression of the female gaze, and consequently female pleasure.

Sexuality is recounted in this corpus using a female perspective in connection with nature. Similarly, this corpus features expressions and descriptions of love that are also intertwined with elements of the natural world. One example of an expression of love from a female perspective can be found in the work of Joy Harjo, in the poem “My Man’s Feet” which is a declaration of love towards a significant other told from the perspective of a female persona.

“They are heroic roots
You cannot mistake them
For any other six-foot walker
I could find them in a sea of feet
A planet or universe of feet” (*An American Sunrise*, 70)

In this somewhat atypical expression of affection towards a significant other, the persona compares her significant other’s feet to roots. The metaphor of a root can point to a number of things, including grounding, and resilience, as well as a direct connection to the ground, much like feet. Here the use of nature to describe a significant other is a means of expressing affection and centering the persona’s values of what is important to her in a romantic connection. In this case, the persona values the resilience of her partner, which she views as a quality that is unique to them.

To further this point, through the use of a female persona, as well as the description above that uses nature to center the persona’s valued qualities in a relationship, the female perspective of a romantic relationship is valued. This is a thought-provoking reversal of the common representation of women in connection with nature in artistic productions. Often women are the subject of lust and desire, with their bodies compared to nature in order to focus upon that desire. For example, the Elizabethan poet Edmund Spencer describes a woman’s lips by comparing them to cherries: “Her lips lyke cherries charming men to byte”⁷. Contrary to the use of natural

⁷ Spencer, Edmund. “Epithalamion”, *Amoretti and Epithalamion*, 1595.

imagery to describe women, this quotation centers a valued quality in the persona's partner, rather than a physical attribute. Much like its use in the persona's relationship, the human relationship to nature shown through this comparison is deepened. The female persona uses nature to describe a valued emotional quality, therefore demonstrating a connection that is not merely surface level.

As mentioned previously, the female persona describes a love interest using a part of nature. Women, nature, and love are consequently entered into an intriguing dynamic in which nature becomes physically a part of the object of love. While this does not translate into the female persona feeling romantic love for nature, it renders the boundary between the loved person and nature blurred. It may not be clear where exactly the body part described using natural imagery starts, and the rest of the loved character ends. Furthermore, metaphoric comparisons are grounded within certain characteristics. For example, the metaphoric likening of a smiling person to the sun might be grounded in their shared bright demeanor. Similarly, while a blinding light might convey a similar meaning, the overall connotation associated with blinding light lacks the positivity needed to describe a smiling person. In this context, nature is compared to an admired entity: the persona's partner's feet. Consequently, comparison of the character's feet to roots is firstly physically grounded in resilience and groundedness, but also in the persona's admiration. For this reason, the use of nature to describe the object of the persona's love establishes a feeling of admiration and love towards nature -- even if that love loses its romantic dimension.

Conclusion

The body is an important yet commonly referenced interface in the female relationship with nature. Whilst genetically no more connected to the natural world than other groups, Indigenous women demonstrate a particular relationship with nature, be it through environmental violence, culture, the placing of both Indigenous women and nature as victims of capitalist exploitation of the natural world, and so on. Within the parameters of this corpus, the evocations of the body speak to the female relationship with the natural world in a number of different ways, such as through motherhood, childbirth, sexuality, and love.

In mainstream settler culture, Motherhood is a widespread means of creating a sense of proximity with the natural world in ecological discourse, using devices such as the Mother Nature trope. The use of the mother nature trope explicitly brings women and nature together through the sharing of certain characteristics such as their ability to give life and nurture.

From both an analytical and contextual perspective, the collections of study for this thesis are demonstrative of how the female maternal figure cannot be dissociated from the natural world and vice versa within an Indigenous female perspective. For example, *Corpse Whale* shows a mother that is syntactically inseparable from the natural world and part of a larger set of interconnected relationships. In other examples, nature is a part of the

female body and therefore benefits from a physical connection to the female form and can not be separated from it.

The Indigenous mother can furthermore contextually not be separated from nature, as both entities are similarly connected to continuations of the colonial process such as the non-consensual sterilization of Indigenous women, or the disproportionate placement of Native children in the system. Both of these issues have an implicit yet direct connection to the land perceived as a commodity to be stolen by settler populations, and their efforts to continue to colonial process thus limiting the propagation and continuation of Native cultures. For this reason, the female Indigenous mother cannot be studied entirely independently from Nature in the context of literatures by Indigenous women living in what is known as North America.

The mention of childbirth throughout *An American Sunrise*, *Corpse Whale*, and *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* is also demonstrative of the female connection to nature. Within the corpus of study for this thesis nature acts as a guide for both the unborn child into the world of the living and a guide to the mother through the process of childbirth. Nature consequently plays an active role in the occurrences of childbirth described here, either welcoming the newborn child or acting as a catalyst for labor. Both of these roles are suggestive of nature being integral to childbirth – an important life experience for many women. The description of nature in labor emphasizes how giving birth is a common experience for all aspects of nature. Women

and nature are thus put onto a level playing field, and brought together for sharing important life experiences.

Sexuality and love also act as means of revealing the female relationship to the natural world. The close proximity between women and nature is shown through the discussion of deeply intimate and personal details of female life, such as sexual encounters and the expression of love. Description of sexual encounters and love -- deeply intimate parts of human existence -- through nature is suggestive of female comfort with the natural world.

The taking of a female perspective in stories of love and sexual encounters that include nature points to nature having a certain omnipresence in the female experiences described here. The female perspective in recounts of love stories and sexual encounters centers on the female gaze rather than rendering women the object of affection or desire. The use of a female Indigenous perspective in amorous and sexual stories is meaningful and a means of reclaiming agency for countless women who have experienced the violence, the stereotyping, or the oppression that goes hand in hand with Indigenous female love and sex.

The relationship between Indigenous women and the body is an ever-changing issue that is impacted by oppressive and colonizing legislation. For example, in recent events, the overturning of Roe vs Wade poses the question of how Indigenous women will interact with their own bodies from this point onwards. As of now, it remains unclear whether

Indigenous women will lose further sovereignty of their bodies through a lack of access to health care.

II. Culture

“One does not lose culture. It is not an object. Culture changes, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse, but it is constantly changing and will do so as long as people busy themselves with living. Culture is a living thing.” (Maracle, 110)

In this epigraph from *I am Woman*, Lee Maracle discusses culture and defines it as fluid. It becomes clear that historical cultural enactments differ greatly from present-day enactments of culture, however, culture in itself isn't weakened but adapted. The very idea of a living and ever-changing conception of culture goes against euro-centric perceptions of Indigenous peoples no longer existing, which are widespread, especially in colonial powers such as the United Kingdom. Ignorance towards the contemporary existence of Indigenous peoples and cultures is reflected in *An American Sunrise*: “We thought John Wayne had killed all of you.” (*An American Sunrise*, 26), “you” is a reference to North American Indigenous peoples as a whole, rather than to any one specific Nation. Whilst this quotation is in reference to the death of people rather than culture, both entities can be viewed as interdependent. People cannot exist without culture and vice versa.

The idea of culture being living is significant, especially considering that a great deal of the cultural concessions made in Indigenous communities was brought on by settler colonialism. For example, forced displacement, a shift in available foods, and legislation prohibiting the practice of ceremony caused a great deal of change to the cultural landscapes of North American Indigenous communities. The idea of survival becomes closely connected with culture continuing to live and adapt. In this context, cultural adaptation and therefore life, becomes an alternative to death, both through the loss of cultures and peoples at the hands of colonialism.

In the following quotation, Haunani-Kay Trask establishes that land and other elements of nature are central to Native Hawai'ian cultures. "My people believed that all living things had spirit and, indeed, consciousness and that gods were many and not singular. Since the land was an ancestor, no living thing could be foreign. The cosmos, like the natural world, was a universe of familial relations" (*From a Native Daughter*, 5). Here, the author brings all aspects of nature together and describes them as being kin. Belief in kinship is central to many Indigenous cultures such as those in Hawai'i, Oklahoma, and Alaska, and highlights the human connection with nature. The author expresses a culturally grounded connection to the natural world, equating their relationship to that one might have with family members.

Trask also makes reference to the attribution of souls to all of nature -- also called animism. According to animistic beliefs, all parts of the natural world, such as animals, minerals, and the weather, are both living and in

possession of a soul. Trask states that animism is foundational to Native Hawai'ian ontologies. Animism is also a core belief of other Indigenous communities such as the Mvskoke and Iñupiat. Animism and kinship are conceptually connected beliefs, as the consideration of nature as family hinges upon those very parts of nature being able to reciprocate such a relationship, and accordingly their possession of a soul. The basis of Hawai'ian culture is grounded in the natural world, much like the other cultures making up the corpus for this thesis. Cultural connectivity to nature also manifests in more concrete forms of culture. In the context of ceremony, crafts, and oral tradition, community knowledge is intertwined with the natural world. Nature thus becomes central to culture, serving as a cultural backdrop and knowledge framework.

As an example of oral tradition grounded in nature, *An American Sunrise* features a retelling of a story from Mvskoke oral tradition. The poem is called "Tobacco Origin Story" (*An American Sunrise*, 81), and recounts how tobacco plants came into existence as a "plant child" (*An American Sunrise*, 81). Both the male and female gender play a part in this retelling of a traditional story, however, the roles played by women are particularly significant. The mother, nature, and the plant child are all female characters, thus constituting a gender imbalance compared to the singular male father figure.

Miss Mary Mack is another female character featured in this poem and a character within the eponymous children's clapping song. In this song, the

character is described wearing a black dress with silver buttons down the back, and wants to see hippos jump over a fence: “Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack, all dressed in black, black, black, with silver buttons, buttons, buttons, all down her back, back, back”⁸. Both works mentioned here are examples of oral tradition: a clapping song is a form of oral tradition, and Harjo’s poem is a transcribed version of a primarily oral cultural story. Their overt similarities appear to be limited to their orality, yet Harjo’s poem engages in an intertextual relationship with *Miss Mary Mack*. Harjo explicitly mentions the name *Miss Mary Mack* at the beginning of the poem, and describes the plant child as wearing a dress with silver buttons down the back:

“In the moonlight tobacco plant had silver
Moon buttons all up her back.”(*An American Sunrise*, 81)

The mention of *Miss Mary Mack* and her silver buttons at the beginning and the end of the poem creates an effect of circularity as if both the characters and the reader were incessantly brought back to the same narrative. The poet’s specific choice to reference *Miss Mary Mack* makes this particularly pertinent. The meaning behind this children’s rhyme is disputed, however, the common theme between different explanations is misery. For example, *Miss Mary Mack* is thought by some to tell the story of a prostitute, others consider Mary Mack to be a passenger on the Titanic, and others interpret this rhyme as written by slaves longing for freedom. The idea of pain running through and changing an otherwise culturally significant story is

⁸ The writer of *Miss Mary Mack* is unknown

meaningful. In this poem, misery and trauma impact the tobacco plant -- a female character -- but also affect the natural world: “Back, when we knew how to hear the songs of plants/And could sing back, like now/ On paper, with marks like bird feet, but where are/Our ears? They have grown to fit/Around earbuds, to hear music made for cold/Cash, like our beloved smoke/Making threaded with addiction and dead words./Sing this song back to me girl.” (*An American Sunrise*, 82) The trauma within *Miss Mary Mack* is reflected in this poem, as a form of mistreatment of nature as a whole, and more specifically of plant child. In this quotation, the relationship with the natural world is clear through the bonds created by trauma. The climate crisis is a manifestation of ecological trauma, and Indigenous women face misogynistic colonial trauma, such as those demonstrated through the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women.

The relationship established between culture and nature persists throughout the remainder of the corpus of study for this thesis. For example, *Corpse Whale*’s use of “Raven” (*Corpse Whale*, 3) showcases nature’s significance in Iñupiaq culture. “Raven” is of course part of the natural world but is also a significant figure in oral tradition, taking on roles such as Iñupiaq creation, and that of a trickster

Leanne Simpson and Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard’s concept of Grounded Normativity is highly pertinent in the connection between culture and nature as it describes an attachment to place. “Grounded normativity houses and reproduces the practices and procedures, based on

deep reciprocity, that is inherently informed by an intimate relationship to place. Grounded normativity teaches us how to live our lives in relation to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly nonauthoritarian, nondominating, nonexploitive manner” (*Grounded Normativity*, 253). Much of what is described here as a part of Grounded Normativity can be thought of as part of culture, such as ceremonies based around thanking or giving back to nature. The concept of *aloha ‘āina*, or loving the land in Native Hawai’ian culture also demonstrates the link between culture and land. *Aloha ‘āina* puts reciprocity between land and people into practice by promoting the idea of the land taking care of you if you take care of the land.

Culture acts as an interface between nature and Indigenous women, revealing part of their relationship. Culture manifests itself in the protection of the land, in physical manifestations of culture, and in oral tradition -- thus showing a new facette of the ways in which women relate to nature.

The protection of nature

“Further, if we are caretakers of this land, then the obligation to alter the destiny of this society is our collective responsibility. The damage done to our homeland is our collective burden.” (Maracle, 42)

In the epigraph that opens this section, Lee Maracle talks about everyone being responsible for nature’s protection. The use of “we” in conjunction with a plural usage of the noun “caretakers” as a designator for everyone, insists on an idea of cooperation between diverse people(s), rather than everyone being a cohesive and singular entity. According to Maracle, people as a whole -- regardless of their cultural heritage, gender, and so on -- hold the same level of responsibility to nature. However, even though everyone is responsible for nature to the same degree, the proportion of damage caused is not equally shared between those same groups of people.

Ecological issues are economically and socially stratified, both in terms of those affected, and those responsible for the damage. According to the Oxfam *Confronting Carbon Equality* report the poorest 50% of the world’s population is responsible for only 7% of emissions, while the richest 5% of the global population is responsible for a shocking third of current emissions. Wealthier groups of people are responsible for a larger proportion of ecological damage, whereas marginalized communities feel a larger proportion of the consequences of that damage. Therefore marginalized

peoples' relationship to the natural world is disproportionately affected by the exploitation of nature, in which they play less of a role.

Ecocide is grounded in wealth and various forms of capitalist exploitation such as the mass production of goods, product distribution, and tourism as an industry. Trask's poem "Tourist" illustrates capitalist responsibility for ecological destruction:

"The flourishing hand

of greed, a predatory

face without dreams.

In the marketplace,

glittering knives of money,

murdering the trees." (*Night is a*

Sharkskin Drum, 20)

Firstly, mention of a "hand of greed"-- especially when paired with overt criticism of capitalist values -- can be deemed an intertextual reference to *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith. In this important capitalist work, Smith establishes a relationship of interdependence between the free market and self-interest. Additionally, and crucially to this context, *The Wealth of Nations* focuses on ideas such as civilization and savagery, which prove to be deeply colonizing and harmful to marginalized peoples. The intertextual reference to Adam Smith cements this poem as an informed anticapitalist

work, but also references colonizing materials, reusing and placing them in a critical context. In juxtaposing Adam Smith with her own anticapitalist and decolonized work, Trask is committing a revolutionary act of derision in this quotation.

The use of the phrase “glittering knives of money” is striking, especially in conjunction with the murder of trees; trees being a metonymic appellation for nature as a whole. Bank notes were also made out of paper at the time of their conception, so for money to be murdering the trees is first and foremost a literal statement. The combination of “knives” and “murdering” in the same passage, conveys a sense of brutality, drawing a parallel between capitalism and violence that establishes a layered relationship between these two concepts. Initially, money is literally responsible for the destruction of trees, then looking deeper into the quotation, capitalism is at the root of violence against nature, but that violence upon the land is also violence upon the body. The linearity of the land/body relationship is especially true for marginalized bodies, such as the ones affected by the acts of environmental violence rooted in white supremacy and capitalism throughout this corpus.

The use of violent vocabulary in talking about natural destruction is symptomatic of both nature being considered as living and deserving of equal ethical consideration with humans, and the inherent cruelty that makes up the capitalist ideology. At its core capitalism is founded upon the idea that capital should be controlled privately in a competitive free-market

setting. Capitalism encourages and banalizes both direct and indirect violence, as people compete in a “rat race” to get ahead and adhere to a material definition of success. The poet establishes a dichotomy between their own ethical consideration for nature as a living being that can be murdered and the disregard for ethics and nature that is associated with capitalism in this passage.

Another striking aspect of this passage is the adjective “glittering” used to describe a knife. “Glittering” would not usually be used to describe such a violent implement, given its overall positive connotations, and points to something that catches the eye, is attractive, magical, or of value. In the context of this citation, “glittering” can be associated with the designated being attractive. Capitalism and its perceived allowance for rapid enrichment -- pushed by tropes such as the “self-made man” -- are indeed seductive, and attractive concepts. However, according to this passage, giving in to the temptation of capitalist ideals is at nature’s expense.

In *As We Have Always Done*, Leanne Simpson aligns the fight against capitalism with the protection of nature and the genocide and oppression of Indigenous peoples.

“Increasingly, we’re experiencing organizing against climate change as the epochal struggle of our times, with revolutionary movements taking on the fight as a fight against global capitalism. This interests me because I see the dismantling of global capitalism as inseparable from the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and

nationhood because capitalism at its core is not just incompatible with core Indigenous values but has to violently shred the bodies who house those values in order to sustain itself.” (*As We Have Always Done*, 67)

The implicit connections established in this passage define the dismantling of capitalism as a common indirect goal for both Indigenous rights activism and eco-activism, both of which intersect at the concept of environmental violence. In *Violence on the Land, Violence on our Bodies*, the Women’s Earth Alliance discusses “The relationship between Indigenous people’s bodies, Indigenous territories, and the systemic disregard that allows both to be violence, underpin the foundations of the emerging term, environmental violence” (Women’s Earth Alliance, 15). Environmental violence is also an important component to understanding the context in which the works making up this corpus were produced. Cultural productions such as those that make up the corpus for this thesis are a lens through which one can look at environmental violence -- an intentional infliction of ecological issues upon marginalized communities, or the destruction of Indigenous lands would alter any given community’s relationship with ancestral lands, oral tradition, beliefs of kinship and so on.

The poets’ explorations of nature’s protection encompass a wide range of climate crisis issues that fall under the wider name of pollution. Throughout the corpus for this dissertation, each poet discusses pollution through the lens of their individual communities and geographical contexts. One

category of pollution that appears to transcend the differences between the specific contexts being analyzed here is littering.

Litter

Littering as an ecological issue is central to western ecological discourse and appears to be of concern throughout a number of communities, such as those being explored here. Much of the worry surrounding littering stems from the widespread use of plastics in packaging that is strewn on the ground, and due to its composition, does not break down. The seeming ubiquity of littering as a core ecological issue is somewhat representative of the overconsumption of material goods and its role in the current climate crisis. As contemporary poets concerned with climate issues, Harjo, Okpik, and Trask enter into the conversation surrounding littering as natural damage.

“Here, drifting trash
clogs the shores, coating
the lost minds

of burnt-red tourists

staining the sand
with acrid oils.” (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 18)

In this quotation, Trask criticizes the abuse of nature, specifically in connection with tourism. A large portion of the ecocide in Hawai'i is caused by tourism or the testing of weapons in the Pacific. Tourism is hugely exploitative of Hawai'ian lands and culture. In *From a Native Daughter*, Trask discusses tourism and its dominance in Hawai'i: "Economically, the statistic of thirty tourists for every Native means that land and water, public policy, law, and the general political attitude are shaped by the ebb and flow of tourist industry demands. For our Native people, the inundation of foreigners decrees marginalization in our own land." (*From a Native Daughter*, 3). According to Trask, the profitability of the tourist industry skews legislation from being favorable to the natural world or to Native Hawai'ian peoples. The capitalist exploitation of Hawai'ian lands comes with dire consequences for nature, but ecological exploitation goes hand in hand with other types of exploitation, such as the commodification of Native Hawai'ian cultures, and the marginalization of Native peoples.

The use of the adjective "clogs" commonly raises the idea of dirt and misuse. In everyday language, it would be perfectly acceptable to use expressions such as clogged drains -- in which drains would not have been properly taken care of -- or clogged pores -- in which skin has not been properly cleaned--."Clogs" -- quite ironically -- also creates a sense of movement in this quotation. Water, an element that is constantly in motion, is made static by debris. The shore is in fact so dirty, that water is not able to circulate as it normally would. The natural state of water is being reversed by ecological damage. This quotation featuring water (a liquid) being turned

into a solid, can be thought of in connection with the melting of the polar ice caps in which ice (a solid) is being transformed into water (a liquid).

The parallels between this passage and the melting of the polar ice caps introduce an idea of reversal of nature's original state, which is a means of creating a dichotomy between the classical way in which nature has always presented itself, and the changes it has undergone because of the climate crisis. The idea of the world turning upside down goes from figurative to literal in these comparisons. Female authorship of this passage brings about the idea of women as showing an understanding of, and compassion for nature's suffering. This passage places women as allies with the natural world in this occurrence of poetry as eco-activism.

The use of the term "Red" is thought-provoking in this passage given its common association with Indigenous issues, initially as a racist description of Indigenous people's skin color, and then later as a means of reclaiming Indigenous identity, such as in the Red Power movement. In the specific context of this passage, "red" is used as an indicator of the severity of burns caused upon the skin of settler colonist tourists. The implied contrast between burnt "red" skin and paler skin appears to create a paradox. Indigenous people are generally more severely affected by the consequences of ecological damage caused by settlers, but given the imbalance between Indigenous people and settlers in Hawai'i, it appears that settler bodies are also bearing some of the consequences of ecocide.

As a dominant stylistic feature of Trask's poetry, her stanzas are often offset from each other creating a series of visual descriptions that are entered into direct confrontation with each other. Here, "of burnt-red tourists" is offset from the rest of the quotation, thus creating a physical and meaningful separation between nature and tourism. Whilst these issues go hand-in-hand, especially in the Hawai'ian context, they are widely seen as being entirely separate, playing into the denial of colonial responsibility for ecocide. The use of space here creates a visual representation of the perceived separation of ecological issues and tourism in Hawai'i. The formal design of the poem accentuates the root of all the discussed problems in Hawai'i: settler intervention.

"As he wonders about the careless debris that humans make" (*An American Sunrise*, 72)

In this quotation from *An American Sunrise*, ecological destruction is seen from nature's perspective. "I Wonder What You are Thinking," is told from the point of view of two birds, who express their bewilderment at the damage caused to nature at the hands of humans. The bird husband is described in the process of pondering ecological damage, which is presented in a way that indicates a discrepancy between how that damage is perceived by nature, and how it is seen by humans. Eco-consciousness is very recent in a large majority of western society, and therefore it can be said that a large majority of harm inflicted upon nature was done through a collective lack of caring.

The bird husband is described as pondering ecocide and doesn't appear to be able to understand the reasoning behind human behavior, and deems it a subject of lengthy reflection. Voluntary positioning of human illogic *vis-à-vis* nature as an unfathomable subject is a means of questioning the set of habits people have adopted that cause direct harm to nature and have led us to this point of the climate crisis. Indirect questioning of human habits leads the reader to think further about their own routines, and how they can limit their personal infliction of violence upon the natural world.

The husband character is described in the process of thinking -- which would typically be considered a uniquely human faculty -- however the subject that is described as thinking is a part of the natural world. Other characteristics that are more commonly associated with humans, such as speech, are bestowed upon both birds, causing the reader to consider the birds as human-like. The bestowal of human qualities upon nature enters the birds described into human principles of ethics -- making people think twice about causing harm to the natural world.

"I Wonder What You are Thinking," features two characters that are in a relationship, one female bird, and one male bird. Over the course of the poem, the male character appears to be far less aware of the natural world surrounding him, being less wary of predators, asking questions about human pollution, as well as about the validity of renewing nests. On the contrary, the female character is more aware of surrounding predators, has scavenged for suitable materials to build a new nest and senses changes in

the weather. Male and female relationships with nature are depicted very differently in this one work. The female character is described as being far more in tune with nature, and having a greater sensibility towards nature, however, this is not to caricature and say that the male character is entirely clueless.

“I Wonder What You are Thinking,” features two distinct relationships with the natural world: a female relationship with nature, and a male relationship with nature. Part of the Poet’s distinction between these two relationships involves the male bird being at the forefront of the poem, whereas the female bird is described as having less direct interventions in the poem and being closer to the background. In the context of this poem, the background is the natural world, thus grounding the female bird in nature. The female character in this passage is presented as having a deep understanding of and being a caretaker of the natural world. She is integrated into the natural landscape.

Pollution

Pollution is an umbrella term for contamination by a foreign and unhealthy body, mainly used in ecological discourse. The conversation surrounding pollution renders ecological damage tangible and concrete, thus creating a visually striking representation of climate issues. Pollution is explored throughout this corpus as a symptom of nature's mistreatment.

“we are left

with broken bodies, blinded

children, infected winds

from across the sea” (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 30)

In this excerpt from *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, the poet speaks about how bodies in Hawai'i are impacted by the ecological damage that the Pacific has endured, more specifically alluding to nuclear weapon testing during the Cold War. The issues spoken about are reflected in the sounds used to form this excerpt. For example, is a plosive voiced phoneme that as its name suggests, sounds explosive. The use of sound here can be said to provide further clarity as to the exact cause of harm described, but also as an expression of the poet's anger at the injustice of environmental violence. The words “broken”, “bodies”, and “blinded” carry the weight of the violence inflicted upon Pacific Islanders, and therefore deliver the pain felt both by nature, and by the people.

The effect of accentuation and indignation caused by the repetition of is also supported by the line breaks and the use of commas found in this extract. For example “children” is placed directly after a line break, and “infected” directly after a comma. Both “children” and “infected” are essential to understanding the gravity of the act of environmental violence that is described. The manner in which the pauses are distributed reflects this same disbelief and indignation at the acts of violence committed upon Pacific Islanders by The U.S. military.

The formal design of the poem reflects its content. The manner in which the lines are laid out on the page appears to aesthetically imitate the wind, and the toxins being brought toward Hawai’ian people. A feeling of movement is created by the form of the poem; words are figuratively being carried in the same way toxins are being carried to Pacific Islanders. The feeling of movement adds a further dimension to the painful and infuriating events being retold, adding more emotion to the poem.

The use of movement to elevate the poetic expression of complex pain and anger does not invite the reader to imagine the experience. It isn’t possible to imagine the extent of the emotional, physical, and psychological damage caused by environmental violence unless you have experienced it directly. Instead, movement adds another dimension to an expression of rage.

The centering of the wind is meaningful when examined in conjunction with the poet’s exploration of anger in this passage. Both anger and wind appear

“She/I see/s the pipeline cracking, the Haul road
paved. Oil dripping on the tundra she/I fall/s asleep
as you are dancing with the dead. Your head adorned
with angel-white, loon feathers.

In this passage from *Corpse Whale* by Okpik, the persona speaks out against ecological damage caused by pipelines. Said damage is described using a wide array of words, including “cracking” and “paved”, which are in direct contrast with each other. Both terms describe a type of injury inflicted upon nature, but “cracking” is indicative of movement, whereas “paved” gives an idea of being motionless. The contrast in descriptive words gives the

impression of ecological destruction being all-encompassing and conveys the advanced stage of the climate crisis.

The mention of ecological harm is juxtaposed with Inuit culture. “Dancing with the dead” and “loon feathers” point towards a presence of ceremony, such as the loon dance or the whale dance, both of which include headdresses made out of loon feathers. An enactment of culture sandwiched between two discussions of ecological destruction creates a visually striking positioning of culture in times of ecological crisis. Like in geographical space, this passage shows nature as surrounding Inuit culture, bringing the discussion of the new relationship to the natural world forward.

The poet’s use of space in this passage appears to reflect the discussion of violence upon nature. When looking at the quotation, the spacing and formal design of the poem give the impression that the words on the page have been drilled into and partially broken apart. Form and content are therefore interwoven, thus enhancing the reader’s sensory experience of the extract at hand. It can be said that here we are witness to nature’s impact on contemporary artistic creation.

As stated previously, reference to Inuit culture is positioned between two uses of the “She/I” pronouns; the first in which the persona falls asleep, and the second in which they are unable to stop ecological damage. The juxtaposition of sleep and attempted eco-activism creates a subconscious connection to dreams as a means of imagining a better future and

highlighting dissatisfaction with the current ecological state of affairs. The persona attempts to enact ecological change from a state of slumber in which one would not typically be considered conscious or cognitively able to function, aside from dreaming. This attempt at activism speaks volumes to the relationship between the persona, using partially feminine pronouns, and nature. The passage at hand portrays the persona as an active defender of nature, as well as them having a deep and almost telepathic bond.

This passage also juxtaposes culture with the striving for ecological change, which can be thought of in connection with the concept of futurity. In *Spiral To The Stars*, Laura Harjo gives the operating definition of futurity as “the enactment of theories and practices that activate our ancestor’s unrealized possibilities, the act of living out the futures we wish for in a contemporary moment, and the creation of conditions for these futures” (L. Harjo, 5). The cultural practices alluded to here are looking to the future, as they are positioned directly next to discourse surrounding an attempt at eco-activism. In this context, the enactment of cultural practices whilst looking to the future can be seen as a means of initiating better ecological and cultural futures for Indigenous peoples.

Nature and physical enactments of culture

“A great deal of the colonizer’s energy has gone into breaking the intimate connection of Nishnaabeg bodies (and minds and spirits) to each other and to the practices and associated knowledges that connect us to land because this is the base of our power. This means land and bodies are commodified as capital under settler colonialism and are naturalized as objects for exploitation” (*As We Have Always Done*, 41). In this quotation, Leanne Simpson connects cultural practices, nature, body, and settler oppression. Here, the undertaking of cultural enactments such as crafts or ceremonies is described as being integral to the formation of community-based knowledges, and therefore to community members themselves. The disruption or forced discontinuation of cultural practices by settler populations is a conscious attack on Indigenous knowledges and ontologies and is described as being a means of stripping Indigenous peoples of their power.

A physical enactment of culture can be defined as a culturally significant practice that includes a physical undertaking, such as beading, preparing food, weaving, and so on. I have chosen to make a distinction between oral and physical forms of culture. Whilst these two types of cultural manifestation are interwoven and provide an intellectual framework for community-based knowledge systems, I feel that the sheer quantity of material pertaining to culture linked to nature in the corpus for this thesis renders a separation necessary. Without the separation of culture into

categories, I fear that this thesis would not be able to make a full analysis of the spectrum of cultural manifestations present in the plethora of possible examples within the corpus. Furthermore, the space given to Indigenous cultural ways of knowing is apt given their importance both in the corpus of study for this thesis and in the communities from which the poets drew their inspiration.

In western society, the meaning of ceremony has been diluted to carry solely celebratory meaning, in mainly religious contexts. Conversely, cultures retaining a closer connection to tradition such as those examined within this thesis have a broader definition of what might be defined as ceremony. “You could say that the specific rituals that make up the ceremony are designed to get the participants into a state of mind that will allow for the extraordinary to take place” (Wilson, 69). According to Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson, at its core ceremony is about relationships, and all participants being connected at one given time. Through a series of actions, words, and so on, the ceremony participants are able to share a moment of enlightenment.

Crafts are a culturally ingrained means of creating objects, often with materials that are local to the community responsible for their creation. Not only do crafts act as a means of creating useful objects that can be sold or shared, but they are also a framework for community knowledge. Crafting is knowledge in a direct sense, as it is a means of taking raw materials and transforming them using a specific method in order to produce the intended

results. Crafting is also a way of understanding nature, the world, and culture itself. Māori scholar Hinekura Smith discusses weaving as methodology in “Whatuora: Theorizing “New” Indigenous Methodology From “Old” Indigenous Weaving Practice”. According to the author: “Indigenous artistic weaving practices, and the storied art forms they produce, hold sophisticated systems of knowledge that guide how we move through and relate to the world, how we learn and are taught, how we experience life, and pass down knowledge” (H. Smith, 1).

Conceptually ceremony and crafts are linked to the natural world, but at times that link spans further, manifesting itself concretely. For example, this quotation from *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* demonstrates a more concrete connection between ceremony and nature.

“Night is a sharkskin drum
sounding our bodies black
and gold.” (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 5)

In this passage, as well as in the title of the collection, the poet refers to a sharkskin drum. The drum discussed is a *Pahu Niu*, a sacred instrument in Native Hawaiian cultures that is used in ceremonies. *Pahu Niu* is used as an accompanying instrument to *Hula*, a traditional means of telling stories and paying respect to divinities. One of the initially striking things in this quotation is the poet’s choice of nomenclature for the sharkskin drum. The manner in which the *Pahu Niu* is introduced to the reader is not by name, but instead by the material from which the drum is partially made. This

description doesn't give a comprehensive list of the materials from which the ceremonial drum was made, but rather focuses on sharkskin. The specific ceremonial object described can only be identified by the reader using cultural ceremonial knowledge.

The naming of the drum in this passage also emphasizes ceremonial connection to the natural world, as it directly references the use of materials that come from nature, in the fabrication of objects used in ceremony. The sharkskin drum becomes a direct and visual area of contact between nature and ceremony, thus embodying the spirit of the collection of poetry as a whole by intertwining culture, nature, and concepts of collective connectivity that are core to both ceremony and readership of a published book.

The concept of collective realization that is central to both ceremony and the reading experience is further illustrated in the quotation from *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*. The ceremonial drum is described as "sounding our bodies black and gold." (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 5), "our bodies" therefore taking a plural and possessive form that is indicative of the shared nature of the collective experience that is described as being underway. The participants in the act of ceremony here undergo a mass and very visual bodily transformation of being sounded "black and gold" by a drum made out of natural materials. The poet creates a striking illustration of or even a working definition of ceremony that is featured both within the collection of poetry and as its title.

Natural involvement in ceremony, the act of ceremony itself, and its described impact upon bodies are all interrelated aspects of the quotation under study. This description of ceremony from *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* directly demonstrates the connection between body, nature, and ceremony.

Physical manifestations of culture can exist in a myriad of different forms that are connected to the natural world. Examples of such include ceremony and crafts.

Ceremony

Ceremony is a means of connecting bodies and entities together. One example of activity that can be defined as ceremony is the preparation of food. There is a considerable focus on food preparation through a traditional lens in Okpik's *Corpse Whale*. To cite but one example:

“She/I cut/s opaque flesh and black meat with a jagged *ulu*,
carve *muktuk*, tie dark and white ribbons on each
gunnysack to mark the body parts. She/I slice/s the dorsal fin, give it to my
brother
for ceremony, barter a bag of whalebones for fuel to heat the aged and
chilled cement
barracks.” (Okpiki, 43)

In this quotation, Okpik describes the culturally ingrained method one would use in Iñupiaq communities in order to properly butcher a whale. The persona uses cultural tools like an *Ulu* -- a rounded blade used in Inuit communities -- in order to prepare *muktuk* -- a cut of whale skin and blubber. The process described here prepares different parts of the whale to be consumed as a traditional food source or used otherwise.

The whale being butchered intertwines ceremony and the natural world. The scenario described in “No Fishing On the Point” describes the lengthy and respectful process of butchering a whale that has been hunted in an Alaska Native community. Typically in western communities, the cutting up of an animal for food consumption would not be considered as demonstrative of a relationship to the natural world, but the care and precision of the described process point to a considerable ethical consideration for the deceased animal. The punctuation in this quotation as well as the level of detail in which the process is described give an impression of slowness and are consequently indicative of the time taken by the female character to complete this ceremony.

In addition to the time taken to butcher the whale, the poet also describes the entirety of the process without mention of blood or gore. Naturally in the process of cutting up an animal, one can expect varying quantities of blood, but this passage, however detailed, does not enter into specifics of the visuals one might see during such a process, not out of biological *naïveté*, but rather as an ethical framework for cultural ceremony. The absence of

details that may shock readers or make this process appear to be violent or murderous, assures focus on community perspectives when reading the poem from which this quotation originates. Furthermore, arctic hunting processes such as seal hunting have been branded as cruel by a change in public opinion in reaction to Greenpeace's anti-sealing campaigns, therefore it can be understood how the poet might not want to draw attention to the inevitable blood spill during butchering. The poet frames the butchering of a whale as a clean and respectful process that informs the female relationship to nature, which given the principles of relationality in Inupiat communities is entirely logical.

As an offset of the respect for the natural world that is interwoven with relationality, the poet describes a series of sustainable practices that reflect not only a relationship with the individual animal but with nature as a whole. For example, the character is described in the process of butchering a singular whale, which is evidenced through the use of singular nouns such as “the dorsal fin” (Okpik, 43). In this context, hunting a singular animal is very much in opposition to mass hunting, and this distinction points to sustainable community hunting practices in which peoples hunt only what they need. Such hunting practices allow animal populations to sustain themselves and act in greater respect of the ecosystem of which they are a part.

Principles of sustainability go hand in hand with hunting practices in which very little of the butchered animal goes to waste. In this quotation, the poet

describes different uses for different parts of the body such as in ceremony, and for consumption. For example, *muktuk*, meat, dorsal fins used in ceremony, and whalebones used as a source of heat are all mentioned in this passage from “No Fishing On The Point”. Other parts of whales can be used in other ways, such as baleen to make baskets, snares, and runners for sleds. A conscious effort is made by communities to waste as little as possible, which speaks volumes about the Iñupiat relationship to the natural world. The female character described as butchering the whale is acting with the utmost respect for the life taken and has compassion for the natural world.

The quotation currently under study is infused with tradition, firstly given the cultural significance of the practices directly described, but also through the presence of Iñupiaq words that are peppered throughout the poem, such as “*ulu*” or “*muktuk*”. Such words are incorporated throughout the entirety of *Corpse Whale*, which is especially meaningful when combined with the repeated mention of culturally significant practices. The series of choices made throughout the collection to include Iñupiat-ness, so to speak, transform this book from a simple collection of poetry into an expression of community-based knowledge. Given the relationships between the ceremony described here and the natural world, it can be said that this quotation is a framework as to how the natural world can be understood by the female protagonist.

Ceremony, nature, and the female identity are also brought together in a multitude of different passages throughout the corpus for this thesis. For

example, Trask's "Who Would Find the Midnight Rainbow" juxtaposes *oli*, Pele, and the natural world surrounding them.

"who would *oli*
in the bosom of Pele
wreathed in
flame?"

(Night is a Sharkskin Drum, 4)

"Who Would Find the Midnight Rainbow" is a series of questions asking who would undertake an assortment of actions, such as finding forests, and who would *oli* -- a Native Hawai'ian sacred chant. *Oli* is a ceremonial means of telling stories that can be chanted either accompanied by music, or acapella. It is based upon a connection with the natural world and is often rife with hidden meanings and metaphors.⁹ Conceptually, *oli*, and thus this quotation intertwines nature with ceremony.

"Who Would Find the Midnight Rainbow" appears to guide the reader, or an unmentioned character, through a series of steps that allow them to arrive "in the bosom of Pele" (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum, 4*) -- which given Pele's domain appears to be in proximity to or in a volcano -- and conduct their ceremony. This poem as a whole is a representation of a physical journey that can be made to a ceremonial site, otherwise known as a map. The previous alternative or decolonized definition of a map is in agreeance with that of Merriam-Webster: "a representation usually on a flat surface of the

⁹ Kapono, Karen Valentine. "The Hidden Power and Tradition of Oli". *Keola: Hawai'i Islands Community Magazine*. Nov-Dec, 2019. <https://keolamagazine.com/culture/oli/>. Accessed 3 Oct, 2022.

whole or a part of an area”¹⁰. If this poem can be considered a map to a place of ceremony, the relationship between ceremony and nature demonstrated in this quotation is dual, drawing from both concrete and conceptual connections to the land. The map poem is concretely connected to the land through the geographical directions given and its grounding within the natural world. Furthermore, this map poem is conceptually related to the land through its ties to intellectual decolonization -- which is directly related to the land and its colonization.

As well as having a deep and layered relationship to the land, this poem as a map is a multifaceted embodiment of community knowledge. The final destination of said map being a place of ceremony, the entirety of the map is centered around its enactment, which is of course grounded in community cultural beliefs and knowledge. Not only does ceremony focus on a specific set of beliefs, but also demonstrates the community’s relationship to the world around them. The map poem in this collection demonstrates community knowledge through knowledge of the natural world.

The map poem “Who Would Find the Midnight Rainbow” is also a demonstration of community knowledge through its form as a written poetic expression. The use of a poem or other non-standardized forms of map is in direct opposition with colonized maps, all of which share codes. For example, maps based upon colonized knowledge use concepts of scale, lines to represent roads, adhere to colonizing concepts of borders, etc. Colonized

¹⁰ Unknown. “Map.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/map>. Accessed 3 Oct. 2022.

maps set aside and attempt to discredit all other geographical representations, such as those founded upon community knowledge, thus creating a hegemonic and misleading definition of a map when in fact they always have existed in other forms: “The earliest indigenous maps of North America were not drawn. The placement and orientation of a village, its buildings, and even mound structures were markers that mirrored the meaning of the heavens or other directional senses. Even a basket could be a map or a song. We carry maps of destiny in our poems.”¹¹ The very use of a non-colonized form of a map renders the poem as a whole a demonstration of community-based knowledge.

Community knowledge is central to this quotation from *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* but the poet’s use of imagery also connects the evocations of community land-based knowledge to both the female body and identity. The poet’s referral to a volcano as “the bosom of Pele” compares its shape to a breast, specifically the breast of Pele; the goddess of volcanoes. As the destination of the poem map, the geographic landform described takes on a central role within the poem as an artistic production. The community and land-based knowledge demonstrated within the map revolves around the female body and identity. From the perspective of the female relationship to nature, the positioning of the female body, and an example of female empowerment as central in discourse highlighting community and ecological knowledge is deeply meaningful. Here, through their portrayal in

¹¹ Harjo, Joy. Perez, Craig Santos. “Joy Harjo on Words as Maps, and a Poem by Craig Santos Perez: From the Upcoming anthology, *Living Nations, Living Words*.”, *Lit Hub*, May 21st 2021. <https://lithub.com/joy-harjo-on-words-as-maps-and-a-poem-by-craig-santos-perez/>. Accessed 5, Oct, 2022.

connection to nature, women are powerful, and they are centrally important to the act of traveling to ceremonial grounds.

Crafts

The female identity, nature, and culture also intersect through the execution of cultural crafts in the corpus for this thesis. An example of such can be found in *Corpse Whale* by Okpik.

“It’s her/my time to carve
oars to make her/my
umiak or *kayak* skin boat.” (Okpik, 41)

This quotation from Okpik’s debut collection describes a female protagonist coming up to the moment in which she is going to undertake a traditional craft: boat making. Whilst the type of boat to be built isn’t definitively mentioned in this quotation, the persona mentions that she is going to make it out of skin -- as is culturally appropriate in Inuit communities. The traditional crafting of boats using animal skin connects this form of knowledge to the natural world, firstly through the origin of the materials used: animals. The choice of using skin to make boats demonstrates a wide knowledge of the natural world given the wide variety of materials available. Community knowledges deem skin to be the most appropriate material available, so this craft and the materials used are deeply connected to nature.

The relationship between boat-making in Inuit communities and nature is dual. Firstly, as stated above, the choice of materials is rooted in community ecological knowledge, but as a finished product the boat is intended to be directly inserted into the water, which is of course part of nature. The use of boats is a physical means of maintaining and strengthening the human relationship with nature, through practices such as fishing, or simply witnessing the natural world at work.

Another prominent feature of this quotation is the concept of a time at which this project should be undertaken. In the wider context of the poem, “her/my time” (Okpik, 41) to undertake this particular project does not point to a specific time in the character’s life per se, or define the act of carving oars and making a boat as being a right of passage. However, the poem discusses the month of June, and therefore the season during which it is most appropriate to make a boat. One could imagine that the summer is best suited to this particular craft because of the increase in temperature, and reduction in rainfall. Once again, the craft at hand is linked back to the natural world as it is a product of a layered and interwoven understanding of nature.

Amongst the deep and complex understanding of the natural world that is demonstrated through this particular embodiment of Inuit culture, the character in this poem that is directly related to the fabrication of a boat is described using female “she/I” pronouns. Such a deep understanding of the

natural world is demonstrated within the craft of boat making, that its undertaking by a female character is demonstrative of female connectivity with, and empathy towards nature.

Another quotation demonstrating the connections between women, cultural crafts, and nature can be found in “Granddaughters” from *An American Sunrise* by Joy Harjo.

“I carried a sack of dreams from a starlight dwelling
To be opened when I start bleeding
There’s a red dress, deerskin moccasins
The taste of berries made of promises” (*An American Sunrise*, 20)

In this quotation, the product of a craft that is culturally specific to Southeastern Woodlands peoples such as the Mvskoke is discussed: deerskin moccasins. Of course, as this craft uses resources that can be found within the natural world, like deerskin, it demonstrates the Mvskoke relationship with nature through their knowledges of different materials and desire to not waste parts of already hunted animals. Therefore the fabrication of deerskin moccasins is inherently connected to the natural world.

As described in this poem, the moccasins are contained within a sack of dreams that itself comes from the “Starlight dwelling”. The existence of a “starlight dwelling” -- which appears to be a home that is lit by the stars -- would seemingly point to a home without electricity, and consequently, a

certain closeness to nature, whether it is intentional or by lack of access. Regardless of the reason for which one might live without access to electricity, the body is forced to remain closer to nature, for example using the sun moon, and stars as a source of light, and basing rest hours around those which would allow the widest access to daylight. An environment that is close to nature as a point of origin for an item crafted according to a methodology that is also close to nature creates a duality in the link to the natural world demonstrated in this passage.

Whilst the crafted items in this quotation are close to nature, they are also linked to femininity. As evidenced in the text, the moccasins are to be accessed only in conjunction with the start of the character's menstrual cycle, "when I start bleeding" (*An American Sunrise*, 20) thus establishing a direct connection between craft, nature, and femininity in this poem.

Through the mentioning of menstruation -- an enabling phenomenon in biological creation -- and crafting --the creation of useful objects from natural materials -- a thought-provoking focus is drawn upon the idea of creation in connection with nature. Thus the creation of moccasins is a means of thinking about biological creation, and how women relate to the natural world. Crafts are frameworks through which people and communities can examine themselves and the world around them.

The mention of a red dress is another striking aspect of this quotation. The red dress is the symbol of the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, which contextually is significant. Indigenous women and two-spirit

people are murdered at rates that are ten times higher than other groups, yet this crisis continues to be ignored by non-Indigenous communities. In the specific context of this quotation, the crisis of MMIW is not a central theme of the poem, however, its mentioning is political and representative of the issues facing Indigenous women. Upon entry into womanhood that is marked by the start of menstruation, the protagonist is not met with celebration, or encouraging stories, but instead with a red dress.

Nature and oral tradition

Oral tradition is a multifaceted cultural expression of community knowledge, serving as a vehicle for the transmission of philosophy, spirituality, teachings, and so on. Oral tradition presents itself in a multitude of different formats, such as stories, poems, and songs. These transmissions of knowledge are often grounded in the natural world, explaining and featuring elements of nature such as animals, plants, or minerals. For example, the natural world is central in the Mvskoke explanation for how day and night came to be separated.

In “Indigenous place-thought and agency amongst humans and non humans”, Vanessa Watts states that: “Our understandings of the world are often viewed as mythic by “modern” society, while our stories are considered to be an alternative mode of understanding and interpretation rather than “real” events. Colonization is not solely an attack on peoples and lands; rather, this attack is accomplished in part through purposeful and

ignorant misrepresentations of Indigenous cosmologies” (Watts, 23). In this quotation, the validity of oral traditions as forms of knowledge is stated and reaffirmed. In many cases, Indigenous knowledges are perceived to be lesser or false unless they are in agreement with colonial knowledges. However, Indigenous knowledges are founded upon thousands of years of observation and connection to the world -- making up vast amounts of data -- much of which is disregarded by systems of knowing that are grounded in white supremacy, such as positivism.

The female relationship to the natural world is reflected in oral tradition. In different cultures, such as the ones mentioned in this corpus, women are featured in oral tradition as deities of natural elements, such as the sea or corn. For example, in this corpus, Trask mentions Hina, a goddess from Native Hawai’ian oral tradition.

“Even Hina, tinted
by love, shone gold
across a lover’s sea.” (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 11)

Hina is the name of two distinct figures in Native Hawai’ian oral tradition: Māui’s mother, and the goddess of the moon. In this specific context, the figure mentioned here appears to be the goddess of the Moon. The quotation “shone gold/across a lover’s sea” paints a picture of a moonscape over the sea. Not only is the female character here a divinity that has rule over the moon -- a part of nature-- but she is described as if she herself is the moon.

In terms of the female relationship to nature in connection to oral tradition, the duplicity of this description of Hina is significant. Here, Hina and the moon are deeply connected to the extent that not only can Hina control the moon, but she can transform herself into it.

Another striking thing about this passage is the use of the verb shine in its past tense form. The use of past tense describing the moon is highly unusual, as it is indicative of some sort of rupture with the present moment when the moon is considered to be a constant that never ceases to reflect the sun's rays. Paired with the phrase "Long ago" (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 11) used elsewhere in the poem, the use of "shone" refers the reader back to a time in which the moon shone gold over the sea. Along with the discourse of ecological damage that can be found throughout "The Broken Gourd" (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 11) such as "our aching earth,/ a cracked *ipu*/ whispers, bloody water/ on its broken lip." (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 11). In this quotation, the Earth is described as having been harmed in the same way as a human or an animal might be harmed -- with visible blood being symptomatic of bodily harm. The visible harm done to the Earth alludes to the contemporary forms of violence against the natural world. In light of the ecological damage alluded to throughout "The broken Gourd", the idea of Hina no longer shining as she once did appears to be indicative of further ecocide that did not affect the world in the past as it does at the time this poem refers to.

Whilst the past tense use of the verb “shone” refers the reader back to a time before the all-encompassing ecological damage that we face in the present, the damaged entity being female is significant. In this quotation, as a female, the moon carries the weight of the harm done to the natural world. Given the consequences of climate issues felt by women contemporarily, such as a rise in sterility, that are discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, the gender of the entity facing harm is far from coincidental. The choice to make ecological harm felt by a female element of nature highlights the reality of the current relationship between women and the natural world. Both women and nature are deeply affected by climate issues. On a similar note, this quotation is also suggestive of a higher level of empathy towards nature, given that the female character can physically feel the pain felt by the natural world.

Whilst “The Broken Ground” alludes to ecological damage, it does not specify the extent to which the Earth has endured violence. The temporal markers used throughout this poem are vague, and thus do not give the reader any indication of the time in which the poem takes place. It can be imagined that this poem could take place in the contemporary moment, yet it could also take place in the past -- at the beginning of tangible ecological damage -- or indeed the future. The unspecified degree of ecological damage leaves the reader with a series of unanswered questions, such as the functionality of the moon in the time in which this poem is set, and the extent to which the Earth can still be affected by climate crisis issues. The reader is pushed to think more about the climate emergency and their

individual actions through community-based knowledge such as oral tradition.

The investigation of the relationship between women and nature through oral tradition in this corpus falls into two categories: female figures from oral tradition in connection with nature, and women in interaction with male figures from oral tradition in connection with nature.

Female figures from oral tradition in connection with nature

Women are portrayed in connection with the natural world at length throughout this corpus, including in “Nāmakaokaha’i” from *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* by Haunani-Kay Trask, which tells the story of its eponymous deity.

“Born from the chest

of Haumea, *mo’o*

woman of *kuapā*,

lizard-tongued goddess

of Hawai’i:

Nāmakaokaha’i,

sister of thunder

and shark --

Kānehekili,

Kūhaimoana --

elder of Pele,

Pelehonuamea.” (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 7)

In this quotation, Trask writes a series of names that situate the deity upon which this poem focuses, in relation to her family. Over the course of this description, the poet cites a number of figures from Native Hawai’ian oral tradition, a majority of which are female. For example, “Pele” (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 7) is the goddess of volcanoes, “Haumea” (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 7) is the goddess of fertility and childbirth, and “Nāmakaokaha’i” (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 7): -- Pele’s sister -- is the goddess of the ocean. Whilst this quotation also features male deities -- such as “Kānehekili” (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 7) the god of thunder, and “Kuhaimoana the shark god” (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 7) -- they are outnumbered by their female counterparts.

As stated above, the gender dynamics in this quotation suffer from an imbalance: women occupy more physical and cultural space here. All the figures mentioned in this quotation are members of Nāmakaokaha’i’s family, however, this is not an extensive list of her relatives but a mention of a select few. It can therefore be said that the family members mentioned here, and the gender distribution is a conscious and meaningful choice. A focus is thus drawn to women through the number of women represented proportionately to the men mentioned within this quotation. Furthermore, all of the women in this poem derive their divine powers from the natural

world, thus calling further attention to the female Indigenous relationship to the natural world.

Later on in the poem, the poet appears to reference the story of Nāmakaokaha'i and Pele's rivalry. According to Native Hawai'ian oral tradition, Nāmakaokaha'i and Pele became rivals after Pele seduced her sister's husband: Aukelenuiaiku. During a battle between the two sisters, Pele was chased uphill to Mauna Loa and from there, Pele and Nāmakaokaha'i were engaged in a fight opposing fire and water. In this poem, Trask describes Pele as "traveling the uplands," (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 8), which appears to reference the infamous battle between two powerful divine sisters. In the context of both this poem and the story from which it seemingly drew inspiration, the women draw their power from the natural world, as they are both natural goddesses. Here, in terms of the female relationship with nature, the natural world can be seen as a source of the feminine power.

The rift between Nāmakaokaha'i and Pele is further demonstrated through the physical positioning of male deities in this passage. The men are vertically positioned between two sets of female deities, who happened to be engaged in strife. The rift between two powerful women is marked and accentuated by the presence of male figures acting as a barrier between them. The placement of brothers between Nāmakaokaha'i and Pele is also indicative of the family's involvement in their feud: each member was

separated into one of two houses based on their support of either one of the two sisters.

The focus upon Nāmakaokaha'i throughout this poem is also striking given the poet's repeated mentioning of and seeming connection to Pele. Pele is extensively featured throughout *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* and acts as symbolic of feminine power, thus directly bringing nature, women, and oral tradition together. The centering of Nāmakaokaha'i in this poem is reflective of the poet's attraction to strong female figures. In writing a poem about Nāmakaokaha'i, Trask showcases other powerful women, but also shows Pele as flawed and in fact more 'human' so to speak. Given the origin of the feud between the two sisters, which stems from Pele seducing her sister's husband, Pele is shown in a moment of un-godlike weakness. In this quotation, the poet shows nature as a source of female power, but also shows that the yielder of such power as being almost human in her actions. The female relationship to nature is thus brought further into the human realm, meaning that human women can also find their power in the natural world.

The relationship between women and nature is also explored through oral tradition in "Little Brother and Serpent Samna" *Corpse Whale* by DG Nanouk Okpik. In this quotation, the persona describes an outing in a natural setting, accompanied by a mother, and a brother.

"11.

Samna brings brother close enough to smell the blue ruin,

Yet far enough to build a castle made of tentacles.

12.

He plays tug-of-war and hopscotch with next of kin.

The seahorse saddled and bucking from the spurs
of brackish headwaters and iced shells of razor clams.” (Okpik, 52)

Throughout this poem, there is a majority female presence through the characters that intervene such as the persona who uses partially female She/I pronouns, the Mother, and Samna, also known as Sedna, the Inuit goddess of the sea. The younger brother character acts as the only male presence within this quotation, thus creating another imbalance between genders. The continued connection between oral tradition stories and the centering of female power derived from nature is meaningful.

In this situation, Samna has complete control over the environment in which she is directly situated. Samna’s control over nature manifests itself through her ability to transport people -- such as the brother character in this quotation-- between land and sea. The gender dynamics in this exertion of power are significant, as the figure described as in control of the situation, as well as of land and sea, is female, whereas the figure being transported is male. The level of connectivity with the landscape surrounding them differs between the two genders mentioned here. The female character -- Samna -- is deeply connected with her environment, whereas her male counterpart is described as merely going through this transportation.

Once again, the relationship between women and nature through oral tradition appears to point to a focus on feminine power. In this case, the demonstration of power is divine and innately connected to the natural world through the realms upon which Samna exercises control. However, the power dynamics in this poem are polarized. Samna maintains control over the spiritual world, but the mother figure holds maternal power in the world of the living. Consequently, this strength once again transcends divine power and translates into human behaviors.

In terms of the female/nature relationship through the lens of female characters in oral tradition, nature appears to be a source of power for the women in this corpus. Contrary to the world from which the reader is experiencing these collections of poetry, the female divinities are powerful independent figures who act in harmony with and yield complete control over nature. These women are both incredible beings with a mastery and understanding of their environment, and forces to be reckoned with.

Female interaction with men from oral tradition

Throughout the corpus of works here, whilst female figures directly intervene in oral tradition, women also interact with male figures from oral tradition. Here in “Demons in a Quonset Hut” Okipik describes the interaction of a female persona and a male devil from Inuit oral tradition.

“We leave the hut go down to the riverbed to
trapped grayling in a fish basket As we enter

the cold, clear water our feet turn cloven, our
fingers curl,
toes forging together. They say: *She/I feed/s devil’s beluga skin. She/I feed/s
demons.*” (Okpik, 47)

The previous quotation describes the physical transformation of the persona using partially female pronouns into a devil in contact with water. The persona’s transformation takes place following her feeding of a devil figure, called *Tuungaq* elsewhere in the poem. In this quotation, the poet creates a direct and visually striking contact between oral tradition, nature, and women.

As the climax of this contact between oral tradition, nature, and women, the persona’s transformation is marked by the phrase “our feet turn cloven”.

The choice of the word “cloven” is striking, firstly used to describe someone who was formerly human, and secondly in a text grounded in Inuit culture --

as culturally “cloven” is tied to the Christian embodiment of the devil.

Whilst other beings can indeed have this physical attribute, there is a strong Christian association between the devil and cloven feet. Cloven feet on a figure from Inuit oral tradition bring Christianity and Inuit-ness into direct confrontation. The interaction between the Inuit backdrop and Christianity is particularly intriguing given the settler modification of the meaning of *Tuungaq*. According to Anna Berge and Lawrence Kaplan, “*tuungak* “shaman’s familiar spirit” was relexicalized to mean ‘devil’ all across the Arctic.” (Berge, Kaplan, 293) by settlers. Therefore the concept of a devilish *Tuungaaq* in itself is imported from Christianity. The concept of the devil is an interface between Inuit culture and Christianity throughout this poem.

The choice to weave Christian symbols into a text grounded in Inuit culture is intriguing and introduces a certain tension between traditional forms of culture and settler intervention. Whilst this could be a means of painting a more nuanced and accurate picture of contemporary Inuit life and reflect the mixed cultural upbringing of the poet, Christian symbols are not woven throughout the rest of *Corpse Whale*. The Christian symbols in this quotation appear to interact with the theme of morality that is central in this poem. For example, the entirety of this poem appears to be written in stages, the first in which the persona commits a mistake or sin by “feed[ing] demons”(Okpik, 47), and “play[ing] string games with *Tuungaq*”(Okpik, 47). In the second stage which intertwines themes of Christianity and morality, the persona is punished for her actions by having her “feet turn cloven”(Okpik, 47) and transformed into a devil character. Lastly, the

persona engages in bloodletting as an act of repentance, pleading for “god to forgive us”(Okpik, 47). Sin, punishment, and repentance are common themes in Christian oral traditions and biblical teachings. The use of such stages throughout this poem fuses Christianity with the theme of morality thus creating a biblical story of sorts, in an Inuit setting.

The interaction of morality with Christian symbols in this quotation is especially thought-provoking considering the gender of the central character in this narrative. As stated previously, the persona in this poem, and the character undergoing a striking physical transformation as well as punishment for their sins, is female. All biblical characters going through a cycle of sin, punishment, and repentance are not female by default, but, the focus on female figures in recounts of sin is prominent. For example, the story of Adam and Eve is core to the Christian belief system and features a female character who is deemed responsible for sin and punished.

The transformation of a female character into a figure from oral tradition in contact with nature is a direct embodiment of the connection between all three entities, thus causing dramatic physical change to the female character. In this quotation, water -- an element of nature -- becomes a catalyst for the transformation of the female persona, into a devil as an act of punishment. The female relationship to nature is highlighted by the striking change in appearance, once a physical connection with the water has been established. Oral tradition is consequently a framework through which one can examine the relationship between women and nature.

Intriguingly, the character in this quotation is transformed from human into a devil -- which would widely be regarded as an evil figure. For that reason, this transformation might be considered to be negative. Given the overall view of nature in a positive light throughout the collections of study for this thesis, one might assume that a transformation triggered in connection to nature might be positive. That is to say, the character would be changed in line with a colonizing idea of progress. However, through this particular occurrence of transformation through nature, the idea of progress -- as a justification of colonization and the invalidation of Indigenous cultures and knowledge systems -- is rejected. The female Indigenous relationship to nature is shown here as transformative, and anti-colonial.

Interaction between the female and male gender through oral tradition is also featured in *American Sunrise* by Harjo. Here, the poet retells a story from Mvskoke oral tradition. In “Tobacco Origin Story”, the poem this quotation was taken from, the poet retells how tobacco came to be according to Mvskoke knowledge.

“The plant child emerges, first the seed head, then
Leafy, long male body and the white female
Flowers of tobacco, or
Hece, as the people called it when it called
To them.” (*An American Sunrise*, 82)

Here, the main character of the poem, an element of nature is described as being both female and male. Given the fact that most plants have female and male reproductive organs, this representation is accurate and appropriate. In this quotation, the female part of the plant is described as the flower, and the male part is described as the stem and leaves. Even though many plants have both female and male reproductive organs, neither flowers nor stems and leaves as a whole are classed as either female or male. The choice to separate the plant in such a way is grounded in poetic choice rather than botanical inaccuracy. The order in which the plant child is described goes from the bottom to the top of the plant, starting from the seed, then moving on to the stem and leaves, and finishing by discussing the flowers. Such a description stresses the idea of upward movement, which can be viewed as reflective of the described plant's growth. Furthermore, each of the three parts of the plant child mentioned would be a stage in plant growth. For example, the plant would initially start off as a seed, then develop stems, before finally producing flowers.

Here, both the female and male gender are directly part of the natural world, embodied by one single organism. Flowers, which are defined as the female part of the plant, have a connotation of beauty, whereas the male part is more utilitarian, transporting nutrients around the plant, and the leaves being used to make tobacco. Nonetheless, flowers are also necessary for the reproduction of plants, the continuation of a species, and the upholding of biodiversity. The role attributed to what is defined as the male part of the plant is limited to the plant. The utility of the part of the plant described here

as female extends to a wider field of nature. Female connectivity to the rest of nature is greater here.

Furthermore, the reciprocity established between the female part of the plant child and other parts of nature is shown through the communication between Mvskoke and the flower: “called it when it called to them”. Repetition of the word “call” establishes reciprocity between Mvskoke people and the tobacco flower. Therefore the poet establishes a wider connection between the tobacco flower and the Mvskoke people, and the environment surrounding the plant. In this quotation, women and nature enter into a dialogue of sorts through oral tradition. The idea of communication between Mvskoke people and the tobacco flower could also be indicative of modern-day addiction to tobacco products such as cigarettes, cigars, snuff, and so on. The plant is physically calling out to people, and they are responding, much like cravings for any addictive substance.

Female comparison to flowers is common amongst canonical works, such as in Robert Frost’s *Love and a Question*. “Her face rose-red with the glowing coal/ And the thought of the heart’s desire.”¹² compares the female subject’s complexion to the color of a rose. Harjo’s use of such a motif is greatly different from that of Robert Frost. Here, the designation of flowers as female appears to be a *Remise en question* of the perception of women’s greatest value being beauty. The female part of the plant is part of a wide network of natural elements all supporting each other. Harjo subverts the

¹² Frost, Robert. “Love and a Question”, *A Boy’s Will*. Henry Holt and Company, 1915.

canonical female comparison to flowers by framing the female flower as part of a wider and essential matrix. The flower found within this poem frames women as capable rather than mere objects of beauty and demonstrates female power.

Conclusion

Nature is central to culture and is shown through community connection to their natural surroundings. The natural world's role within culture is evidenced through attachment to place by way of sacred lands, the use of natural materials in ceremony, nature's role in oral traditions, and so on. Culture, nature, and women come into contact in a number of ways throughout this corpus, such as through the protection of nature, physical enactments of culture, and oral tradition.

Ecological protection plays an important role in cultural conservation within this corpus. Nature is central to Mvskoke, Native Hawai'ian, and Inupiat cultural beliefs, meaning that ecological and cultural preservation are interdependent. Throughout the collections of study for this thesis, female characters and personas involve themselves in ecological protection and speak out about the level of damage faced by the natural world. Female characters thus demonstrate an understanding of ecological sufferance and consequently compassion for the natural world, entering female poetic characters into an allyship with the natural world. As an offset of the level of the demonstrated female compassion for nature and its sufferance,

palpable anger can be detected within this corpus at the widespread disrespect of nature brought on by capitalism and the constant expansion of industry.

Physical enactments of culture such as food preparation, ceremony, and crafts continue the showing of female compassion for nature. Whilst physical enactments of culture necessitate the use of natural resources, such as animal products or plants, they are not wasted, showcasing the level of ecological respect reflected within the cultural enactments discussed in this corpus. Moreover, the physical incorporation of the natural world into cultural practices undertaken by female characters creates a direct confrontation of nature and women, thus creating an opportunity for exploration of that relationship. Ceremony and crafts are means of connecting the women involved in their execution to the natural world, and thus exploring their relationship to it.

The Indigenous oral traditions featured within *Corpse Whale*, *An American Sunrise*, and *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* showcase a wide range of female ecological figures and deities with domain over nature. These female figures feel the consequences of ecocide, therefore, exhibiting an understanding of and concrete link with the natural world. The use of female deities as entities with control over the natural world brings women and nature into direct confrontation in one same being. Nature is a source of female power here, that is extended to the human realm through the display of human and flawed behaviors by deities who might otherwise be perceived as godlike.

The weaving of cultural practices into the collections of poetry of study presents the reader with a framework through which they might examine the female relationship to nature. It brings forward a relationship of allyship and understanding between women and the natural world that is not reflected equally within male characters in this corpus.

The study of culture examines the aspects of activities that are embedded within communities as a whole, however many of those cultural activities have a creative component that remains relevant to the exploration of the female relationship to the natural world.

III. Creativity

“But there is also an ecology of creativity, one indivisible from our futurity. In the face of an antagonistic relation to the past, let us start anew in the haven of a world in the image of our radical art.” (Belcourt, 128)

In this epigraph from *A History of My Brief Body*, Billy-Ray Belcourt (Cree) connects creativity to the world in a very concrete way. Belcourt mentions what he describes as an “ecology of creativity” (Belcourt, 128), thus directly bringing creativity and nature into confrontation, rendering the creative process tangible, and bringing it into an imaginable world, inscribed into ecological relationships known to the reader. Even though the author doesn’t specifically mention ecology in a natural sense -- but rather as more of an

interwoven ecosystem of creatives and influences -- the interaction between an ecology of creativity and creativity studied through its natural dimension is thought-provoking. Creativity is inscribed within an ecosystem that is specific to each and every creative, be it nature related or not.

The concept of creativity being inscribed in an ecosystem is reflected in Joy Harjo's *Poet Warrior*: "I often wish I had written down everything my aunt and all the elders told me, so I could have their wisdom, their struggles, their hard-won stories right here for referral, to provoke and even cultivate new stories." (*Poet Warrior*, 13). Here Harjo grounds a specific brand of her own creativity within her family and cultural history. This type of creativity is extensively represented within *An American Sunrise*, in which the poet intersperses poems with texts and other materials about her Nation's and her family's history, often featuring Monahwee -- an important figure in Mvskoke history, and one of Harjo's ancestors.

Within the quotation from *A History of My brief Body*, creativity is presented as being in discontinuity with the past, or a means of reimagining the future and enacting positive change. Given past and present colonial legacies, the idea of taking action for different futures is especially meaningful. The means by which creativity is spoken about here is suggestive of it being a possible means of reclamation of sovereignty and striving towards a different future for Indigenous peoples, which is even more powerful in connection with the concept of futurity. Futurity is mentioned within Belcourt's autobiographical novel and defined by Laura

Harjo's *Spiral to the Stars*: "My operating definition of futurity is the enactment of theories and practices that activate our ancestor's unrealized possibilities, the act of living out the futures we wish for in a contemporary moment, and the creation of conditions for these futures." (L. Harjo, 5)

Creativity is consequently a vehicle for change to the world surrounding its enactment.

The idea of a creative ecology¹³ is mentioned within *Genetic Criticism* by Dirk Van Hulle. The author states that "In many ways, literary creation is an ecological phenomenon." (Van Hulle, 76). In saying this, the author situates literary creativity within a greater environment of knowledge or ecology thus treating the creative as a part of a wider ecosystem of influences and actors coming together to produce a literary work. Even though the author isn't talking about an ecology in a natural sense, the concept of a creative ecology grounds creativity within an external context, whether that is literary, political, ecological, and so on. In the corpus for this thesis, the natural topics covered ground these works into a largely natural ecology. For this reason, the creative process for these works is also partially grounded within nature, thus allowing each of these works to speak to the creative interface between women and their relationship to the natural world.

Kathy Jetñil-Kijner's (Marshall Islander) *Anointed* is a poem video or a creative production influenced by the ecological crisis faced specifically in the Marshall Islands because of their proximity to nuclear testing during the

¹³ Distinct from Creative Ecology in which creative media are used to provide climate solutions.

Cold War. The creative dimension of this work can be detected within the poet's use of words, motifs, and video, intertwining creativity, womanhood, and nature.

Anointed is infused with female power through the mention of “a turtle goddess” (Jetñil-Kijner, 2:38) whose power is indirectly at the origin of a village almost burning to the ground. In this poem, the turtle goddess gifted a part of her shell to her son Letao, who subsequently re-gifted it to a young boy. As a result of this regifting, and placement of power into the wrong hands, a village is set on fire. Similarly to the ecocide of Indigenous lands such as the Marshall Islands, Hawai'i, or Turtle Island, the poetic description of a village burning down is due to misuse of misplaced power.

The link between female power and nature is shown through a visible connection made between women and nature. For example, here the land damaged by nuclear testing on Runit Island is directly addressed using second-person singular “you” pronouns, indicating a direct communication between nature and the female persona. Whilst the choice to enter the persona into a direct line of communication with the natural world highlights the female relationship to nature, it also concentrates on nature as living and worthy of ethical consideration.

The idea of communication with the land is upheld through the creative choices made in the video accompanying the poem. For example, the first section of the video features a series of alternating shots of nature and the

people living on Runit Island. The video creates a dialogue or relationship of sorts between people and nature that reflects the poet's choice to address the island directly. The poem in itself doesn't formulate a direct response from the natural world, but, it is a direct demonstration of giving back to nature as possible. Here, the poet gives back with words, consideration, and creativity.

The poet features a direct dialogue between the natural landscape and its inhabitants through her creative choices, but that sense of dialogue is continued through the use of imagery in the poem. *Anointed* features three similar and parallel uses of imagery centered around the belly in a specifically female context: "chiefs birthed from women who could swim pregnant for miles beneath a full moon" (Jetñil-Kijner, 1:33), "You became crater, an empty belly." (Jetñil-Kijner, 1:55), and "My belly is a crater empty of stories and answers only questions, hard as concrete." (Jetñil-Kijner, 4:17) In these passages a crater is compared to a belly, a belly is compared to a crater, and a pregnant woman is spoken about. Firstly these quotations tie womanhood together with the natural world. In this context, a belly being "hard as concrete" carries meaning, and whilst indicative of illness and physiological ill-being, it also brings in the Runit dome, the subject matter of the poem video, and a concrete dome that encases nuclear waste on Runit island. The female persona is taking on a physical and striking characteristic of the land even in ill health, thus bringing femaleness further into the poem, but also closer to nature.

The similarities between female and ecological ill-health described within this poem speak to female compassion for the natural world. As mentioned in the line: “My belly is a crater empty of stories and answers only questions, hard as concrete.” (Jetñil-Kijner, 4:17) the female persona is able to put herself into the planet’s shoes, as she physically feels the discomfort felt by Runit Island. This particular relationship between nature and a female character allows the reader to think further about connectivity between human and ecological well-being, and consequently the relationship between their healing through ecological action in the case of nature, and medicine for the female body.

The bellies mentioned in the quotations above can be classified in two ways: empty and full. Pregnancy can firstly be defined as being a full belly, and the other two quotations would be classified as featuring empty bellies, therefore, creating a contrast between two distinct evocations of the belly. Whilst these quotations may initially appear to be unrelated to the wider meaning of the poem, the belly motif enters into a dialogue with the surrounding ecological discourse. In juxtaposition with discussions surrounding ecocide, the use of specifically empty bellies allows the readers to think of the connection between ecological distress and the rise in sterility. The dialogue between ecological damage and the female body in ill health because of that same damage is a demonstration of the relationship between female and ecological health that is conveyed through the use of creativity.

The collections of poetry of study for this thesis are infused with creativity, both in ways that are immediately visible to the reader, such as creative characters and in ways that are implicit within the reading experience such as the series of formal decisions made by the poet.

Creative female characters and nature

The female characters featured throughout *An American Sunrise*, *Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, and *Corpse Whale* act as creative entities in connection with nature throughout these collections of poetry. Female characters enact their creativity in a number of ways including through actions such as storytelling, singing, and writing. Whilst perhaps not considered through their ecological angle, the creative actions undertaken are an interface between women and nature. For example, Okpik's "Riding Samna's Gyr Falcon" features a female creative character:

"Her/my songs call shadows
to lie sideways"

(Okpik, 20)

The female persona mentioned in this quotation uses song to enact change upon the shadows -- which are a natural phenomenon. In the context of this poem, the character is written into an entirely natural landscape that is grounded in Alaska Native oral traditions -- evidenced through the Gyr Falcon being mounted's description as "Samna's Gyr Falcon". Over the course of this poem, the character and the gyrfalcon fly over a seemingly

untouched natural landscape, thus justifying shadow's qualification as a part of nature. In this quotation, the female character is integrated into nature.

Even though the poem is centered around oral tradition -- which isn't necessarily creative -- this quotation features the character's singing. Song is a common oral tradition and knowledge transmission genre, both of which are not founded upon individual creativity. However, song is also a creative genre akin to poetry, as demonstrated by Bob Dylan -- the 2016 recipient of the Nobel Prize for literature based on his catalog of songs. Furthermore, this occurrence of singing is preceded by the possessive "her/my", which is indicative of the songs belonging to the character. The use of a possessive pronoun in front of the noun "song" is widely perceived as reflecting authorship. The female persona enacts creativity in a natural environment, thus bringing women, nature, and creativity into confrontation in this quotation.

The female persona calls shadows into existence and enacts change upon existing non-horizontal shadows through her creativity. The enactment of female creativity, thus, has some degree of control over the natural world. Moreover, the female character's songs are calling to the shadows, and consequently establishing some kind of communication between the persona and nature. Even though it is unclear whether the shadows are able to respond to this call or if they are simply moved to lie horizontally by it, the act of calling out to the natural world is powerful.

The featuring of female characters engaged in creative activities is meaningful, especially when thought of in parallel with the epigraph to this chapter, in which Belcourt frames creativity as a means of striving for different futures. The collections of study for this thesis are infused with female creativity, and therefore discontinuity with present and past norms, such as the treatment of Indigenous women.

According to Audre Lorde: “For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action.” (Lorde, 9) In this quotation Lorde defines poetry as a means of striving for concrete change -- in other words, poetry is political. Even though this quotation relates specifically to poetry, the idea defended -- that poetry is political-- is applicable to all forms of creative expression such as painting, sculpting, storytelling, etc. All creativity is a personal formulation of some sort, whether the political dimension of that creativity is intentional or not. Through the enactment of cultural traditions and systems of knowing, and simply the act of taking up physical and intellectual space -- that creation is necessarily political, even when it is enacted by a character rather than a physical person.

Female characters within this corpus relate to the natural world through the acts of creativity they forge. Such acts include storytelling, singing, and writing.

Women linked to creativity and nature

The female characters featured within *An American Sunrise*, *Corpse Whale*, and *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* are linked to the natural world through creativity, whether it be their own or that of other figures.

Harjo's "Rabbit Plays the Saxophone" links women, nature, and creativity together. In this poem, Rabbit, a well-known Mvskoke trickster figure, enters a bar and is called up on stage to play some music. Rabbit, who is not a musician and is incapable of performing finds a creative solution to his predicament.

"Rabbit's newborn horn made a rip in the sky

It made old women dance, and girls fall to their knees" (*An American Sunrise*, 76)

Rabbit, an undeniable part of nature, is described within this quotation from *An American Sunrise*, as in the midst of creativity. In spite of the fact that Rabbit is most generally depicted as being a male figure, and so does not speak to the female relationship to nature through creativity as an isolated entity, he is an interface for two separate confrontations between women, nature, and creativity. Firstly, a solely female audience reacts directly to Rabbit's creativity, and the male figure's enactment of creativity is the creative product of a female poet. This section focuses on the female reaction to Rabbit's own creativity.

Women, whilst not directly implicated in the fulfillment of Rabbit's creative actions, display notable reactivity to an ecological enactment of creativity. Moreover, women are solely identified as being impacted by this particular performance event. Female reactivity to creativity establishes a clear relationship between women, nature, and creativity. In this quotation, creativity causes change in the female characters thus painting a picture of a mutual ability to modify each other. In the last chapter women are shown as deities with domain over the natural world, and consequently the power to change it, and here, nature causes change to women. The provocation of change to an entity such as a woman or a part of nature necessitates a thorough understanding of that entity, its functionality, its capabilities, its limitations, and the consequences that change may bring about. Accordingly, this occurrence of creativity in female presence showcases the familiar nature of the Indigenous female relationship with nature.

Harjo describes women as reactive to creativity, however, it appears as if nature reacts in a similar way to this enactment of creativity. The poem states that "Rabbit's newborn horn made a rip in the sky" (*An American Sunrise*, 76), establishing a relationship of cause and effect between Rabbit's creativity, and a significant change undergone by nature. Whilst significant, this change is not framed in a destructive way, much like the rest of the discourse surrounding ecological modification throughout the corpus of study for this thesis. The use of a language of ecological change in juxtaposition with the multiple evocations of climate-related issues is

thought-provoking and appears to speak to the potential impact of creativity upon the world.

Female and natural reactivity to creativity in this quotation both brings women and nature closer together and explicitly establishes a relationship between both parties. Not only does this relationship speak to the proximity between women and nature that is discussed throughout this thesis, but it is demonstrative of the rapport between the female body and the natural world. Here, the acts of creativity undertaken by Rabbit move the female characters into physical bodily activity such as dance or falling to their knees, and cause considerable and possibly irreversible change to the natural world.

Okpik's *Corpse Whale* features the juxtaposition of creativity, nature, and female characters. The following quotation features a female persona telling a story by cutting their skin. Storytelling is of course a creative medium, and given its placement, within a narrative poem, it places this quotation within the realm of meta-storytelling.

“She/I cut cut cut tear cut cut

patterns on my arms inside the pits below sock-line

to tell a story. Just as chrysanthemum

 petals radiate from one orbit seed

you continue to unfold infinitely” (Okpik, 33)

Much like a number of other poems from *Corpse Whale*, this quotation features “she/I” pronouns, which are at least partially, if not necessarily entirely feminine. The character described is in the midst of telling a story by creating cuts upon their skin, which may be considered an unusual storytelling medium, and is demonstrative of feminine creative action. The creative action of making cuts upon the skin to tell a story and its ongoing nature is compared to a flower: “Just as chrysanthemum petals radiate from one orbit seed” (Okpik, 33). Just as cuts heal and new ones can be made, flower petals fan out and renew themselves, giving way to an ever-changing and ongoing story. The comparison between telling a story through cuts upon the body, and flower petals speaks to the changing nature of creativity. Creative production is inscribed within a contextual moment and is subject to a possible constant influx of new ideas. So, if a creative was inspired to undertake a specific existing creative action at a different time, the result would be different as it would be created within a different creative context. The changing aspect of creativity is organically written into the female creative process, and into nature, in this quotation. Creativity is therefore a means for women to write about and explore their relationship with nature, but also to affirm the common points between women and the natural world. For example, both women and nature are presented as being everchanging, yet everchanging within certain natural cycles. Female evolution is constant and timed within a menstrual cycle, and while nature is in a constant state of reform, it is inscribed into larger cycles of change such as the lunar cycle, and the seasons.

The poetic choices made within the passage describing the character's creativity join form and content together. The word "tear" is inserted into the middle of five occurrences of the verb "cut": "cut cut cut tear cut cut" (Okpik, 33) thus creating an effect of the line being cut in two by the insertion of "tear". Given the process being described in this line -- one of making cuts upon the skin to tell a story-- the use of "tear" creates a dialogue between the cutting described and the cutting of the line into two. The formal design of this quotation is reflective of the meaning being conveyed to the reader.

The quotation above features five repetitions of the word "cut" that are separated into two sides of differing lengths by the intervention of the word "tear". The line as a whole is made up of three parts: the first three "cuts", the singular "tear", and the remaining two "cuts"-- all of which are of varying lengths. The sectioning of this line into different length sections produces an effect of the text being hacked apart, creating rough and unpredictable edges on the page. The creative text appears to be wounded in the same way as the female character, both by the creative process. Furthermore, the creativity expressed within the quotation from *Corpse Whale* is further reflected in its layout thus building a sort of creative duality. On top of the creativity discussed above, the poet also uses creative spacing as a part of her formal design for the poem, thus adding further cutting into the fabric of the poem. In appearance, the quotation has been cut up or is filled with holes, which is of course reflective of its meaning and the words used. Both the persona and the poet appear to be engaged in a sort

of creative cooperation, both drawing upon cutting in their storytelling process, whether it be physical or appeared cutting.

The female characters throughout *Corpse Whale*, *An American Sunrise*, and *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* are creative in a number of different ways.

Female creativity especially manifests through crafting, storytelling, and writing.

Women as writers in narratives that heavily feature nature

Throughout the poems making up the corpus of study for this thesis, women are shown in the midst of creative activities such as telling stories, singing, and writing. These activities take on a wide variety of functions such as personal fulfillment, and the enactment of wider change. However female Indigenous creativity is also a means of engaging with the natural world.

Given the literary canon's lack of ethnic inclusivity, female Indigenous writers are not recognized proportionately to their skill. Indigenous communities welcome and celebrate female writers such as Joy Harjo, yet that same recognition is yet to translate into non-Indigenous communities. The occurrences of female writing throughout these collections are not framed as being destined for any type of public audience. While this may be a coincidence, the private nature of the writing described speaks to the lack of acknowledgment of the skill found within works by Indigenous women, such as those making up this corpus.

In *Nights is a Sharkskin Drum*, Haunani-Kay Trask describes the creative process of writing in connection with the natural world.

“To write by moonlight,

mai’a leaves, the green

ink of night;

silvered *niu*,

the hair of dark’s

blue quill.” (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 50)

The personal and intimate nature of the subjects treated within *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* as a whole, as well as the collection’s extensive featuring of the poet’s perspective and opinions, and of first person singular blurs the line of distinction between poet and persona. Within this collection, the poet recounts sexual experiences, as well as tales of colonial violence, and those from Native Hawai’ian oral tradition. the reader is incapable of distinguishing a boundary between the poet and the persona. Poems such as *The Broken Gourd* (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 11), *Tourist* (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 20), and *At Punalu’u* (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 31) do not allow for a clear ideological, physical, and experiential distinction to be made between the poet and a persona. For this reason, the quotation above must be considered at the very least to be interwoven with the female

perspective, and consequentially speak to the female relationship to nature and creativity.

The entirety of the creative writing process is connected to and dependent on moonlight. First and foremost light is needed in order to properly see the creativity that is underway, so it can be considered evident that during a nocturnal writing session, some kind of light would be available to the writer, be it moonlight or light from another source. Moonlight is also placed at the very top of the quotation -- which is found at the beginning of the poem -- as if it were shedding light upon, or once again enabling the writer and their creative process. Without the presence of moonlight, the rest of the poem would not be able to occur both in a concrete sense, as it starts the poem, and in a figurative sense as the persona wouldn't be able to write without any light. Nature -- which is represented here by moonlight-- enables the female creative process.

“Light”, whilst directly a part of nature in this poem given its lunar provenance, is also conceptually suggestive of creativity in a wider sense. For example, the common manner of representing ideas in media such as cartoons would be a lightbulb over a character's head. Therefore, the act of having an idea, which is the primary means by which creativity can be detected, is culturally synonymous with light. Furthermore, the French language refers to a genius idea as an ‘*éclair de génie*’ which can loosely be translated as a lightning bolt of genius. A lightning bolt is a natural phenomenon in which electricity is discharged, creating a flash of light in

the sky. The association of creativity with light spans different languages and worldviews, establishing an intriguing parallel between a creative light and the manner in which light enables creativity within this quotation.

Moonlight -- a part of nature-- allows for the occurrence of creative innovation by shedding light upon the persona, but other parts of nature enable the creative process in similar ways. The writing implements described within the rest of the quotation from “To Write by Moonlight” are compared to elements of the natural world. For example, the poet compares Mai’a leaves to ink, and niu to a quill. So, not only is moonlight necessary to the described creative process but so are Mai’a leaves and niu. This example of creativity could not be undertaken in the same way with the same result without nature, as nature serves as light, paper, and ink, in a nocturnal writing scenario. Female creativity couldn’t exist here without nature. Thus nature can be perceived as a creative aid of sorts for women, thus demonstrating a relationship of inspiration.

Female creativity relies further upon the natural landscape in Okpik’s *Corpse Whale*, which features a wolf girl¹⁴ character in the process of rewriting the natural landscape.

“with a sealskin satchel

birch bark and pencil

wolf girl rewrites tundra.” (Okpik, 19)

¹⁴ The lack of capitalization of “wolf girl” within this thesis honours the poetic choices made throughout *Corpse Whale*.

Firstly, this quotation features a character named “wolf girl” (Okpik, 19), who is of course a feminine character and is described in the midst of creativity. It is unclear where the inspiration for a wolf girl might come from -- as such a character does not appear to exist within Inuit oral traditions -- therefore solidifying wolf girl’s creative, rather than cultural role within this poem. Wolf girl intertwines the female gender with the natural world through her sole existence by simultaneously embodying womanhood and nature. Wolf girl’s existence seemingly being made up by the poet reinforces the natural and female link to creativity. Wolf girl brings femininity, creativity, and nature into a direct confrontation with each other in this quotation.

Furthermore, wolf girl, an embodiment of the female relationship to nature through creativity, is rewriting in this quotation -- rewriting being a manifestation of creativity. Rewriting requires the reimagining or the reframing of a pre-existing narrative, or here a pre-existing landscape. To add to the layering of literary contact between women, nature, and creativity, wolf girl is doing that rewrite upon birchbark -- a natural material. The poet’s layering of creativity, with ecological motifs, and women creates an effect of complexity or confusion. Given the commonplace and problematic essentialization of the female Indigenous relationship to the natural world, the writing of an intensely complex interaction between the feminine and nature is thought-provoking. In the case of settler readership of Okpik’s poetry, the reader may be moved to ponder and perhaps challenge their own preconceived thoughts on the Indigenous female

relationship to nature. For Indigenous readers, this level of complexity might speak to their experiences or knowledge of the Indigenous female relationship to nature.

Visually, the use of a birchbark pencil to rewrite the tundra is meaningful, as it utilizes nature as a necessary tool in the creative process and consequently founds this act of female creativity upon nature. In light of the female relationship to the natural world that is demonstrated through the sole existence of wolf girl, it can be understood that this creative act may be in turn based upon a relationship with nature, both literally and metaphorically. The means by which one relates to the outside world can be considered as the basis for one's worldview, or perspective, and consequently essential to a person's voice, be it their creative voice or other.

The female character mentioned in this quotation is directly responsible for the enactment of creativity. This particular creative act: the rewriting of the tundra is thought-provoking, as it consists of a character reimagining the natural landscape, exerting control over the natural world, and having the ability to modify it through her creativity. Wolf girl's rewriting speaks to the power of creativity in the orchestration of change, which when thought of in connection with the concept of activist literature, and the poetic strive for ecological change, can be found throughout this corpus. In a way, writing as a means of striving for ecological change can be viewed as a means of giving back to the natural world or entering into a reciprocal relationship with it. Robin Wall Kimmerer defends this idea through her work, such as in

The Democracy of Species: “I’ve come to think of writing as an act of reciprocity with the living land.” (*The Democracy of Species*, 88)

Aside from its creative connotation, the act of rewriting the tundra is meaningful from an ecological standpoint. Especially in the current Anthropocene, in which nature is impacted by human life and actions, anthropomorphic nature’s influence upon the natural world speaks to both human negative impact on the natural world and the potential to initiate positive change through media such as activism, and painting. The duality of meanings associated with the rewriting of the natural landscape is backed up by the lack of specific positive or negative connotations associated with the poet’s description of this particular act of creativity. As the verb “rewriting” is entirely neutral --simply describing the action of writing something that has already been written-- it doesn’t give the reader any preconceived ideas on if the natural world is being changed for the better, or indeed for the worse. Therefore, the reader is at liberty to interpret the verb “rewriting” in different ways, thus giving way to a stylistic form of ambiguity and prompting the existence of two parallel dimensions of sorts within the poem, each of which shows wolf girl rewriting differently.

Furthermore, the choice of the descriptive verb “rewrite” rather than one holding either positive or negative connotations is intriguing in juxtaposition with the overt critiques of ecologically irresponsible behaviors found elsewhere within this corpus. The contrast created between the negative manner in which ecocide is spoken about, and the ambiguous yet neutral

wording for the rewriting of the tundra creates an almost jarring effect for the reader leading them to delve deeper into the use of ambiguity. This particular use of ambiguity -- and creativity -- invites the reader to ponder wolf girl's relationship to the natural world.

Poet as a creative

The poets responsible for the collections being studied in this thesis demonstrate exemplary creativity within their collections. However, they are creative entities in their own right, and entirely separate from the work being studied here. This is shown within Joy Harjo's own memoir, in which she references other types of creative action: "I painted. I painted as I loved my children without question and because of what the painting was teaching me, to keep beauty moving in my hands, through my bloodstream, through my perceptions as I walked through the inner wars of historical trauma." (*Poet Warrior*, 105). Evidently, Harjo -- the creative behind *An American Sunrise* -- describes herself as engaged in creativity that is entirely separate from the collection being studied here. Even though the specific creative inspiration used to paint in years past is not the same as that used to write in the current day, a number of creative similarities join them together within a creative ecology of works. For example, both examples of creativity share a similar artistic perspective, even though the temporal difference between both creative instances doubtlessly caused said perspective to evolve, as well as a shared web of inspirations, and stylistic characteristics.

In Western academic circles, it is customary to separate creatives from their works, primarily avoiding the clouding of analytical judgment with the creative's intentions, of which no one can be certain. The exclusion of the poet from analysis, consequently, prevents the making of false assumptions based on personal experiences or on false information, and work is rendered refutable based on the veracity of the information used. The exclusion of the poet from the analysis of their work is an act of separation of the persona, in the case of poetry, from the poet. This separation may be pertinent in some cases, however, given the highly personal and almost autobiographical nature of the corpus of study for this thesis, I feel that the poets can not be entirely separated from their creative productions. This being said, I shall only be examining how the manifestations of the poets' storytelling and creativity interact with the themes relevant to this thesis.

In the context of this thesis, I focus on anti-colonial works, that actively refuse certain western intellectual and cultural traditions as an act of colonial resistance. For that reason, the rejection of certain western academic conventions that do not make sense in the context of this corpus seems both appropriate and reflective of the sentiment found throughout the collections of study. *An American Sunrise*, *Corpse Whale*, and *Night are a Sharkskin Drum* are intensely personal poetry collections, and therefore the poet cannot be entirely subtracted from the analysis of their collections.

The poets' own creativity manifests itself extensively throughout the collections of study for this thesis. That creativity renders the poets

inseparable from their collections and turns these collections into a pedagogical tool.

Collections that are inseparable from their creators

Given the personal nature of the collections being studied here, it can be difficult for the reader to distinguish the poet from the personae they deploy. For example, *Corpse Whale* features a quotation in which the poet discusses adoption:

“ I as wolf girl became weary of the light
dwell in darkness long time ago I was taken
away from *Utqiagvik* by the ones in black cloaks,
adopted.” (Okpik, 19)

As we know, Okpik was raised by an adoptive family, but, the conditions of her adoption are unknown. I am both unable and unwilling to speculate upon the degree to which “taken away from *Utqiagvik* by the ones in black coats” is grounded in the poet’s own life. Regardless of whether or not this quotation features fictional enhancement, “wolf girl” and Okpik share a common experience: that of being brought up by adoptive parents. It is entirely plausible for “wolf girl” to be inspired by the poet herself, given their sharing in an experience that is somewhat uncommon within the poetic genre. Consequently, the boundary between persona and poet becomes blurred, to the point where it is impossible to determine the voice used with certainty.

Furthermore, the poet refers to wolf-girl as “I”. The use of a first-person singular persona is fairly typical within poetry and does not necessarily indicate a poet’s own implication within a work. In combination with the poet and persona’s sharing in uncommon and emotional life experiences, “I” further blurs the distinction between persona and poet. The ambiguous distinction between poet and persona adds to the personal aspect of this collection but draws the poet further into the creative layers of the poem. For this reason, the poet cannot be separated from her creative work and is essential to a full study of creativity, women, and nature in this corpus.

Nature and women come into direct contact through the character of wolf girl -- reinforcing the idea of a strong bond between women and the natural world. Given the blurred nature of the limit between persona and poet in this quotation, the extent to which wolf girl’s relationship with nature draws from the poet’s own relationship with nature is unclear. For that reason, the poet cannot be subtracted from the study of the female relationship with the natural world. The relationship with nature depicted through wolf girl is one of solidarity -- femininity and nature are embodied in one singular being, in the face of emotional adversity.

As a figure embodying both women and nature, wolf girl’s association with parts of nature is intriguing. “Darkness” and “light” while metaphorical indicators of wolf girl’s emotional and/or mental well-being, are also part of the natural world. The use of nature to describe a female character’s emotional state brings the reader -- and by the same means nature -- further

into the fabric of the character. Wolf girl already embodies the female connection to nature, but that confrontation is now taken from a physical embodiment into the psychological and intangible realm of emotion. Nature, therefore, becomes somewhat part of the character's internal fabric, thus suggesting a deeper emotional female Indigenous connection to nature. Rather than the discussion of a uniquely physical and tangible relationship with nature -- which might be brought up through the use of the natural world to discuss the physical body -- here, the poet alludes to the intangible.

On a similar note, Harjo's *An American Sunrise* intersperses poems with narrative texts, often telling the stories of her ancestors, and her nation, both of which are very personal to her. The collection is centered around the general theme of reconnection to cultural heritage and lands, which is also very personal. Reconnection may be a shared experience within Indigenous communities, given the prevalence of forced displacement within North American Nations. However, this collection features cultural specificities, and furthermore, cultural reconnection can be navigated in different ways. In addition, this narrative is grounded in a familiar environment to the poet, regardless of the reader's ability to connect to the experiences described. Consequently, Harjo's collection is a study of her own relationship with nature, as a woman. Harjo's "How to Write a Poem in a Time of War" renders the poet inseparable from *An American Sunrise*.

"If we begin here, non of us will make it to the end

Of the poem."

(An American Sunrise, 49)

In this quotation, poetic suggestions are made to a poet-persona as to where to start a poem set during a war. Throughout the narrative poem, a total of five metapoetic (Jakobson, 356-357) interjections are made to the poet-persona, who appears to be responsible for the creative genesis of this poem. Immediately after each italicized suggestion is made to the poet-persona, a swift transition into another potential starting point for the poem is made -- thus integrating the advice. Given the immediate creative response to these interjections and the lack of conversation surrounding the suggestions, the italicized voice appears to belong to the poet-persona themselves. The commentary in this quotation is part of the poet-persona's internal monologue during their creative process.

The metapoetic comments made throughout this poem all concern the emotional difficulty of discussing a subject such as war -- a time in which many people go through loss, displacement, fear, and so on. For this reason, the poet-persona suggests starting the poem at another moment in time, so as to minimize the emotional discomfort potentially felt by both themselves and the reader. The centering of the poet-persona's opinion within the metapoetic discourse evidences the types of internal decisions made during the creative process and places the poet at the core of their creation. While controversial in the academic community -- as the poet is perceived as needing to be excluded from the analysis of their works -- the poet-persona can not be dissociated from the poem.

The insights into the creative process, such as the one featured above, are directly and visibly written into the poem. Even though these metapoetic interjections are integral to the poem, its narrative section would still make sense in their absence. That being said “How to Write a Poem in a Time of War” would lose a significant part of its meaning without the mechanics of how that story is crafted. The mechanics of how a story is told are central to this poem -- as is reflected in its title. For this reason -- both literally and figuratively -- the poet cannot be subtracted from their creation.

The use of spacing throughout the poem supports metapoetics’ central role within the intended narrative. As shown in the quotation above, the commentary made as part of the poet-persona’s internal monologue is laid out using typically poetic spacing, rather than a simple linear format. The continuation of poetic form in the metapoetic interjections is thought-provoking and accentuates their involvement in the delivery of the poetic message. Even though they are part of the poet-persona’s internal monologue, the commentary is still poetry.

The poet-persona is not necessarily Joy Harjo herself, but this poem shows the poet as a creative force at play within their work. Consequently, the poet cannot be subtracted from their work -- as the poetic and formal design at play are all constructed according to a set of opinions, intentions, and influences. That is not to say that literary studies should hinge on attempts to know the poet’s intentions or internal thinking. The poet should simply be considered as part of the forces at play bringing together a poem. For

example here, the poet's creativity cannot be excluded from the analysis of female creativity within this corpus -- especially as a female creative writing about nature.

Creativity as pedagogy

The poems featured within *Corpse Whale*, *An American Sunrise*, and *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* can be classified into several genres: maps, cultural stories, songs, and so on. Regardless of their genre, all the poems from the collections under study are examples of storytelling. For example, Harjo's "Falling From the Night Sky" is described as a song within the collection, but it is also an act of storytelling.

"My heart wore flowers and a red dress.

The first time we kissed

You smelled of happiness and moonlight

We drove the night to tenderness." (*An American Sunrise*, 54)

The quotation above is defined as being part of a song, but it has a clear narrative thread and describes a feeling of being in love and in a position of vulnerability -- it is part of a wider story that is told throughout the song/poem.

In personal stories such as this one, the exact nature of the story being told can sometimes be ambiguous, thus allowing the reader to interpret the story in a way that is close to them and their lived experiences. In this particular poem, different sections could resonate differently with the reader based on

their lived experience. For example, a reader who has been in a romantic relationship in which their partner was simultaneously in a different relationship may relate to “You keep your eyes to the ground/ Walk that line she had to you./ That path of patient expectation./ Keeps you true to her undoing.” (*An American Sunrise*, 54) through their own lived experiences. Furthermore, a reader who has been let down in their relationships, romantic or other, may see “I was a star falling from the night sky/ I needed you to catch me/ I was a rainbow lifting from a dark cloud/ I needed you to see me” (*An American Sunrise*, 54) through a lens that is connected to their own worldview. The poet, thus, provides the reader with an opportunity to connect with the material, the poet, and potentially other readers. The universality of the story told allows the reader to extract a teachable lesson from the material, even though their situation may not be the same as the one that provided inspiration for this act of creation.

According to Shawn Wilson, “Stories allow listeners to draw their own conclusions and to gain life lessons from a more personal perspective. By getting away from abstractions and rules, stories allow us to see others’ life experiences through our own eyes. This information may then be internalized in a way that is difficult for abstract discussions to achieve.” (Wilson, 17) The personal nature of this enactment of creativity, and its connection to storytelling transform this poem, along with the other collections, into a means of learning, or in fact a pedagogy. In this specific context, the lessons learned by the reader are connected to personal experiences and would provide clarity on the manner in which people might

react to certain life events, the manner in which they themselves might be able to better deal with difficult experiences, and so on. Here, storytelling is used as a pedagogy to teach about life experiences, however, it may be used in other ways to teach about ecological knowledge, amongst other things. teaching about life experiences.

Trask's *Night is a Sharkskin Drum* also uses storytelling as pedagogy. For example "The Broken Gourd" uses land-based storytelling as a means of teaching lessons about the damage done to the Earth.

"A common horizon:

smelly shores

under spidery moons,

pockmarked *maile* vines

rotting 'ulu groves,

the brittle *clack*

of broken lava stones."

(*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 13)

In this quotation, a series of natural beings are described as damaged, using words such as "pockmarked", and "rotting". Even though this quotation doesn't overtly mention the reason for such damage to the natural world, it can be understood that it is connected to the current climate crisis. The poet uses the term "pockmarked" to describe *maile* -- a pendulous and leafy plant that is Native to Hawai'i and often used to make *Leis*. Pockmarked would

not typically be used to describe *maile* or any plants at all for that matter.

The qualification of beings as pockmarked is generally reserved for humans in the context of illnesses that cause blemishes upon the skin such as chickenpox or historically the bubonic plague. Therefore the idea of pox being present upon a plant is intriguing and creates an idea of nature physically being ill. Manifestation of ecological issues through the physical and recognizable illness of plants enters into a dialogue with the manner in which the climate crisis manifests upon the human body -- through illness.

Furthermore, these descriptions of nature show the natural world in a state of reversal from the manner in which healthy vegetation presents itself.

Here, *'ulu* -- another plant native to Hawai'i -- is depicted as rotting.

Organic beings such as plants would eventually rot after the end of their natural life, but entire "groves" (*Night is a Sharkskin Drum*, 13)

simultaneously rotting is highly unusual and points to a larger problem. The juxtaposition of rotting plants with other manifestations of ecological ill-being suggests that the organic decay described is unusual or untimely.

Moreover, the adjective "brittle" when used to describe stone, and "smelly" to depict the shore are suggestive of a reversal of the natural state of the entities described: stones would usually be considered strong, and sea air would often be described as fresh. At this current stage of the climate emergency, nature is shown as so damaged, that it takes on qualities that are opposite to its true nature and becomes strikingly unpleasant. One of nature's central and most revered characteristics is reversed -- its beauty.

Once again, storytelling is an important pedagogical tool. For that reason, the telling of stories about nature's suffering at the hands of humans is one means of teaching about nature and its needs in a contemporary context. The showcasing of natural suffering in the environment surrounding Indigenous communities -- that are disproportionately affected by ecological issues -- is a means of raising awareness of the extent of the violence inflicted on the Earth. From this point, the reader can reconsider their own treatment of the natural world and how they participate in systems of violence. In telling stories about nature in its current state, the poet's creativity causes reflection surrounding the individual and collective actions one might be able to participate in to bring positive ecological change into existence. The poet -- as a female storyteller -- places herself in the position of the holder of ecological knowledge and demonstrates her understanding of ecological suffering.

The poet's creativity becomes a pedagogical resource through the use of storytelling showing nature's state of suffering. Learning about the natural world starts the process of returning to nature as a pedagogy in itself.

According to Leanne Simpson, the land must once again become a pedagogy: "we shouldn't be striving for land-based pedagogies. The land must once again *become* the pedagogy." (*As We Have Always Done*, 160)

This is to say, our knowledge of the land must come from the land itself. For example, our knowledge of water must come from spending time in and around water, observing it. The knowledge shared within this quotation comes from past and present observations of the land. In order to determine

that nature is suffering, prior observations of a healthy or healthier natural world must have been made, in conjunction with present-day observations. The poet's creative pedagogy is founded on information collected by listening to the natural world's pedagogy. From this, we can deduce that women telling stories about nature -- such as the poets of these collections -- possess ecological knowledge that has been accessed through an observation and deduction process that is grounded in the land's pedagogy. Through their collections, Harjo, Trask, and Okpik are sharing their ecological observations, thus enacting a better treatment of nature in the future.

Conclusion

Enactments of creativity linked to nature, as well as female and natural shared reactivity to those enactments, is demonstrative of a close relationship of both women and the natural world through the interface of creativity. That relationship may not yet be known to the women involved in this corpus, however, creativity acts as a means of examining one's relationship with nature. The use of natural materials, physical positioning within the natural landscape, and experiences of nature's creativity all bring femininity and nature into direct confrontation, thus directly demonstrating a relationship between both entities. Creativity allows for reflection as to how female characters find knowledge or inspiration within their interaction with the natural world.

In this corpus, writing is framed as activism and a means of protecting the natural world in the same way nature protects and nurtures women. Writing in connection with nature consequently defines the female relationship with the natural world as one of mutual care, compassion, and protection.

According to Audre Lorde, “Poetry is not only a dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what had never been before.” (Lorde, 9)

In other words, Lorde treats poetry -- a type of writing -- as a means of enacting concrete change. Depending on the poet, the change desired would be different. For example, Indigenous women have vastly different calls for change than Caucasian American men. Therefore, these collections of poetry strive for the construction of new Indigenous female futures. Given the prominence of ecological discourse throughout the corpus of study for this thesis, they can also be seen as a means of enacting new ecological futures.

The use of personal narratives turns these collections into a means of teaching lessons to the reader, both in a personal and an ecological context. These collections teach a wide range of lessons, such as about traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), sustainable ways of being, and ways of relating to nature. The foundation of knowledge for this use of storytelling as a pedagogical tool stems from the poets’ own relationships with the natural world, and the ability to listen to and learn from nature. Teaching others about the natural world, especially in the context of a climate crisis is a means of giving back to the Earth, or reaffirming a reciprocal relationship

with nature. The poets responsible for the construction of these collections are demonstrating a relationship of care, and a certain understanding of nature, and the difficulties it is currently facing.

Conclusion

Indigenous women and nature are undeniably close and benefit from a unique relationship that is at the intersection of colonialism, Indigenous cultures, and ecocide. For that reason, the Indigenous female relationship with the natural world is nuanced and complex. Regardless of the complexity of the Indigenous relationship to nature, it has been stereotyped and essentialized by colonizing peoples, transforming an important and beautiful relationship into further colonial violence.

The context surrounding both Indigenous women and nature is also closely related. Women and the natural world are brought together through the sharing of common life experiences such as childbirth and menstruation. However, the greater social and political backdrop to both women and nature translates that connection into the realm of oppression. For example, women and nature are similarly affected by the patriarchal and capitalistic powers at play in what is widely known as North America. The extractive industry inflicts violence directly upon the Earth, and indirectly upon Indigenous women -- through the rise in the number of sexual assault occurrences.

The corpus of study for this thesis shows the female relationship to the natural world through a series of interactions between women and nature. The interfaces of body, culture, and creativity, allow the female relationship to shine through the creative layers of the collections of poetry.

Women and nature are brought together through the use of bodily imagery. The body physically showcases the female relationship to nature and reveals the common ground that can be found between women and the natural world through their shared experiences such as childbirth. The poets' use of the body throughout their collections furthermore evidences an intimate connection to nature through natural presence within sexual and sentimental narratives. The women described are comfortable with the natural world, enough so to have intimate details of their sexual encounters retold involving the natural world. Moreover, nature and women cannot be dissociated in this corpus. The interactions of women and the natural world are so extensive and contextually linked, that the analysis of women without the consideration of their link to nature, and vice versa, would be incomplete.

Women's enactment of cultural practices throughout this corpus reveals another part of the female relationship with the natural world. Natural relevance to culture -- shown through sacred lands, oral traditions, the use of natural materials in ceremony and cultural crafts-- centers nature within female enactments of culture and cultural preservation. The lack of waste of the natural materials used within cultural practices, and care taken during

these practices show a level of female respect for the natural world.

Accompanied by overt critiques of ecocide, this corpus establishes a sense of allyship, or solidarity between women and nature. In the same way that nature nurtures and somewhat protects women, women aim to protect the natural world.

Oral tradition and other cultural stories demonstrate the use of nature as a source of feminine power. Throughout the references to and retellings of cultural stories, women are depicted as powerful deities with domain over different parts of the natural world -- such as water, or fire. In this corpus, feminine power is drawn from the natural world, be it mortal or divine.

Women, nature, and creativity also interact in a layered and complex way throughout this corpus. Creative female characters come into contact with nature, and creative female poets write about nature. To add to the layering of creativity, nature, and femininity, acts of female creativity are inscribed within a creative ecology, that whilst not related to nature, creates an intriguing echo of land-based creativity. As evidenced within this thesis, creativity is a means for the female characters and poets intervening in the corpus to explore their own relationship to nature. Thus the female relationship to nature is a relationship of exploration; each and every woman relates to nature in a slightly different way.

As shown through this corpus, there is no one singular female relationship to nature. Given the geographical diversity present within this corpus, and

the contrasting landscapes referred to, the poets and their female characters relate to the natural world differently in each collection. Consequently, this thesis represents the complexity of the Indigenous female relationship with nature, as best as possible. Through the lens of Okpik, Harjo, and Trask's works, the reader becomes privy to a unique and nuanced depiction of the Indigenous female relationship with nature. The relationship described is one of reciprocity, compassion, trust, and respect. The impression given is of a camaraderie of sorts, given the colonial violence endured by both women and nature. Women are not the sole gender that feels the continued impact of violence, but the historical association made between the taking colonial of the land and the taking -- so to speak -- of the women, is significant and creates a bond between the female gender and nature.

Other genders also have tangible connections to the natural world shown in Indigenous literature, all of which are different, and that pose questions of how those relationships manifest in various corpora of Indigenous literatures. The degree to which other genders' relationships to the natural world are similar to the female relationship with nature is source for future inquiry. Nonetheless, I feel that such research would be more adequately explored by a person whose gender identity matches that being studied -- especially for non-cis-gendered relationships to the natural world.

Indigenous women, as key in knowledge transmission, hold traditional ecological knowledge. Whilst such knowledge could in fact be crucial to the reversal of ecological damage, the ethics of requesting cultural -- sometimes

sacred -- knowledge of continuously oppressed peoples are poor.

Furthermore, cultural knowledges continue to be discredited in academic and other Western circles. Therefore -- even if it were ethical to place the burden of ecological salvation upon Indigenous women -- monumental amounts of decolonial work must first be done before said knowledges could be utilized by Western communities.

Even without the issue of continued colonization, ecological salvation cannot exist in the same space as capitalism. Ecological care and capitalism are diametrically opposed. Climate reparations would require the slowing or halt of ecological exploitation, which could not occur under capitalism. The very perception of nature -- as a commodifiable resource -- that is rife in Western cultures, would need to be undone before measurable positive ecological change might arise. The commodification of nature is grounded in colonialism, so ecological salvation goes hand in hand with the dismantling of colonial institutions, teachings, and ideologies. To use the words of Audre Lorde: "I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of colour remains chained. Nor is any one of you." (Lorde, 29) Whilst this quotation was written in the context of striving for racial equality, its sentiment can be extended to the equality of all living beings, including those that are part of nature. Nature can consequently not be free while people of colour are unfree, and vice versa.

One step towards the shaping of a decolonized and anticapitalist world would be the encouragement of practices such as the Honorable Harvest (*Braiding Sweetgrass*, 175-201) -- or the “exchange of a life for a life, the endless cycling between my body and the body of the world” (*Braiding Sweetgrass*, 177). The Honorable Harvest is carried out by requesting plants’ permission before harvesting them -- and only harvesting with permission from the life being taken. As a form of traditional ecological knowledge and an acknowledgment of nature as a lifeform worthy of ethical consideration -- or kin -- the Honorable Harvest is a decolonizing practice. It can be said that all decolonizing practices are inherently anticapitalist, as they actively oppose hegemonic ideas founded upon colonization and inequality. However, the Honorable Harvest also limits the plants gathered, so that their population can be sustained -- resulting in what might be called a waste of resources in a profit-driven economic system such as capitalism. The natural world would consequently not be exploited as a resource. The practice of the Honourable Harvest, therefore, establishes equality between nature and all humans regardless of ethnicity, religious denomination, and so on. Widespread enactment of decolonizing ecological practices would allow for more explorations of the different gendered relationships to the natural world -- including the female Indigenous relationship to nature.

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