

Crystal Webber

Dr. L. Camille van der Marel

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Indigenous Resurgence and Futurism in Literature

In the realm of Canadian literature, the general question emerging asks “Is Indigenous literature considered Canadian literature?” To reframe the question, should Indigenous literature stand as its own category and how do Indigenous stories demonstrate history and culture within the framework of Indigenous resurgence? While Indigenous literature includes various genres and styles, I argue it is separate from Canadian literature as a whole. To give historical context, Indigenous peoples predate the existence of “Canada ” and the Canadian peoples, in fact up until the 1960s, Indigenous peoples were not considered as Canadians. Canada continues to reframe Indigenous sovereignty as Canadian through land policies, the Indian act, and through literature. Culture, beliefs, and attitudes are inherently linked to an author's work. More importantly, if Indigenous works remain under the category of Canadian literature, then another colonial constraint is placed on the native voice. Indigenous literature should be thought of as uniquely heterogeneous as there are a multitude of different cultures, languages, and practices which apply to their literary works. However, my focus will be on the regeneration and resurgence of the Indigenous voice through literature.

Many Indigenous authors break the mold of what is considered formal literary techniques to provide an indigenous perspective of story and narrative. Michi Sagiig Nishnaabeg author Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Metis writer Chelsea Vowel challenge the depiction of narrative and storytelling by bringing indigenous stories to life in their works in a non-traditional

way (with regards to Canadian literature). Simpson explains the notion of “resurgence” represents the radical revitalization of Indigenous culture and practices in the modern world. Simpson’s “Big Water” and Vowel’s “Kitaskinaw 2350” demonstrate a world in which technology, the environment, and indigeneity work together. Their stories reflect on the future and past of the Indigenous experience in Canada and impose the question of Indigenous futurism. “Big Water” plays with diegesis by intertwining an Anishinaabe creation story with contemporary events. The diction Simpson uses promotes the interconnectedness of Indigenous culture and the future, perhaps with technology. On the other hand, “Kitaskinaw 2350” integrates Cree culture with technology to discover the violent colonial history in order to create a better future. Both of these stories use the incorporation of the environmental impacts and technology of contemporary society with an Indigenous perspective in order to depict a future in which Indigenous cultures thrive. Simpson’s short story “Big Water” and Vowel’s comic “Kitaskinaw 2350” illustrate resurgence in literature demonstrated through the futurism of Indigenous culture alongside settler society.

The future of Indigenous lives with settlers is reflected in Simpson and Vowel’s literary works. To understand the indigenous-settler relationship, I draw on the work ““How Do We Learn To Live Together?”” by Daniel Heath Justice, an Indigenous scholar. He imagines a collective future after the apocalypse in which Indigenous people and other non-white people have survived. Justice uses non-settler authors to illustrate the new connections within the ruins of their former worlds. Within the Canadian context, Justice discusses the impact of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its evident lack of integrity and action the government enacted. The government and settler society need to recognize the truth of the Indigenous experience in order to move forward. The concept of creating connections and living together

(with settlers) in this new post-apocalyptic world for Indigenous peoples is central to healing. Justice considers that Indigenous literatures matter all the more as they do offer possibilities to voice it, heal and “live together.” By using, Justice’s concept of the post-apocalyptic work for Indigenous peoples serves to highlight the futurism within Simpson’s “Big Water” and Vowel’s comic “Kitaskinaw 2350.”

Now, with the focus on Vowel’s science fiction comic “Kitaskinaw 2350,” illustrated by Tara Audibert, it highlights the journey of an Indigenous girl who must return to the past in order to understand the history and behaviour of The Returners. Comics scholar Jaime Michaels highlights the importance of comics and how their use of gutters elicit an emotional response from readers, they allow the repressed groups in Canada to reframe the absence of their history. Presenting Indigenous history in comics contributes to the process of resurgence by “challeng[ing] settlers’ comfortable assumptions about the past in ways that enable a paradigm shift in the present” (Michaels 208). The comic opens with the setting in a futuristic world in which the advanced architecture integrated with traditional Cree design takes prominence (see fig. 1).

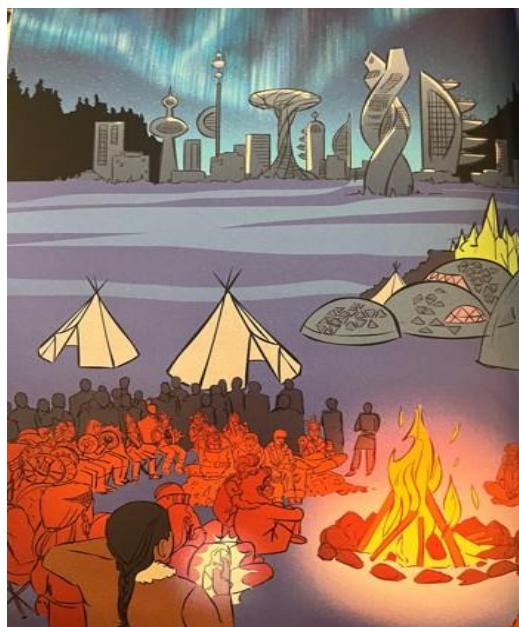


Fig. 1. Illustrated by Tara Audibert and written by Chelsea Vowel in *This Place: 150 Years Retold*, “Kitaskinaw 2350.”

The silhouette of the buildings creates the illusion that they sprout from the ground establishing the sense that nature and technology function together symbiotically. The first page contains zero borders or gutters which reinforces the unification of traditional and futuristic design and that division or conflict is not present. Wapanacahkos, the main character, must return to the past in order to understand The Returners. The moment her people decide to send her back in time, the borders and gutters appear and distinctly separate each panel (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Illustrated by Tara Audibert and written by Chelsea Vowel in *This Place: 150 Years Retold*, “Kitaskinaw 2350.”

The divisive gutters symbolize the lack of understanding towards the historical colonizers (The Returners) and the resulting fear forms distrust. Wapanacahkos’ great-grandparent advises her that “[a] decolonized mind cannot so easily understand colonial motivations” (Vowel 250). The use of the word “decolonized” also points towards the healing and restoration they have experienced to create the hybrid civilization they inhabit.

In certain moments, the gutters disappear, yet the borders remain suggesting the atmosphere of ignorant chaos or the resurgence of culture. The shift in use of borders and gutters allows “[a] careful examination of the space between borders in comics offers a useful way to probe the border as a literal and metaphoric structure that has participated in the shaping of Canadian literature and culture, and to question ‘for whom the border performs legitimately in the first place’” (Roberts and Stirrup qtd. in Gray 171). A moment wherein the gutters disappear and the borders remain happens when Wari, a woman who grew up disconnected from her culture, embodies resurgence by obtaining a cultural tattoo (263). The gutters disappear in order to establish a closer connection to reclaiming culture, but the borders remain around Wari’s memories and tribal tattoo in order to signify her original disconnect (see fig. 3).

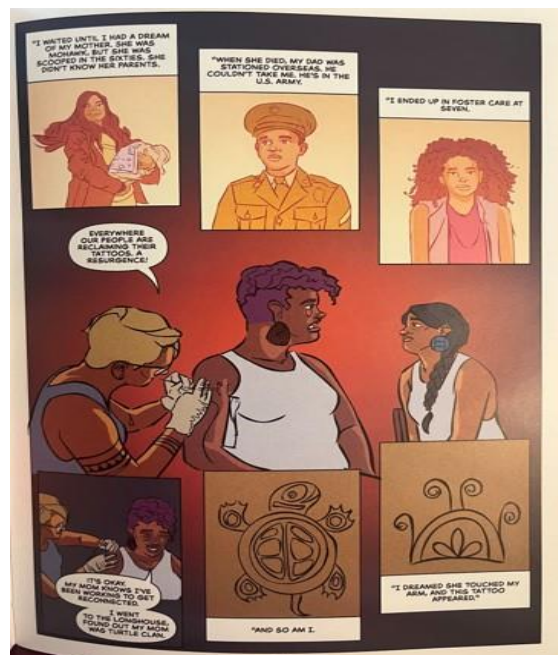


Fig. 3. Illustrated by Tara Audibert and written by Chelsea Vowel in *This Place: 150 Years Retold*, “Kitaskinaw 2350.”

The following panel contains zero borders and gutters due to the main character experiencing the concept of resurgence while questioning The Returners (see fig. 4.). However, with the mention

of the atrocities committed against Indigenous peoples (surrounded by borders of fire), the following pages return to the borders and thick gutters separating each panel (see fig. 4.).



Fig. 4. Illustrated by Tara Audibert and written by Chelsea Vowel in *This Place: 150 Years Retold*, “Kitaskinaw 2350.”

The behaviour of The Returners confuses her, which eliminates the connection between the panels and therefore the connection between Indigenous and settlers.

The last two pages of the comic display fewer borders and gutters in order to demonstrate the convergence of The Returners and the Indigenous population (see fig. 5.).



Fig. 5. Illustrated by Tara Audibert and written by Chelsea Vowel in *This Place: 150 Years Retold*, “Kitaskinaw 2350.”

The main character returns to her planet after discovering what the settlers need. The reconnection with her people and culture establishes less panels. Their excitement to share culture, yet remain wary due to the colonial past demonstrates why the few gutters remain. However, the eagle in the last panel suggests a blessing and good omen towards Indigenous futurism with the settler nations.

In “Big Water” as Simpson creates the intertextual dialogue of an Anishinaabe creation story with contemporary environmental events, such as the Toronto and Calgary floods, she pushes the notion of a future where spirits and technology can live together harmoniously with the land. “Big Water” anachronistically links the personified Anishinaabe spirits to modern day elements such as technology and current climate change events. Justice states “[l]earning how to live together is about living better in relationship, but for that to happen, we need to combine new action with transformed thought—our own, as well as that of others” (160). In order for Indigenous futurism and the resurgence of culture to happen, Indigenous peoples and settlers must learn to live together cohesively.

The narrator of "Big Water " could be one of the great spirits since they can communicate with Nibiish, the lake, they allude to being acquainted with the Thunderbirds, and participated in the creation of the world. Talking about Nibiish the narrator says "She is full. She is full of sad. She wants us to see her, to see what we're doing to her, and change" (Simpson 66). Simpson creates a sense of anxiety regarding climate change due to the lack of respect for the land. The importance of stating that Nibiish is sad not angry personifies the land and spirits' disappointment towards pollution. An essential element to learning to live with settlers and the resurgence of culture is by respecting the land.

Technology, the land, animals, and spirits become intertwined in "Big Water." Nibiish can text, the animals use a work-out app and Instagram pictures, but the most notable statements is the last sentence of the story: "And I'm texting Kwe, telling her that I love her, because she likes that, telling her to just stay in bed, because I'll be back soon and we almost always survive" (Simpson 68). Simpson braids the future and traditional together by demonstrating the ability of Anishinaabe spirits to use modern technology. Furthermore, this line alludes to the idea that the future of the world and spirits can coexist with technology whether or not humans are present. Ultimately, in order to represent Indigenous futurism and resurgence, we all (indigenous and settler) must take care of each other and the land, the way the narrator cares for Kwe and Nibiish.

Through Indigenous literature such as "Big Water" and "Kitaskinaw 2350," the concept Indigenous futurism demonstrates a desire for decolonized settler-indigenous relationships to heal and move forward together. While "Kitaskinaw 2350" elicits a positive connotation to the message of Indigenous futurism, "Big Water" creates a sense of anxiety towards the idea that the future of the world can survive without humans. After analyzing Simpson and Vowel's stories, the concept resurgence is the act of creating Indigenous stories of culture and the Indigenous

future. Meaning, Simpson and Vowel inherently convey resurgence through their works. The ability to interlink the past of Turtle Island, contemporary issues, and the Indigenous future demonstrates the rejection of colonial constraints and the rise of Indigenous literature.

Works Cited

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