

# Turning a new page: cultural safety, critical creative literary interventions, truth and reconciliation, and the crisis of child welfare

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## Abstract

Despite the recent Truth and Reconciliation Report in Canada, rates of Indigenous children being apprehended by the state remain disproportionately high when compared to non-Indigenous children. Starting with a critical decolonizing methodology, this article charts connections between historic and contemporary settler-colonial state interventions into lives and places of Indigenous families. We interrogate resiliencies of false settler-state logics based on “for their own good” logics about Indigenous peoples. We then turn to the recent ascendance of cultural safety, considering the concept’s positive possibility, and potential limitations, with reference to child-welfare and apprehension of Indigenous children. Finally, based on established evidence that child welfare is a crucial determinant of broader Indigenous health and well-being, the article concludes with thoughts about how those working with settler-colonial state apparatuses might achieve culturally safe engagements with Indigenous cultures in the contemporary colonial present. Our solutions are located in literary arts, where the article begins.

## Keywords

child welfare, Indigenous children and communities, British Columbia, cultural safety, truth and reconciliation, creative cultural materials, literary arts

*The act of witnessing, for me, is a sacred act. It involves the ceremony of our eyes and ears, the ceremony of connecting to what is in front of you. This act of witnessing can be both painful and magical, but I believe it's through this ceremony we are led to new understandings within ourselves. We learn to move our minds and bones differently. The act of bearing witness, as I mentioned, is highly important because it enables us to connect with the things we find incomprehensible and fearful, yet it enables us to connect with the things we find comforting and familiar.*

Gregory Scofield, Poet, 2017

## Introduction

This article takes as its starting point, and then returns to, the concept that books and literary arts—among other creative cultural expressions—can be powerful catalysts for cross-cultural cross-generational understandings. Specifically, we put this concept “to work” with reference to cultural safety, arguing that the current state of Aboriginal children vis-a-vis the child-welfare system is unacceptable and requires radically new orientations to Indigenous peoples and communities by non-Indigenous settler subjects in order to be rectified: which is not to say, we want to state from the onset of this

article, that we are arguing either that settler-Canadians should simply become better at apprehending children in order to “fix” the child-welfare system or that child-welfare workers are always settlers. Indeed, it is our position both that the child-welfare system likely needs to be entirely deconstructed, perhaps even done away with entirely, and that Indigenous people must also be at the helm of any future decisions about what is best for Indigenous children and families. Still, if things are to improve in the interim, we suggest practices of cultural safety offer some solutions, especially when paired with creative and arts-based learnings. Indeed, a number of community strengthening projects, some of which are reviewed in this article, along with a plethora of contemporary public conversations including statements by Publishers Weekly (n.d.) and recent features in *The Guardian*, all highlight for a mass and general audience the idea that literary arts are catalysts for cross-cultural and cross-community understanding and positive social change

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(foundational premises of cultural safety, literacy, and competency, which are at the heart of this article). Research in health and social sciences, along with the humanities, has evidenced these same premises for a long time (Cox et al., 2010; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). Literature, the arts, and the humanities can inform culturally sensitive, nuanced, and empathetic orientations to the world (Kidd & Castano, 2013). Even more pertinent to this article, however, is a growing body of research articulating the power of creative cultural materials (and by this we mean everything from literary and visual arts through to theater and multimedia expressions, including music or even performance and dance) to specifically expand empathetic orientations to “othered” peoples and communities (Charon, 2001) including, and importantly, latent or even blatant anti-Indigenous prejudices, misunderstandings, or racisms held by colonial settlers toward Indigenous peoples which result in the ongoing subjugation and marginalization of First Peoples (see, for instance, Ferrara, 2004).

We start the article with a brief overview of the terms and concepts we make use of throughout the article. For instance, we use the term Indigenous to refer, collectively, to all three of Canada’s constitutionally recognized First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. Where appropriate, we use the specific names of communities (e.g. Ojibwe). First Nations peoples make up the largest percentage of Indigenous peoples in British Columbia and, consequently, the Indigenous families and communities we are writing about in this article are often First Nations. We include an exploration of how, within a particular sociocultural and historical Canadian moment (the “Post-Truth and Reconciliation Calls To Action Moment”), we examine what we characterize as fundamentally colonialist policies and state rhetoric pertaining to Indigenous children and families in British Columbia, Canada. The “Post-Truth and Reconciliation Calls To Action Moment,” we argue, demands broad, trans-disciplinary, cross-community, and multi-scale attention to Canada’s colonial past and present, often using expressly decolonizing methods and methodologies, especially when imbedded inside frameworks of cultural safety. In the second section then, we chart connections between historic and contemporary state logics and discourses legitimizing settler-colonial intervention into lives and places of Indigenous families. We are particularly interested in critically interrogating the resilient (but false) settler state logics of “for their own good” presumptions, which we argue might be productively disrupted through modalities of cultural safety that, at least in part, include creative cultural materials—including literary works. Following from this, in the article’s fourth and final section, we turn to conversations about cultural safety, outlining the concept’s positive possibilities and its potential limitations with reference to reconfiguring state or Indigenous relationships in the arena of child welfare. Anchored in the premise that child welfare is a crucial determinant of broader Indigenous health and well-being, the article concludes with concrete and applied strategies to strengthen cultural safety work, including in child-welfare environments, through the use of creative cultural materials—including literary works. Ultimately, we argue for and

offer examples about how settler-colonial state apparatuses might achieve increased lived, embodied, and affective engagement with Indigenous cultures so as to produce re-oriented and culturally safe relationships in the contemporary colonial present.

### **States of decolonization in Canada’s post-truth and reconciliation moment: exploring theories and practices**

As we and others have begun to write about in some analytical depth (see, for instance, de Leeuw [in press]), on 15 December 2015, Justice Murray Sinclair released the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). More than a half decade in the making, the six-volume report is thousands of pages long and centers on documenting and honoring statements made by more than 6,000 First Nations, Inuit and Métis people impacted by the physical, biological and cultural genocide at the core of residential schooling in Canada (TRC, 2015a). The Commission worked for 6 years, following a class action lawsuit brought forward by residential school survivors and, in 2007, an apology from the federal government about residential schools, which itself received criticism (see, for instance, Waterstone & de Leeuw, 2010). The TRC follows a long lineage of federal inquiries into the inequalities lived by Indigenous peoples in Canada, including the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), and is in dialogue with multiple reports and investigations into the deeply problematic child-welfare relationships between government and Indigenous communities, including in British Columbia where this article is focused (see, for instance, Hughes, 2006; Turpel-Lafond, 2011, 2013). Indeed, the number one Call to Action in the TRC [2015b] is to “reduc[e] the number of Aboriginal children in [government/state] care” (p. 1), a call which must be finding resonance in British Columbia where numerous reports describe a Ministry for Children and Family Development (MCFD) in crisis, particularly with reference to Indigenous families.

As critics have observed, many of the lengthy and involved inquiries, reports, and commissions, often evoking ideas of recognition and a commitment to “doing better,” rarely result in substantive actions that alleviate disparities lived by Indigenous families and communities—or, for that matter, to fundamentally destabilize supremacy of colonial power and rule (Coulthard, 2007). In fact, as we consider in this article, the number of Indigenous children in state-run child-welfare programs is now greater than the number of Indigenous children enrolled during the apex of Indian residential schools in Canada. This underscores how colonial power remains remarkably resilient and unchecked, making all the more pressing current calls for and discussion about cultural safety, including in child-welfare contexts (see also, de Leeuw, 2014, 2016).

The TRC (2015b) report calls for new ways of thinking and practicing in realms that involve relationships between the state, settler-colonial subjects, and Indigenous peoples

in Canada. The TRC also provides insights about cultural safety. The TRC's 10 principles of reconciliation provide a foundation for us to think about cultural safety in the area of child welfare, specifying that it is the responsibility of "[a]ll Canadians, as Treaty peoples . . . [to establish and maintain] mutually respectful relationships" (Principle 6) and emphasizes that "[r]econciliation requires constructive action on addressing the ongoing legacies of colonialism that have had destructive impacts on Aboriginal peoples' education, cultures and languages, health, child welfare, the administration of justice, and economic opportunities and prosperity" (Principle 4) (TRC, 2015c). The TRC makes clear that reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, which the TRC notes is at the heart of reducing the number of children in government care, must be a focused, mutual process, a process resting in great part on settler subjects unsettling our comfortable ignorance and reorienting ourselves to the awareness that our comfort is built on a legacy of colonial violence. These concepts are central to cultural safety.

To work in a culturally safe fashion, a concept pioneered in the nursing profession in New Zealand, involves undertaking actions that recognize, respect, and nurture the unique cultural identity of especially marginalized cultures so as to safely meet their needs, expectations, and rights (Papps & Ramsden, 1996; Polaschek, 1998; see also Anderson et al., 2003). Although cultural safety aims to enhance the delivery of health services specifically, the broad tenets of culturally safe practices carry across disciplines and practices, with clear implications for those working in child welfare. Broadly speaking, cultural safety starts with identifying inherent power relationships between service providers and the people who use the services—this maps well onto service relationships between Indigenous peoples and child protection workers or other subjects enacting state legislation that bear down on Indigenous peoples. A service provider in a culturally safe environment accepts and works alongside others after undergoing a careful process of institutional and personal analysis of power relationships. Importantly, and in line with calls for action by the TRC around child apprehensions, users of a service—for example, Indigenous peoples and families—are empowered as active participants. People should be able to express degrees of perceived risk or safety. Another key aspect of providing a culturally safe service involves preparing professionals, or the service providers, to understand the diversity within their own cultural reality and the impact of those cultural realities on any person who differs in any way from themselves—in the case of child welfare, an understanding of the broad historical realities that produce an often anti-Indigenous or pro-settler-colonial hegemony must be accounted for. To not make this overt is to potentially neutralize it, making it invisible and potentially not dismantling it. Finally, a key aspect of cultural safety is a recognition that applying social science concepts (and humanities, we would argue) can underpin good practices that are sometimes seen as beyond the scope of frontline service provision. In health and medicine, along with child protection activities, there can be an erroneous assumption

that service in great part centers on carrying out tasks. Culturally safe practices recognize and laud the idea that this is not the case: instead, working in the area of child welfare is about relating and responding effectively to people with diverse needs and strengths in a way that the people who are most affected by the services can define as safe—clearly not the case in child welfare in British Columbia today. The question thus arises: how can child welfare become a culturally safe practice?

In contextualizing its 94 Calls to Action and the over 500-page Summary of the Final Report, the TRC defines reconciliation as "an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships" (2015b, p. 121). This wording opens new space for innovative, even creative, means for non-Indigenous settler-colonial subjects to reform our knowledges about colonial violence of the past, present, and future: to behave, in essence, in more culturally safe and attuned ways, ways that put decolonizing theories and practices into action.

Decolonization is a contested and slippery concept. It is often used in conjunction with anti-colonization: both concepts are meant to conjure and encourage anti-colonial or decolonizing work and practice in more productive ways than were enabled by previous "postcolonial" theory or discussions about colonialism, both of which received critical pushback from Aboriginal peoples (see, for instance, Gilmartin & Berg, 2007). An increasing number of scholars and practitioners (especially in helping professions such as medicine, nursing, and social work) are now seeking to decolonize processes and practices or are calling upon anti-colonial methodologies with the intention of interrogating White settler supremacy and recalibrating relationships between settler and Indigenous peoples (Berg, 2012; see also Morgensen, 2011). Decolonizing or anti-colonial work seeks to actively de-center and dismantle colonial institutions, modalities, systems, structures, and ways of knowing and being that continue to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their lands, families, homes, languages, and rights. In this article, we are invested in anti-colonial work that seeks to decolonize the current state of child welfare. We suggest that applying ideas of cultural safety to child-welfare practices might enable this.

Still, and as we and others have observed, much of the work claiming or aiming to be decolonizing or anti-colonial either falls short in its good but misplaced intentions (see de Leeuw, Greenwood, & Lindsay, 2013), or fails to fully comprehend the (virtually) impossible nature of work that is truly or fully decolonizing and anti-colonial: that is, reinstating lands, resources, cultures, languages families, and nations that have already been destroyed or are still (permanently) occupied and can never be given back (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Other scholars have noted that neither decolonizing nor anti-colonial work tidily "wraps up" or finishes with an unsettling of colonial power (Cameron, 2015; Wolfe, 2006). This too suggests that caution should be rightfully applied to ideas about cultural safety, work which can also never be understood as wrapped up or "complete" but which must, instead, keep evolving in pace with the transformative power of colonial privilege and power.

Although we must acknowledge the limitations of what we refer to as “decolonization,” anti- and decolonizing practices, used cautiously and with recognition that both must always be adaptive and unfixed, can work toward disassembling (especially White) settler supremacy by de-centering and dismantling colonial institutions, modalities, systems, structures, and ways of knowing and being that continue to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their lands, families, homes, languages, and rights. And—if we are to be hopeful and optimistic about the work of decolonization, anti-colonialism, and even cultural safety—we might see in these concepts a set of ideals to work toward. In particular, anti-colonial, decolonizing, and culturally safe work—and those who undertake it—must be deeply committed to understanding, valuing, and defending Indigenous lives, traditions, knowledges, and futures, especially those outside and beyond the purview of settler subjects. At the same time, (especially White) non-Indigenous settler subjects must expand understandings about our own histories and our sociocultural and even geographical privileges (Berg, 2012). To do this requires, in part, understanding the historical, geographic, and sociocultural foundations of where we are today, including in the realm of child welfare.

### **The “Caring” colonial state: linking historic welfare policies to contemporary interventions into Indigenous families and communities**

In January 2011, Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, a Cree lawyer and British Columbia’s Representative for Children and Youth, presented a report titled *Fragile Lives, Fragmented Systems: Strengthening Supports for Vulnerable Infants* to the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. The report reviewed the lives of 21 infants under the age of 2 who died between 1 June 2007 and 1 May 2009 while in the care of the state in some capacity. Turpel-Lafond (2011) wrote that “an alarming number of the infants—15 of the 21—were Aboriginal” (p. 3). These numbers reflect the current reality of child apprehension in British Columbia: while only 8% of children and youth in the province are Aboriginal, as of March 2015, 57% of the children and youth in care and 66% of children and youth under a continuing care order were Aboriginal (Office of the Representative for Children and Youth [RCY], 2015a, p. 13; see also Aboriginal Children in Care Working Group, 2015). The proportion of Aboriginal children in state care in Canada is similarly high: according to the National Household Survey (2011), Aboriginal children comprise 48.1% of children and youth in foster care across Canada. In short, Aboriginal children and youth are about 10 times more likely to come into care than non-Aboriginal children (RCY, 2015b). Even when child apprehensions do not result in the death of a child, the disproportionately high rates of child apprehension are invasive and disruptive to

families and communities (de Leeuw, 2014, 2016; Foster & Wharf, 2007; Fournier & Crey, 1997; Walmsley, 2005). First-person testimonials by parents about their experiences of having their children removed rely on words like “stealing,” “baby snatching,” “kidnapping,” and “life altering” (Jones, 2010; see also Pivot Legal Society and Law Foundation of British Columbia, 2008; Walmsley, 2005).

Like other state actions that suspend the rights granted to the majority of a population or to a majority of individuals (e.g. imprisoning a person), intervening into families for child protection purposes requires systems of logic and law that render invasive, disruptive, and sometimes even violent practices of child apprehension as justified (Blomley, 2004). These systems operate discursively: they both draw from and reinforce dominant ideas and commonly accepted assumptions. In order to maintain a dominant discourse, or in order for something to operate discursively, some level of institutional support is required, often “by the way in which knowledge is put to work, valorized, distributes, and in a sense attributed, in a society” (Foucault, 1981, p. 55). Since the very earliest days of child protection policy, agencies and the social workers implementing these services have always been required to balance conflicting pressures between society’s wish to protect children from abuse on the one hand and, on the other, broad social agreement that the family unit is a bastion of liberty which should be intervened into only with utmost caution (Munroe, 1996; Regehr, Chau, Leslie, & Howe, 2002). This requires a complex system of discursive rationalization and justification based on accepted knowledge (“common sense”) of the historical moment.

Given that British Columbia joined the confederation of Canada in 1871, legalized state intervention into families has a relatively long history in the province. In March 1901, the first child-welfare act was passed in the British Columbia Legislative Assembly, solidifying into law the efforts of the Council of Women of Vancouver to ensure that children were not left in circumstances and places where they faced abuse, neglect, or abandonment (Foster & Wharf, 2007). Dominant discourses and accepted logics regarding child welfare rested upon the assumption that there were objective quantifiable means of assessing the goodness of some families’ domestic spaces versus the corruptness or unwholesomeness of others. Assessments were often based on the hygiene of a home, morality of the parents, future potential afforded to the children by living in the home, and behaviors of parents and relatives toward each other and the children (see, for example, Canadian Council on Child Welfare, 1927).

Indeed, colonial benevolence—assisting and bettering the lives of those living on the margins of society, particularly Indigenous peoples—is an impulse remarkably immune to critique at the time of its unfolding (de Leeuw, Greenwood, & Cameron, 2010). With ostensibly all good intentions, non-Indigenous government, non-governmental, and ecumenical agencies have a long history of constructing

themselves as protecting and benevolent forces aiming to “improve” and “help” Indigenous peoples “for their own good” (Haig-Brown & Nock, 2006). Much of this work was underwritten by logics of common sense:

The epistemic tasks that colonial institutions faced were contingent on forms of knowledge that bureaucratic machines . . . uneasily embraced: problematic predictions about the political consequences of people’s affective and moral states . . . [depended on] . . . a shared common sense about what was likely, allowing prediction and directing the political projects it served. (Stoler, 2008, p. 353)

Common sense was (and is) a crucial colonial strategy with remarkable resiliency, offering colonizers a means to distance themselves from more obviously coercive or violent ideas, actions, and policies. As early as 1845, the government of the then-not-yet Canada voiced interest in the welfare of Indigenous peoples who were considered to be at risk for deleterious and amoral behaviors:

[We are] interested in the welfare of this race . . . [of] mass[ing] valuable information upon their present state, and suggestions for improving it . . . to form a judgment upon any scheme proposed for their future management. (Rawson, Davidson, & Hepburn, 1845, p. 3)

These colonial “good intentions” discursively and materially undergirded the Indian residential schooling system, which has been referred to as Canada’s “national crime” (Milloy, 1999) and recognized as one of the nation’s most egregious interventions into Indigenous peoples’ families and social structures. Although justifications and logics shifted depending on the times and places in which it was delivered, residential schooling was described in federal government policy documents and program documents of the time as an effort to “produce Indians . . . adjusted to modern life [and] capable of meeting the exacting demands of modern society with all its complexities” (see Education Division, 1947). From its onset, residential schooling was framed as a means of “saving” Indigenous children from the lack of education, civility, safety, and progress understood to mark the spaces of Indigenous families and communities. Residential schooling was presented as a benevolent endeavor concerned with child welfare and protection (de Leeuw, 2007, 2009; Miller, 1997; Milloy, 1999), much as child-welfare policies today are justified to be in the best interests of children, families, and society at large.

This type of common-sense benevolence, however, is not a response to a politically neutral assessment of “need” among Indigenous peoples. Historically, there has been a constant (re)production of Indigeneity—and places it is associated with—as abnormal or as normally aberrant (Cameron, de Leeuw, & Greenwood, 2009). Spaces and bodies of Indigenous peoples are rarified and codified in policy and law as unique in ways that require the good intentioned interventions of non-Indigenous powers. For Indigenous peoples, this cycle involves an endless deferral—often by governments—of the time when they can be deemed “ready” to “manage” themselves (de Leeuw et al., 2010). For over 150 years, discourses comprising laws,

policies, and popular rhetoric about the need to protect and care for those unable to do so themselves have had disastrous results for Indigenous people, including severe inequities in health, standards of living, and overall individual and community well-being (Adelson, 2005; Assembly of First Nations, 2006; Government of British Columbia, 2002). Still, because discourses are produced by human subjects and imaginations, albeit often those in power, discourses are also subject to challenge and change. We argue that the long-standing history of anti-Indigenous racist discourses, and the subsequent materializations of those discourses as interventions into the lives and families of Indigenous peoples especially through child-welfare mechanisms, must be intervened into—and by many accounts, cultural safety might be one mechanism of doing this.

### **Cultural safety and child welfare: envisioning a new state of relations through creative arts**

Cultural safety—especially when more specifically understood in relationship with critical cultural perspectives that draw attention to power and to the historical, social, and political relationships and processes that undergird and inform the actions of those especially in helping professions (see Browne & Varcoe, 2006)—may have the power to extend a decolonizing discourse, a kind of antidote to colonizing anti-Indigenous discourse. Cultural safety, in other words, might be understood as a means of broadening and solidifying decolonizing discourses, especially in realms of child welfare. For the reasons described above, in addition to a long and deeply complex history of deceit, domination, and abuse not in the purview of this article, colonial governments in Canada have always had, and continue to have, deeply problematic relationships with Indigenous people and communities, especially in realms involving Indigenous children and childhood. Calls by Indigenous organizations, leaders, and communities to rectify past harms and restructure relationships highlight the need for cultural responsiveness by non-Indigenous settler subjects to Indigenous realities. This type of awareness, understanding, and responsiveness on the part of non-Indigenous individuals and organizations is variably referred to as cultural sensitivity, cultural appropriateness, or (as this article is focused upon) cultural safety and competence or competency. All of these concepts require empathy and holistic understandings of “full” people: which leads us to quickly offer a caveat about the concept of “empathy” that is often interwoven into considerations of cultural safety (see, for instance, Kirmayer, 2013). Empathy has received and is receiving critical pushback from especially Indigenous scholars and activists (see Simon, 2013) who worry the goal of achieving empathy as an “end state” may spur non-Indigenous settlers, once they have achieved as a kind of “empathetic awake-ness,” to simply congratulate ourselves while not continuing to

work toward dismantling broader systems of ongoing colonial violence. Awareness of this risk must be read into our arguments about cultural safety in this article.

With that said, a growing body of evidence in both the medical and health sciences highlights a powerful connection between creative arts and cultural safety. For individuals in positions of power relative to marginalized populations (e.g. health or social welfare professionals), studies have shown that immersion in creative arts—particularly visual, dramatic, or literary works created by marginalized people—can help build the empathy and understanding required for culturally safe practices. Engaging with literature in particular, with the goal of understanding the experiences, feelings, and values of other people (Hunter, Charon, & Coulehan, 1995), has been shown to be effective in building an “empathetic approach” (about which we offer a cautionary remark below) to care wherein a reader or professional comes to recognize the uniqueness of other individuals’ realities, leading to more affective and reflective interactions, especially in healthcare (Charon, 2001; Hunter et al., 1995).

Although much of the research on arts and cultural safety focuses on medical and health fields, we argue that there are strong parallels between the experiences of social services and health professions—both of which are being called to account for the ways that cultural stereotyping about Indigenous peoples and, more bluntly, anti-Indigenous racism (see, for instance, Allan & Smylie, 2015; Reading & de Leeuw, 2014) are having devastating impacts on Indigenous people’s health and well-being. The power of literary arts—particularly poetry, fiction, and novels—to increase empathy and to shift thinking and understandings about marginalized patients has been fairly constantly demonstrated in studies with medical students (Shapiro, Duke, Boker, & Ahearn, 2005; Shapiro, Morrison, & Boker, 2004) and general practice residents (Foster & Freeman, 2008). Other studies have quantified how immersion in literary fiction results in deeper connections with subjective experiences of the characters that, in turn, lead to increased empathy and amplified “theory of mind” (ToM). ToM is the ability to recognize mental states—beliefs, intents, desires, knowledge, and so on—and to understand that beliefs, desires, intentions, and perspectives that are different from one’s own are still valid and requiring of consideration (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009). These studies in medical and healthcare professions are linked with growing calls for medical and health professionals to exercise culturally safe or culturally competent care, both of which are also increasingly being evidenced as improving through engagement with and immersion in literary and creative arts. This suggests, in other words, a role for literary arts and creative writings in culturally safe practices and work, including, potentially, in child welfare.

*The Elder Project* (n.d.) has a deceptively simple goal: bring Indigenous Elders and young people together to exchange narratives, encourage the youth to render what they hear into poems, and share those poetic works among all the participants and then the rest of the world (see <http://www.theelderproject.com/home.html>). The outcome of

*The Elder Project* (n.d.), however, is anything but simplistic: 10 books of poetry at last count, moving accounts of connections made across generations, and poetry tackling everything from residential schooling experiences to life-long struggles with poverty or addiction. Maybe most powerful, however, are the poems documenting incredible strength, resilience, and power of Indigenous people as offered by Elders and as carefully rendered by the next generation. Powerfully denoted in the following poem, written by two young Ojibwe boys to reflect their learnings with an Ojibwe Elder, literary arts have capacities to transmit complicated feelings and memories in straightforward and moving language that resonates and affects any reader:

*Kokum*

*I was born in Manitoba in 1947.*

*My childhood memories: fresh hot bread, winter nights, frost on the windows, hot fire in the stove.*

*My memories of school: ink wells, braids, hard tack cookies, lunch pails made from lard cans, outdoor toilets, getting strapped.*

*I can speak Ojibwe, which I learned in my 50s.*

*When my sister and my daagwe would phone, I'd ask them to speak only in our language.*

*I want to learn to bead and speak Spanish.*

*My jobs: waitress, nanny, clerk, secretary, executive assistant, legal secretary, academic assistant, a good wife.*

*What makes me happy: my grandchildren, a good cup of tea a sunny day, a sewing machine.* (Morton & Lynxleg, 2010)

The fact that the literary arts can forge bonds across generations and cultures is neither a new concept nor one confined to regional or small-scale spaces. For over 130 years, Publishers Weekly has been known “familarly as ‘the bible of the book business,’ [ . . . ] a weekly news magazine focused on the international book publishing business” (<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/corp/aboutus.html>). In March 2016, as part of an increased commitment to lobbying for book publishers and books more generally on a global scale, Publishers Weekly brought together representatives from more than 40 of North America’s largest publishing houses: the publishers appealed to The White House and the US Congress to end their trade embargo of books with Cuba. The reason for this historic demand, as articulated by Publishers Weekly and highlighted in a series of National Public Radio (NPR) commentaries, was that “books are catalysts for greater cross-cultural understanding . . . and positive social change” <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/international/international-book-news/article/69612-end-the-book-embargo-against-cuba.html>. Indeed, in August 2016, the British newspaper *The Guardian* featured an article about recent research confirming that exposure to literary arts was a positive predictor of people being better at inferring the feelings

of others, a central tenet of cultural safety and competency (<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/23/literary-fiction-readers-understand-others-emotions-better-study-finds>, accessed August 2016). Around the world, then, and also in British Columbia with reference to First Nations, the literary arts are understood as catalysts for cultural awareness, competency, and, ultimately, cultural safety.

### **Creative states: conclusions and recommendations for culturally safe practices in the future**

The ongoing harms to Indigenous children both within and in spite of the best intentions of the child-welfare system in British Columbia and across Canada clearly point to an ongoing crisis which must be urgently addressed. In a post-TRC climate, we have argued that a “caring” colonial state such as Canada must urgently address child welfare as an extension of violent discourses that have always subjugated Indigenous peoples, producing an imaginary of Indigenous families and communities as entities requiring state intervention. The rates of Indigenous child apprehension in British Columbia and the rest of Canada signal an ongoing crisis—one that, in this post-TRC moment, must be addressed. We have argued that the crisis of Indigenous child apprehensions must be historically and culturally contextualized as an extension of ongoing state logics that, from early on in the settler-colonial project and as exemplified in projects like residential schooling, have always validated the rights of settler-colonial state powers to intervene into the lives of Indigenous families and communities with impunity. Recognizing colonial logic as a discourse allows it to be understood as anchored in common-sense reasoning of interventions being in the best interests of the Indigenous families and communities who were being intervened into. However, like any dominant discourse, in order to cohere and remain intact over time, it must be reinforced by a set of logical reasoning that posits Indigenous people as less capable of parenting, Indigenous homes less suitable for children, and so on. In order to maintain institutional anti-Indigenous racism, it must also be *undisrupted* by empathetic or culturally specific understandings of Indigenous peoples and communities.

Drawing on growing bodies of research and evidence about the transformative power of especially the literary arts, albeit mostly in health and medical fields, to shift ways of thinking and orientations to marginalized peoples, this article concludes with some broad suggestions about how to make child-welfare services more culturally safe in British Columbia (and beyond); in sum, about how to actively disrupt colonial logics and naturalized discourses. We want to emphasize that what we explore (below) should not be taken as prescriptive. Our suggestions are simply starting points, suggestions that might inform broader or more nuanced professional-development projects that would, ultimately, provide empowering and enjoyable opportunities for especially non-Indigenous professionals to (re)consider the way power is often discursively produced, the ways it is always tethered to historical, social,

and political relationships and systems, but also the idea that power can be disrupted and destabilized. We also want to argue that our suggestions not be unidirectional: in many cases (for instance, therapeutic letters), the work will be more meaningful, confronting, and transformative if children and youth in care are able to write BACK to (and against) the systems that continually try to subjugate them.

With that said, we advocate first for “literary immersion” opportunities for (especially non-Indigenous White settler) people working the front lines of child welfare and child apprehension: this immersion might take the form of ongoing individual and group book or reading circles where creative writing produced by Indigenous authors was critically contemplated and conversed about, facilitated in part by prompt questions or, better still, by visiting Indigenous authors who would be able to assist in conversing about the literature. The books need not be prescriptive or even specifically focused on relationships between the state and Indigenous communities that have at the center intervention into families and communities, although books with this focus might be beneficial as well. Here, we are thinking of canonical books like *My Name is Seepeetza* by First Nations author Shirley Sterling, *Half Breed* by Métis author Maria Campbell, or the autobiography of Norvel Moriseau, *Man Changing into Thunderbird*, by Ojibwe author Armand Garnet Ruffo who also wrote an accompanying book of poetry about the world-renowned artist, *The Thunderbird Poems*. Each of these incredible texts insists on complex orientation to questions about poverty, family violence, dysfunction, and even addiction—many of the issues that form the basis of so many Indigenous child apprehensions by colonial state logics suggesting apprehension is in the “best interest” of the family, child, and community. There are hundreds of equally powerful and evocative texts authored by Indigenous writers in Canada, the vast majority of which deal substantively with Indigenous ways of knowing and being that are not otherwise put on the public record for access by non-Indigenous peoples. The visions in these texts, in other words, hold a world of possibility in building culturally safe practices.

Second, we suggest opportunities for ongoing reflective interactions, by as many social workers involved in the child-welfare systems who want to be involved, with literatures authored by Indigenous peoples: this would take the form of facilitated and personal reflective conversations and then consequent personal writings, which might also be shared, about various topics concerning settler-colonial violence (at the broadest scales and most diffuse levels) perpetuated against Indigenous peoples in Canada. Active reflection integrates a series of steps, including critical synthesis of lessons learned while engaging with a specific subject (in this case, the text and book lessons), contemplation of one’s feelings and responses to the subject, including importantly feelings of illumination or discomfort, an active effort to integrate lessons from the subject into one’s own life and actions, followed by iterative and generative contemplations on the ensuing actions and reflection—a kind of ongoing “check in with self” about the reflections and associated activities. Text and stories upon which such reflections might occur include *Red Rooms* (Theytus Books) by Cherie Dimaline, *Monkey*

*Beach* by Eden Robinson, a book of plays titled *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* by Marie Clements, Lee Maracle's *Ravensong*, or any number of books by Thomas King, including his recent *The Inconvenient Indian*. We suggest the collection of poetry *Witness, I Am* by Gregory Scofield would be especially productive here, carefully and emotively detailing as it does some of Canada's most pressing issues of anti-Indigenous colonial violence.

Finally, in line with a growing literature about "therapeutic letters," especially in social engagement professions and as a way for professionals to increase a sense of relational responsibility and empathy toward those who they often have professional power "over" (SmithBattle, Leander, Westhus, Freed, & McLaughlin, 2009), we encourage child-welfare professional development that would include, first, reading and engaging with a number of texts authored by Indigenous writers and, second, the penning of letters to children, youth, and families within MCFD preview that begin conversations about characters and themes learned about by social workers, including themes about strengths and resiliencies of Indigenous peoples and cultures. We suggest further that children and youth in care be invited and supported to write letters (or produce forms of creative documentation) recording their child-welfare realities and their dreams and imaginings of the present-future, recordings that are then read by child-welfare workers. We suggest that this may "reset" relationships between settler-colonial social workers and Indigenous families and communities, insisting upon a strengths-based approach and opening new spaces for conversing about the immense adaptability and power that Indigenous peoples have always demonstrated—and will likely continue to embody. Literary texts which might prove especially useful in such an exercise include *A Really Good Brown Girl* and *The Pemmican Eaters*, both by Marilyn Dumont; the book of poems titled *Halving Spring: An Internet Romance* by Joanne Arnott; or *Islands of Decolonial Love*, a book of short poetically inspired stories by Leanne Simpson.

These texts and exercises are by no means conclusive or prescriptive; our intent at the end of this article is simply to map out options to grow culturally safe practices, through sustained engagement with books and literary arts, within what remains a space that is distinctly culturally unsafe. It is our conviction—buoyed by a growing body of evidence and research—that empathetic culturally attuned and sensitive practices between professionals and peoples who are too often marginalized and "othered" can begin at the scale of words, on the page, in the incredible worlds found between the covers of books. We hope, that in the end, our suggestions offer possibilities for re-writing the futures of many Indigenous children, families, and communities currently being traumatized by state intervention, a story too often overlooked or unresponded to. We hope from books and the literary arts can begin the work of authentic truth, reconciliation, and culturally safe practice.

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