Organizing Fictions: Material Ecocriticism, Environmental Justice, and American Indian Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

by

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May, 2015
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Organizing Fictions: Material Ecocriticism, Environmental Justice, and American Indian Literature

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

This dissertation considers how environmental humanities, in dialogue with Native studies, can enhance scholarship concerned with environmental justice. Maintaining a critical interest in how materiality—as conceived within material ecocriticism and American Indian relational ontologies—plays into these discourses, the dissertation examines representations of land, water, and community in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American Indian literature, in order to inform a deeper understanding of contemporary environmental and indigenous movements. Chapter one introduces the project’s theoretical framework and diffractive methodology. The following three chapters, grouped under the presiding images of land, water, and community, examine a range of cultural and literary texts involving environmental justice organizing and activism. Chapter two argues for the liveliness of borders and demarcations of place in the reservation landscapes of novels by Louise Erdrich and Winona LaDuke. Chapter three investigates the discourse of environmental resources, focusing on recent mining projects and water activism in the Upper Midwest and reading online activist websites, the poetry of Cecelia Rose LaPointe, and Linda Hogan’s novel Solar Storms. Chapter four analyzes how the rhetoric of prophecy influences coalitional activism in the work of Leslie Marmon Silko and in the recent indigenous movement Idle No More. The conclusion argues for the evolution of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) discourse using the work of Robin Wall Kimmerer. The dissertation’s title plays on the term “organizing fictions” to refer both to the ontological underpinnings that influence identities and to the fiction and literature that inspires environmental activism.
Dedication

For my parents, and for the land and water.
Acknowledgments

I am deeply grateful to have had the support of a vibrant, inspiring community of friends and colleagues while writing this dissertation. First and foremost, my thanks to my esteemed committee: Cheryll Glotfelty and Mike Branch have been unparalleled mentors and supporters, and Kathy Boardman, Greta de Jong, and Leah Wilds have continually lent their expertise and insight. My gratitude also goes to Erin James and Scott Slovic, whose excellent seminars and mentorship helped this project take shape. Thanks to my Literature and Environment cohort, including Kyhl Lyndgaard, David Stentiford, David P. Johnson II, Meredith Privott (and Camp Meh), English Brooks, Sarah Nolan, Sylvan Goldberg, Jack Fredericks, Andy Ross, Jo Landis, Lauren McCrady, Patrick Russell, Juhi Huda, Tamara Turnbeaugh, Lauren Yero, and Coral Wu. Special thanks to Tom Hertweck, academic superhero, literal and figurative lifesaver, and excellent friend; to Will Lombardi, carpenter-poet, dream colleague, and insightful guide to the postlocal West; and to Jessica Fanaselle, rogue scholar and unparalleled Reno companion. In the English Department at UNR, thanks also to Laurel Griffiths (mitten kids for life!), Jen Forsberg, Cassie Hemstrom, Renee Bryzik, Estibalitz Ezkerra, and Eric Stottlemyer. At UNR, I am honored to have been in the company of brilliant professors who have influenced my work, including Deborah Achtenberg, Deborah Boehm, Cathy Chaput, Katherine Fusco, Justin Gifford, and Debra Harry. Likewise, I appreciate the guidance and inspiration of colleagues and friends beyond UNR, including Joni Adamson, Stacy Alaimo, Mascha Gemein, Amy Hamilton, Jenn Ladino, April Lindala, Serpil Oppermann, and Jaspal Singh. Chi miigwech to Cecelia Rose LaPointe for the kind permission to reprint her
poetry and for our email conversation. Thanks also to the Russell J. and Dorothy S.
Bilinski Foundation for much-needed financial support in completing the dissertation.

Thanks to the good folks of Bibo Coffee Company, in whose Record Street
location I spent the most of the past six years. St. James Infirmary, meanwhile, provided
respite with some of the most epic dance parties imaginable. The Great Basin Community
Food Coop inspired me to frame chapters around land, water, and community, and
volunteering there gave me a break from staring at screens to enjoy tending local
produce. Profound thanks to my kindred: Kathy, Mike, Kailey, Shannon, and Sean; Kari
Stromberg; and the Case and Mendes clans. Alex Mendes appeared right when this
project was getting underway. I cannot imagine completing it without his continual
support, and I look forward to the future projects we will undertake together.

Finally, thank you to the Truckee River and its terminal lakes, Tahoe and
Pyramid—the waters that greeted me when I first arrived in Reno, and which have kept
me grounded since. I have been blessed to spend these years in the shadow of the Sierra
Nevada, on Wa She Shu (Washoe) and Numu (Northern Paiute) land.
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Chapter One

Introduction: Diffraction Patterns of Material Ecocriticism and Native Studies

At a guest lecture for the Literature and Environment Colloquium Series at the University of Nevada, Reno in February of 2012, Serpil Oppermann introduced the audience to the emerging field of material ecocriticism, which reconceptualizes agency to suggest that it is not the prerogative of human beings but also exhibited by nonhuman matter. During the ensuing Q&A, attendees wondered how the field might connect to indigenous worldviews. The consensus seemed to be that material ecocriticism reflected so-called ancient, animist traditions.

As a student of new materialisms and Native American literature, I was both intrigued and unsettled by this connection. The audience seemed correct to notice similarities. New materialist trends direct us towards a more relational understanding of a dynamic world in which things are not as separate as they might appear, and this view fits well with the traditions of many indigenous worldviews emphasizing human relationships with nonhuman beings and places. But I was also troubled by the assumptions of this audience. For one, Native traditions were spoken of in the past tense, evoking the specter of the vanishing Indian, a trope that implies all “authentic” Native people belong to an inaccessible, precolonial past and that anyone today who claims Native identity is either

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1 Where I fail to use specific tribal designations, I use “indigenous” and “Native” interchangeably to refer to original inhabitants and their descendants. I likewise alternate between “American Indian” and “Native American,” recognizing the varied preferences among those who identify with them.
too assimilated into Euro-American cultures or otherwise too divested of traditional lands and lifeways to count. This way of relegating indigenous beliefs to the past obscures the presence of contemporary American Indians who hold traditional tribal views and who apply them to their political and environmental activism. Secondly, I was disconcerted with the idea of using generalized Native wisdom to authenticate new materialist claims, a move that echoes decades of New Age exploitation of Native cultural knowledge and practices. If it does not carefully attend to the ways in which it aligns indigenous traditions with its own intellectual project, material ecocriticism risks perpetuating the appropriation and misrepresentation of Native thought endemic in colonial cultures.

But despite these potential pitfalls, I resist the hasty dismissal of material ecocriticism because I believe it can be directed in ways that resist intellectual cooption. The associations made with Native traditions, when explored more critically, could bring scholars from disparate fields into conversations about land, identity, and the material world. Those who profess worldviews long held as incompatible with the paradigm of global capitalism might find new ways to address hegemonic power structures. Given present social and ecological crises and the fact that many indigenous communities face them as “frontline communities,” it is important that they have multiple tools and scholarly allies. We can hope to find in these conversations not only strategies for combatting climate change and environmental destruction, but renewed relations with one another and with the earth.

To briefly illustrate one of the connections material ecocriticism courts with Native studies, consider rocks. Whether discussing new materialisms or indigenous worldviews, people frequently cite rocks and stones as a way to explain and compare
notions of animacy and agency. Scholars too have recourse to rocks, as when Elizabeth Povinelli titled an article on Australian Aboriginal culture “Do Rocks Listen?” This particular type of matter is the one most relied on to convey or test out ways of understanding matter as dynamic, agential, or vibrant. Sure enough, rocks came up in our colloquium Q&A, with attendees considering animist traditions that discuss the spirit or souls inherent in rocks.

During that Q&A, I looked out a window in the direction of Pyramid Lake, some thirty miles northeast. Aside from the pyramidal tufa rock formation for which the lake is named, another formation called Stone Mother confounds the assumption that stone is an inert, dead substance. The version of the story available on the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe’s website, “Stone Mother,” recounts how after her quarrelsome children (who become the “Pitt-Rivers” and “Paiutes”) were separated by their father, Woman grows to miss them:

One day she decided to sit near a mountain where she could look toward Pitt River country. She sat there day after day crying. Her tears fell so fast that they formed a great lake beneath her. This became “Pyramid Lake”. She sat for so long that she turned to stone. There she remained to this day, sitting on the Eastern shore of Pyramid Lake, with her basket by her side. The “Kuyuidokado” (Pyramid Lake Paiutes/Cui-ui eaters) call her “Stone Mother”.

Stone Mother is a local example of the vitality of mineral materiality. The rock formation and the water of Pyramid Lake is “storied matter, embodying its own narratives in the minds of human agents and in the very structure of its own self-constructive forces”
(Iovino and Oppermann 83). The shape of Stone Mother, the direction she faces, and the water before her reinforce the story.

Stories of vital or soul-possessing rock and stones are popular examples for demonstrating how different indigenous traditions can be from Euro-American ones, but even for Western\(^2\) geologists and seismologists, rocks are anything but inert. Meanwhile, new materialists also invoke rock in order to interrupt materiality’s associations with inertness or nonvitality. For instance, Jane Bennett references Spinoza’s thought on the conatus of stones and also considers the liveliness of metal, a material similarly thought of as inert and solid, in order “to theorize a vitality intrinsic to materiality as such, and to detach materiality from the figures of passive, mechanistic, or divinely infused substance” (xiii). Serenella Iovino examines the porosity of the city of Naples, which “occurs at many levels, both material and semiotic, allowing transformations, metabolism, and flows of matter, energy, and information” (3). The light volcanic rock found near the city and used in much of its construction plays a major role in its porous materiality. Iovino considers the rock alongside stories of Naples in order to show how “rhythms of ‘mineralization’ and ‘catalysis’ of cities . . . are part of the ongoing morphing process that involves together organisms, structures, genes, languages or ideas” (4).

Iovino’s material ecocritical approach thus finds the materiality of Naples integral to understanding its cultural development. For both Iovino and Bennett, rocks and stones are not foundational, solid matter, but a key example for demonstrating how all matter is active and changing.

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2 Unless otherwise specified, I use “Western” as shorthand for the traditions, beliefs, or methodologies derived from Euro-American, Judeo-Christian cultures.
These new materialist ways of viewing stone show one point of convergence between themselves and Native studies. But new materialisms—contrary to the assumption hanging in the air during the Q&A I attended—are less a sophisticated improvement on ancient, “primitive” intuitions than a set of intellectual explorations that contemporary Native philosophical traditions are capable of informing and transforming.

**Ecocriticism and Native Studies: Early Pathways**

This dissertation engages late twentieth- and early twenty-first century American environmental literature using the lenses of material ecocriticism and Native studies in order to explore contemporary environmental justice activism. The literary texts demonstrate via their narratives and characters ways in which Native worldviews help mobilize coalitional environmental activism, which in turn opens these worldviews to sometimes-unanticipated connections with others. Approaching such literary activism through material ecocriticism opens the latter field (and ecocriticism more generally) to productive conversations with Native studies. The dissertation’s title plays on the term “organizing fictions” to refer both to the ontological underpinnings that shape worldviews and to the fiction that inspires environmental activism.

In this chapter, I draw out convergences between the fields of material ecocriticism and Native literary studies. First, in this section I survey the most promising ecocritical projects engaged with American Indian literature, which have guided and inspired my inquiries. Second, in the “Material Ecocriticism” section, I delineate the specific body of new materialism I use—“new materialisms” being a broad, umbrella term—the same body that predominantly influences emergent material ecocriticism.
Finally, in the “Native Projects” section, I address Native studies projects that converge with these new materialist perspectives. Bringing these areas together, I thus articulate a theoretical platform that guides my investigations in the subsequent chapters.

Considering the dynamic materiality of both Native and new materialist perspectives and the conceptions of resources and communities they furnish, the dissertation aligns with earlier projects that overlap American ecocriticism and Native studies. Joni Adamson’s *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* is one of the most significant of these works, a key example of what Adamson and Scott Slovic, in an introduction to a special issue of *MELUS*, would later term the “third wave” of ecocriticism. This wave “recognizes ethnic and national particularities and yet transcends ethnic and national boundaries; this third wave explores all facets of human experience from an environmental viewpoint” (6-7).

This multicultural emphasis appears in *American Indian Literature*. Adamson uses a multicultural environmental justice lens in order to correct for ecocriticism’s too-narrow focus on Euro-American conceptions of wilderness and conservation, conceptions that preclude other ways of understanding nature. The book explores representative texts by American Indian authors and includes narrative scholarship as Adamson shares her experiences teaching American Indian students in the Southwest. In class discussions of texts, Adamson’s students offered perspectives that helped her move away from discussions of communion with nature “to the ways in which American Indians have been stereotyped for far too long by environmentalists” (xiv). Welcoming these redirections in the classroom and sharing her students’ insights in her work, Adamson demonstrates the kind of promising dialogic approach that can occur between
ecocriticism and Native studies.

Adamson’s subtitle (The Middle Place) alludes to Richard White’s The Middle Ground. The metaphor in White’s title refers to native/settler relationships in the Great Lakes region during the seventeenth century. In a review of White’s work, Philip Deloria considers the popular adoption of the metaphor, worrying that it has led to scholarly oversimplification. Deloria sees scholars using “middle ground” to suggest compromises between groups, rather than White’s original intention for the metaphor to refer to complex processes of cultural production and exchange. Deloria notes that “middle ground” became “a kind of all-purpose tool for thinking about white-Indian interactions on the terrain of culture” (20). Deloria locates the wide adoption of “middle place” during the same period when Adamson’s book was published, and Adamson has not escaped critique for her use of the metaphor. Sebastian F. Braun, for instance, claims that she doesn’t reference White’s work despite its “obvious” use of White’s metaphor (184 n.7).

However, closer reading of Adamson’s book shows White’s metaphor is not necessarily her main influence, even if her “middle place” may echo White’s “middle ground.” Where the book does echo, it does so more faithfully than the works Deloria critiques for using the metaphor. Adamson references White less specifically than she does the emergence stories of Southwest Native peoples, particularly the Zuni Pueblo story that designates their first village as the “Middle Place” (Adamson 190 n.13). She adopts “middle place” to refer to “that contested terrain where interrelated social and environmental problems originate,” and where different people might come together for “transformative change” (xvii). Adamson’s middle place, then, is not a simplistic rendering of interaction or compromise, but rather emphasizes the very process-oriented
A major achievement of *American Indian Literature* is the way it broadens ecocriticism beyond the confines of a nature largely determined by Euro-American discourses of wilderness. Adamson uses the insights of environmental justice literature to advance American Indian writers who resist the easy separation of nature from culture, showing instead how writers produce a sense of an inhabited, living landscape. She urges critics to continue attending to these voices so that they might foster the transformative change needed to advance social and environmental justice in a multicultural world. She also shows that although ecocriticism may have a longstanding engagement with Euro-American nature writers, the field is not committed merely to their unexamined celebration. Adamson particularly denounces Edward Abbey’s denial of the presence of Native peoples in his portrayals of a wild, uninhabited American West; she further critiques his paternalism and racism where he does give them notice, as when he suggests birth control for the Navajo (45). Adamson’s observations here and her work as a whole, although proving the wider applicability of ecocriticism, also resists the perception that one can teach and study ecocriticism and environmental literature as a kind of green supplement to progressive academic discourses on race, class, and gender. Rather, Adamson’s work insists that these social categories thoroughly inhere in environmental issues and that we “ignore their connection at our critical peril” (79).

Such an environmental justice insight informs the challenge Native studies poses for ecocriticism. The field troubles facile distinctions between nature and culture and refutes the argument that social issues can be extricated from environmental ones, and does so not (only) because American Indians assert sacred connections to land. However
accurately such professed connections may describe American Indian experiences, they become explanations that many—including many ecocritics—too easily romanticize and depoliticize. A more nuanced reading attends to sociopolitical factors like ongoing treaty discourse and legacies of removal that have further entangled American Indian identity with land. Adamson shows these concerns through her environmental justice framework as well as her careful attention to place. Although, as many nature writers profess, connection to place can instill ecological sensibility, Adamson observes that connection to place “is insufficient to understand broader social and ecological processes occurring at scales that cannot be directly experienced” (71). Environmental justice approaches are better equipped to understand these more complex processes because even while they focus on people living in specific places, they also address the impact of global systems of production and exchange.

Lee Schweninger’s *Listening to the Land* also takes up the question of American Indian identifications with landscape in fiction. Schweninger’s project is from the outset cautious about American Indian environmentalisms. He writes that American Indian writers “do posit arguments for an American Indian land ethic on some level. At the same time they disallow any simplistic, reductive, or stereotypical readings of American Indian cultures or beliefs” (10). Schweninger’s study is not specifically ecocritical, but he is well aware of the field, giving considerable attention in his first chapter to its engagements (or lack thereof) with American Indian literature. Schweninger’s project examines American

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3 Robert Nelson’s *Place and Vision* anticipates these later works. His study “derives from the proposition, generally encoded in many Native American cultural traditions themselves, that place—in the sense of a real geophysical entity—matters, that ‘life’ is a ‘property’ of the land as well as of the forms occupying it” (3). His literary criticism, focusing on N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko, and James Welch, does not employ the same environmental justice frameworks as Adamson and Schweninger.
Indian writing over the past century, offering an array of views on land connections. He permits the dissonance that arises as these various writers express environmental consciousness differently, thereby refusing the easy generalization encouraged by the stereotype of the ecological Indian while nonetheless affirming the persistence and relevance of “a contemporary American Indian land ethic” (15).

Although Adamson and Schweninger’s projects each demonstrate productive exchanges of American Indian and environmental literary criticism, they are on a short list of scholars to extensively engage both fields. One reason for this dearth of scholarship could be the assumption that ecocriticism privileges Euro-American writers, many who have been coolly received in Native literary studies. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s essay “Why I Can’t Read Wallace Stegner,” for instance, points out how Stegner’s nativist rhetoric glorifies histories of westward expansion by the United States while erasing Native belonging to the land. Cook-Lynn writes that “the subject of what Stegner imagines becomes believable to everyone except those who have had thousands of years of prior knowledge of that same world and environment and imagined it on their own very different terms” (30). Granted, ecocriticism has a strong association with Euro-American writers, but it is also true that the field has expanded globally. Not all ecocritics share the backgrounds or worldviews of the writers they study, and many critique rather than espouse writers’ perspectives on land, while also seeking non-Western conceptual platforms on which to build ecological critiques.

Indeed, some scholars have asserted a keen affiliation between Native worldviews and ecocriticism, such as Donelle Dreese, who writes, “American Indian philosophies have made a vital impact on the development of ecocriticism” (6). Key to these
similarities is the notion of interconnection; Dreese finds that “much like some American Indian philosophies, [ecocriticism] promotes and teaches the interdependence and connectedness of all living things” (8). Mita Bannerjee finds that “the discourse of contemporary ecocriticism, both academic and political, may be at its best where it takes its native antecedents seriously, and where it refuses to view them as antecedents, stressing and exploring instead native contemporaneity” (225-26). Both scholars stress the influence of Native worldviews on ecocriticism and call for continued dialogue, which is crucial if these claims are to hold weight.

What projects best represent this dialogue? Material ecocriticism, because it reshuffles dominant philosophical foundations of critical engagement, offers potential alliances with Native studies, which offers its own fair amount of reshuffling as it calls into question the presumptions of settler colonialism and offers a space for criticism that operates from specific tribal worldviews. Another opportunity for dialogue arises with the current expansion of global indigenous movements. These movements employ collective indigenous identity as a position from which to campaign against colonial and environmental abuses, representing what Ronald Niezen calls “indigenism” or “the international movement that aspires to promote and protect the rights of the world’s ‘first peoples’” (4). A global, collective indigenous identity provides a new platform for advancing viewpoints. Ecocritical projects can study these contemporary movements, observing the literary tropes they draw on and using material ecocriticism to consider how they interweave materiality and political agency. At the same time, simply comparing Native worldviews with new materialism or related philosophical perspectives without considering sociopolitical and historical legacies that inflect these views risks
Organizing Fictions considers how these varied worldviews support ongoing resistance and activist organizing, working with the potential of these recent scholarly developments while also trying to delineate hazards. Like Adamson’s work, it questions the idea of a “middle ground” between ecocriticism and Native studies by trying to identify a critical space in which both operate. These fields of study often trace similar themes—North American ecology, sustainability, stories about land and connections to place among them. Ecology is especially relevant, first, because contemporary Native identity and the colonial regimes influencing them are tied to environments; second, because ecocriticism asks how representations of nature influence environmental policy, while Native studies also examines how Native cultures inform tribal environmental policies and land management; and third, because both Native studies and ecocriticism share commitments to environmental justice.

Ecology is an important and influential shared space, but it has also raised controversy over how legitimately and capably humanities scholars can refer to an area beyond their disciplinary purview. Dana Phillips’s The Truth of Ecology raises this question, warning against the appropriations of ecological tenets by literary critics, especially when ecology is itself an imprecise field. Ecocriticism isn’t the only field to draw on ecology. In Native studies, the longstanding trope of the ecological Indian has generated much debate. Scholars continue to dispute Shepard Krech’s Ecological Indian: Myth and History alongside more recent discussion of the proliferating category of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), questioning the efficacy of this category and the political motivations that undergird its reference and use. Ecology is anything but a stable
concept to be imported into either Native studies or ecocritical discourse.

Ecological discussions also run the danger of reinforcing the dichotomy between nature and culture and generalizations about each. Sebastian F. Braun writes that ecocritical approaches to Native literature constantly reiterate generalized differences. Braun warns against inferring too much about culture from literature: “Not everybody in a given society writes, and of those who do, not everybody writes about the environment” (177). He faults Adamson (and Dreese, and ecocriticism generally) for perpetuating the idea of literature as cultural representation while spurning non-literary anthropological investigations. This dissertation does not dismiss anthropology—indeed, the ideas of anthropologists such as Keith Basso and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro have strongly influenced my own thinking, and I strive to learn from its complicated disciplinary past. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s Decolonizing Methodologies reminds academics, “research” is “a significant site of struggle” (2), with negative connotations for many indigenous communities. Improving this situation requires the involvement of community members and prioritizing the communities’ needs and uses for research. Though I heed Braun’s observation that literature cannot represent the totality of a culture, literatures do belong to cultures and play important roles in the directions that they take. For instance, indigenous communities draw on stories and traditional philosophies in order to stand against colonization and new challenges of global warming.

Not sharing Braun’s suspicion that literary studies are a dubious form of cultural inquiry, I maintain that ecocriticism can enter into productive dialogue with Native studies. I find the developments of the material turn inspiring in this endeavor, particularly as they manifest within the emerging subfield of material ecocriticism.
Recognizing the prolific range of reappraisals of materiality in critical theory, I will next delineate the particular trajectories that influence this project. Tracing a genealogy of material ecocriticism will also emphasize certain theoretical concepts that most resonate with Native studies projects.

**Material Ecocriticism: Forays and Frictions**

Although the term “material ecocriticism” appears in ecocritical publications only in the last few years, it has already earned a strong foothold in the field. Indeed, its widespread popularity prompted Scott Slovic to claim that this material turn “may well represent a new ‘fourth wave of ecocriticism’” (619). This potential wave comes after the third wave that Slovic and Joni Adamson announced and with which Adamson’s own work aligns. While I share the conviction of the significance of the material turn’s influence in ecocriticism, I hesitate to assert the arrival of a fourth wave, uncertain of the utility of the metaphor after three iterations and cognizant of the critique that it promotes a false sense of succession. It also seems that, however new the critical terms or references, some of the concerns and inquiries of material ecocriticism retrace those presented at the incipience of ecocriticism. 4 Given these issues, in this section I elucidate those particular aspects and influences on the emergent material ecocriticism that I find particularly significant, as well as the potential limits of the field. I also focus on two theorists whose work is crucial to this dissertation: Karen Barad, one of the most-cited new materialists, and Vicki Kirby, who in her analysis of language offers insights particularly tailored to the literary focus of ecocritics.

Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann first formulated “material ecocriticism” in 2012 in the ecocritical journals ISLE and Ecozon@. They cite a vast range of influences for the material turn that spans the humanities. Oppermann’s particular expertise in continental philosophy and postmodern critical theory led her to attribute Deleuze’s concept of the rhizome to ecocriticism. She asserts that ecocriticism demonstrates its own rhizomatic trajectory (a nice metaphor not least for its botanical connotations), demonstrating that “if the various developments in ecocriticism are unified neither by a common object nor by a single theoretical language, they can, however, still be viewed as participating in a shared intellectual attitude” (18). The rhizomatic trajectory thus refigures methodological imprecision as wide-reaching potential for projects and scholarly affinities. As Oppermann champions the rhizome as a metaphor for the branching network of an evolving ecocriticism, the rhizome equally serves to describe material ecocriticism’s diffuse associations and alignments. My own allegiances with materially oriented ecocriticism remain close to the recent feminist and science studies scholarship that Iovino and Oppermann repeatedly mention.5

The material turn is foremost determined to assert that matter is not comprised of inert, discrete objects but rather of dynamic, vital phenomena. The collection Material Feminisms (2008), which confronts feminism’s aversion to materiality, well represents this conceptual shift. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman note in their introduction that “postmodernism has not fulfilled its promise as a theoretical grounding for feminism” and that more productive work could be done by “attempting to move beyond discursive

5 Other types of new materialism include non-representational geography, speculative realism, and object-oriented ontology; ecocritic Timothy Morton pursues the latter.
construction and grapple with materiality” (2). However, Alaimo and Hekman carefully affirm that this move is not a turning away from preceding postmodernist or poststructuralist theories, but rather an attempt “to build on rather than abandon the lessons learned in the linguistic turn” (2). The point is important to underscore, lest new materialist arguments hastily position themselves as transcending poststructuralism. Perhaps eager for the newness of new materialisms, few at first engaged new materialisms with deconstruction and other poststructuralist theories. Ecocritics, trained as literary scholars in structuralism and poststructuralism, are well positioned to fulfill Alaimo and Hekman’s call of developing rather than abandoning the theoretical developments of the linguistic turn.

*Material Feminisms* includes many core influences for later material ecocriticism, including Karen Barad. Barad’s contribution to the collection distilled some of her scholarship from *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, published a year before in 2007. An insightful work, *Meeting* draws on Barad’s background in theoretical particle physics and feminist studies to outline her philosophy of agential realism, an “ethico-onto-epistemology” (185) presenting the world as comprised of *intra-actions* of entangled phenomena rather than *interactions* of discrete objects. For Barad, agential realism asserts that the “world is a dynamic process of intra-activity and materialization in the enactment of determinate causal structures with determinate boundaries, properties, meanings, and marks on bodies” (140). Agential realism is not, then, an ethereal metaphysics in which everything is infinitely malleable; rather, it explains how fundamental intra-acting phenomena produce fixed, determined, or local resolutions, effecting the sense of separate entities.
Agential realism’s insistence on the co-constitution of the material and the discursive through intra-acting phenomena grew from Barad’s considerations of Niels Bohr’s concept of complementarity, which differs from the better-known uncertainty principle of Heisenberg. If uncertainty says that we cannot know both position and momentum of a particle, complementarity suggests that such properties are never just given to begin with. That is, Bohr’s ontological rejoinder to Heisenberg’s epistemology demands accounting for the ways in which scientific measurement and experimentation is part of the world it observes. Complementarity informs agential realist understanding that reality is composed “not of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but of things-in-phenomena” (140). Barad elaborates her theory with a host of concepts—“apparatuses,” “agential cuts,” and “entanglements” are some of the most prominent—in order to trace out agential realism’s radical refiguring of notions like agency, causality, and materiality. These ideas trouble the separation of the material (or natural) from the discursive (or cultural) and strongly insist that neither category is prior to the other.

Agential realism offers an epistemological-ontological-ethical framework that provides an understanding of the role of the human and nonhuman, material and discursive, and natural and cultural factors in scientific and other social-material practices, thereby moving such considerations beyond well-worn debates that pit constructivism against realism, agency against structure, and idealism against materialism. (26)

As the above quote shows, agential realism offers useful insights into the longstanding ecocritical investigation of the nature/culture binary. Developing new materialism,
agent realism draws on physics experiments that trouble any easy distinction between the two sides of this binary. I will return to Barad to present her methodological insights after tracing out the rest of the new materialist trajectory that informs my understanding of material ecocriticism.

Barad demonstrates the potential for new materialist frameworks to foster interdisciplinary studies by modeling how scientific insights from physics can produce new meanings for philosophy. Stacy Alaimo, another contributor and coeditor for the Material Feminisms collection, brings these developments more directly to ecocriticism. Barad’s agential realism influenced Alaimo’s Bodily Natures. Alaimo also presented ecocritics with “trans-corporeality,” which has proven a popular, productive concept. Trans-corporeality underscores the fact that human bodies interpenetrate with their environments and that this permeability transcends supposed divides between natural and cultural phenomena. Trans-corporeality helps apprehend the subtle ways that biological or ecological systems entangle with social and political ones. Drawing on multiple disciplines to make these claims, trans-corporeality becomes “a theoretical site . . . where corporeal theories, environmental theories, and science studies meet and mingle in productive ways” (3). Alaimo uses this concept to investigate novels, memoirs, poetry, and film; thus, her attention to literature and the new materialisms provided an example of material ecocriticism avant la lettre and inspiration for its later development.

It was not until Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann proposed the term “material ecocriticism” that new materialist thinking was applied to ecocriticism in an explicit, sustained manner. Iovino and Oppermann were well positioned to mark material ecocriticism’s emergence because they were already steeped in critical theories
undergoing the material turn. For example, Oppermann had previously been arguing for ecocriticism’s rapprochement with theory; specifically, she advanced the potential for an ecological postmodernism to offer useful new ways to think about nature in an era of late capitalism and globalization, as a way to “re-enchant” the world (“Rethinking” 39).

Oppermann affirmed that theory belongs in ecocriticism, taking sides in a noted if waning debate in the field. The tensions over the place and relevance of theory marked the early development of ecocriticism—one need look no further than the theory/anti-theory row between Simon C. Estok and S. K. Robisch in volume 16 of ISLE—but the debate has resolved in Oppermann’s favor: ecocritical journals, collections, and conferences present no shortage of theoretical engagement. The ascendant popularity of material ecocriticism further testifies to the willingness of ecocritics to also be ecotheorists.6

In their sketch of material ecocriticism’s emergence, Iovino and Oppermann trace a route similar to the one I have presented above through feminist science studies. They too find material feminisms a “determining moment” for the field (76). In keeping with Oppermann’s attentiveness to rhizomes, their article helpfully references many of the other influences and disciplinary forays for the material turn. Iovino and Oppermann build on the ways these ideas reform notions of matter, agency, and causality; they posit how entanglements of matter and meaning occur in literature and storytelling. Barad’s agential realism is a presiding influence in their work, cited frequently in the Ecozon@ and ISLE articles.

To incorporate new materialist insights into material ecocriticism, Iovino and

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6 Some thirty-two paper titles from the 2013 ASLE conference program suggested new materialist theories.
Oppermann acknowledge that the agency of matter produces narratives and that these “narrative agencies” come together to shape “onto-tales” of matter. These concepts draw on the mutual constitution of matter and meaning. They also imply a wider range of “texts” that can be read and interpreted. If cultural studies greatly expanded the category of “text” to include film and other media, material ecocriticism may have exploded it: there are onto-tales in weather patterns, resource extraction and material production, cityscapes, migrations, and gene sequencing. In their Ecozon@ article, Iovino and Oppermann suggest how to read such narratives. Looking at these material forces and objects, scholars can observe how “matter itself becomes a text where dynamics of ‘diffuse’ agency and non-linear causality are inscribed and produced” (79-80); matter becomes a “site of narrativity” that critics can examine (83). This leads to the decentering of the human as privileged meaning-makers and finds new roles for reading practices in increasingly posthuman academic scholarship.7

Despite its enthusiastic reception, material ecocriticism remains a young field, and it remains to be seen how ecocritics will adopt, adapt, or dismiss it. My own approach has affinities with Iovino and Oppermann’s definition while testing out extensions or modifications. Given my enthusiasm for materialist theories and my allegiances to ecocriticism, I want to see material ecocriticism grow, though I am also cautious about...

7 I refer to “posthuman” as a helpful way to think about the disintegration of preceding and discriminatory conceptions of the human. Rosi Braidotti provides a helpful definition of the posthuman as “the historical moment that marks the end of the opposition between Humanism and anti-humanism and traces a different discursive framework, looking towards new alternatives” (37). This is a moment in which “contemporary science and biotechnologies affect the very fibre and structure of the living and have altered dramatically our understanding of what counts as the basic frame of reference for the human today” (40) Braidotti’s conception of the posthuman is clearly in line with new materialisms, given that she finds “the common denominator for the posthuman condition is an assumption about the vital, self-organizing and yet non-naturalistic structure of living matter itself” (2).
how it might continue to cohere. At this early period, I see several stumbling blocks, which I trace here and for which my project as a whole—situated among ecocriticism and Native studies—strives to account.

The first, perhaps most basic issue has to do with the jargon that attaches itself to the new materialisms. In addition to driving scholars away (especially more theory-suspicious ecocritics), the complexity in some of these concepts is multiplied by the translational difficulties in their interdisciplinary applications. As new materialist developments emerge from science studies, philosophy, natural sciences, geography, and other fields, the terms employed can be misunderstood. A prime example here is “materialism” itself, which many literary critics may quickly associate with cultural materialism or Marxist criticism. While these areas can influence new materialist readings, it is also true that materialism has allegiances with earlier traditions (e.g., vitalism, animism, the works of Spinoza).

Materialism aside, the need for additional terms (e.g., object-oriented ontology, agential realism, trans-corporeality) to account for how matter works generates more jargon. Take, for instance, Barad’s dense if dazzling Meeting the Universe Halfway, which needs to carefully state and restate its points in order to work against the prevailing ontological assumptions tied to the language she uses. Barad continually resists terms that rely on subject/object distinctions, a daunting task that quickly convolutes her writing. It can be difficult to maintain this style of writing—let alone read it—and readers should forgive new materialists when they occasionally slip back into old usages, as when Iovino and Opperman say matter “possesses agency” (77); a more accurate verb might be “enacts,” because it conveys that agency is an expression of vital materiality, whereas
“possesses” suggests that agency is an object that may be possessed and wielded by other material objects (and that these latter objects have consciousness in doing so).

The proliferation of new terms might be attributed to the field’s youth, but it can be especially distracting for literary critics attentive to language. Additionally, it would not be surprising for ecocritics to ask whether the term “material ecocriticism” isn’t pointlessly redundant, given that even the earliest definition of ecocriticism, “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii), already capably emphasized materiality and its prevailing concern with the nature/culture binary. While I would like to see ecocriticism as thoroughly materialist in itself, it nevertheless makes sense to append the modifier “material” to this subfield to indicate its intellectual influences and traditions. In turning criticism towards physical environments and matter, new materialisms share the commitments of ecocriticism that seeks to effect beneficial ecological awareness and change in the world.

Or perhaps this is all too utopian. The optimism of material ecocriticism may also threaten to undermine it. I would like to see material ecocriticism flourish, but not by making promises it cannot keep. For example, it is perhaps a misstep to assert that “all material entities, even atoms and subatomic particles have some degree of sentient experience” (Iovino and Oppermann 78) without thoroughly explaining what sentience means. New materialisms are replete with counterintuitive and worldview-shaking suppositions, but without vigilance this work could dissolve into pseudoscientific fantasy, perpetuating mystifications akin to the sort New Age spiritualists commit with quantum physics. Instead of inviting interdisciplinary conversations with physicists, it might preclude them altogether. Like many cultural critics, I find nondualist thinking and
deconstructing binaries appealing, yet I am highly suspicious of those enterprises that herald it too loudly. I am thus suspicious of the assertion that material ecocriticism provides “the essential step toward a posthuman vision that will liberate us from oppressive and dualistic visions” (Iovino and Oppermann 88). The tone here seems to be setting up readers for disappointment, since binaries are an abiding technique of human reasoning, not automatically pernicious or oppressive, and not likely to be dismissed from cognitive functioning anytime soon.

More significantly, I’m skeptical of the ability to produce nondualist visions by discussing nondualism or merely praising their deconstruction. Eve K. Sedgwick reminds us that “it’s far easier to deprecate the confounding, tendentious effects of binary modes of thinking—and to expose their often stultifying perseverance—than it is to articulate or model other structures of thought. Even to invoke nondualism, as plenty of Buddhist sutras point out, is to tumble right into a dualistic trap” (2). The more we move away from binaries, the more they stick to us or the closer we get to reinstating them. Additionally, nondualism as liberation poses dangers via the oppressions we might overlook. A materialist reading might instead acknowledge the operation of binary thought and categories in a material-discursive world, willing to engage them as they emerge through material and discursive actions. Promoting nondualism isn’t so much a matter of purging binaries as it is acknowledging their operation and not being ignorant to their presence and influence in the very terms we employ to get around them (e.g., “naturecultures,” “material-discursive”).

As a final concern, even though material ecocriticism emphasizes narrative agencies of matter as an ongoing process of the meaning-mattering of materiality and
story, there nonetheless seems to be an emphasis on the putatively “nonhuman.” That is, humans seem to drop out of the picture. Losing sight of the human might be necessary for recalibrating our attention to the ways in which matter and nonhumans exhibit vitality and agency; however, unless we also emphasize human actors, we only invert the current anthropocentric hierarchy. By describing posthumanist agency, we can better understand ourselves as part of the world, but such descriptions may also risk reinscribing the human-nonhuman dichotomy. Material ecocriticism can analyze narratives in which objects and matter have strange vitality, agency, or sentience as a good starting point, but relying too narrowly on this approach also subtly reaffirms nonhuman objects as a discrete category. What other ways of looking at matter can be used? How to better dissolve the subject/object distinction, and to what end? To sort through such quandaries, anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism can come to our aid, provided they are divorced from their longstanding associations with speciesist privilege. Anthropocentrism, in the weak sense, can serve us not as a self-evident fact but as a useful position. Likewise, anthropomorphism need not be castigated as delusionary, but can be acknowledged as a pragmatic way to engage the matter and beings already in relation to us.

Let me slow down here, as questioning these human prerogatives evoke the larger motivations of my project. Combining these fraught aspects of material ecocriticism reveals the major problem I posit. When scholars explain how new materialisms reappraise post-Enlightenment Western worldviews and celebrate the natural world as thoroughly invested with sentient beings, they might be tempted to align them with non-Western, so-called “premodern” ways of thinking. As I show below, there are many Native scholars and intellectuals working with projects that harmonize with new
materialisms, but non-Native scholars must be careful, in reading them together, not to read them as identical, or to use Native beliefs as exotic worldviews whose ideas they engage or discuss only as reflections of their own.

Such tendencies speak to the ongoing legacies of the noble savage and the ecological Indian. In *Playing Indian*, Philip Deloria explains how Anglo-Americans have used tropes of American Indians to help constitute authentic identities in opposition to European sociopolitical institutions; Braun similarly argues that Western academics have used Native worldviews as mirrors. Meanwhile, whether material ecocritics perpetuate ecological Indian discourse or deconstruct it, actual Native connections to land (and their motivations and purposes) are ignored. If material ecocritics are to legitimately claim that material ecocriticism and related movements are in league with indigenous worldviews, they must include Native scholars. This inclusion may not be easily accomplished, and the prospect of such conversation may not seem as momentous as the promise to dismantle all dualisms, but I think it a responsible and exciting direction for material ecocriticism to take.

From which of its own theoretical influences might material ecocriticism draw in order to be more inclusive? Karen Barad, in addition to offering many conceptual ideas for the field, presents a compelling methodological model inspired by the process of diffraction. Barad attributes her own diffractive methodology to Donna Haraway, who originally proposed it. Both versions employ diffraction as a useful alternative to critical stances of reflexivity, reflection, and representationalism. However, diffraction departs from reflection and reflexivity by emphasizing the way differences are produced. Reflection posits sameness, while diffraction patterns emerge via the superimposition of
different waves (imagine the ripples that coalesce when two pebbles are dropped alongside each other into a still pond). Barad finds that diffraction is a way to understand “the relational nature of difference; it does not figure difference as either a matter of essence or as inconsequential” (72). Differences aren’t just present in things; they emerge through processes and relations. Barad explains the complexity at work in employing diffraction, since it fluctuates between being an object of investigation and the apparatus for investigation, just as a stick can serve as an object to feel or as a tool with which to feel an object.

Like other analogies of methodologies since the Enlightenment, diffraction is an optical metaphor (and a way to explain how light operates), but unlike other visual metaphors, diffraction makes it hard to maintain a sense of separation between observer and observed. Barad writes, “Reflexivity, like reflection, still holds the world at a distance” (87); diffraction, meanwhile, resists the tendency of reflection to emphasize separate entities and homologies between them. Barad applies these observations to her methodology by refusing to engage physics and feminist philosophy as two fixed, predetermined fields. Instead, Barad writes,

[M]y method is to engage aspects of each in dynamic relationality to the other, being attentive to the iterative production of boundaries . . . the diffractive methodology that I use in thinking insights from different disciplines . . . through one another is attentive to the relational ontology that is at the core of agential realism. It does not take the boundaries of any of the objects or subjects of these studies for granted. (93)

However daunting it might be to maintain this approach, diffractive methodologies seem
the only way to honestly pursue a study that takes for its theoretical grounding the entangled, material-discursive reality as asserted by new materialisms.

I thus emulate Barad’s diffractive methodology by proposing to develop the conversations of ecocriticism and Native studies not as two utterly independent, separate fields, but as disciplines whose boundaries are formed and reformed in the process of conversing with one another. What emerges from reading these fields through each other, rather than keeping them separate? What are the peaks and troughs of their superimposition? And how does this approach entail a more relational, response-able study than does looking for similarities between material ecocriticism and Native worldviews, or vice versa?

In addition to diffraction’s usefulness in considering disciplinary formations, it can also offer insights into the practice of literary interpretation. Barad writes, “unlike methods of reading one text or set of ideas against another where one set serves as a fixed frame of reference, diffraction involves reading insights through one another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge: how differences get made, what gets excluded, and how those exclusions matter” (31). This practice is crucial for exposing moments where difference gets ignored or appropriated. The point should already make intuitive sense for literary scholars, who use language and writing both as their objects of study and as their means of analysis—reading and writing processes through each other in order to make differences in the world, they comprehend how language intra-acts with itself.

Related insights come from poststructuralist theories of language. If the introduction to Material Feminisms calls for new materialists to revisit poststructuralism,
Vicki Kirby is the scholar to have most thoroughly done so. Kirby and Barad maintain a cordial intellectual exchange and find their projects mutually reinforcing. Meanwhile, material ecocriticism tends to focus on Barad’s ideas, leaving Kirby aside except for occasional references. However, Kirby’s work on Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida is indispensable. It offers a link between material ecocriticism and wider literary criticism, and it demonstrates how new materialisms can develop rather than banish poststructuralism. For example, it is easy enough to position deconstructive thought as trapped in a linguistic system outside of materiality; less easy, but more intriguing and potentially rewarding, is the attempt to reconcile his work with new materialism.

Kirby insists on the importance of observations about language, but her especially brilliant move is to radically assert that linguistic systems, rather than belonging to a realm of culture, are thoroughly natural. She wants to get back to nature directly, and although such a move can bring along some of its own tricks and troubles, it is a refreshing and helpful way to tame anthropocentrism without losing the ability to consider language and writing (long held as a the paragon of the human). Kirby presents important ideas for material ecocritics by demonstrating how literary studies might shift towards posthumanism. For instance, Kirby’s insistence upon the naturalness of language helps explain why literature is nature. Critics who would disavow material ecocriticism because it takes material theories and applies them to narratives—instead of, say, wood pulp or ink—exhibit the wrong kind of thinking about this field, because they ignore the foundational premise that language and narrative are thoroughly material, and matter thoroughly discursive.

While other new materialists prefer Gilles Deleuze’s theories of immanence or the
intersectional observations of Bruno Latour, Vicki Kirby is among the first to extensively draw upon Derrida. Kirby asserts the applicability of Derrida’s thought to the natural sciences, so that Derrida’s famous maxim “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte” (“there is no outside to the text”) holds true for the “world” of “stuff” as much as it does for culture and language. Deconstruction belongs in biology and mathematics as much as it does in the humanities. Derrida himself suggests such belonging, but his work has been so thoroughly figured within language that it takes some reassessment by Kirby to trace it out.

Kirby points out that a closer examination of Saussurean linguistics affirms a faith in a prediscursive materiality, “that meaning has a given universal pre-existence that different languages merely capture” (Telling 17), and that however Saussure might have denied prediscursive materiality, it is continually reaffirmed by his presuppositions. Furthermore, such structuralism depends on a reliable nature/culture split that removes language from the world in all its materiality. Kirby continues to trouble Saussure’s intellectual legacy by drawing on Derrida’s critique of semiotics; she observes, “If the sign is purely ‘differential’ then it is never sufficient to itself: it is always pregnant with otherness, full with expressing its particular indebtedness” (Telling 46). This observation leads Kirby to ask, “[H]ow does the identity of the limit—or, by extension, the identities of ideality and materiality—precede the différantial process of limiting? Put simply, how does identity already precede the conditions of its emergence?” (89).

The paradoxical character of these inquiries is somewhat resolved in Kirby’s consistent assertion that we need to reevaluate the distinction between nature and culture. Elizabeth Grosz offers the helpful analogy of the Möbius strip to help demonstrate how
the cultural and the natural interpenetrate and transmute into each other. It might be tempting to say such interpenetration exists merely because all nature is culturally mediated, but we might instead take Kirby’s stance that culture is really nature. Considering the dimensionality of Derrida’s no-outside-of-text and of the nature/culture divide, she writes,

My justification for wanting to naturalize language and its productive energies rests on considering how strange this ‘inside’ of language might be. It could be likened to the way physicists negotiate the spatial demarcation of what is inside or outside the universe. . . . the provocation I am offering . . . might be to interpret ‘there is no outside of language’ as ‘there is not outside of Nature.’ What do I forfeit in doing this, and more importantly, what might I gain?” (83)

A response to this question could take many possible directions, but its provocation alone is useful because it boldly, directly addresses the omnipresent dilemma of the nature/culture dichotomy. If in pretending to dismantle binaries we inevitably reinscribe them, collapsing the binary between nature and culture or putting it under erasure as Kirby does might be a remedy. Kirby’s all-encompassing nature guards against the tempting new materialist suggestion that all scholars need do is to more equitably consider the myriad agencies of the human and the nonhuman; such a strategy troublingly maintains the distinction between the human and nonhuman as separate categories.

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8 Grosz writes, “The Möbius strip model has the advantage of showing that there can be a relation between two ‘things’—mind and body—which presumes neither their identity nor their radical disjunction, a model which shows that while there are disparate ‘things’ being related, they have the capacity to twist one into the other” (Volatile Bodies 209-10).
reflecting each other to greater or less degrees. Instead, following Kirby, we can inspect how a pervasive nature enacts itself in ways that allow the nature/culture dichotomy to appear.

Barad likewise finds diffractive methodologies capable of resisting the reinscription of nature/culture even as it is supposedly dismantled:

> In particular, this approach provides important theoretical tools needed to move conversations . . . beyond the mere acknowledgment that both material and discursive, and natural and cultural, factors play a role in knowledge production by examining how these factors work together, and how conceptions of materiality, social practice, nature, and discourse must change to accommodate their mutual involvement. (25)

I adopt diffractive methodology in response to Barad’s call here urging scholars to attend to differences rather than to make things and theories the same, capable of reflecting each other. Diffraction informs how I approach material ecocriticism and Native literary studies as dynamic, different fields, instead of simply comparing one to the other and thereby ignoring their particularities and situations in the academy and wider world.

Given the value I see in Kirby’s work, it is encouraging to note that Barad (perhaps the single greatest influence on the trajectory of material ecocriticism I trace here) continues to elaborate agential realism in her more recent work by turning to Derrida. Deconstruction, instead of an incompatible linguistic theory that cannot apprehend the new (and newly privileged) material turn, can be productively considered alongside quantum physics, biosemiotics, epigenetics, and other emergent sciences. Kirby’s *Quantum Anthropologies* shows its interdisciplinary potential with such bold
inquiries as investigating the communicative potential of lightning, and these strange new ideas are aided by parallel developments in the sciences. What at one moment might look like a linguistic theory in the next appears like a description of a scientific experiment. Kirby’s approach shows how, like Barad, she works from a position that resists a predominant way of looking at the world (namely, through the nature/culture binary).

These influences guide my theoretical and methodological approach as I strive to remain as attentive as possible to the material-discursive entangled phenomena of the world and to the fact that this entanglement includes even the ways we as scholars choose to engage these phenomena, since we also are them. Although my approach is primarily recognizable as a material ecocritical one, that “wave” is superimposed with the “wave” of Native studies to produce something new. In the next section, I will sketch my primary influences from Native studies. On the one hand, I focus on those works that seem the most related to—arguably, the most reflective of—the ways in which new materialisms view the world. On the other hand, I resist this reflection model by examining these “similar” ideas for their complexities: for their different positions in academic and other communities and their varied historical development and contributions.

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9 For a different field, consider contemporary neurobiology: Thomas Metzinger’s *Being No One* examines the “fiction” of a coherent phenomenal self as produced by the brain. His conclusion waxes philosophical, and his closing line could be taken from Kirby or a new materialist, entertaining as it does the notion that language is nature’s way of observing itself: “There is no one whose illusion the conscious self could be, no one who is confusing herself with anything [e.g., the delusion of a whole, conscious self]. As soon as the basic point has been grasped . . . one can start talking back to Mother Nature, elevating her self-conversation to a new level” (634).
Native Projects

I choose a few representative Native studies projects engaged in environmental or ecological discourses to orient my own engagements with Native studies and to counterpoise the ecocritically focused projects discussed above. There are several significant works that reach from a base in Native studies towards other areas of ecological thought. The most influential for this project include Daniel Wildcat’s *Red Alert!: Saving the Planet with Indigenous Realism* and Sean Kicummah Teuton’s *Red Land, Red Power*. Both adopt versions of philosophical realism to describe progressive Native worldviews that address both cultural marginalization and environmental crises, a helpful coincidence that also links them to *Organizing Fictions*.

*Land* is a term to which Native studies scholarship frequently returns and a central concept for many Native intellectuals working toward goals of self-determination and resurgence. As Taiaiake Alfred writes, “Now, then, and forever, the fight is for the land. The land, and all it has to teach, to give, and all it demands, is what it means to be Indigenous” (qtd. in Simpson, *Lighting 10*). As Schweninger and others are careful to examine, “land” means more than “setting”; it refers to a community of beings for many different groups, a “mutually constituting dynamic of land and identity” or “geoidentity” according to Sean Teuton (46). Indeed, Teuton’s theory of *tribal realism* is itself grounded in this idea: “I propose that we consider our identification with tribal lands . . . as the umbilicus of American Indian studies and as the epistemological grounds prepared for the growth of Native identity” (23).10

10 Similarly, Teuton received his inspiration for his book’s title, *Red Land, Red Power*, while sitting under his Cherokee clan’s ceremonial arbor: “I looked out on the ceremonial grounds and
Granted, claiming land is crucial to Native identity can be as limiting as it can be empowering, particularly when it essentializes identity or implies that diverse indigenous cultures have a unified way of approaching land. Teuton avoids overgeneralizing Native identity by insisting it be understood through the lived experience of Native peoples. This experience accounts for identity formation that “neither relies on reductive essentialism nor resorts to trickster indeterminacy” (15), neither of which serves the goals of Native scholars working for urgent political goals. For Teuton, specific material conditions determine how land is tied to identity—involving not simplistic, essentialized belonging, but ongoing histories. He delicately turns away from “trickster” conceptions of identity used by other scholars, conceptions which may help liberate Indian identity from colonial representations, but which in doing so “must support a mode of inquiry that discounts all normative knowledge about Native peoples” (84). And rather than deploying normative knowledge via essentialism or social construction, Teuton reframes identity through tribal realism, his scholarship put in the service of social and political efficacy (the sort resonant with Adamson’s middle place) and aimed at environmental justice—as Teuton writes, for “the dignity of Native peoples from all walks of life as well as for the land and its creatures” (203). This pragmatic approach thus lends itself to ecological conservation or restoration, goals often included if not always explicitly stated alongside other political endeavors. Akin to new materialist readings of identity, Teuton’s tribal realism accounts for material being and constructed identities as equal, pervasively intermingled influences, not separate or sequential ones.

suddenly realized that tribal knowledge grows from the land and the people, and the people meet to renew this relationship” (39).
Teuton’s resistance to essentialized identities fits with the work of Daniel Wildcat, a Yuchi/Muscogee scholar more directly focused on Native ecologies. In Red Alert!: Saving the Planet with Indigenous Knowledge, Daniel Wildcat builds a case for his framework of indigenous realism. Wildcat’s environmentalist goals, clear from the book’s subtitle, are particularly concerned with global warming and its connections to environmental degradation and resource extraction. Like most Native environmentalists, he is keenly aware of the sociopolitical entanglements in these issues, unlike other forms of environmentalism that might obscure or deny class or racial influences. Whatever “Native environmentalism” might mean for Wildcat, it entails environmental justice, and is increasingly global in scope. Wildcat establishes these connections in his opening lines: “I get angry when I think about global warming, or global burning, as I prefer to designate this world phenomenon. I get angry because I know the history of involuntary removals and relations indigenous peoples throughout the United States and around the world have endured” (1). Juxtaposing these two seemingly separate issues, Wildcat suggests their correlation. Wildcat explains the removal of Alaskan Natives from melting permafrost as the latest in a series of removals by colonizers and settlers. He extrapolates from these incidents a view of environmental degradation as an outcome of domineering Western colonialism and imperialism.

One might accuse Wildcat of being dualistic and reductive in ways similar to the ecocritics Braun critiques, that he posits indigenous worldviews as a mirror to hold against corrupting Western culture. Yet Wildcat resists easy cultural simplifications with his indigenous realist account of Native worldviews. Besides acknowledging that Natives, like all people, are capable of environmental degradation—“our ancestors made
mistakes throughout their history” (129)—Wildcat does not attempt to reclaim an idealized precolonial existence: “I reject the usefulness of the simplistic formulation of moving backward or forward along some abstract ideological notion of human history” (114). Such formulations produce romanticized conceptions of Native cultures and overlook “proposals to look carefully at older knowledges, ways of living, and technologies in the contexts of their environments” (113). Wildcat’s indigenous realism, like Teuton’s tribal realism with its pragmatic approach to identity, asserts the continued relevance of indigenous knowledges in contemporary contexts of global warming and Native decolonization; the development of recent movements such as Idle No More support his claims (see chapter four). Wildcat shows how current policymaking and activism are not incompatible with traditional cultures, cultures espousing ways of being that are neither lost nor guarantors of an edenic existence attuned to nature, as so much Euro-American discourse—from Rousseau to New Age mystics—take them to be. Rather, these lifeways remain vitally connected to material practices and places in the world. Indigenous realism, then, takes the instrumentalist notion that the world is filled with resources to be used and replaces it with the imperative that we must first understand those resources, which “requires respect for the relationships and relatives that constitute the complex web of life” and also requires that humans “accept our inalienable responsibilities as members of the planet’s complex life system, as well as our inalienable rights” (9).

As Wildcat’s indigenous realism posits a fundamentally relational ontology that embeds humans into inextricable relationships with land (69), and as Teuton advances tribal realism for people and land, so too does land figure as key in the Native literary
studies collections *Reasoning Together* and *American Indian Literary Nationalism*. Both works advance responsible, politically aware literary studies of American Indian literature for American Indian communities. Like Teuton and Wildcat, the collection’s contributors are largely receptive to realism as a pragmatic way to conduct scholarship that aids cultural self-determination as it dispels unproductive critiques over essentialism and hybridity.

Craig Womack, a prominent voice in both collections, especially defends this realist position. In *American Indian Literary Nationalism*, Womack warns of a split between the approaches of Native American studies and English literary studies to Native literature, with English disciplines running the risk of undermining the analytical tools and starting points of Native studies (Weaver, Womack, and Warrior 153). The work provides a sobering reminder of the political import of literary studies and of the struggles inter- or cross-disciplinary conversations may face. Encouragingly, Womack believes more supportive engagements are also possible. While pointing out the shortcomings of decontextualized, ahistorical approaches, Womack reaffirms the political realities of these works. Womack details the reductive traps that a binary between “Native” and “Western” poses for critics. Here, as elsewhere, the issue rests not so much in the descriptive accuracy of a dualist framework so much as in who gets to wield that framework, and to what ends.

Lisa Brooks’s Afterword to *American Indian Literary Nationalism* emphasizes the power of words by recounting the Vermont Supreme Court’s ruling that the aboriginal title of the Sovereign Abenaki Nation of Missisquoi to its land was no longer applicable. She reflects Womack’s call for realism by describing the potential for scholarship to be
reminiscent of conversations at kitchen tables, gatherings where many voices can be heard and where the dialogue helps maintain the integrity of inquiries and methodologies. She aligns with realist writers in noting how her students become “empowered as writers and scholars when they can rely on the political, historical, and cultural traditions of specific nations to guide their readings and their writings” (238). She remains wary of theories that cast these traditions as irrelevant or inaccessible, convinced as she is that Native literary studies can and should draw on “theoretical and epistemological models that arise from indigenous languages and literatures, as well as the many, varied, complex, and changing modes in which Native nations have operated on the ground, in particular places, over a wide expanse of time” (244). This definition echoes the variations of realism that Teuton, Wildcat, and Womack deploy, while remaining relevant to ecocritical investigations of place attachment and to new materialist acknowledgment of material-discursive co-constitution. Brooks’s explicit emphasis on land brings these discussions full circle. Like the kitchen table, the land itself becomes the source of relationality and an important facet of realist investigations.

The collection *Reasoning Together*, written by the Native Critics Collective (Acoose et al.), develops Brooks’s model of communal scholarship via its co-authorship and its editorial process (writers read drafts of each other’s articles). Relationality remains key, as in Daniel Heath Justice’s article on kinship, which foregrounds landscape as a fundamental kind of relationality: “While the land herself is of central concern to most indigenous epistemologies, we don’t know her outside of our relationship(s) to her . . . . Beyond the earth itself are our relationships with other spirit-beings and peoples, all of which depend on attentive engagement” (162-63). Reality is profoundly relational.
These relational, realist approaches in literary and cultural studies also find expressions in philosophy. The collection *American Indian Thought*, edited by Anne Waters, demonstrates how indigenous philosophy, however realist, does not escape dualistic thought; Native writers themselves claim cultural difference from Western perspectives. The collection features twenty-two articles on American Indian philosophy by American Indians, many with PhDs in philosophy; in the introduction, Waters contends that compiling the articles revealed a difference between their ideas and Western philosophy that was “more than a critique: We come to understand that American Indian philosophy embodies epistemologies and metaphysics totally different from what has become known as ‘Western’ thought” (xv).

*American Indian Thought* posits that its Native writers “live in two [philosophical] worlds” (xv), and the collection’s essays suggest potential intersections between these worlds. The contributions also show that the findings of new materialisms and material ecocriticism are not merely reflections of ancient indigenous traditions; they just as readily evoke contemporary indigenous thought, an ongoing discourse of the world in conversation with itself, cut and folded apart in differences that matter. A diffractive approach reads Native philosophies and new materialisms through each other for positionalities, folds, and waves that intimate difference without absolute separation.

Several of the contributors’ articles strongly coincide with the material turn, presenting radical alternatives to scientific determinism and objectivity. These writers demonstrate intercultural conversation, blending tribal worldviews with European philosophy. They also draw on several of the same scientific developments as new
materialists. For Burkhart, Cajete, and other contributors, relationality remains the key to understanding how Native worldviews operate, functioning as the basis for developing Native philosophies. In Burkhart’s chapter, Coyote’s missteps reveal the importance of interrelatedness and that “how we act is not merely a response to stimuli. . . . [W]e participate in the meaning making of the world” (16); meanwhile, Cajete observes, “We cannot help but participate” as “active entities” (“Philosophy” 50). As Wildcat and the Native literary scholars above present in their versions of realism, Burkhart and Cajete underscore that the world and our knowledge of it is constituted by principles of relation between active participants.

More than any other term, analogy, or framework, then, relationality seems the single best way to align these voices and perceive diffraction. A strong resonance builds between the interrelatedness of ecology, the relationality of Native perspectives, and the relational ontologies of the new materialisms.

From the dissonance and confusion produced by the binaries between dualism/nondualism and Euro-American/Native, it seems the best way to proceed is in an open manner, not too daunted by contradiction or holding too fast to any one perspective. Cross-cultural projects require more than exposing the construction of categories; they require accounting for the lived effects and experiences they produce. Going past the superficial associations we make between philosophical traditions and cultures opens the conversation and offers larger opportunities for intellectual and cultural exchange. The

11 For instance, Gregory Cajete writes, “Today, with the creative influence of chaos theory and quantum physics, a new scientific cultural metaphor has begun to take hold. The insights of this new science parallel the vision of the world long held in Indigenous spiritual traditions” (“Philosophy” 56).
process demands seeking out the voices of those we reference; it demands working with and through the dualisms and divisions we find, rather than asserting they can be overcome or that they are unalterable and permanent. Such dialogue also sets the ground for more coalitions and collective action against environmental injustice and the degradation of the systems that have sustained life on this planet for hundreds of millions of years. Examining these different worldviews and the identities formed through them is the heart of Organizing Fictions.

Chapter Outlines

The following three chapters, grouped under the presiding images of land, water, and community, examine a range of cultural and literary texts depicting environmental justice organizing and activism. These texts also help illustrate the theories and concerns of material ecocriticism. Chapter two looks at demarcations of place for the way land and human identity co-constitute; chapter three considers conceptions of environmental resources and environmental organizing against resource extraction, focusing on recent mining projects in the Great Lakes region of the Upper Midwest; chapter four examines how prophecies in Native ontologies bear on current environmental coalitions between Native and non-Native peoples. This structure helps elucidate how “organizing” landscapes relates to the organizing of resource extraction as well as the organizing of people concerned about environmental degradation. It also maintains a critical interest in the ways materiality, as conceived within Western and American Indian ontologies, plays into such discourse.

Chapter two, “Bodies of Land: Entanglements of Place and Personhood,”
commences literary analysis focused on land claims and belonging in fiction. American Indian fiction and scholarship consistently foregrounds these concerns. The inextricability of land from land rights, of place from politics, and of matter from meaning lends itself to material ecocritical approaches. In addition to notions that humans claim, own, inhabit, or are removed from land, this chapter shows more dynamic intra-actions of these supposed subjects and objects. At the same time, an environmental justice frame refuses to allow this broader conception of agency to efface colonial violence or culpability. Material ecocritical definitions of agency should prevent such reductive readings, working instead to deepen understandings of complex events, to rework temporalities and causalities that limit such understandings, and to broaden spheres of ethical concern.

This second chapter’s discussion of land issues thus necessitates discussion of boundaries, in particular, the reservation lines demarcating the spaces between Native nations and the United States and Canada. Louise Erdrich’s most recent novels, *The Plague of Doves* and *The Round House*, are two works that bring the reservation line sharply into focus, showing how spatial divides affect land and human bodies. Erdrich’s novels further demonstrate how these spatial borders influence identity formation and inform bioregional discussions of landscape. Their lyricism also invites an elaboration of the “realisms” discussed in this chapter. Meanwhile, Winona LaDuke’s novel *Last Standing Woman* recounts seven generations of life on the White Earth Reservation, and the materiality of the place informs the identities of the Anishinaabeg who live there and those who have moved elsewhere. Erdrich’s books arrive at environmental justice in less direct ways than does the work of LaDuke, but comparing these two Anishinaabe authors
shows their shared concerns for people and place.

Chapter three, “Bodies of Water: Resource Extraction Makes Waves,” moves on from delineations of place in order to consider the competing ideas of matter as resource versus matter as relative. Resource extraction depends on conceiving matter as inexpressive and wholly subject to human agency, while many indigenous environmental justice movements stress connections to vital, living matter. Material ecocriticism likewise stresses the importance of relationality. Chapter three focuses in particular on water as resource versus water as relative, considering conflicts between resource extraction and water conservation in the Upper Midwest as revealed in activist blogs and literary collections authored by local residents. A new materialist influence for this chapter on resources is Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*, which contributes to political theory especially in terms of distributed agency. Bennett’s insights are here enlisted to further resist extractivist mindsets dependent on notions of inert, discrete matter in order to conceive of the utility of environmental resources. To complement these perspectives, the chapter also demonstrates the roles water plays in relationships with human characters in Linda Hogan’s novel *Solar Storms*.

These chapters on environmental justice struggles for land and water intimate the relevance of another concept—community. Chapter four, “Collective Bodies: Envisioning Communities through Prophecy and Coalitional Activism,” addresses community by examines trans-cultural community building; this sense of community is moreover a *posthumanist* one, including other-than-human beings and echoing Aldo Leopold’s land ethic as well as multiple American Indian perspectives that include nonhuman beings in the scope of “all our relations.” These worldviews convey not just knowledge, but ethics,
informing how communities should inhabit places. They influence the environmental justice struggles outlined in previous chapters, inspiring and empowering communities to speak out against environmental degradation. Unique to several American Indian conceptions of community are prophecies that mobilize action for both fictional and actual Native activist groups, which this chapter argues using Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* and the collection *The Winter We Danced*. Prophecy serves as a rhetorical force that motivates groups, as when it galvanized the movement Idle No More by supporting and sustaining its political appeals. Prophecy can also promote more egalitarian connections between groups, promising reconciliation and gathering as humans, as a species and as part of a larger planetary community of life, face the threats of climate change and others posed by the “Destroyers,” to use Silko’s terminology.

The conclusion, “The Future of Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Environmental Justice Struggles,” draws together the land-water-community focus by arguing that Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass* performs dialogue between knowledge systems while underscoring the vitality of matter.

Overall, *Organizing Fictions* encourages disparate intellectual and activist groups to continue to pursue dialogue by listening and by producing art and criticism that nourishes and protects our bodies, land, and water. It continually asserts that matter matters in these discussions; the notion that nature can be easily separated out from culture is an illusory one. Instead, the ways in which we organize our identities and our worldviews are material acts, part of a world of dynamic, active materiality.
Chapter Two

Bodies of Land: Entanglements of Place and Personhood

This chapter applies material ecocriticism to several novels in order to interpret their presentation of land, which along with many ecocritics I read as more than setting or backdrop; land is entangled with identity and plays active roles in the stories that constitute those identities. The authors I consider, Louise Erdrich and Winona LaDuke, depict these entanglements with particular focus on the borders drawn on their homelands between nations and as a result of the U.S. reservation system. Both authors show how the borders that contain and constitute human identities blend with those that are marked on landscapes. These images help delineate further the tensions and opportunities at stake in the diffraction of ecocriticism and Native studies.

When waves diffract, they produce interference patterns from their merging amplitudes that result in both constructive and destructive areas. Similarly, an interference pattern occurs when bringing Native writers describing reservations together with ecocritical and new materialist critical approaches attuned to landscapes. The pattern that emerges shows peaks (points of agreement or amplification between fields) and troughs (points of dissension) that encourage new insights. One important peak is the acknowledgment that land lives. The vitality of land recurs in Native, new materialist, and ecocritical (especially bioregionalist) thinking. Landscapes play active roles that

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1 I use the term “landscape” to refer to particular sites or regions of land, but deliberately against connotations of it as a bounded area cut off from the viewer; As Leslie Marmon Silko has observed, “the term landscape, as it has entered the English language, is misleading” insofar as it suggests this separation (“Interior” 27).
involve the actions of humans and others but are not reducible to them. One role is communicative: stories, language, and meaning inhere in landscapes. We humans are more ourselves when we engage landscapes by attuning to these connections and to the conversations our bodies have with land.

A major trough is the potential foreclosure of political issues by oversimplified readings of identification with land. For example, a bioregionalist ethic that eschews political boundaries while advocating for “reinhabiting” land may be ill equipped to address the ongoing struggles of those Native peoples who also inhabit or have ancestral ties to a given place. Reconciling the desire to “become native to place” with settler colonialism is difficult; the phrase itself takes on a nefarious tone when expressed in ignorance of contemporary Native land claims. Likewise, new materialist approaches to landscapes should be evaluated for how productively they trouble colonialist legacies. Freya Mathews, a philosopher whose version of panpsychism has been favorably adopted by other new materialists, acknowledges the colonial legacies in Australia.² Her first book on panpsychism, For Love of Matter, asks, “Where are those who could adaptively render insights revived from inspirational traditions, such as those of aboriginal peoples, into a truly contemporary idiom, while also warning of the ways in which exotic imports and inventions can become Trojan horses for old, endemic, reactionary habits of thought and fundamentalist proclivities?” (7). There may be no single extant group able to fulfill Mathews’s desire; instead, the collective dialogue of multiple groups—including

² In Reinhabiting Reality, Mathews considers hindrances to adopting a panpsychist “nativism” in Australia: “To become native thus requires that we acknowledge the entire history of colonization, opening ourselves to all the regret and preparedness to compensate that such acknowledgment entrains” (74). Her new materialist panpsychism grants interiority and a communicative capacity to all matter.
Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders—could help create useful tools and strategies for engaging with their home landscapes.

Looking at this interference pattern of peaks and troughs, new insights emerge. When we diffract material ecocriticism with Native fiction and philosophy, we see that drawing lines on the land is drawing lines on ourselves, in the sense that borders affect the lives of people, but also because “land” is vitally entangled with human lives. However we might isolate such complicated networks of relation into geological, biological, and historical categories, their enmeshment and vitality are consistently recognized in both new materialist and Native philosophies.

Both authors in this chapter demonstrate their awareness of land-human relations with a particular emphasis on reservation spaces. Reservations have conflicting meanings for several of their characters. While they are enactments and reminders of colonial injustice, some reservations also exist on tribal homelands that preceded Euro-American contact, and can serve as sites of revitalization. Not intending to ignore the historical specificities of different reservations and their roles among different American Indian nations, I nonetheless find that abstracting the concept of reservation for literary contexts can be illuminating. The “rez” looms large in the imaginations and lives of many writers, Native and non-Native alike, signifying on the one hand decreased space, forced containment and loss, and limited opportunities, but on the other hand signifying endurance, resistance, and hope. Both Louise Erdrich and Winona LaDuke partake in such ambivalent depictions, showing the dire situations on Anishinaabe reservations while at the same time clearly portraying them as home centers that nurture Native identity and culture.
Identity formation also operates by using boundaries, as Louise Erdrich’s fiction emphasizes. Critics consistently note the ways she traces and crosses boundaries as she explores the idea of Native belonging and experiments with formal textual strategies. Erdrich continues with these themes in *The Plague of Doves* and *The Round House*. *The Plague of Doves* explores narrative boundaries and their transgression by telling a multi-generational story about a particular reservation and a nearby North Dakotan town. Erdrich’s reservation (unnamed until the publication of her seventh novel, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*) is one of the connecting strands of her oeuvre, itself becoming a character and garnering critical comparisons to Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County. Little No Horse is located in North Dakota near the U.S.-Canada border, as is Erdrich’s own Turtle Mountain Reservation, though she is clear in her Author’s Note to *Last Report* that the reservation is not intended to represent Turtle Mountain.

While *The Plague of Doves* features several narrators braiding stories together into its multi-generational plot, the plot of *The Round House* focuses on the rape of Geraldine, an Ojibwe tribal clerk, and the subsequent search for justice by her husband, a tribal lawyer, and son Joe, the narrator. Erdrich uses this plot to dramatize the very real issue of disproportionate incidents of sexual assault on reservations as well as the inadequacies of extant legal systems caught between tribal, state, and federal governments. These jurisdictional disputes also reveal the subtle intra-action of matter and meaning, as objects and property lines influence legal battles. In both novels, individual identities are constituted relationally with one another and with the land.

Winona LaDuke is less known as a creative writer than she is as an environmental
activist (and a former vice presidential candidate for the Green Party). Her writing on environmental justice is complemented by her serving as Executive Director of The White Earth Land Recovery Project, which works to restore the original land base of the White Earth Indian Reservation in Minnesota. Yet her fiction also contributes to these goals of depicting the complex nature of a reservation and its involvement in the identity formation of her characters. Her historical novel *Last Standing Woman* provides another example of a northern reservation whose land engages with the identities of characters through marked and reordered boundaries.

I bring these authors together in this chapter because both contribute to new materialist understandings of land as more than setting; they convey the vitality of land and the agency that it has in affecting human lives. Both authors demand looking at the history of land and considering the temporality of landscape. To draw from Edward Soja, they both raise questions of “spatial justice.” In his book *Seeking Spatial Justice*, Soja posits three different but potentially overlapping scales in which spatial injustice operates. Significantly, Erdrich and LaDuke’s reservations (along with many actual reservations) satisfy all three of these scales. First, external impositions on space can cause spatial injustice, such as the establishment of reservation lines by the U.S. government. Second, local forms of containment such as exclusionary zoning can cause spatial injustice, as Erdrich and LaDuke highlight in their presentations of land fractionalization post-Dawes Act. Finally, geographically uneven socioeconomic development can spark spatial injustice, as residents of the Upper Midwest and rural locales well know. Soja notes that in building a theory of spatial justice, “ontological rethinking is necessary to understand the power and meaning of a critical spatial
perspective and to understand the new spatial consciousness that has been emerging in recent years” (9). Part of this rethinking could be achieved using new materialist theories of matter but would be incomplete without attending to Native perspectives and stories.

Despite how well reservations serve as examples of spatial injustice, Soja does not address settler colonialism in his book; however, other geographers have astutely made the connection. In *Mark My Words*, Mishuana Goeman links Soja’s spatial justice to Native studies and extends it in her concept of (re)mapping, which signifies the literary efforts by Native women who draw from tribal stories as they creatively negotiate ongoing colonial contestations of space. The process of (re)mapping “requires us to engage in past modes of knowledge production as well as to examine how it informs policies and laws—and yes, even our own resistance to colonialism and imperialism. We must recognize how the injustices that coupled a mapping of the Americas materializes in all our lives—Native and non-Native alike—on a daily basis” (204). Erdrich and LaDuke’s reservation settings function as powerful examples of Mishuana Goeman’s (re)mapping, as the characters negotiate their connections to place, and as the two authors themselves dramatize past and present colonial struggles in Anishinaabe territory.

Critically reading the bordered lands of reservations can further develop engagements between material ecocriticism and Native literary studies. Given the ways Erdrich and LaDuke depict the vitality of landscape, it is not surprising that one might associate a new materialist reading of these moments with conceptions of indigenous animism. Yet these comparisons between animism and new materialisms can be too hasty or superficial. Although, as Jane Bennett has written, “Vital materialism as a doctrine has affinities with several nonmodern and often discredited modes of thought, including
animism” (xxvii-xxviii), it is also true that Native ontologies construed as “animist” are more complex and more dynamically engaged in the world today than that term tends to imply. One way to commence more productive conversations with these kinds of different if resonant thought is to continue investigating borders. As a concept, borders challenge us to think about the liveliness of matter as part of the ongoing constitution of identities in bodily and social arrangements.

To start a conversation on the liveliness of matter, I next describe how the material sensibility of Louise Erdrich is particularly amenable to material ecocriticism before analyzing her two most recent novels and their reservation landscape. I then consider Winona LaDuke’s Last Standing Woman and its representation of borders and the White Earth reservation. I conclude by moving these novels into environmental activist concerns, in preparation for the discussion about resources and relatives in chapter three.

**Erdrich’s Material Sensibility**

Louise Erdrich has written thirteen novels (with another co-written with Michael Dorris). She received critical and popular acclaim and with her first four novels, a quartet frequently termed “the reservation novels.” The Little No Horse Reservation and surrounding towns of Argus and Hoopdance (and, in her recent novels, Pluto) are important locations that further complicate the already-entwined characters’ lives in these works. I focus on Erdrich’s two most recent novels, *The Plague of Doves* and *The Round House*, which pair well given that they are more distanced from the others in terms of publishing history and cast of characters.
The two novels depict a setting as vital and active as the characters themselves. The reservation is home for several characters, yet the history it expresses through its sites and borders denies any sense of placid domestic belonging, speaking instead to past violence and injustice. The reservation’s borders play a role in the struggles of characters in both novels, with the borders enacted by land fractionalization becoming especially troublesome to the characters pursuing justice in *The Round House*. As any bioregionalist would assert, place heavily marks the identities of the characters, and a fuller understanding of their lives requires knowing their social (and physical) location relative to the reservation. It is thus not surprising that the stories that matter most to these characters are also caught up in the landscape—in these novels, particularly in a tree and a ceremonial round house.

Erdrich’s tendency to represent the reservation and other landscapes as living and storied stems from her general ability to expertly convey how things and matter implicate themselves in human stories and agencies. This material sensibility invites her work to be read along for its active materiality. She demonstrates this material sensibility perhaps most acutely in her emphasis on food. Throughout her fiction, food appears on practically every page as an essential physical as well as symbolic presence, from pies salvaged from a violent outburst in the beginning of *Love Medicine* to a spoiled casserole thawing in a central chapter in *The Round House*. These foods ground the novels, advance their action, and promote attentiveness to the liveliness of matter. As Kari Winter observes, through food “Erdrich focuses our attention on the primacy of embodied experience” such that her work introduces a “sensual interplay of story, smell, touch, and taste” (60). New materialist insights underscore Winter’s observations, troubling the distinctions between
meaning and matter by showing how they depend on each other. Stacy Alaimo’s transcorporeality, for instance, “is a recognition not just that everything is interconnected but that humans are the very stuff of the material, emergent world” (Bodily Natures 20). Erdrich’s style evokes the spirit of trans-corporeality as it winds together materiality and story.

While food is the central example of Erdrich’s material focus, other objects and materials also express vitality, as does the land itself. Amenable to material ecocriticism, this material sensibility appears throughout Erdrich’s works, but an especially illustrative example is in Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country. This memoir states explicitly those perspectives on materiality suffused throughout her fiction—that matter is alive, and that humans are intimately tied to their landscapes. In the book, Erdrich travels with her infant daughter to Lake of the Woods in Minnesota to visit the baby’s father, whose “people were the lake, and the lake was them. At one time, everyone who lived near the lake was essentially made of the lake . . . literally cell by cell composed of the lake and the lake’s islands” (34). Erdrich clearly reinforces the entanglement of humans and environment, such that they can be seen as extensions of one another. Elsewhere she grants vitality to the rock paintings, made with a remarkably permanent red paint, that exist in this landscape. Erdrich begins a section on these paintings by writing, “The rock paintings are alive. This is more important than anything else that I can say about them” (50). By prioritizing this seemingly counterintuitive statement, Erdrich urges readers to readjust their thinking about the paintings (and the rocks that feature them). Instead of being lifeless and disassociated from things that move, they take part in the world.

The engagement of the symbolic with the natural extends further as Erdrich
considers Ojibwemowin, “a language that most directly reflects a human involvement with the spirit of the land itself. It is the language of the paintings that seem to glow from within the rocks” (85). Ojibwemowin thus not only enables communication between people, but further connects them to the lands in which the language developed and lives. The language does not merely represent the landscape but emerges from the rock paintings, conveying that these paintings are dynamic agents in a network of human and material agencies.

These philosophical musings in *Books and Islands* are also evident in Erdrich’s fiction. She persuasively conveys such moments through her keen lyricism, a poetic capacity to her prose that many have termed “magical realism.” Although this is an association she herself resists, it is worth considering how Erdrich’s material sensibility—the ways she shows matter as more than mere backdrop or instrument— informs these connections to magical realism.

A literary mode ever ready “to admit a plurality of worlds” (Zamora and Faris 6), magical realism offers a unique way to demonstrate more lively understandings of materiality. One can reconsider the strange happenings, the independent movement of objects, the quirks and bending of physical laws that characterize this mode as attempts to convey matter as more active and agential than commonly understood. Magical realism has relevance to material ecocriticism because it

not only converses with two of its immediate allies, postmodernism and postcolonialism, but also dialogues with the tenets of an analytical tradition of Western thought such as quantum theory. Although at times described as ‘quaint,’ magical realism performs a wide and profound
cultural and ideological work. It yanks us out of the comfortable complacency that assesses the real as an either-or kind of argument, placing us in an alternative intellectual landscape. (Benito, Manzanas, and Simal 3)

Thus conceived, magical realism finds productive engagement with material ecocriticism, given that the latter also employs worldviews and theories that demand we reconsider prevailing Western assumptions about the workings of the world. The surfacing of magical realism in Erdrich scholarship is a key indicator why her prose is amenable to new materialist readings.

Erdrich resists the magical realist label for good reasons. For one, the term is attenuated as marketing teams and book clubs generously deploy it. Magical realist works also risk being seen as less serious, closer to the realms of fantasy. Erdrich likely eschews the label for these associations with fantasy, having said, “The thing is, the events people pick out as magical don’t seem unreal to me. . . . I think the term is applied to writers from cultures more closely aligned to religious oddities and the natural and strange world” (Chavkin and Chavkin 221).

A wealth of amended “realisms” are relatively interchangeable with magical realism, including fabulous realism, critical irrealism, and post-postmodern realism. It might also make sense, and perhaps would be more accurate, to call Erdrich’s style “Native realism.” I avoid this term here wishing not to complicate it with Wildcat’s indigenous realism or Sean Teuton’s tribal realism, though certainly there could be a resonance. Recognizing that any of these terms might work to describe what Erdrich is doing, and also recognizing the reasons for her personal resistance to the term, I
selectively apply “magical realism” to events in her fiction that warp so-called commonsense assumptions about the world, without intending them to be read as fantasy. In Erdrich’s writing these events include moments of bizarre coincidence, illogical causality, warped time, telepathy, and the appearance of “supernatural” creatures. Such instances allow Erdrich to further enmesh characters’ identities with their surrounding landscapes. Magical realism—and the other realisms mentioned above—works alongside new materialisms to trouble notions of empirical objectivity and independence, to apprehend the strange ontologies revealed by quantum physics and other scientific developments.

Magical realism also celebrates joyous ways of seeing and being in the world, re-enchanting it against modernist disenchantment and further suiting it to material ecocriticism. As Serpil Oppermann recognizes, material ecocriticism (as one kind of “ecological postmodernism”) “redefines nature in terms of its intrinsic value, its interacting entities, and their internal relations. It is in this sense that ecological postmodernism aims to re-enchant nature, claiming that all material entities, even atoms and subatomic particles, have some degree of sentient experience” (“Rethinking” 39). Deploying magical realist literature to represent new materialist and Native worldviews helps disclose ontologies that do not conceive of the material world and landscapes as inert and lifeless.

Magical realist moments occur in *Plague of Doves* and *The Round House* in ways that help the story cohere. Even readers unfamiliar with Erdrich’s literary style can be tipped off to her magical realist lyricism early on in *Plague of Doves*. In short vignettes, the first major narrator, Evelina, spins together memories of her childhood with the
stories of her grandparents. At the beginning of one such section, “Story,” Evelina comments on the indeterminacy of the tales: “But if there was embellishment,” she states, “it only had to do with facts” (19). Her words paraphrase the popular definition of magical realism as a literary style that “uses lies to tell the truth.” With these words, Evelina warns readers that fixed, independent narratives rarely if ever exist for these characters and their stories.

Erdrich’s style notably blends the voices of her narrators, and that is no less true for this novel. The four primary narrators recall their individual lives but also piece together a larger story of the lynching of four Natives falsely accused of murdering the Lochren family on the family’s farm. Evelina’s grandfather, Mooshum, survived the hanging; Mooshum’s friend Holy Track, Holy Track’s great-uncle Asiginak, and Cuthbert Peace were killed. The narrators demonstrate the lynching’s influences on succeeding generations through their partial knowledge of the event and their varied opinions on it.

Early on, readers can sense the materiality of these layers of story, both as stories are passed from one person to another in the physical, performative act of storytelling and as the stories uncover attachments to place. These stories enliven the land as they are told and retold, nearly as tangible as other features of the landscape. Evelina hints to their tangibility in her opening narration of *Plague of Doves*. When Mooshum recollects the lynching, the story enchants her such that when it concludes and she rushes to bring in laundry from a coming storm, she says, “The clothing flew from my hands, twisted off in the sharp wind. A circle-skirt wound me in its embrace. I was still caught in the story, and it took all of my concentration to struggle across the yard with my thoughts and that clothing into the quiet of the house” (80). The materiality of the twisting clothing here
blends with her thoughts, so that both seem physical burdens.

*Plague of Doves* relies on the persistence and agency of key objects in order to uncover connections between characters (whereas in *Round House* objects additionally take on the crime-novel role of serving as evidence). In particular, boots, the lynching tree, and a violin played by three characters matter to the narrators and the wider plot they cover together.

Holy Track’s boots are an example of story tied to materiality. The boots serve as an artifact that transports Mooshum back into the story he told Evelina at the novel’s beginning. Evelina receives the boots after meeting with her former schoolteacher, a descendant of one of the lynchers. With a cross nailed to each sole, the boots are unmistakably Holy Track’s, and when Evelina brings them to Mooshum he is forced to confront the physical remnants of the lynching and the story he has told her about it. Like other objects, the boots link the characters’ lives together, and they also link the histories characters have received to their present lives. The incorporation of these older stories in turn helps the present narration unfold. When Evelina presents the boots to a stricken Mooshum, he admits more information about the personal role he played in the story before asking Evelina to drive him to the lynching tree. Through the boots, then, the story surfaces into the narrative present and further implicates both characters.

As they drive to the tree and fling the boots into the branches, Evelina mentally rehearses a line, which she delivers to Mooshum after the boots are hung: “This is sentiment instead of justice” (253). The statement suits the moment, but readers can understand how it also applies to the novel overall once the plot resolves the opening murder mystery. If the boots are the material object embodying the meaning in the scene
at the lynching tree, violins are the objects that matter most in telling the story of the murder. Guided by the novel’s final narrator, readers piece together the significance of a particular violin performance in a state mental hospital, which triggers a fatal stroke in one of the patients. Readers can comprehend the intricacy of this scene by recalling the violin music playing during the peculiar opening of the novel. Titled “Solo,” the opening is focalized through the unknown murderer of the Lochren family, who listens to a gramophone recording of a violin performance at the Lochren home following the murders. The episode, written in one page and a single paragraph, becomes especially meaningful as readers near the end of the novel, when violin music is played again at the state hospital. Readers, attuned to the material evidence of the violins, understand that the state hospital patient who suffers the stroke after hearing the violin is the murderer of the Lochren family. Evelina’s statement at the lynching tree thus suits the whole novel: the patient-murderer’s death is not quite justice, but a grand sentiment, since only readers and not the characters are able to grasp this coincidental retribution, using the material clues of the violins.

Just as the novel’s stories enmesh with matter, the violent opening’s focus on music also emphasizes the materiality of the violin music. As with the spoken words of a story, the music itself is not divorced of material being, produced as it is through assemblages of airwaves, wood and string, gramophones, and so forth. Violins are particularly relevant to investigating the novel’s material sensibility not only because they tie together all narrative segments and their narrators—including the unspecified narrator of “Solo”—but also because a violin produces the most magical realist event in the novel. In Plague of Doves, this violin reminds readers that matter plays roles, and not merely as
instruments for humans. The violin demonstrates its own sense of agency by inexplicably reappearing at different historical periods covered in the plot, traveling from Henri Peace on a twenty-year canoe voyage to Shamengwa, and eventually on to Henri’s descendant Corwin Peace. When Corwin is sentenced to take music lessons from Shamengwa after originally stealing this well-traveled violin, Shamengwa teaches him using this same violin. Later, it is Corwin’s playing in the mental hospital (albeit on a different violin) that triggers the stroke in the Lochren family murderer. The strange, purposeful traveling of the violin invites the readers to read the complex interweaving of materiality with human agency and justice.

Erdrich maintains this material focus in *The Round House*, though in a different manner as she experiments with the genre of the crime thriller. In this novel objects become evidence and seemingly insignificant items—matchbooks, washers, gravel, a doll’s dress—become relevant. When Geraldine claims there is no evidence of her rape, Bazil replies, “[T]here is your own memory. And there are other things” (158), including the terrain of the landscape itself, which might help Bazil determine who has jurisdiction over Geraldine’s case (the rape occurs where tribal land intersects with state land). The novel also features magical realist moments, as when Joe describes a strange interaction with a tree: “I put my back against a tree and leaned there—not slumping, I was filled with that odd energy. I was allowing the tree to help me think” (98). The energy of the tree enabling Joe’s thinking suggests an interspecies connection that would be untenable to a thoroughgoing anthropocentrism. It is a brief moment, but its offhand, mundane presentation quietly affirms the vitality and agency of plant species.

The most sensational magical realist moment, however, is the appearance of a
ghost that Joe witnesses while looking out his bedroom window one night: “It was standing at the edge of the yard, in the tangle of branches. As we watched, its hands parted the branches, and it looked up at my bedroom window. . . . Although I was not exactly alarmed, I had the clear notion that what I was seeing was unreal. Yet it was neither human nor entirely inhuman” (79-80). Like the tree, this being troubles the category of the human by presenting another other-than-human sentient being.

The ghost becomes more troubling the more it is grounded in the mundane. Explaining the sighting to Bazil, Joe is perplexed by his rational father’s nonplussed response:

Yes, they’re out there, my father answered. . . . As usual, he refused to be perturbed by my anger.

Joe, he said, I worked in a graveyard.

So what?

There was an occasional ghost, that’s what. Ghosts were there. (81)

Just as Erdrich eschews the magical realist label because nonstandard events aren’t irreconcilable with her worldview, Bazil is similarly able to accept the existence of ghosts. Joe’s sighting and Bazil’s response reminds Joe (and the reader) that the world is stranger than it seems, and that our ways of framing it determine our capacity to acknowledge that strangeness.

Our scholarly frameworks also determine what we do with these magical realist moments. Whereas material ecocritical reading might suggest that magical realism reminds us that humans are embedded in wider communities of beings and active matter, a Native studies approach might instead emphasize how these ways of describing matter
and objects point towards particular tribal worldviews that question Eurocentric readings. Either way, the mode of magical realism does not so much present these events as fantastic or unreal; instead, it creates moments that give readers pause, producing dissonance that might open them to other ontological orientations and to a deeper appreciation of the vitality of matter.

For her part, Erdrich seems less interested in portraying the world as strange than she is in trying to portray the intimate and deeply interwoven social fabric of the lives of her characters both on and off the reservation. As material objects and magical realist events tie story threads together, the stories also blend the identities of the characters. Erdrich is a master at constructing such interwoven subjectivities. The technique is obvious in *Plague of Doves* with its four primary narrators, though it also occurs in *The Round House* when Joe (as primary narrator) retells the stories told to him by Mooshum and Linda Wishkob. This trans-identity means that, like material objects, borders have agency in the lives and lands in which they operate.

**Transpersonal Identity**

Perhaps the master metaphor to identity, borders trace out formations of self and other. Erdrich’s fiction uses material sensibility to build a nuanced approach to geopolitical and narratological borders, granting more liveliness to matter and suggesting identities are interwoven with one another and with their landscapes.

Critics have long used boundaries as a trope in analyzing Erdrich’s literature. These considerations emerge primarily because of the fact of Erdrich’s own mixed Anishinaabe-German-American heritage, because of the prevalence of mixed-blood
characters in her work, and because her novels establish and persistently transgress intricate formal boundaries among multiple narrators. For example, Jeanne Smith’s “Transpersonal Selfhood: The Boundaries of Identity in Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*” notes how characters form identities in relationship with one another and with their local landscapes, and she sees in such relating an expansive self able to transgress the bounds of individual bodies. According to Smith, Erdrich’s portrayals of identity exhibit “a capacity to merge” to local communities, myths, and landscapes (13).

In another representative example of borders emphasized in Erdrich criticism, Rita Ferrari examines Erdrich’s mixed identity in “‘Where the Maps Stopped’: The Aesthetics of Borders in Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* and *Tracks.*” Ferrari writes, “Because many of Erdrich’s characters exist simultaneously inside and outside Native American culture, they embody the fluidity of identity that has come to epitomize so much postmodern self-conception” (147). Emphasizing Erdrich’s formal aesthetic choices, Ferrari examines how “Erdrich’s novels elaborate (often elusive) borders as sites of constant interplay” (146) and how Erdrich “uses this concept of the border both as metaphor and as technique in such a way that oppositions dissolve and differences come to light” (159). Here again, borders constitute identity and are important to comprehending poststructuralist theoretical investigations. Ferrari is particularly keen to notice the slipperiness of borders, their indefinite shimmering that suggests a process of becoming rather than a permanent mark or cut: “Borders in Erdrich’s novels become the

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3 Borders also help convey how Barad’s agential realism works. They recall the indeterminate play of phenomena she describes, which coalesce through agential cuts into specific bodily arrangements. That is, relating is the primary phenomenon, which “cuts” reality and creates borders or closures that establish bodies and matter.
ground that, as we cover it, disappears beneath us” (159).

But whereas Smith and Ferrari show how borders compose identities even as those identities transgress them, this last quotation of Ferrari’s helps bring us back to ground. If the borders that influence identity formation are indefinite, so too are physical and geopolitical borders, which shift in a dynamic interplay of material-discursive phenomena. The criss-crossing of our identities in the stories we tell about our landscapes also ties us to land. Trans-identities and interpersonal narratives become a meta-narrator—the land speaking.

*The Plague of Doves* focuses more on the town of Pluto and the reservation connected to it, with the only other nearby towns being Hoopdance and Argus (the latter is featured in many of Erdrich’s preceding novels and the primary setting of *The Beet Queen* and *The Master Butchers Singing Club*). The references to the reservation itself are few, and the tree where the lynching occurs—arguably the plot’s most significant place—exists on non-reservation farmland. The location underscores the multiple histories and cultures tied to the landscape. Indeed, though the lynching tree exists on non-reservation land, it is anything but separate from the local Anishinaabeg, who continue to leave prayer flags in its branches. Readers later discover it is part of the Wolde’s property, a German-American farming family. Marn Wolde, one of the primary narrators, describes her return to her family’s farm with her husband Billy Peace, an Ojibwe who becomes a cult leader and gradually takes leadership over the property: “This was reservation, Billy says, and should be again. This was my family’s land, Indian land. Will be again” (152). Pluto is an Indian town, but the land changes hands over lifetimes, also blending the lines between people.
The changing ownership of the land not only reflects land fractionalization after
the 1887 General Allotment Act but also parallels the tangled lineage of the characters.
Whereas Erdrich previously relented and offered family trees to accompany her books, in
*Plague of Doves* and *Round House* no family trees appear. Readers are perennially
interested in knowing who is related to whom, but there are sound reasons for choosing
not to include family trees. Helen Dennis notes the tendency for critics to attempt to
create a definitive family tree, though she remarks that it is futile endeavor: “Given the
complexity of kinship patterns and the chaotic nature of human sexual relations, a
definitive version is unattainable. . . . While it is understandable that readers will continue
to puzzle over how to draw a satisfactory family tree . . . it is perhaps more profitable to
consider why we as readers feel impelled to do so” (173). Dennis suggests that the
complexity of the narration is why we feel so impelled, given the variety of narrators and
the fact that narrators frequently tell their stories to other characters as performances
framed in the larger narration of the novel.

I agree with Dennis’s explanation and would add that Erdrich productively
exploits the desire for genealogical comprehension in order to convey common Native
experiences with heritage. Erdrich has commented on the way the U.S. Government
demands American Indians practice genealogy, since in order to attain official enrollment
in a tribe applicants most often prove descent from historical tribal rolls; she also points
out that such colonial practices threaten to diminish Native populations (Gates).
Confronting and seeking out this genealogy in the texts, readers also become more
attuned to the characters who themselves grapple with their complicated lineage. While
the lack of genealogy may serve as a statement protesting genealogy’s use as a colonial
tool (e.g., in the form of blood quanta), readers can share their frustrations with Evelina, who in *Plague of Doves* wonders at her heritage, becoming obsessed with it after she learns the story of the lynching. One scene closely resembles readers’ attempts to craft a family tree while working through the novel: Evelina writes, “I traced the blood history of the murders through my classmates and friends until I could draw out elaborate spider webs of lines and intersecting circles. I drew in pencil. There were a few people . . . whose chart was so complicated that I erased parts of it until I wore right through the paper” (86).

Evelina’s sentiment on blood history resurfaces later in the novel when another primary narrator, Antone Bazil Coutts, observes of Pluto and the reservation, “Nothing that happens, *nothing*, is not connected here by blood” (115). In these portrayals, Erdrich echoes Chadwick Allen’s analysis of the “blood/land/memory complex” in Native American literature. Allen writes that this complex “names both the process and the product of the indigenous minority writer situating him- or herself within a particular indigenous family’s or nation’s ‘racial memory’ of its relationship with specific lands” (16). The characters in *Plague* (and throughout Erdrich’s fiction) demonstrate this negotiation and dramatically demonstrate that bloodlines are not wholly separate from landlines.

Antone Bazil Coutts also delivers the most pointed explanation of borders, land, and identity to appear in *Plague of Doves*. In a characteristically stoic tone, he describes Pluto:

As I look at the town now, dwindling without grace, I think how strange that lives were lost in its formation. It is the same with all desperate
enterprises that involve boundaries we place upon the earth. By drawing a line and defending it, we seem to think we have mastered something. What? The earth swallows and absorbs even those who manage to form a country, a reservation. (Yet there is something to the love and knowledge of the land and its relationship to dreams—that’s what the old people had. That’s why as a tribe we exist to the present.) (115)

Coutts here captures the way land and identities intermingle, how lives are tied to lines. His ambivalence toward the land hinges on it being simultaneously a colonized space and an ancestral homeland. But more than mere backdrop or setting, the land supports the people, with a profound agency in its ability to also “swallow” and “absorb.”

Erdrich thus conveys the vitality of land and the agency it possesses to affect human lives. Where a more limited ecocritical reading might only consider the representation of the environment, literary studies attuned to materiality and diffracted with Native studies demand looking at the history of land and considering temporal dimensions to landscape. To return again to Edward Soja, thinking about land’s vitality and the ways it speaks raises questions of “spatial justice,” a term that resists the compartmentalizing of issues between the ecological, political, and social and shows how “the spatiality of (in)justice . . . affects society and social life just as much as social processes shape the spatiality or specific geography of (in)justice” (5). Place shapes people as surely as people shape place. The insights of spatial justice apply to reservations by asking how land simultaneously informs personal and collective identities, ecological concerns, and national self-determination. Erdrich’s setting of the reservation and surrounding towns also functions as a strong example of Mishuana
Goeman’s (re)mapping, as the characters negotiate their connections to place, and as Erdrich herself dramatizes past and present colonial struggles in Anishinaabe territory.

A closer look into Erdrich’s The Round House reveals how textual borders are equally relevant to representations of identity formation in her fiction. This novel is notable for its single narrator-protagonist; Erdrich, renowned for intricate narrative webs of alternating perspectives, presents an interesting departure with this character, a thirteen-year-old named Joe Coutts (the son of Antone Bazil Coutts, primary narrator in Plague of Doves, discussed above).

The lack of quotation marks is worth pointing out in an investigation of Joe’s narration. One could easily argue how this feature simply signals a high literary aesthetic, a move that evokes her work’s frequent associations with William Faulkner. But the decision to avoid quotation marks in The Round House has additional influences on the novel’s themes and texture. Their removal blends together the internal and interpersonal dialogue with the narration, as in the following scene, which begins with Joe’s father speaking:

I had to take your mother down to Minot this morning. To the hospital. They’ll keep her a couple of days. I’m going back down tomorrow. I asked if I could go, but he said there was nothing I could do. She just has to rest.

She sleeps all the time.

I know. He paused, then finally looked at me, a relief. She knows who it was, he said. (164)

This passage demonstrates how Erdrich, foregoing quotation marks and the divisions they
establish, deftly maintains distinct voices even as she provocatively blends them. The lines begin with Joe’s father speaking, while the line starting “I asked” is Joe’s narration paraphrasing their conversation. The following two lines show direct speech, and the last line blends Joe’s father’s speech (the lines “I know” and “She knows who it was”) with Joe’s narration.

One might argue that the lack of quotation marks conveys a more direct approximation of Joe’s narration, since he remains the first-person narrator throughout the book and all the words are thus, in effect, his voice. However, rather than being subsumed to the single narrative level of Joe’s narration, the voices remain distinct even without quotation marks. While the lack reinforces the connections between the characters, Erdrich’s artistry keeps the character voices from becoming entirely filtered through Joe’s voice. Their speech acts, which repeat and retell the speech acts of others, show the extent of the characters’ influences on each other—one person’s words are another’s, too. The blending frustrates the desire to interpret speech acts as the exclusive agency of particular actors, supporting those critics who recognize transpersonal identities in Erdrich’s work. For instance, when Geraldine recounts her trauma to Bazil and Joe, Bazil later regrets that Joe has heard the story. Joe says he needed to know, but he also remarks that the words were “a poison in [him]” (165). The absence of quotation marks in this scene again reveals the interpersonal nature of language, with Geraldine’s speech capable of poisoning Joe. Language binds people together and reinforces their interdependent identities.

Language and stories are also tied to matter. Erdrich brings this attentiveness to the co-implication of matter and discourse through Joe’s depiction of Native identity. Joe
explains the tenuous and fraught conditions in governmental attempts to fix Native identity: “You can’t tell if a person is an Indian from a set of fingerprints. You can’t tell from a name . . . a local police report . . . a picture . . . a mug shot . . . a phone number” (29-30). The list of potentially identifying evidence fits with the investigative tone of the novel, yet none of it is enough to “capture” Native identity. Physical manifestations and appearances don’t hold up; instead, the person’s name has to match a history and genealogy and must be sorted through blood quanta. Caught between material genes and narrative, between lines of descent and lines on paper, the complexity of Native identity is immediately apparent.

At the same time, Joe realizes, “Indians know other Indians without the need for a federal pedigree, and this knowledge—like love, sex, or having or not having a baby—has nothing to do with government” (30). The statement echoes Teuton’s tribal realism, emphasizing the lived daily realities of Native people and the practical, functional level of identity. Of course, as Foucault has shown, government crops up in numerous, often unexpected ways in the allegedly nonpolitical issues of love, sex, and reproduction, but Joe’s associating identity with the physical intimacy of relationships suggests he is more concerned with affirming identity as an embodied, intuitive, and natural process. Though highlighted in this passage, Erdrich’s novels and characters radiate with this felt sense of kinship.

*The Round House* recurrently attaches kinship and identity to land and materiality. The novel begins with a scene of Joe digging up saplings that would threaten the foundation of his family’s home if left to grow; the tenacity of these roots and their proximity to the house neatly symbolize Joe’s community, and the image is suggested
further when Joe describes his mother’s job as an enrollment clerk. He says her job is “to parse the ever more complicated branching and interbranching tangle of each bloodline. Through the generations, we have become an impenetrable undergrowth of names and liaisons” (149). This undergrowth extends beyond the borders of the reservation, and it also comes to bear on the round house of the title. A traditional gathering place for the Anishinaabeg on the reservation, the round house represents an interpenetration of cultural memory with materiality. It is also the site of Geraldine’s rape, located where “three classes of land intersect . . . tribal, state, and fee” (160). Joe’s father presses Geraldine to remember where exactly the rape occurred, lamenting, “We can’t prosecute if we don’t know which laws apply” (179). The convergence of borders here heightens sensitivity to the materiality of place, as Joe’s father asks Geraldine to remember if she noticed “gravel” or “brush” (160) and when Joe himself closely inspects the land around the round house in the aftermath of the crime.

Bazil’s careful, persistent interrogation reveals the ways land matters and speaks its own complex history. In addition, the titular round house takes on layers of significance as the story unfolds, first somberly marked as the site of the rape, but later shown as a site for justice and communal gathering. Joe learns about the round house when he overhears his grandfather Mooshum speaking in his sleep.4 Mooshum’s stories reveal that the round house is a site that has cycled between moments of violence and communal reconciliation, since it never would have been built had it not been for their ancestor Akiikwe’s unjust persecution and Nanapush’s suffering, nor without the

4 Granted, Mooshum may not be asleep at all, given the intricate and fully formed narrative he delivers. Alternatively, readers might interpret his refined, somnolent speech as another magical realist moment.
generosity of the buffalo that saves Nanapush’s life.

The round house thus entwines the matter of the place with the stories it possesses. In one of the rarer moments of the text, as Joe listens to Mooshum’s sleeptalking, the narration seems to break from Joe as a new section in the chapter, titled “Akii” appears in bold, enacting a formal textual border setting the section apart. The story recounts Akiikwe (Earth Woman) and her struggle to survive as the reservation borders constrain hunting grounds and tribal lifeways. Mooshum says, “Akii and her husband were . . . very good at finding food . . . that is, until the year they forced us into our boundaries. The reservation year” (180). He adds, “Ah, those first reservation years, when they squeezed us! Down to only a few square miles. We starved while the cows of settlers lived fat off the fenced grass of our old hunting grounds” (184). The tribe survives when Akiikwe’s son, Nanapush, successfully hunts a buffalo. The spirit of the buffalo remains with Nanapush and instructs him to build the round house, saying, “The round house will be my body, the poles my ribs, the fire my heart” (214).

This symbolic embodiment of the house and its connections to cultural identity grants vitality to matter and to the stories it tells. Indeed, the house takes on a strange vitality for Joe when, visiting it to search for clues to the identity of his mother’s rapist, he hears it moan in the wind and notes, “The grieving cry seemed emitted by the structure itself” (59). The materiality of the structure connects with cultural myths, identity, and borderlines to effect a complex, lively place. The round house exemplifies the “storied matter” that material ecocriticism explores.

The reservation line Mooshum mentions in his story recurs in Erdrich’s fiction as a subtle but significant reminder of containment, socioeconomic disparity, jurisdictional
difficulties, and the multiple influences such spatial injustices have on the characters. These effects play out differently depending on which side of the line a character inhabits, and moments of crossing the line matter. The reservation’s borders, marked out on the land by the federal government, wind tightly around the characters and symbolize the government’s influence in determining Native identities. Its appearance in the closing lines of *The Round House* makes for a bold reminder of the ways place reinforces identity.

Erdrich’s careful portrayal of the Little No Horse reservation quietly but continually asks its readers to think about the intermingling of people and land. In her essay “Where I Ought to Be: A Writer’s Sense of Place,” Erdrich writes that all writers must have “a place to love and be irritated with.” She underscores the intimacy of place by presenting our mothers’ wombs as our first landscape, our “boundaries and personal geography which are all we know of the world.” This knowledge translates into her environmental ethic, the profoundly relational reality of our being on earth that we ignore at our peril. Erdrich acknowledges that fiction may not be enough to forestall environmental destruction, but she also believes it can “spur us to treat the earth, in which we abide and which harbors us, as we would treat our own mothers and fathers. For, once we no longer live beneath our mother’s heart, it is the earth with which we form the same dependent relationship, relying completely on its cycles and elements, helpless without its protective embrace.” Erdrich’s fiction shows how such ecological dependencies are learned, along with our own identities, by listening to stories told by our relatives, the land, and the borders among both.
LaDuke, White Earth, and Last Standing Woman

Winona LaDuke’s only published novel, Last Standing Woman, develops a vital, nuanced landscape similar to those in Erdrich’s novels. Whereas Erdrich’s reservation is expressly fictional, LaDuke deliberately draws from historical events that occurred on and around the White Earth Indian Reservation in Minnesota. Her Author’s Note mentions, “This is a work of fiction although the circumstances, history, and traditional stories, as well as some of the characters, are true, retold to the best of my ability” (10).

The lives and stories of these characters are linked by the existence of White Earth itself, such that the reservation becomes its own character. Its centrality is mentioned on the back cover, which describes the novel as one that “chronicles a Native American Indian reservation and its people’s struggle to restore their culture.” The struggles of the people are also the land’s struggles. White Earth is not just its lakes and woods, but also its people. Last Standing Woman, in blending characters’ lives with the land’s life, further testifies to literature’s ability to portray land’s identity.

Maps of White Earth and nearby reservations appear in the front matter, and the opening two sections in Part One are titled “White Earth” and “The Border,” emphasizing a particular place and the divisions marked on it. This first section describes the land:

There were many migrations that brought the people here. Omaa, omaa, here. Here to where the food grows on the water. Anishinaabeg Akiing, the people’s land, the land where the manoomin, the wild rice, grows. . . . They traveled by foot on the land and by canoe on the rivers, traveling farther and farther to the west until they turned home. Giiwedahn. So it was that the families, the clans, and the head people of the Anishinaabeg
came to the headwaters of the Mississippi. Here, *Gaawaawaabiganikaag,* White Earth, named after the clay, the white clay you find here. It’s so beautiful, it is. Here the people would remain in the good land that was theirs. (23)

The repetition of “here” and the recurring presentation of travel, wild rice, and the White Earth landscape disrupt the linear progression of the section even as it reinforces the completion of the Anishinaabe migration. The narration incorporates the sense of belonging with the addition of Anishinaabe words and the closing phrase, “the good land that was theirs.” The passage’s repetition conveys a temporality outside of Western history and chronology; indeed, several sentences later, the narrator comments, “By snowshoe, canoe, or dog team, they moved through those woods, rivers, and lakes. It was not a life circumscribed by a clock, stamp, fence, or road” (24). The latter objects refer metonymically to institutions built around Western timescales.

Unlike most of the sections, “White Earth” is one of the few that does not assign a specific year to its events, and the long stretches of undetermined time further cement the belonging of the Anishinaabeg to this landscape.5 This opening to Part One, “The Refuge,” thus describes and celebrates White Earth; the narrator recounts, “That reservation was to be the refuge for all those clans. It was a good land” (24). After this atemporal opening section, the storyteller (who we later learn is narrating in 2018) begins the account of the first Ishkwegaabawiikwe, Last Standing Woman, for whom she is

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5 Scott Richard Lyons (Ojibwe/Dakota) remarks, “If anything can be considered an enduring value for Ojibwe people, it has got to be migration. . . . The Great Migration probably started around 900 CE and took some five hundred years to finish—if it can be said to have ‘finished’” (3-4).
named. This latter-day Ishkwegaabawiikwe recounts seven generations of her ancestors, which resonates with the widely disseminated Native American ethic of weighing decision-making with seven generations in mind. The novel provides a new take on the seven-generations perspective by using it as the timeframe for describing the land. This long-term vision fits human action to a longer land rhythm. While there are numerous ways to envision ecological cycles, the seven-generations view is one that can promote sustainable behavior while also enfolding humans into landscape.

The second section, “The Border,” takes place in 1862. From here, the storyteller jumps back to 1800 to recount the arrival of Jesuit missionaries, before resuming a mostly chronological account of these characters. Borders appear in this section in reference to those between Anishinaabe territory and their Dakota neighbors. LaDuke depicts the Dakota as the traditional enemies of the Anishinaabeg, ever since the latter’s migration onto the plains, but this antagonism changes tone in the face of advancing Euro-American settler colonialism.

LaDuke reimagines these intertribal relations by having the first Ishkwegaabawiikwe rescue a Dakota woman, Situpiwin (Tailfeathers Woman) from attack by the U.S. Army during the Dakota War of 1862. Her actions are influenced by her engagement with the borders that shape her identity. She is “a woman drawn to the border” (26), though it is a dangerous place in a tumultuous time of inter-cultural conflict:

She wished to see the border. The Anishinaabeg knew that the white man would punish all Indians for the actions of a few. The white man chose not to tell the difference. The Anishinaabeg also knew that the Dakota would
need help, that there would be refugees. They were the Anishinaabeg’s most honored enemies, and centuries of a border meant generations of war, retaliations, trade, hostages, love, and marriage. (33)

Euro-American antagonism complicates this traditional border. When Ishkwegaabawiikwe arrives there, she finds the Dakota village destroyed by Col. Henry Sibley’s army. Finding Situpiwin wounded, she rescues and takes her “home, across the border, back to the woods, back to the lake, back to the refuge” (34). Ishkwegaabawiikwe sees her decision to rescue Situpiwin as an attempt at peacemaking; she was “weary of the wars, the battles between the Dakota and the Anishinaabeg, the battles between the Indians and the white men, the war in her own lodge. . . . she was perhaps in need of ending another war with a small gesture” (34). Later, Ishkwegaabawiikwe takes Situpiwin to Mankato to witness the execution of Situpiwin’s husband (he is fictionalized as one of the thirty-eight Dakota killed as part of the largest single-day mass execution by the U.S. on December 26, 1862). Ishkwegaabawiikwe does not leave Situpiwin afterward, but brings her back a second time, “back to the border, giìwedahn, home” (39). The two live together and eventually become the wives of Namaybin Minnogeeshig.

Ishkwegaabawiikwe’s “small gesture” of border crossing and kinship formation colors the rest of the story, inaugurating a theme of belonging and traveling that recurs throughout the generations on a landscape that itself gets crossed and re-crossed with territorial boundaries. These divisions and separations are simultaneously made on the landscape and on Anishinaabe bodies, illustrated by the arrival of Ales Hrdlicka—a historical ethnographer who appears in the story—to intrusively study the Anishinaabeg as specimens:
it was from the living, whom [Hrdlicka] yearned to observe, that he could truly study cranial capacity, breadth of septum, character and retention of hair, and the personal histories of individuals and allegations as to their lineage.

White Earth was prime for the plucking. Under the 1887 Nelson Act, the reservation had been divided into individual eighty-acre allotments in a policy intended to civilize the White Earth Anishinaabeg . . . . The allotments also inexplicably followed the boundaries noted carefully by logging companies who now flourished in the northwoods. (62)

The paratactic juxtaposition of human bodies with White Earth suggests the ways invasive colonial practices reveal (and exploit) the enmeshment of people with place. Hdrlicka’s desire to study the histories of “individuals” emphasizes a person’s separation from others, and this separability reappears in the next sentence as “individual” allotments are created in order to weaken Anishinaabe traditions and promote Euro-American industries. Privileging individuality and separation enables the colonial motive to transform Anishinaabe land into allotments, which could then be sold to white settlers and extractive industries.

Ethnographic research further dispossessed Native people, since the research on their bodies was not for their benefit but for the store of “knowledge” gathered by white ethnographers. The sale of land and the production of ethnographic information are not contradictory enterprises, but joint endeavors. Their association has only grown clearer since the example of Hrdlicka in the nineteenth century, as biomedical industries harvest and use indigenous genetic and bodily material much the way other industries harvest and
use environmental resources, without benefitting the people from whom they are taken—
sometimes, without even their knowledge or approval.⁶

Settler colonialism thus produces divisions through borderlines and through
family trees and blood quanta. In Last Standing Woman, ethnographic research and land
surveying impinge on human identity and land through borders but also through material
objects: in particular, the White Earth Anishinaabeg are connected to their reservation
homeland through drums and the human remains that are buried, exhumed, and reburied
in the land. As Louise Erdrich states in Books and Islands that the Anishinaabeg were
composed of the lake, so LaDuke’s depictions reinforce a deep connection and
entanglement of bodies with the land.

The novel’s structure across the seven generations creates a story of loss and
reclamation. After the first two parts detail different forms of colonial violence—
including war, boarding schools, land theft, poverty, and substance abuse—the latter two
parts tell a story of hope, resistance, and revitalization that reaffirms connections between
people and land through materiality and grassroots organizing. The land retains its role as
a refuge, first attributed to it in Part One. For the character George Ahnib, the reservation
is “home. Not only was he related by blood to many families, he was related by the
tragedy and joy of the village’s collective history. Everyone had a place and a role, and
George had his . . . White Earth was his refuge” (119). Meanwhile, Mesabe, an elder by
this point in the story, considers how his descendants are “scattered like maple leaves

⁶ Working at the interstices of new materialisms and Native studies, Kim Tallbear recognizes the
cos-constitution of matter and meaning in DNA, writing, “Native American DNA is material-
semiotic. It is supported by and threads back into the social-historical fabric to (re)constitute the
categories and narratives by which we order life. Indigenous political authorities and identities, as
well as land and resource claims, are at stake” (7). See also the work of Debra Harry and the
Indigenous Peoples Council on Biocolonialism.
from Minneapolis to Winnipeg. There were no jobs, houses, or land for the Indians of White Earth. Only a promise of justice, and a memory of what was once. And, of course, the land itself remained, through it all, battered, scarred, and shorn” (122). Although the land is degraded, it remains a powerful influence, housing the memories of those who lived on it and grounding the “promise of justice.” Significantly, White Earth can serve this function even for those who do not live there. By asserting that homelands are just as relevant to Natives living elsewhere, LaDuke intimates James Clifford’s understanding that “practices of urban indigenous life rely on circular migration to homelands and diaspora networking across distances” (21).  

Mesabe’s perspective represents a potential pivoting moment for the loss-recovery structure of the novel, a shift made possible via Mesabe’s identification with the land. He begins having dreams in which elderly women and a few girls speak to him and show him the allotments. He notices that the trees on this land “were grown up high and big just like the old days before they cut them down” (124). His granddaughter Elaine asks him about his dreams, wondering if he saw the land as it was in the past, but Mesabe asserts, “No. It was now. Or in the future. It was about something to happen, like it would be that way again . . . something is going on with them lands. Something bad and something good both” (124-25). The dreams presage the novel’s later events, when Elaine and others form the Protect Our Land Coalition, which ultimately leads to the occupation of White Earth in order to protect the land from the tribal government’s plans

7 Clifford’s Returns analyzes localism in Native studies: “We need to distinguish, and also (carefully, partially) to connect ‘diasporism’ and ‘indigenism.’ What’s at stake is the articulation . . . of ‘big-enough’ worlds: concrete lives led in specific circuits between the global and the local” (64).
for new logging projects and the construction of a paper mill: “The old people said that the land needed to be protected and that the logging and new mill would desecrate the water and their sacred places” (151). Just as the land is a refuge protecting people, it also needs protecting by people; such reciprocity is a key distinction that marks a place as “home.”

The Protect Our Land occupation becomes the most prominent event in the novel, covering an entire part of its own. In addition to Mesabe’s dreams, other events influence the development of this action, including land disputes in 1977 over illegally sold or occupied land, which LaDuke portrays especially in a scene showing Euro-American farmers’ lack of knowledge about Indian politics (136). Another scene describes the disputes in strongly material terms, and once again the land’s description is merged with bodies. As government officials investigate yellowing affidavits and papers,

the dust particles were blown off the papers and deeds in the archival vaults, the dust blew into the air of the northwoods and cornfields, the lakes and prairies, and all that was old and resting remembered their words, thumbprints, and blood samples taken by land agents and anthropologists. They stirred from their long restless sleep, listening for the sound of their language, their beadwork and jingle dresses, and their drums. (133)

The traveling dust reveals the link between the words on these official documents and the land they affect. The passage shifts focus from the dust traversing the landscape to the ancestors of the present generation, who are drawn to the materiality of drums, beads, dresses, and language. This dust’s movement over the landscape thus reaffirms the
coexistence of the Anishinaabeg and the land of the northwoods.

The drums are the most prominent material object to connect the stories. They are also repeatedly described not as objects but as relatives: “According to custom, drums were relatives, and as such, other drum families attended feasts and ceremonies with related drums” (51). Mesabe’s dreams and their connection to land represent one path; the drums represent another. Like Mesabe’s dreams, which anticipate the rise of Protect Our Land, the original Ishkwegaabawiikwe dreams of a drum and songs that belong with it. Later, Namaybin Minnogeeshig helps her make the drum, which is eventually cached for years in the rafters of an Episcopalian church until it is taken up by members of the Protect Our Earth Coalition. “The drums are the history of White Earth,” Mesabe says (152).

Drums further serve as relatives when they are returned with the remains of ancestors, in a section of the novel that dramatizes the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. Moose is given the responsibility of returning the ancestors from the Smithsonian. On the return, he has car trouble. Trying to make repairs himself at a rest stop, he encounters several white Americans—a hippie, a cop, and middle-class nuclear family on a picnic. LaDuke cleverly subverts Moose and readers’ expectations of how these interactions will proceed; rather than exchanges characterized by prejudice or ignorance, all these characters eagerly help Moose and discuss their own knowledge of repatriation. Besides being an amusing scene and a hopeful vision for Native/non-Native interactions, the scene also hearkens back to Ishkwegaabawiikwe’s “small gesture” by suggesting that, however difficult, boundaries and relationships can be reordered.
The reburial ceremony brings healing, but it is not complete. Moose for instance notes that the remains of the original Ishkwegaabawiikwe and Situpiwin, not part of the Smithsonian’s collections, were being kept at the University of Minnesota. Thus, though the ceremony is part of what the Anishinaabe character Alanis Nordstrom calls “reordering the world,” it is “only a single strand in a web of generations who still wandered, looking for their clan markers” (282).

A journalist from Denver, Alanis is of White Earth ancestry and is assigned to cover the occupation. The novel offers another case of land borders influencing identity in presenting the occupation through her perspective. In Part Three, “The Occupation,” White Earth is renewed as a refuge when the Protect Our Earth coalition blockades the road and stages the occupation. A dangerous, militarized border reappears, echoing the one Ishkwegaabawiikwe visits and transgresses in 1862.

As Alanis arrives at White Earth, she drives past the border and smiles, noticing “a handmade sign that read simply, ‘This is ours’” (168). She meets with the FBI agent assigned to the case and surprises him by announcing her plans of “going in” to report the story (172). Alanis’s actions renew the border images in the novel, and these borders established by the occupation affect her more than she expects when she first decides on “going in.” In a scene after Alanis has embedded herself with the Protect Our Land protesters, the police fire shots, one of which nearly hits her. She is shocked by her internal reaction when the other Anishinaabeg warn her that she might be a target:

*I am not one of you*, she had almost said, yet obviously to whomever had leveled the rifle . . . she was *one of them*. . . . And now the image of herself as the objective, professional newspaper reporter became confused with
her image as the gunman saw her, as an Indian, as an enemy, as someone to shoot. The bullets had destroyed the boundaries in her mind, and the ricochet reverberated through her very soul. (187)

The physical border confronts Alanis with the “boundaries” she has constructed to shape her own identity. Her new self-understanding remains with her after the occupation, which succeeds in stopping the logging and milling operations. The occupation also initiates further land consolidation that returns “almost a third of the land” that had been lost (247).

The last section of the novel, which takes as its primary theme the healing and revitalization of the White Earth community, reveals the positive results of the occupation. With its title “Oshki Anishinaabeg,” this final part suggests that the last generations covered in the plot are the Oshki Anishinaabeg, the “new people” of traditional Anishinaabe prophecies. LaDuke weaves together several scenes of healing in this part that promote a vision of White Earth’s resurgence: a women’s group rescues a girl from sexual abuse, traditional ceremonies heal individuals afflicted by substance abuse, a Native birthing clinic is established, and the aforementioned ancestral remains are repatriated.

The section also shows Alanis continuing to grapple with the shifts in her self-awareness that occurred during the occupation; ultimately, this leads her to return to the reservation: “At her house in Denver, Alanis tossed and turned until she finally turned home. Giíwe. She drove her Saab past the prairies, past the border, and into the woods. She was coming home to White Earth” (291).

And for the narrator Ishkwegaaabawiikwe (Alanis’s daughter, given the name of
the original Ishkwegaabawiikwe), the promise of continued resurgence seems evident. Her concluding journal entry is written in Anishinaabemowin, suggesting that language revitalization efforts have been successful. The translation reads,

I do not believe that time is linear. Instead, I have come to believe that time is in cycles, and that the future is a part of our past and the past is a part of our future. Always, however, we are in new cycles. The cycles omit some pieces and collect other pieces of our stories and our lives.

That is why we keep the names, and that is why we keep the words.

(299)
The novel’s structure replicates this narrator’s perspective. The opening mentions that Anishinaabe migration stories and prophecies also “told of the coming of the light-skinned people and the hard times for the Anishinaabeg. Those same prophecies spoke of the Oshki Anishinaabeg, the new people, who came later” (18). A fixed linear chronology breaks down as gaps in the segmented narrative ultimately cycle back to an indefinite, atemporal time grounded in the land of White Earth. The land functions as a living character entwined with multiple human generations as people are buried and remains are repatriated there.

Portraying White Earth as homeland, LaDuke’s novel suits the popular “homing plot” that William Bevis suggests better suits Native American novels than Euro-American ones. Bevis argues that Native identity depends not on finding oneself so much as “finding a ‘self’ that is transpersonal and includes a society, a past, and place. To be separated from that transpersonal time and space is to lose identity” (585). Bevis’s definition of transpersonal identity suits this chapter’s argument because it includes place
and landscape. Like Erdrich and LaDuke’s reservations, the settings in the novels Bevis analyzes are also the ancestral homelands of their protagonists and are a key component of their identities. Bevis suggests, “Place is not only an aspect of these works; place may have made them possible” (592). He adds that such natural places are not diametrically opposed to civilization; rather, nature is humanized.

However Bevis stresses transpersonal identity, the single human protagonists in the novels he analyzes encourage a classic, narrowly humanist focus. LaDuke’s novel alters this interpretation because it features multiple protagonists and a multigenerational plot. Additionally, *Last Standing Woman* complicates the homing narrative by including Anishinaabe migration and characters who live away from White Earth. Influenced by material ecocriticism, I find LaDuke’s homecoming to be less focused on the heroic journeying of the characters than it is on the reservation itself. The land’s endurance and change over two centuries reflects the people’s, with the themes of revitalization and hope simultaneously applicable to tribal cultures and to landscapes. Transpersonal identity in dynamic entanglements with place revises the homing narrative in which, as Bevis suggests, “The hero comes home” (582) to consider instead that the hero is the home, the living landscape.

**Organizing Environments**

Freya Mathew’s panpsychism offers an example of new materialist thought particularly resonant with this chapter’s portrayals of Native landscapes. Mathew’s *For Love of Matter* and *Reinhabiting Reality* argue that the world is communicative and that matter possesses a “subjectival” interiority even if objects do not possess subjectivity.
Mathews offers a version of *new* materialism because it grants a liveliness to matter that Western philosophical traditions have dismissed.

In her works, Mathews occasionally references non-Western worldviews, particularly Australian Aboriginal beliefs, acknowledging that “some of what have in the Western tradition been judged as primitive forms of knowledge, or the forms of knowledge adopted by primitive cultures, may in fact have been strategies for encountering the world” (*For Love of Matter* 79). Mathews here offers a starting point for dialogue between different worldviews. As material ecocriticism draws on scholars such as Mathews, it should pay attention to how it frames “Other” forms of knowledge, with particular attention to the common pitfalls of primitivism and the articulation of worldviews as successive or mutually exclusive. LaDuke’s novel is one of many examples that show why the strategies Mathews mentions need not reference shadowy “primitive” cultures only in the past tense: the work of Erdrich, LaDuke, and their contemporaries shows the evolving vitality of traditional worldviews relating people to place. Critical theory has often aimed to decouple associations between people and more-than-human land and beings, because such associations have historically served ideologies justifying enslavement and genocide. But in an age of advancing ecological destruction, we need sensitive theory that exposes and resists such justifications without sacrificing the crucial acknowledgment of our relations with the rest of the world, our ability to identify with the land that we are.

How can these concerns about treaties, land, and identity connect with environmental justice? Government and industries have targeted reservations as sites for dumping toxic chemicals or weapons testing, while mining, logging, and development
interests continue to threaten ancestral homelands not part of official reservations, endangering traditional lifeways as they disrupt ecosystems. Climate change exacerbates these troubles. LaDuke’s activism and nonfiction essays draw attention to such concerns, while Last Standing Woman imagines forms of collective resistance and activism. In an exemplary chapter, Anishinaabe women organize as a group to end a girl’s abuse on the reservation. The collective action empowers the women and helps heal the pervasive, intangible “sickness” the women feel in their home environment (233). Combining particular moments like this within a longer history of the Anishinaabeg, and employing magical realist moments to more fully convey how borders and identities co-create, LaDuke’s novel reveals the kinds of treaties and reservation formations that impact multiple generations of inhabitants on the White Earth reservation.

Meanwhile, although Erdrich’s fiction may not espouse environmental themes directly, her keen attention to the landscape and its value as more than just a resource is important. Beyond her fiction, Erdrich has assumed more environmentalist roles. In early 2013, she joined other activists to ride the Earth Train to Washington, D.C. in order to protest climate change and the lack of a more efficient U.S. railway system. She said, “We realized that the climate change movement parallels many of the major issues for Native America right now, and that is resource extraction and the tremendous toll it is taking on Native communities” (qtd. in Keith, n. pag.). In the Minneapolis Star Tribune, Erdrich offers a commentary opposing the city’s commuter rail construction plans, arguing that the proposal would disrupt homes and destroy green spaces and tarnish the image of a city that promotes “loving care of the physical world” (“Southwest Commuter”). On her Facebook page in February 2014, she posted photos from a
Keystone XL pipeline protest and urged people to join Bill McKibben’s climate activism group, 350.org. In these articles and posts, Erdrich advocates for the protection of the environment not in terms of its economic value but rather for its intimate relation to human communities dependent upon them. This ethic is also evident in her fiction, where she suggests that caring for the environment is good cultural practice for the Anishinaabeg living on the Little No Horse reservation and surrounding land.

LaDuke and Erdrich’s works embody their commitment to environmental justice influenced by Anishinaabe perspectives, an obligation to protect land and to honor women. Material ecocriticism provides an analytical perspective for examining how physical, textual, and identity borders affect these obligations. The agentic capacities of tools and objects, reservation lines, and physical bodies complicate standard notions of individual subjective agency. The dividing of land into territories shows how “fictional” organizing of land through political demarcation produces very real ecological effects for its inhabitants. I consider some of these effects in the next chapter in terms of environmental resources—how they are found, and how they dynamically intra-act with those who seek to extract them and those who seek to defend them. Fresh water stands out as a unique “resource” for environmental justice struggles, displaying its own agentic capacities as activists advocate for its protection.
Chapter Three

Bodies of Water: Resource Extraction Makes Waves

The Yellow Dog Plains lie amidst some half-million acres of remote pine stands, woodlands, and wetlands in the heart of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula (U.P.). They are also part of Anishinaabe homelands and adjacent to the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community. In 2003, residents and activists began protesting a nickel and copper mining operation proposed by Kennecott Minerals (owned by Rio Tinto). In the following years, despite Kennecott commencing its Eagle Project on the Yellow Dog Plains—fencing off public land and boring a main mine portal into Migi zii wa sin, the Anishinaabe sacred site also known as Eagle Rock—protestors continue to mobilize in resisting the mining project while raising awareness about similar projects planned for the region. Activists have successfully delayed the operations of the present mine by contesting permitting processes, have protected wetlands from a mining road being built, and have developed a new wave of resistance against legacies of extraction and exploitation in the Upper Midwest.

This region is no stranger to resource extraction; nineteenth-century industries clear-cut white pine forests and heavily mined iron and copper. However, it is now perched amidst a new wave of resource extraction sweeping across the continent. Perhaps the most reported examples have been hydraulic fracturing for natural gas and the oil extraction of Alberta’s tar sands. Such operations, with their risks to surrounding environments, demonstrate the increasingly desperate and dangerous ways in which nonrenewable energy and resource demands are to be met in the future. These are
compounded by the dangers of global warming, which exacerbate conditions like water scarcity. With Lake Superior alone containing ten percent of the world’s fresh water, the Great Lakes stand as major targets in future deliberations about water. Proposed and extant resource extraction of minerals (including the Eagle Mine and proposed iron mining in the Penokee Hills of Wisconsin) threatens the quality of Great Lakes freshwater with industrial pollution. A major reason for opposition to the Eagle Mine, for instance, is the fact that it is a sulfide mine; extracted ore, once in contact with the air, produces sulfuric acid that can contaminate streams and threaten life, including the endangered coaster brook trout. It also infringes on access to state public land and on treaty rights.

Thus far, I have wondered how active materiality can invite conversations between material ecocriticism and Native literary studies. Instead of pursuing analogies between them, I have encouraged an approach that draws on both in order to advance environmental justice. Proceeding from chapter two’s acknowledgment that identities are co-constituted with vibrant, material lands, this chapter approaches matter from another angle: I focus on water in order to address resource extraction and the concept of environmental resources. Reading literature with a critical focus informed by Native studies and material ecocriticism encourages thinking beyond the term *resources*. Connecting all life, water is an environmental resource unlike any other, and water security stands to become a defining challenge of the twenty-first century as scarcity and pollution intensify.

In chapter one, I pointed out the temptation for people to state that new materialisms are “just like” traditional indigenous worldviews. Though such observations
might be useful for beginning a conversation, without further exploration they wane into platitudinous stories that romanticize Native cultures. The recognition of “traditional worldviews” as belonging to ancient cultures often wrongly implies that the peoples who held these worldviews no longer exist, or that their descendants are less authentic in espousing them. However unintentionally, the non-Native new materialist who makes superficial references to animism or other trends in traditional Native worldviews thus risks perpetuating tropes like the vanishing Indian or ecological Indian.

Given that such associations most often involve the vitality of matter, one way to move beyond references to bygone animist traditions is to consider how contemporary Native environmental activists use traditional, tribally derived understandings of environmental or natural resources to advance ecological ethics. Although many concepts are available, I focus in this chapter on the idea of resources as relatives. It is a version of “all my relations,” the web of responsibilities and ecological interconnection key to the relational ontologies of many indigenous cultures and excellently captured by Daniel Wildcat’s indigenous realism, which, instead of prescribing sustainable resource use, “entails that we, members of humankind, accept our inalienable responsibilities as members of the planet’s complex life system” (9). I draw on indigenous realism to examine current resource extraction projects in the Upper Midwest.

Current Native environmentalist groups revive and redeploy these relational concepts. Reasserting resources as relatives empowers people to connect deeply with their environments and to fight for them. These groups frequently rely on grassroots organizing to form themselves and to join coalitions with non-Native environmental groups. Current literature captures these emerging movements and the directions they
take toward revaluing environments. While some of this literature is put into print, much of it appears online, where a significant portion of the organizing also takes place. Thus, I rely on the creative works appearing on some of these sites and blogs to identify alternative conceptions of materiality and environmental resources.

For Native and non-Native organizing in the Great Lakes region, water has profound material and symbolic abilities to link people together. Crucial to life and more tangible than air, water is as deeply embedded in our psyches as it is in our composition, ubiquitous in myth and religion and influential for philosophers and artists; Gaston Bachelard writes, “Plus qu’aucun autre élément peut-être, l’eau est une réalité poétique complète,” (“Perhaps more than any other element, water is a complete poetic reality”; 23). Depictions of water revise the popular Gaian imagery attached to the environmental activism of preceding decades; in addition to or in place of these particular versions of Mother Earth, water is increasingly seen as an entity deserving respect and in need of protection. Certainly, given the compounding dangers of climate destabilization, the accumulation of nonbiodegradable debris in acidifying oceans, and the pollution of freshwater (by pesticides, radiation, prescription drugs, or extreme energy production), it seems more urgent than ever to hear water’s voice and to create art, criticism, and activism in support of its integrity.

It is inspiring to witness a rising tide of cultural and theoretical work about water influenced by the material turn. The collection Thinking with Water exemplifies this approach. Essays by scholars, activists, and artists commingle with poems and photography. Native writers are present, and many non-Native contributors also reference Native writers. These collaborations offer compelling ways to bring water into cultural
discourse; as co-editor Cecelia Chen writes, “Thinking of water as a resource is a way of thinking about (and not with) water... Water is much more than a resource. It is a socio-natural force—an active agent of overflow, creation, and destruction” (267-77). Thinking with water rather than just writing about aquatic metaphors is an exciting, challenging prospect, one undertaken by the writers I consider in this chapter.

Even when water is not the primary resource targeted for use, its omnipresence in the Great Lakes region assures that it remains a major figure in discussions of resource extraction. However often water is labeled an inert commodity, it frustrates these interpretations by revealing itself as a potent, vital force and a gathering point for multiple environmental justice struggles.¹ Anishinaabe people remain crucial in leading this struggle. In waging resistance to environmental degradation, they draw on and contribute to ongoing cultural traditions in what Anishinaabe scholar Leanne Simpson has termed resurgence. Simpson writes, “In essence, we need to not just figure out who we are [as Native peoples]; we need to re-establish the processes by which we live who we are within the current context we find ourselves... Building diverse, nation-culture-based resurgences means significantly re-investing in our own ways of being” (17). The artistic and collaborative strategies pursued by Upper Peninsula Anishinaabeg not only raise environmental awareness but also contribute to reestablishing these processes of resurgence.

What happens when matter resists, whether this matter is a resource itself (e.g.,

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¹ Naomi Klein observes, “In fact, what has emerged in the movement against extreme extraction is less an anti-fossil fuels movement than a pro-water movement... The duty to protect water... is the animating force behind every single movement fighting extreme extraction” (344-45). This duty is demonstrated by the activists and fictional characters discussed below.
difficult-to-reach oil deposits) or matter in the form of human bodies amassed in protest? I argue that when matter resists, such moments can raise awareness that the human is an embedded part of multiple lively materialities; furthermore, this awareness supports coalitional activism that can unite supposedly distinct sociopolitical struggles. For instance, when Paul DeMain (Oneida), formed the Penokee Hills Harvest Camp to protest Gogebic Taconite’s proposed open-pit iron ore mine in Wisconsin (which if constructed would become the largest in the world), his activism cleverly aligned concerns about the environment and about settler colonialism. Tribal citizens and non-Natives who participated in this productive occupation gathered wild leeks and morel mushrooms. In a report on the camp, DeMain humorously proposed a unique identity for the campers: a whole new tribe. “Enrollment requirements for the Penokee tribe are stringent . . . they require all members prove they are at least 70 percent water” (Pember). DeMain’s formulation plays on the colonialist yet common way of determining tribal enrollment by blood quantum while also underscoring the basic yet too-easily-forgotten fact that we all depend on water.

Indeed, we are water more than anything else. Human bodies are more than half water, upon which they depend for the functioning of their complex systems, each arranged in chains of matter and communication. As resource extraction threatens the ecological health of water and people, literary investigations can identify and amplify resistance to such threats by drawing on the combined strengths of material ecocriticism and Native studies.
Uploading U.P. Activism

Resistance to the U.P.’s Eagle Mine emerged alongside the worldwide expansion of social media and web activism. Over the years the opposition increasingly went online, with local residents using Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and blogs to campaign and organize. The literary resistance to the mine first appeared online as well, and therefore, before I turn to print publications, I will discuss blogs that published such works while informing concerned citizens about the mine.

Extant research on political or activist blog writing is mostly quantitative, and data are not easily acquired given the ephemerality of most websites, the frequency of collective authorship, and the diffusive nature of web browsing. Despite these features, and sometimes because of them, blogs support collective identification, action coordination, and public awareness over issues that may not receive attention elsewhere in the media. The Internet and social media thus promote a kind of “Protest 2.0” (Petray), allowing new ways for people to resist. Manuel Castells, in Networks of Outrage and Hope, observes how online activism mobilizes social movements in the wider world; Internet-savvy activists “subvert the practice of communication as usual by occupying the medium and creating the message. . . . They fight the powers that be by identifying the networks that are” (9). Blogs might be difficult to analyze, and some might be better categorized—along with one-click petitions or rants in isolated online forums—as online slacktivism rather than activism. In other instances, however, they have the potential to build momentum by linking concerned citizens to other artists and activists.

The resistance to the Eagle Project is a good example of Protest 2.0. Of the websites created in response to the mine, the most prominent and ongoing is Save the
Wild UP (SWUP), which describes itself as “a grassroots environmental organization dedicated to the preservation of the Upper Peninsula’s unique cultural and natural resources.” While focusing on the Eagle Project, SWUP has become a hub for environmental activism in the area. It lists as allies other environmental groups, watershed partnerships, and the local Keweenaw Bay Indian Community (KBIC). It has developed an internship program and in 2013 sent its Executive Director to Rio Tinto’s Annual General Meeting in London to express opposition to the mine; these and other activities are well documented on the site alongside resources for those unfamiliar with the Eagle Project.

While current and prospective mining projects echo the Upper Peninsula’s history of resource extraction, they are met with unprecedented forms of resistance, both in the sense of new coalitions of peoples and worldviews and in the sense of those coalitions utilizing new technologies like blogs and social media. Although the Eagle Mine has been constructed—the mine was sold to Lundin Mining in July 2013, and production at the site commenced in 2014—it has also instigated a wide-ranging network of activists and residents who are working together to protect resources and their relationships to the land and water. It should be heartening for those concerned with Eagle Mine to witness the exceptional advocacy and environmental organizing that originated with this issue. SWUP, KBIC, and other groups have coordinated well and created an effective online presence to address future land use issues. Such organizing has also helped draw attention to proposed projects in nearby areas, galvanizing people to get involved and stay informed, their vigilance enhanced by accessible blogrolls and update feeds.

Native concerns and opposition to extractive projects continue to promote a
relational understanding of water. Mike Wiggins, tribal chairman for the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, says, “Bad River people aren’t random water, just like anybody reading this isn’t random water. Up in Bad River, most of the tribal members walking around are Penokee Mountain-groundwater aquifer water” (Collins, “Saving”); meanwhile, Bryan Bainbridge, head of natural resources for the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, affirms, “We hold these waters in the highest regard, kind of like you would a mother, father or even your grandparents to whom you look to for knowledge, comfort, protection and survival” (Collins, “Undermining”). Such perspectives became a theme in some of the most prominent blogs during the development of the Eagle Mine.

While dozens of sites appeared and many drew upon environmental justice arguments, two in particular focused on Native voices, Stand For the Land and Keepers of the Water. I am interested in the blogs as a site for organizing different creative writers as part of the resistance to extractive industries. Posting to blogs in addition to publishing in print collections has helped writers identify as community activists who can respond in real time to mining project developments and who can connect to resistance movements beyond their home region. I take Cecelia Rose LaPointe’s work as a major example. A member of the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community, LaPointe served as Director of Keepers of the Water and contributed frequently to its website; her poetry also appears on her personal website and in the print collections Voice on the Water: Great Lakes Native America Now (2011) and Honouring Indigenous Women: Hearts of Nations (two volumes, 2011 and 2012). Presenting a strong Native identity and speaking out for

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2 Keepers of the Water is now defunct, while Stand for the Land hasn’t had a post since January 2013. Nonetheless, I find analyzing their posts relevant for the prominence they played during particular phases of opposition to the Eagle Mine.
water protection, LaPointe’s work (hyper)links to related projects, including water walkers like Josephine Madamin and U.P. Native ecological educational programs.

*Stand for the Land*, a co-written blog whose first post occurred in April 2010, traces an emerging environmental consciousness based primarily on Kennecott/Lundin’s Eagle Project, but its purpose extends to the larger mission of “defending land and water rights in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula.” The blog takes as its founding event the arrest of area resident Cynthia Pryor for trespassing on the mine site, which she argued was public land at the time, since the company’s lease of the land was still awaiting permits before it could begin construction. The blog posts narrate Pryor’s story but also shift to emphasize the occupation of Migi zii wa sin by KBIC members Charlotte Loonsfoot, Chalsea Smith, and Chris Chosa and others; Loonsfoot and Chosa were also arrested in May 2010 after a month-long occupation. The blog was named for these incidents, and it became a hub for advertising local rallies and events, including a Stand for the Land rally at the state capitol in Lansing and the Protect the Earth Great Lakes Community Gathering in Marquette.

*Stand for the Land* records the ongoing resistance to the mine but also supports broader consciousness of environmental justice, including posts on Anishinaabe treaty rights and culminating in the Idle No More movement that emerged in 2012. KBIC member Dave Mayo addresses this consciousness in a post, writing to the mining company, “Start inviting us to your table so we can discuss these matters. We are the true stewards of this land; our women are the keepers of the water. We offer to let you use it, walk about it as you please. Just respect it; you can’t do anything you want on our land” (“O’dewe’igan”). A visitor to the site named Marty replies in a comment, “I respect the
Anishinaabeg although I am not a member of their nation and I stand behind them totally.” Such an exchange online reflects the nature of offline activism as well.

Ultimately, *Stand for the Land* creates a new online narrative that fosters a coalition of Native and non-Native activists. They seek environmental justice that recognizes larger colonial and imperial schemes at work in U.P. mining and that respects land and water not as mere resources, but sacred sites bound in relationships with people.

Where *Stand for the Land* builds itself out of the specific instance of the Eagle Mine to express larger ecological and political concerns, *Keepers of the Water* originates from a more explicitly Anishinaabe perspective that argues for renewing respect of Gichigami (Lake Superior) and other waterways in Anishinaabe Territory, thereby advancing conceptions of water and land as more than mere resources. Launched in summer 2012, this blog is also co-written, though it features many articles by Keweenaw Bay Indian Community member and mining consultant Jessica Koski as well as several poems by Cecelia LaPointe. *Keepers* expresses more direct ties to Idle No More than *Stand for the Land*, and it also celebrates local Great Lakes water walks by Anishinaabe women to raise awareness about water issues. Embracing Idle No More’s indigenous ecofeminist emphasis, this blog also foregrounds Native women’s issues and their leadership roles in anticolonial and environmental resistance campaigns. This blog shows environmental justice activism grounded in Anishinaabe culture and traditions. Together with *Stand for the Land*, it constellates emergent environmental justice activism mobilized against the Eagle Mine, but quickly expands into an argument for transforming environmental resource use via more relational understandings of water and matter.

Imbuing its activism with Native relational perspectives, *Keepers of the Water*
demonstrates Leanne Simpson’s concept of resurgence. The “About” section of the blog announces, “Keepers of the Water is an Indigenous women’s led organization guided by traditional Anishinaabekwe [Anishinaabe women] values and responsibilities. We work to protect the waters of the Great Lakes acting in spiritual and political ways.” These spiritual ways often manifest themselves in artistic projects, which also suggest political initiatives. Interspersed with posts about political rallies and government hearings are posts announcing performances and readings that raise awareness for water protection and celebrate Anishinaabe culture.

The Keepers of the Water mission statement further outlines their concerns for environmental justice, with particularly keen attention to women and water. It addresses a split between the realms of the political and the spiritual, acknowledging the complexity of interaction between worldviews. But rather than suppress spiritual discourse in order to satisfy or gain access to privileged environmental discourse couched in secular legal and scientific terms, the Keepers refuse to subordinate the discussion of the spiritual. Indeed, they foreground this category more than any other, declaring in the opening of the Mission Statement, “We will work in a spiritual way, guided by Ojibwe traditions, to protect *nibi* (water). We will also work in political ways, if needed, to raise awareness of the importance of this water that sustains us and all living things.” This statement prioritizes the spiritual as a distinct category from the political; however, the declaration nonetheless conveys a political motivation. Members and affiliates of Keepers of the Water certainly work in recognizably political ways—shown by rallies, protests, and gatherings—but even in asserting the spiritual, the group conveys a political message, one that critiques the settler hegemony embedded in political discourse. By calling into
question the presuppositions that (Western) politics hold about reality, the group’s
spiritual call encourages more honest engagement with multiple worldviews. Specifically,
and resonant with new materialist projects, the spiritual and ethical focus of Keepers on
protecting and defending *nibi* resists a definition of water as an objective resource,
instead presenting it as an entity with whom humans and others relate.

Whether or not these politico-spiritual initiatives gain traction with prevailing
industrial and governmental organizations—and it is hard to imagine extractive
companies conceding to worldviews that trouble their currently profitable
arrangements—the assertions made by the contributors to the *Keepers* blog do advance
resurgences of Native cultures and lifeways. As the Keepers and related groups speak out
against daunting threats to land and water, each post and action contributes to a
burgeoning movement of self-determination and pride. Even as artists and activists speak
out to defend water, water gives them a renewed sense of collective identity and vision,
offering itself to the ongoing cultural production by Anishinaabe artists. The poet and
artist Cecelia LaPointe exemplifies this exchange.

LaPointe was a main coordinator for *Keepers* whose work appears in several posts
and in links to her own blog. LaPointe’s poem “Women, Water, Spirit,” posted to the
*Keepers* blog, captures the sentiment of women’s leadership roles also popularized by
Idle No More, while also foregrounding a spiritual, relational understanding of water.
Alternating between the figure of a single woman and groups of Native women
(grandmothers and aunties), LaPointe deploys single-word lines, a technique common in
her work, in order to describe the productive, creative, and guiding actions of these
women. Near the end of the poem, the focus returns to the single woman: “She listens to
the water / What does the water say? / How does the water feel? / If it is hurt? / She feels her heart, / It is connected to the water, / To her h

Water here is decidedly not an inanimate resource, but a speaking, feeling entity intimately connected to women. The poem’s reference to carrying water in a copper bucket alludes to Josephine Mandamin, an Anishinaabe elder who helped create the Mother Earth Water Walkers in 2002 and has since led several walks around the Great Lakes, carrying water in a copper pail (Bédard 103). Mandamin asserts that the project was inspired during a conversation with other Native women and that the walks themselves are “spiritual” (qtd. in Bédard 104). Her quiet dignity and impressive endurance contribute to the moral and emotional appeal of this quest for greater respect for water.

The Keepers of the Water blog clearly draws from Mandamin and other Anishinaabe women who are asserting their sacred connections to water and their responsibilities for caring for it as a relative. LaPointe’s poetry affirms the spiritual mission of the Keepers of the Water, and it is intriguing that a fair number of Native artists expressing related themes choose to employ poetry. Poetry’s prevalence is due perhaps to the special position it holds between fixed prose and dynamic performance, or because of its shorter form, well suited for a quick scroll through a blog. Also significant here is the manner in which poetry allows these writers to convey a sense of the spiritual motives underlying these water walks and gatherings. Confluent with their urgent optimism, LaPointe’s poems convey a sense of the sacred. Their form and repetition are not simply poetic, but prayerful. In being intelligible as poetry, they also grant spiritual

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3 The LaPointe poems analyzed most extensively in this chapter are reprinted in the Appendix.
worldviews entry into environmental and political discussions that might otherwise overlook them.

For the Keepers of the Water, a key form of denying vitality would be the degradation of land and water. Commonly understood environmental threats to water—damming, pollution, overuse—acquire new ways of being understood as threats to its vitality, both from Native spiritual perspectives and from new materialist ones like Jane Bennett’s, considered below. But if such perspectives affirm lively materiality, they also feature important differences. For instance, new materialists might emphasize the non- or other-than-human nature of water, while for the Anishinaabe women discussed here, water may not be an entirely nonhuman entity but instead belong to a more inclusive definition of humanity. Elder Josephine Mandamin expresses such an idea in saying that women are particularly suited to speak for water “because [water] is the mother earth, it is the woman” (qtd. in Bédard 99). Keepers of the Water could be speaking for water; they could also be water speaking.

Despite these invigorating ways of perceiving matter, which along with Anishinaabe assertions about water could be enlisted to protest environmental degradation, the Eagle Mine has begun its extraction of nickel and copper from the Yellow Dog Plains. As the temporary mining jobs that fueled much of the support for the mine taper off or vanish completely as the mine completes its excavation within the next decade, what will remain are the commitments residents have made to their land and water as well as a growing appreciation for new creative works that celebrate the region. Significantly, these works challenge corporate notions of “resources” by instead presenting them as vital entities embedded in relationships with people. Showing itself in
poetry, this politico-spiritual imperative gives promise to people that the production, sharing, and discussion of literature contributes to the evolution of worldviews and the pursuit of environmental justice.

Telling old stories and creating new ones is a crucial part of building both a resilient environmental movement and promoting cultural resurgence. This is expressed in the end of LaPointe’s poem “Women, Water, Spirit” as water becomes the gathering place for these assemblages or entities. She writes,

We hold hands around these waters,
We hold hands in unity,
We hold hands for healing.
We hold hands for justice,
We hold hands as keepers of the water.

At first glance, critics might be quick to categorize LaPointe’s work as protest poetry, dismissible for being too straightforward or for appearing more on blogs than in glossy chapbooks. However, such a reading grossly overlooks the aesthetic craft of the poems and their relevance to community building. Her work’s accessibility online greatly bolsters its power to encourage activism. Her poems capture the vitality of an emergent, twenty-first-century Native environmental movement while also adding to a growing body of work by Anishinaabe women. The poems that appear in the Keepers of the Water newsfeed (and indexed in its “Women, Water, Spirit” section) feature driving cadences that convey not only the urgency invoked by activists addressing current environmental crises, but also express the enthusiasm among a growing group of committed Native youth working to defend land and water.
LaPointe’s poem “Idle No More, Youth” replicates these sentiments in content and form. Most lines consist of a single word, producing a slender line and deliberate momentum, whether these lines are read in quick succession or paced to produce a more marching effect. The speaker celebrates the youth joining the Idle No More movement, encouraging them and cataloging the numerous ways in which they participate: the speaker exclaims, “Be proud of your culture / . . . / Show up / Howevya you wanna be.” The ten gerunds comprising the second stanza roll along in a blend of imaginative and creative actions. As these different verbs unite in their repetitive “-ing” ending, so have the varied activities of Idle No More activists from distant communities joined in solidarity, witnessed in the imagery of diverse peoples joining in flash mobs at malls to dance to the repetitive beat of drums. Less spectacular but equally important are the thousands who visited the Keepers website to read and reflect on LaPointe’s poetry, which, along with the works of other Upper Peninsula environmentalist and anticolonial writers, has migrated beyond online spaces.

**From Blogs to Print**

Literary resistance to current extractive projects has also appeared in print. *Voice on the Water*, published by Northern Michigan University Press in 2011, includes several of the blog writers above as well as a nonfiction piece on the opposition to Eagle Mine. The collection of essays, poetry, fiction, and artwork enacts vibrant regional restorying that affirms the resurgence of Anishinaabe culture and calls for environmental justice. These works draw attention to resource use, aligning legacies of colonialism and cultural oppression alongside those of logging and mining industries. They also celebrate
alternative futures, particularly anticipating those in which relationships with environments are restored. Aimée Cree Dunn’s story “Backroads,” for example, brings these ideas to life in the story of a young Métis man, Jacques, who struggles to provide for himself and his family against a dominant culture of extraction that cuts him off from his own land. Early in the story, Jacques notes the absence of wolves in the forests, thinking they had been “driven away by the recent increase in logging traffic brought on by the new biofuel plant. This new eater of forests was a branch of the iron mining industry that had ruined vast tracts of U.P. Land. ‘Our land,’ he muttered” (44). Dunn’s story articulates an understanding of land as the basis for a community that includes the other-than-human (here, wolves) against a perspective that sees only resources to be consumed and extracted. It also subtly critiques supposedly green industries like biofuels, showing how these industries market images of sustainability but are not without their own environmental costs, here the logging required to establish the plant. Insofar as they are aligned with consumer capitalism, such industries represent a kind of environmentalism often at odds with those fostered from Native anticolonial perspectives.

Cecelia LaPointe joins Dunn’s call for decolonization in her contribution to *Voice on the Water*, her poem titled “Wounding of Our Womb.” Each of the seven slender stanzas begins with “She plays classical music,” referring to the main persona aside from the female speaker, and each ends with “love.” The poem presents a supportive relationship between these women, survivors of violence; it also establishes two settings

Likewise, proponents of the Eagle Mine point out how the nickel being extracted will find its way into millions of electric and hybrid vehicle batteries, thus greenwashing the environmental threats of metallic sulfide mining.
that the speaker travels between, a rural-feeling suburban home and an urban core.

This poem follows its title in using the plural possessive “our” in reference to a singular “womb,” but it also uses other pronouns; in the first instance, the speaker says, “the wounding of my womb” (148). The speaker acknowledges her past abuse, specifying the “violence / pain / fear” that is part of the home’s past. The other female persona, who plays classical music, is also a victim and witness to sexual violence: “in the wounding of my womb, / our womb, / we cried, / there was pain, / oppression, / violence against Native women” (148). The plural pronoun encompasses their shared trauma while also signaling solidarity with a larger community of Native women. While the poem recounts these multiple instances of violence, it also functions as a healing act by empowering the speaker to tell her story and by its formal the repetition of “love” at the end of every stanza, a hopeful one-word refrain linking “Native sister to Native sister, / Anishinaabekwe supporting another Anishinaabekwe” (149).

“Wounding of Our Womb” (included in a section of Voice on the Water entitled “Survival”) decries abuse of Native women and supports healing; however, the gestures attributing this violence to colonization and other systems are the same gestures that invite readers to consider ecological issues. The poem’s contrasting domestic and urban spaces reveal these associations. After detailing her own abuse, the speaker ties her memories to the urban: “to travel down the industrial freeways, / to the urban core, / to feel what I felt, / in the wounding of my womb, / our womb” (148). The connection is most explicit in the next and penultimate stanza:
She played classical music,
sometimes I turned the station on in my car,
all the way down,
down the industrial freeways to the urban core,
the urban core which wounded my womb,
wounded her womb, wounded our womb. (149)

While the speaker never identifies an individual responsible for her own wounding, here the urban core becomes the perpetrator of related violence on a larger scale. By traveling the freeway, the speaker aligns her pain with an urban space and further connects it with the pain of other Native women, as “I” becomes “hers” becomes “ours” in rapid succession. Of the various ways to interpret the urban core as the perpetrator of wounding (e.g., a symbol of settler development or of urban relocation programs in the mid-twentieth century) environmental degradation is a candidate readily evoked by references to feminine fertility.

As a shared singular, “our womb” is nonspecific enough to include maternal figures besides human women. It alludes both to the Gaian imagery common to Western perspectives and to the Mother Earth of pantribal Native movements. As the setting shifts to an industrial city space, the source of the womb’s wounding, it is easier to take “our womb” to mean Earth. Cityscapes have a long tradition of serving as popular icons of environmental degradation, and that seems the intent in this poem, given how the freeways and urban core sharply contrast with the poem’s other setting, a pleasant domestic space whose lavender, vanilla, and floral colors give it a “country feel” (148).

LaPointe is clearly an anticolonialist before she is an environmentalist. Indeed,
she does not identify with the latter term despite holding a master’s degree in Environmental Leadership (“Re: [Contact & Lead Form]”). In her poetry, the term “environmentalists” refers to forms of conservation-based environmentalism that have been used against Native peoples, serving instead the sentiments and political aims of settler cultures (e.g., the eviction of American Indians from national parks to foster myths of untouched wilderness, the Makah whale hunt). The sentiment is most apparent in her poem “‘All One’ Is Colonization and Violence”: “The hippie movement is exclusive, / ‘Environmentalists’ are discriminatory and racist.” Similarly, her emphasis on Native women’s issues is wary of any kind of pseudo-ecofeminism that homogenizes Native experiences and leaves non-Native female privilege unchecked. While recognizing that not all environmental movements advance social justice issues, LaPointe nevertheless remains deeply concerned for land and water. The environmental allusion of “Wounding of Our Womb” intensifies given its appearance in Voice on the Water, a collection that returns repeatedly to the Eagle Mine and other environmental issues in the Great Lakes. If the poem references a generic sense of Mother Earth, it also refuses to rely on such a trope; readers must attend to the individual experience of the speaker and her companion

5 In “Ecofeminism and Native American Cultures,” Greta Gaard warns of the potential for ecofeminism to coopt Native American cultures. “Without stealing pieces from other cultures,” she argues, ecofeminism can express its spiritual dimensions and emphasis on the interconnection of all life (309). Of course, policing cultural boundaries can backfire. Stacy Alaimo observes how, “in an effort to avoid appropriation, critics can further marginalize certain works by assuming that their cultural context is ‘limited’ to Native American culture” (“Displacing Darwin” 64 n.4); the problem worsens when myriad, diverse Native cultures are effectively homogenized into a single culture. Fortunately, ecofeminism works to build alliances without assimilating difference, and its establishment and evolution continues to inform the environmental humanities. Pointing out that many ecofeminist concerns have preceded ecocriticism, Gaard critiques the defamation of ecofeminism and defends its scope and vision: “The history of ecofeminism merits recuperation, both for the intellectual lineage it provides and for the feminist force it give to contemporary theory” (“Ecofeminism Revisited” 42-3).
as well. LaPointe’s perspective demands intersectional analysis and refuses facile “we’re-all-one” coalitions that erase significant differences.

LaPointe’s contributions to the two-volume *Honouring Indigenous Women: Hearts of Nations*, another print collection, maintain her emphasis on Native women and their relationship to a living Earth. In the first volume, her poem “And If We Cry” affirms crying as an empowering, restorative act that connects griever’s with their ancestors and with the land: “When our tears, / Fell to the Earth in silence, / The Earth listened” (11). Later in the poem, ancestors and future generations join the Earth as witnesses to those who cry, reassuring them that they are not alone. Land and relatives remain closely aligned in the second volume as well. “Shkakaamik Kwe” addresses colonial and sexualized violence in a manner identifiable as ecofeminist. The speaker states, “The land, / My body, / Was injured in the name of ‘Christ’” (10). The land-as-woman motif has been thoroughly rehearsed and deconstructed in ecofeminism, yet LaPointe deploys it within an explicitly Native context to address how colonialism has enabled and perpetuated systematic violence against Native women in the forms of broken treaties, removal and assimilation, and sterilization programs. The defiant closing asserts both endurance and calls for reproductive justice. LaPointe maintains her poetry’s succinct lines in this collection, contributing to their directness and potency. LaPointe’s other poem in the second volume, “The Healing of the Women of Our Nations,” uses her incantatory style to call for “removing the chains” of oppression, marginalization, racism, and sexism (30). Once more, land and relatives are closely aligned in a process of healing. “Grounded firmly into the Earth, / Grounded into the wisdom of the ancestors,” part of Native resurgence that expands to include “all” (30).
LaPointe would be skeptical of the pantribal Mother Earth trope when carelessly appropriated by non-Natives and when it erases the specificities of Native cultures; her allusions to it, however, fittingly convey the solidarity of Native women and the interconnected violence they experience. Her emphasis on water, evinced in her personal blog and in *Keepers of the Water*, provides another way of expressing her themes. Water provides literal and metaphoric connections between people, a “sacred life force” more than a resource (“Anishinaabekwe Nibi”).

LaPointe consistently infuses her portrayals of water with the importance of relationships. Her poems are acts of healing and prayers for decolonization, chronicled in print anthologies and published online for the purpose of sharing poetry and inspiring activism. Her work bridges the local concerns about mining with global concerns for Native rights and caring for water. Drawing on Anishinaabe traditions and the support from her blogging communities, she creates poems that resist contemporary extractive industries and that present *nibi* in ways also recognized by new materialist understandings of matter.

**Merging Multiple Materialities for Water**

It is no small task to bring these compelling spiritual and artistic calls for environmental justice into political realms dominated by Western worldviews. While a host of dystopian writers critique the latter, some more optimistically anticipate the advent of relational ontologies as people cultivate their environmental consciousness in ways more responsible to the more-than-human world. Were such a radical transformation to occur—works like Paul Hawken’s *Blessed Unrest* suggest one may be
underway—then destructive and extractive industries might lose their dominance in world economies and governments.

Optimistic projections aside, recent developments in Western critical thought condition it for better dialogue with other worldviews that may in turn facilitate evolving political and economic models. Nascent revaluations of materiality may come to bear on political theories. Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* is a leading example, contributing to the revaluation of water as more than a mere environmental resource.

Bennett’s project in *Vibrant Matter* is to posit a vital materiality. She traces its contours using philosophy, including largely discredited ventures like vitalism, which she thinks can help shake up ontological assumptions that foreclose accounts of matter as more active and dynamic. She also emphasizes three concepts to flesh out vital materiality: *thing-power*, the ability for supposedly inanimate things to produce effects; *material recalcitrance*, when matter acts aside from or against human intentions; and *distributive agency*, which shuffles human subjects into larger assemblages of human and nonhuman actants, upsetting traditional notions of causality and intentionality.

Bennett’s work becomes especially salient for environmental resource discourse because her project entails a discussion of environmentalism. She finds mainstream environmentalism limited by its prevailing worldview that separates nature and culture. Bennett shifts away from the idea that humans exist as separate entities within surrounding environments by arguing that the world is comprised of assemblages of human and nonhuman agencies. She writes, “If environmentalists are selves who live on earth, vital materialists are selves who live as earth” (111). Humans, composed of minerals, electricity, and other organisms, are not separate from something called nature,
as well-worn ecological maxims about interconnectedness remind us.

Vibrant materialism takes this connectedness further by attributing purposiveness and agency to these larger, interconnected assemblages. Bennett writes, “It seems necessary and impossible to rewrite the default grammar of agency, a grammar that assigns activity to people and passivity to things” (119). Yet granting nonhumans such agency “tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiotica” (112). This broadening of relations quickly draws matter into ethical and political realms.

For Bennett, the distributive agency that emerges in a vital materialist conception of the world means humans are never “simply incapable of bearing full responsibility for their effects” (37), since they are always part of greater assemblages, yet it also means that there is a larger scope in which to consider blame and justice. The broadening of relations also invites consideration of other entities as politically significant subjects—though not discussed in Vibrant Matter, the Bolivian Law of the Rights of Mother Earth seems a readymade example—and Bennett defends anthropomorphism as one strategy to conceive of such entities while simultaneously resisting strict anthropocentrism. Vital materialist and posthumanist projects point out that anthropomorphism need not slavishly reinforce a narrow anthropocentrism. Indeed, as human essence unravels under the posthumanist lens, anthropomorphism functions differently. For once we begin to observe ourselves as ever-stranger, not-so-human assemblages, what qualities can we possibly project onto nonhuman things as uniquely “human”? A thoroughgoing critique of anthropomorphism should not stop with the human organism but lend itself to better understanding why certain affects, dispositions, and arrangements—the particular assemblages we recognize as ourselves—get called human. If we delimit certain sets of
assemblages as the category “human beings,” it should not be surprising to find some applicability of those characteristics outside of that category. Anthropomorphism becomes less a psychological error than a tool for including other beings into an ethical sphere of concern.

Enabling concern for the nonhuman is a worthwhile service for anthropomorphism, though Bennett is aware of its pitfalls. She acknowledges the potential for anthropomorphism to aggrandize human mastery. Drawing on Adorno, she warns of the temptation of anthropomorphism to put humans beyond the realm of what they can know, enabling “the violent hubris of Western philosophy” (13). And even broadening relationships does not mean dissolving hierarchies entirely. Some relationships matter more than others: “The political goal of a vital materialism is not the perfect equality of actants, but a polity with more channels of communication between members” (104). Bennett is speaking of a Western democratic politics here, but it is interesting to note the resonance with Native studies. Native relational ontologies often include this acknowledgment that not all actants are equal, while emphasizing that the point is to recognize the relationships and responsibilities among them (see Kyle Powys Whyte in chapter four). We do not need to challenge either of these models, but affirm their affinities to support political and intellectual work that enriches our current and future communities on this planet. Put another way, we must reconceive of resources as actants, as relatives—whatever our intellectual discourse. Given the pressing ecological crises of the Anthropocene, it should be helpful to broadcast this message in multiple discourses, especially in ways that harmonize across differences.

Reading Bennett’s conditional anthropomorphism alongside and through
American Indian worldviews in the above texts advances the diffractive method of the dissertation. Like deep ecology and related movements that ecocritics critique, American Indian perspectives often use “Mother Earth” and similar anthropomorphic concepts to describe connections with nature; however, they have also worked within the resource discourse ubiquitous in non-Native environmentalism. Walt Bresette (Anishinaabe), for instance, proposed a Seventh Generation Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: “The right of citizens of the United States to use and enjoy air, water, wildlife, and other renewable resources determined by the Congress to be common property shall not be impaired, nor shall such use impair their availability for the use of future generations” (qtd. in LaDuke, Relations 199; my emphasis). Environmental justice writing shows how arguments about resource use quickly expand to address communities and worldviews. Instead of being inert, quantifiable resources, water and minerals are vibrant participants in the world, our relatives.

Despite its emphasis on materialism, Bennett concludes Vibrant Matter not far from the spiritual space of Keepers of the Water. Conceding to the immense work yet to be done with such a radical project as vital materialism, she instead offers what she calls “a kind of Nicene Creed for would-be vital materialists” (122). This poetic, even prayerful closing resonates with the words of LaPointe and others about the sacredness of water, advocating for humility and asserting, “it is wrong to deny vitality to nonhuman bodies, forces, and forms” (122).

Bennett’s insights can be enlisted to further resist the mindset of those who unreservedly promote resource extraction, a mindset dependent on notions of passive, inert matter to conceive environmental resources in bluntly utilitarian terms. She asserts
that vital materiality affords a “sense of a strange and incomplete commonality with the out-side may induce vital materialists to treat nonhumans—animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities—more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically” (18). It is strange Bennett does not add water to this list; again, given that humans are more than half water, relating to it should be paramount. Indigenous speakers from diverse communities around the world resoundingly attest to the sacredness and vitality of water. It is a “storied matter” that flows between all stories just as water cycles in global systems. Turning to one ecologically minded Native novelist, Linda Hogan, I diffract a material ecocritical reading with her Native ecological perspective on water as both resource and relative.

**Keeping Promises to Water**

Linda Hogan’s work features a readily identifiable preoccupation with ecological issues. From her first novel *Mean Spirit*, about the development of oil resources on Osage land, to her recent novel *People of the Whale*, which considers traditional whaling rights alongside contemporary environmentalist concerns about endangered species, Hogan consistently orients her Native themes to ecological issues. She has shown her commitments further in such projects as her co-edited anthology *Intimate Nature: Women and Animals* and her foreword to *Ecological Feminist Criticism in the Twenty-First Century*.

For Hogan, Native cultures and ecological sustainability go hand-in-hand. She navigates the dissonance between the two terms by acknowledging differences between
Native cultures and Western environmentalism. She says of her work, “I try to stay just as totally well-rounded as I possibly can, so that I understand spirituality and environmental justice and what’s going on in the indigenous world and what’s going on in the Anglo world, and how to put all these things together” (qtd. in Harrison 164). Yet if these worlds are distinct, she also finds them in some ways commensurable. She says, “If I look back on my novels as a pattern, every one of them has a return to indigenous knowledge systems,” but she also suggests the relevance of environmentalist terms, since the indigenous people who inherit such systems have “lived some place for generation after generation . . . You know everything about that environment, and you don’t endanger it because you have to keep it—the new word is—‘sustainable’” (qtd. in Harrison 170). Keeping herself “well-rounded” and balanced between different ways of speaking about land, Hogan acknowledges the prominence of the term “sustainability” in contemporary environmentalist discourse, while also situating it as a “new” term for a longstanding value, thus affirming the continued relevance of traditional ecological knowledge.

I focus on one of Hogan’s 1995 novel Solar Storms, one of her most popular works and an important addition to environmental justice literature. Its return to indigenous knowledge recognizes the relationality of people and place by showing how resources, more than discrete commodities that can be managed or removed from land, are active entities that form relationships with those in close contact with them.

Fictionalizing the Hydro-Quebec James Bay project in Canada, the novel takes place in

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6 The debate is detailed by the publication of Shepherd Krech’s The Ecological Indian and the subsequent collection Native Americans and the Environment: Perspectives on the Ecological Indian, edited Michael E. Harkin.
lands adjacent to the Upper Midwest and deals with issues similar to the U.P. mining projects detailed above. Although the resource extracted is energy (not metals, as it is for the Eagle Project), both types of resource extraction endanger local lakes and rivers. Indeed, the damming projects do so in a much more dramatic way, flooding land and redirecting water on a large scale. The threats of damming and mining are all the more immediate given the extremely intricate, extensive waterways contained in these northern wetlands. The second sentence of *Solar Storms* explains, “It was the north country, the place where water was broken apart by land, land split open by water . . . . The elders said it was where land and water had joined together in an ancient pact, now broken” (21). With water suffusing the land, mining projects are all the more likely to leak pollution, and damming is all the more detrimental to complex hydrologic systems. The protagonist Angel comes to see the hydroelectric project as an evil darkness endemic in extractive industries and the cultures that support them:

> It was a darkness of words and ideas, wants and desires. This darkness came in the guise of laws made up by lawless men and people who were, as they explained, and believed, only doing their jobs. Part of the fast-moving darkness was the desire of those who wanted to conquer the land, the water, the rivers that kept running away from them. It was their desire to guide the waters, narrow them down into the thin black electrical wires that traversed the world. They wanted to control water, the rise and fall of it, the direction of its ancient life. They wanted its power. (268)

The passage suits not only the hydroelectric project in the novel, but effectively captures the horror many people feel in the face of environmental destruction. The darkness
connotes a sense of ignorance on the part of those who facilitate such destruction, while “just doing their jobs” evokes Hannah Arendt’s observations on the banality of evil. The darkness stems from legislative decisions made by people who may have no connections to the lands and communities they affect. These people may or may not be part of the second group mentioned, “those who wanted to conquer,” alluding through the word “conquer” to Euro-American settler colonial societies exerting dominion over land. The image of water being transformed into electrical wires links resource extraction to such legacies of control. Damming also links to mining as a fellow extractive enterprise, shown in the progression of the hydroelectric project; once an area was slated to be flooded, Angel explains, “there was a stepped-up effort to strip the land’s resources. The land was being drilled to see what else could be taken, looted, and mined before the waters covered this little length of earth” (218-19). As with the word “conquer,” the word “looted” here emphasizes the injustice of the project that makes profits for BEEVCO and its partners while destroying the homes and livelihood of others.

Just as water permeates the land in which *Solar Storms* is set, so too does it permeate the novel, serving as a primary metaphor and as an omnipresent force and entity. At first, the presence of water might indicate Angel’s attention to the unfamiliar place to which she has moved, since she has returned to Adam’s Rib after growing up in Oklahoma; she also doesn’t know how to swim when she arrives. Yet from these early moments in the novel, and with growing emphasis throughout, water is shown to be much more than the resource that the hydroelectric company BEEVCO takes it for. Upon Angel’s return to Adam’s Rib after being sent away as a child, her great-grandmother Agnes aligns water with the women in Angel’s family: “But I was like Agnes had said:
Water going back to itself. I was water falling into a lake and these women were that lake” (55). The figurative meaning soon blends with more literal understandings of belonging to water, and with the presence of water as its own entity. As these women unite in this image of a single lake, and as the intermingling land and water confuse their boundaries with each other, the narration of the novel fluidly slips from Angel to these other women, particularly in the opening pages between Angel and Agnes.

Angel retells her events with heavily expositive narration, at times using proleptic phrases to demonstrate that she has learned much from moving back to Adam’s Rib, from her journey further north with her female relatives, and from the anti-dam movement she takes part in there. In one proleptic moment, she remembers her early days in Adam’s Rib, when her stepmother Bush appeared to her as “equal parts light and water,” and she adds, “The world of water, in truth, had claimed her the way it did with people, the way it would one day claim me, although nothing (on that first day) could have convinced me of this. I was afraid of water” (67). A mature Angel narrates this passage and in so doing connects her family reunion with water. Reinforcing the close association of relatives and water, Angel’s fear of water parallels the trepidation she has over meeting her mother Hannah as the group travels north. Hannah suffered abuse and passed it on by cutting and scarring Angel. Before the journey, Angel notices a picture of Hannah holding her as a baby, before she was scarred; reflecting on it, Angel states, “I had an entangled memory, with good parts of it missing. I was returning to the watery places in order to unravel my mind and set straight what I had lost, which seemed like everything to me” (72).

Returning to watery places has the double meaning, as metaphor for a fluid, shifting and uncertain memory, and as the literal watery places of Adam’s Rib and the other northern
communities to which Angel returns.

While the water is shown to be an empowering entity in the book, neither it nor the women of Angel’s life are wholly comforting. Its existence as a powerful force appears early in the novel, confounding any purely figurative reading of its significance. Hogan captures this vitality by describing a unique watery location between Adam’s Rib and Bush’s home on Fur Island:

Halfway between Adam’s Rib and Fur Island was the Hungry Mouth of Water. It was a circle in the lake where winter ice never froze. Young people, with their new and shiny beliefs, called this place the Warm Spot, and thought it was geological oddity, a spring perhaps, or bad currents. But the older ones, whose gods still lived on earth, called it the Hungry Mouth of Water, because if water wasn’t a spirit, if water wasn’t a god that ruled their lives, nothing was. For centuries they had lived by nets and hooks, spears and ropes, by distances and depths. They’d lived on the rocking skin of water and the groaning ice it became. They swallowed it. It swallowed them. (62)

The description of Hungry Mouth allows Angel to express the ways in which different people understand water as something more than a resource or mere feature of a landscape. One can also sense in the passage Hogan’s preoccupation (mentioned in her interviews) with bridging different kinds of ecological knowledge. Younger people seek scientific explanations for Hungry Mouth, yet these are ultimately “shiny beliefs” that produce a limited, fixed understanding of this waterway predicated on a “faith” in positivistic scientific principles. The inclusion of this worldview in Angel’s description
suggests that, whether called the Warm Spot or Hungry Mouth, different ways of understanding this water are not entirely incompatible. The older view of the place should not be dismissed as superstition. While the younger scientific explanation might offer some comforting objective knowledge about the water, it offers little in the way of showing people how to respect and relate to it. The older understanding meanwhile links the people to the water, putting them into further awareness of the deep relationship they have with it. The description of a mutual swallowing at the passage’s end further embodies and materializes the relationship.

Angel’s cautious observation of water leads her to coexist with it, to understand and appreciate its wisdom. As she lives with Bush on Fur Island, she states, “I lived inside water. There was no separation between us. I knew in a moment what water was. It was what had been snow. It had passed through old forests, now gone. It was the sweetness of milk and corn and it had journeyed through human lives. It was blood spilled on the ground. Some of it was the blood of my ancestors” (78). The direct contact with water precipitates observations that are at first simple (snowmelt produces water) but which swiftly grow more profound as Angel paints the evocative picture of lost forests, food, and blood. She uses it to link herself to her unfamiliar ancestry and to realize her unity with a wider community of life, “part of the same equation as birds and rain” (79).

Angel’s understanding grows stronger as she begins her journey north with her relatives and is immersed physically and spiritually in water. Diving to view some rock paintings, she notes,
When I was inside water, I understood how these simple elements married and became a third thing. . . . In that moment, I remembered being fish. I remembered being oxygen and hydrogen, bird and wolverine. It was all there. I felt it in my heart. But I could never think what to call it after that. I only knew that I and my many mothers had been lost in sky, water, and the galaxy, as we rested on a planet so small it was invisible to the turning of other worlds. (179)

Here water facilitates further communion with life by provoking memories that seem deeper than the bloodlines of the previous passage, going further to produce a sense of evolutionary memory. An extended spatial scale complements this vastly expanded temporal scale, as Angel sees her family amidst the vastness of the galaxy. She also admits the difficulty in conveying the meaning of this communion, and comes to recognize that her direct experience has afforded her an understanding that might not make sense to others: “What was real in those land-broken waters, real even to me, were things others might call the superstitions of primitive people” (189). These superstitions recall the above gloss on the Hungry Mouth, but here, rather than merely commenting on the different ways of interpreting the water, Angel seems to side with a particular understanding. Having experienced water more deeply, having come to understand its vitality and deep relation to herself, Angel sees these worldviews others call primitive as more valuable and impossible to dismiss as superstitious.

Aside from characters’ perceptions of it, water itself proves to be the primary influence on the journey undertaken by the female protagonists. As Jim Tarter has noted, a central theme of Solar Storms is obligation to land, described in terms of pacts made
and broken. Pacts appear as a way to describe the land and water—as the opening passage shows—but pacts also illustrate the arrangement between humans and nonhumans. I agree with Tarter but add that the most significant pact is the one forged between Dora-Rouge and water. This particular pact becomes foundational to Dora-Rouge, Bush, and Angel’s understanding of their journey north, and the activism they undertake once there. When Agnes perishes on the trip, Dora-Rouge feels guilty, and Angel explains, “It was only later that I learned how she believed Agnes’ death was part of the deal she’d made with water” (210). Angel returns to Dora-Rouge’s pact when she explains their resistance to the BEEVCO project.

Significantly, the term “pact” signals an agreement between entities, thus reaffirming that water is something more than an inert resource. Angel’s descriptions of water speaking further bolsters its agency. Beyond learning her deep relationship to water, Angel begins to understand its language. Living with Bush on Fur Island, she hears “the sound of the lake talking to the sky, revealing some part of itself or what lay inside its blue-green light. The lake was recalling the memory of last year’s ice, the jewelry lost in its waters, the fishermen who’d fallen through storms, who lay inside it even now” (94-95). Among the many lessons Angel learns while traveling north, not least is learning to better comprehend water’s voice. Having traveled north, she says of herself, Dora-Rouge, and Bush, “Now our arms were strong and we were articulate in the languages of land, water, animal, even in the harder languages of one another. I’d entered waters and swamps, been changed by them” (193). Acquiring these languages requires a full, embodied immersion in the land and persistently facing the challenges of traversing it.

The allusion to language also helps readers comprehend the theme of pacts. Tarter
especially emphasizes the sense of language and communication shared between humans and nonhumans, and as he points out, this strongly informs the understanding of pacts: “The pact or contract represents for Hogan something that can be reconstructed, a shared understanding, *a shared language*, a shared set of duties and responsibilities. It can apply equally well to humans or nonhumans” (133; my emphasis). The concept of language efficiently conveys multiple kinds of relationality between entities comprising a landscape. It refers to the common gesture in indigenous traditional stories to reference ancient periods during which animals and humans were able to speak to one another, but in *Solar Storms* it also suggests an embodied ethics, one to which Tarter alludes in his discussion of obligation to land and which Daniel Wildcat echoes in his term “inalienable responsibilities.” Of all the nonhuman entities with whom to be in communion, water seems paramount, especially as Angel recognizes “water to be the source, the origin of all the land” (224). It focuses the activism of the characters: after witnessing the threats posed by BEEVCO, Angel says, “I wanted to fight back, for the water, the people, the animals. And Dora-Rouge, who owed something to water . . . I didn’t know if she was looking forward to the fight or if she was compelled by her bargain with water” (275). Angel later mentions that Miss Nett, another Native activist, has said, “The water loves us. We live in the place of its birth. This is where rivers are born and we’re going to protect them” (306). The commitments of these women are tied directly to water, as when Angel wants to fight for it because it is the source of life and land, and when Dora-Rouge wants to keep her pact with it.

The pact Dora-Rouge makes reinforces the trope of language and communication. When Angel describes the pact, she first acknowledges the agency of water, stating,
“Water, I knew, had its own needs, its own speaking and desires. No one had asked the water what it wanted. Except, Dora-Rouge that is, who’d spoken with it directly” (279). The pact here is described as a spoken exchange, while a subsequent reference briefly switches to written pacts. When Dora-Rouge places herself on a railroad track in the way of the BEEVCO workers and police trying to clear it for the project, they are uneasy about her determination. Angel recounts, “What they didn’t know was that she had a pact with water and that it was signed with something deeper than pen and ink, deeper even than blood” (307). The pact again shows how water strengthens her resolve. Angel’s metaphor may struggle here to find an appropriate medium for the signature (ink or blood) because the pact is better understood as a spoken agreement conveyed through language. Dora-Rouge’s embodied resistance signals her keeping her word and honoring the terms of the pact.

What then about water’s end of the bargain? Most importantly, water creates the land, generates life, and sustains ecosystems through its coursing. This flow is the language of the water, its particular way of speaking and being with the life it nurtures. As Angel notices hydroelectric power being used to light up String Town, the place they have journeyed to, she is keenly aware that the lights emerged from the energy of flowing water rerouted to produce electricity: “It was against the will of land, I knew, to turn rivers into lakes, lakes into dry land, to send rivers along new paths. I hoped the earth would one day forgive this breach of faith, the broken agreement humans had with it” (330). This mention of agreements once more conveys the agency expressed by water as it flows and the relations it forms with the lives it “speaks” to.

As references to pacts gradually shift from those broken or forgotten in the
beginning of the novel to those (like Dora-Rouge’s) forged or maintained in the end, the narration implies that the characters’ journey and activism have led them to a restored relationship with one another and to a promising future with the land. Angel speaks about her partner, “I believed Tommy and I were our ancestors reunited in their search for each other and we loved deeply, in the way they had loved” (350). Concluding her narration and the novel, Angel expands this sense of continuity and communion with her ancestors. She feels the presence of Agnes and Dora-Rouge in the fog and wind and hears Dora-Rouge say “that a human is alive water, that creation is not yet over” (350). It is fitting that this final reference to water in such an aquatically focused novel affirms the aqueous materiality of human beings. Water is alive and speaks, both in the waterways of the land and the waterways of our own bodies. Alongside this fundamental relationship with water, the mention of creation expands ancestral kinship to an evolutionary scale, to the wider fellowship humans have with nonhuman life, a connection strengthened further on the final page: “Older creatures are remembered in the blood. . . . We are tree. We are frog in amber” (351). The statement recalls one of Angel’s earliest musings on water, in which she knows that some of the water she is in contact with once coursed through the bodies of her ancestors. Water awakens Angel to her deeply embodied relationships with the environment and the lives around her. If at first she is afraid of water, by the end she takes great comfort in water and the human and nonhuman communities it links her to.

Hogan’s unified portrayal of water as agential and relational, while used to express multiple fictional tribes, nonetheless well represents the perspectives on water championed by many diverse Native environmental justice activists. Certainly, it is in keeping with those expressed by many Anishinaabekwe. Like Keepers of the Water,
Hogan’s characters see their vigilant protection of water as a jointly political and spiritual project. Like Dora-Rouge, Josephine Mandamin has enacted a pact with water, demonstrating her commitment to it by recurrently undertaking the daunting physical challenges of her water walks. And like Cecelia LaPointe’s poems, the novel argues that protecting and respecting water suits decolonizing movements, recognizing the links between invasive extractive industries and colonialism.

As Hogan’s characters resonate with these real figures, it would be a mistake to call the fact that they are all women coincidental. In his reading of Solar Storms, Tarter is compelled to acknowledge the prevalence of women in environmental justice movements: “Women are not biologically or essentially better able to provide this type of leadership, but at this point in time they are doing it more than men” (144). Tarter rightly disclaims an essentialist perspective, as poststructuralist cultural criticism has repeatedly shown the malicious effects of biological determinism. Yet it is also true that for many Native women biology does play a role in convincing them to act to protect water, as it does for Frances Van Zile (Anishinaabe):

This isn’t an Indian issue, nor is it a white issue. It’s everybody’s issue. Everybody has to take care of that water. The women are the ones who are the keepers of that water. I ask all women to stand up and support that and realize that if it wasn’t for the water none of us would be here today, because when we first started out in life, we were born in that water in our mother’s womb. (qtd. in Gedicks 138)

Van Zile finds all women responsible as keepers of the water by virtue of their bodily composition. Seeing water protection as part of female gender roles appears in
Anishinaabe cultural texts (whereas men are described as keepers of the fire). Van Zile expands on the necessity of water for sustaining life by referencing amniotic fluid. If not an ideal portrayal for a social constructivist, it would be irresponsible to fail to acknowledge this (at least strategic) essentialism. Furthermore, it remains to be shown how this particular, culturally situated essentialism recreates the kinds of oppression seen elsewhere (i.e., patriarchal settler colonial states). It might instead provide an inclusive way to celebrate women’s leadership.

New materialism provides a helpful response to the intellectual tension here, given that it has taken for its founding move a reappraisal of materiality and embodiment in ways that have been avoided since the poststructuralist linguistic turn. This is especially true of material feminism, which I have placed within an umbrella category of “new materialisms.” Material feminists investigate how biological and physical science informs feminism, recognizing and challenging the tendency to avoid biological approaches because patriarchal discourse has used biological determinism to subordinate women. The prominent ethical concerns in many of these projects align material feminists with ecofeminist scholarship of past decades. Like Native women undertaking coalitional environmentalism, women are leading this new scholarship. And having inspired the formation of material ecocriticism, they (Stacy Alaimo and Karen Barad especially) will likely continue to have a strong influence on its future development.7

Female leadership is a prominent feature in contemporary Native

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7 Other ecocritics have taken up other branches of new materialisms. Object-oriented ontology, or OOO, not much worked with here, has been explored by established ecocritics, including Timothy Morton (indeed, OOO has its own notable gender correlation with male scholars). Object-oriented ontologies posit the reality of objects that persists even beyond any relationship they might be put in. It remains to be seen how OOO best fits with environmental justice scholarship and activism.
environmentalism. But if women are meant to take a central role in protecting water, Van Zile and other activists are also clear to articulate that the need for everyone to take part. Much like Hogan’s female protagonists, such women repeatedly enact a coalitional kinship approach. They stand at the forefront of the emerging communities I address in chapter four. Such coalitional organization is one Tarter notices in Solar Storms, a novel he argues “shows alliances formed between different people on an environmental basis” (139). It is also evident to sociologist and mining activist Al Gedicks, who points out the globalization and continued growth of “multiracial” coalitions that increasingly recognize interconnections, especially the “native-environmentalist alliance” he studies, a prescient observation given the rise of Idle No More and related groups.

**Restorying Waterways**

Water walks, protests, and water ecology workshops are just a few examples that demonstrate a commitment to protecting and coming into better relation with water. But restorying waterways also matters, as it is a process that teaches people to speak of water as more than a commodity. Water is a spirited entity, connected to women and ancestors, not a resource but a relative. Hogan’s Angel asks, “I would wonder for years—I still wonder—what elements, what events would allow men to go against their inner voices, to go against even the cellular will of the body to live and to protect life, land, even their own children, and their future” (288). This chapter argues that one key element that allows such exploitation is the language and rhetoric of “resources” that ignores the vitality of water. Hogan’s novel, LaPointe’s poetry, and the words of many keepers of the water restore and maintain our deep relation to water. Flowing through our lives and
bodies, immersing us before our birth and returning to other waterways after our death, water is one of our closest relatives. Water guides us in seeing this relationship, speaking sometimes softly, as when we rest beside a river or on a beach; sometimes forcefully, as unprecedented storms and flooding occur with ever more frequently in the current era; and sometimes not at all, as new drought patterns emerge as a result of climate change. Those unwilling to consider water’s communicative vitality limit their ability to envision sustainable ways of living on the planet. As Daniel Wildcat cautions from his indigenous realist perspective, “Nowhere are the anthropocentric features of the modern American worldview and modern notions of history more obvious than in our inattentiveness regarding water . . . . Water, its presence and absence, will be the most obvious manifestation of our burning of the planet” (85).

We need to continue to listen and speak with water, to treat it like a relative by being more careful about how we use it. Native environmental justice literature encourages such understanding; resource extraction that obstructs water has been consistently portrayed in Native American writing in a way that “impl[ies] extreme unwisdom, injuriousness, or injustice in impeding or even interfering with its natural movement” (Donaldson 74). Native activists utilize a language of prohibition to oppose extractive industries, condemning the excessive hindrance of water or mining of metals from the earth as a violation. Water inevitably comes into play in extractive industries whether or not it is directly targeted as the desired resource. Although people may raise concerns about water contamination or loss, emphasizing the preciousness of water also provides the opportunity to celebrate and reaffirm connections to water. For instance, as people in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula continue to fight against the Eagle Project and
other mining endeavors threatening the region, they also have reinvigorated water awareness programs. Meanwhile, as new materialists seek other ways to understand the material world, they also provide terms and concepts that align with different worldviews opposed to resource extraction. Bennett, Barad, Mathews, and others represent theoretical developments that support the rich restorying of the world: seeing it as communicative, vibrant, and inescapably interwoven with us.

Water’s fluid, extensive reach connects all life. In *Lighting the 7th Fire*, a documentary examining the conflicts and racism over spearfishing treaty rights in Wisconsin, Eugene Begay (Anishinaabe) speaks of his community’s water ceremony, in which “we also acknowledge all other life, everything, even the non-Indian people, we pray for them, so that they may begin to have dreams, and to have visions, and to sacrifice, and to understand the spiritual nature of all of life, we pray for them.” As the investigations of this chapter help demonstrate, any ceremony that seeks to improve relationships between people and between species does well to involve water. As an intensely connective and communicative kind of vital matter, its unique material properties manifest the spiritual values of communion and regeneration. The next chapter addresses hopes such as the one Begay expresses by examining prophetic and spiritual influences on environmental justice movements that anticipate the uniting of diverse communities.
Chapter Four

Collective Bodies:

Envisioning Communities through Prophecy and Coalitional Activism

This chapter rounds out my ecocritical investigation of Native environmental justice literature by turning directly to community formation and alliance building. As Native groups organize themselves to resist environmental degradation and other threats, they inevitably encounter non-Native groups and governments who become allies, foes (especially multinational corporations), or ignorant and indifferent citizens. Non-Native environmentalist organizing has in some instances been at odds with Native self-determination, but it can also support decolonization efforts, whether incidentally or deliberately. Natives meanwhile draw on their cultures and worldviews in their interactions with non-Natives to create effective strategies for protecting their lands.

One important strategy that includes non-Natives is the use of prophecy as a mobilizing rhetoric. Several traditions specifically reference prophecies that include non-Natives in visions of the future, while other traditions extend spiritual calls to non-Natives. Such stories and teachings can guide coalition building and recalibrate communities in the face of settler colonialism, reaffirming communal respect of a sort that goes beyond liberal humanism by inviting and remembering other-than-human beings.

A literary example of such use of prophecy is highlighted in Leslie Marmon Silko’s immense novel *Almanac of the Dead*. This book fictionalizes grassroots mobilization among Natives and non-Natives, but it also foresees such activism in the
real world (e.g., the Zapatistas, Idle No More). Turning to other prophecies, chapter four ends with a look at non-Native alliances and the potential for activist and academic coalitions, particularly between Native studies and new materialisms.

*Almanac of the Dead*

Published in 1991, *Almanac of the Dead* became a significant work at the time of the Columbus quincentennial. Reviewers were quick to observe the connection and to comment on the prediction made by many of the characters about both the arrival of Europeans in the Western Hemisphere and the ultimate disappearance of all things European. The expansive 763-page work evades definitive categorization. Silko has described writing the book in terms of receiving transmissions and being guided by spirits: “The spirits had a sense of time and things about dates and time. It’s like *Almanac of the Dead* did everything it wanted, that’s how it’s been” (qtd. in Arnold 8). Though a difficult read—many reviewers looked at it unkindly after her career-launching, more commercially successful novel *Ceremony*—the novel continues to offer keen political commentary well after the historical moments of the quincentennial and millennium. What began as a shorter novel about the drug trade in Tucson, where Silko was living at the time, became much more as she found other connections to Latin America. More than a novel, it belongs in many ways alongside the almanacs it references.

*Almanac* functions as a composite novel-almanac. Joni Adamson considers how almanacs are used thematically and formally in the novel, observing that “Silko has repeatedly observed that those who would understand her project must put aside ambiguous notions of ‘novelistic merit’ and read her book—as the title clearly
indicates—as an almanac” (*American Indian* 133). Adamson capably examines the way almanacs function and their influences on American literature. I extend the study of the novel as almanac by considering its agency and complicated deployment of temporality. Almanacs, given their multivocality and multiple functions, “challenge the very notion of authoritative discourse” and, according to Silko, are “designed so that you don’t have control when you confront [them]” (qtd. in Adamson 134). If almanacs are instruments for use by subjects, they also exhibit curious agencies themselves.

Besides their polyvocal, aggregative nature, the almanacs Silko used as a model influenced the plot structure of her novel-almanac. Previous criticism points to the book’s largely unresolved ending—focused on the protagonist Sterling’s return to Laguna Pueblo but failing to show any results of the plot’s civil unrest and anticipated hemispheric revolution—and suggests that this ending leaves the book open for optimistic interpretations about the potential for progressive social and environmental change.¹ However, this ending affords the opportunity to extend the reading of the novel as an almanac; at least, the kind of almanac from which Silko draws: Mayan codices that represent cyclical time.

Silko’s almanacs allude to and resemble classical Mayan works like the Popul Vuh, which serve, as Dennis Tedlock describes them, as a “complex navigation system for those who wish to see and move beyond the present” (qtd. in Adamson 141). Adamson further argues that the books served as cultural resistance in the face of colonialism because they helped promulgate Mayan knowledge, and that Silko takes a

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¹ For instance, Arnold Krupat sees in the south-facing position of the stone snake featured prominently in this final scene “a metaphor for change of cultural and political value” (53).
similar stance in her presentation of the keepers of the almanac in her novel. Combining mythopoetic wisdom with historical events, the almanacs are instruments for aligning multiple temporalities. The novel-almanac serves as a meeting place for multiple worldviews by depicting multiple dimensions of time, and this perspective helps better apprehend an ending that fails to satisfy the expectations of either rigidly linear or circular plots.

Key to understanding the kinds of time represented in Mayan codices and recreated in *Almanac* is the book’s emphasis on time’s material being. Rather than nonexistent measurements, units of time exist as forces or entities with particular attributes. In a fragment from The Snakes’ Notebook, which Almanac keeper Yoeme claims is key to understanding the rest of the almanac, the Spirit Snake states, “I have told you the names and identities of the Days and Years” (135). The narration later recounts, “The only true gods were all the days in the Long Count” (257). A later almanac fragment tells a story in which “Month was created first, before the World . . . . Then the Month began to walk . . . . Month spoke Day’s name when Day had no name. So the Month was created, then the Day” (570-71). Perhaps the most significant units of time for *Almanac* are the larger epochs. The novel preoccupies itself with the epoch of the narrative present, called the Death-Eye Dog, though different people recognize it globally with different names. Death-Eye Dog represents a particularly violent epoch and “has been seated on the throne for five hundred years” (252), recalling again the Columbus

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2 Silko writes of her research on Mayan culture, “What interested me about the Mayas was their notion of time; they believed time was a living being that had a personality, a sort of identity. Time was alive and might pass, but time did not die; moreover, the days and weeks eventually would return” (“Notes” 136).
quincentennial. But like the cycles of Mayan calendars, the reign of the epochs are limited. One of the book’s sacred twins comprehends this cyclical nature: “El Feo daydreamed about the days of the past—sensuous daydreams of Mother Earth who loved all her children, all living beings. Those past times were not lost. The days, months, and years were living beings who roamed the starry universe until they came around again” (313). The cyclical understanding of time is echoed in the persistent anticipation of the characters that a new time with different attributes is coming, suiting the tenor of the book’s foremost prophecy: that land will be restored and returned to indigenous ownership.³

The prophecies in Almanac encourage readers to see the connections between the diverse experiences of the characters, and the novel features plenty: there are over sixty characters listed on the prefatory Map of the Americas, with more in the text itself, and over two dozen of these characters take turns as primary focalizers of the narration. Heather Houser has rightly observed that “the novel is remarkably peopled, and peopled above all with would-be leaders and catalysts of change” (212). Houser’s analysis shows how this revolutionary spirit for global change is compromised by the affect of anxiety the novel produces and by its persistent suggestion that that the Earth itself is the primary agent of this change, not the people. A material ecocritical analysis—one focused on the

³ Other scholars have insisted on the animate quality of time and its influences in the novel. For instance, David Mogen writes, “Ultimately, this revolution cannot be entirely explained through conventional political or economic theory (hence the elaborate commentary on the limitations of Marxism). Its force comes from Mayan metaphysics, from the angry energies of the returning days” (162). Although the days returning after the Death-Eye Dog epoch might actually be more peaceful than angry (as El Feo’s words above suggest), Mogen’s aligning of the revolutionary spirit with time complements Heather Houser’s observation that the ultimate source of the revolution is the Earth itself as a “geophysical agent” (215). That is, both temporal and geologic entities serve similar roles in bringing about the revolution.
agent capacities of matter and its interweaving with meaning—further illuminates this perspective of Earth as agent of prophesized revolution. First, however, I attend to these revolutionary characters to show how they enact the text’s prophecies.

The characters belong to various anti-globalization groups, insofar as globalization is allied to neoliberal capitalism. The book’s abiding theme, established by one of the legends on the Map of the Americas and recurring with increasing prominence through its second half, refers to a generalized prophecy that land will be returned to Natives and that all things European in the Americas will disappear. Characters in these different groups express repeatedly their intuition that changes are afoot; these changes are closely linked, sometimes explicitly, to this prophecy. Reinforcing this sentiment, the structure of the book contains scraps and fragments from various notebooks, in the same manner as the almanac held by Lecha and Zeta. Collecting the stories of different characters throughout the Western Hemisphere allows readers to “see” the changes at work and how they are connected.

To provide this vision of hemispheric change, the novel-almanac must compile more than just the revolutionary characters’ stories. The narrative replicates the multi-authored almanacs by interspersing passages from them with fragments from different fictional texts, including transcriptions of the revolutionary Angelita La Escapía’s speech and fragments from Lecha’s psychic notebook and Clinton’s black studies notebooks. Significantly, besides these characters who anticipate the revolution, there are also passages from the notebooks of the villainous organ harvester Eddie Trigg; later, the text

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4 This globalization is notably distinct from the indigenous transnationalism Shari Huhndorf and others recognize in the book.
includes the transcription of a dream the white character Seese types in the midst of transcribing the almanac for Lecha (595). The resulting collage helps detail the qualities of the current epoch to which everyone—indigenous and nonindigenous, hero and villain—belongs. Collecting many different characters’ stories, this arrangement enhances the novel’s qualities as an almanac because it suggests the stories align as part of a global epochal change. Like other almanacs, the text uses these fragments as an instrument for understanding time in a more spatial sense, one that maps time. As Silko has stated in an interview, the novel-almanac is “trying to do what the old Mayan almanacs are doing, projecting or looking into the future” (Kelleher). If portions of the ancient notebooks seem inscrutable, so too is the resulting patchwork when these different if contemporary notebook fragments are presented together. And these fragments become only the latter pages of an account of the Death-Eye Dog epoch, a period whose length is best shown in the section “From the Ancient Almanac,” whose mythopoetic fragments give way to a European historical chronology, which are in turn followed by entries from Lecha and Zeta’s grandmother Yoeme (570-78).

Just as it is significant for Almanac to include entries from multiple notebooks of its characters, so too is it an important event when Lecha records a story told by Yoeme, writing it down in the almanac using English. When Yoeme sees this transcription, she “claimed this was the sign the keepers of the notebooks had always prayed for” (130). This sign indicates the persistence and adaptation of culture, that the books of the

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5 In “The Timeliness of Almanac of the Dead,” Caren Irr similarly observes how the book “display[s] spatial confusion as the effect of conflicting versions of temporality. In this novel . . . we find a variety of other space-time formations serving as placeholders for an emergent, potentially revolutionary pre- and postmodern near future” (225). Irr maps the novel’s temporal structure using Navajo cosmology: “Understood as an endless spatialized temporal zone, this sacred native time encompasses Eurocentric linearity and expands beyond it” (133).
almanac are living and its keepers are “alive, responsive, resistant, and capable of articulating their own perspective about the world and their place in it” (Adamson 144). But the transcription is also significant for the way it connects worldviews and insists that the legacy of Western colonialism is part of a larger story predicted within Native cosmologies. Just as including English in the almanac’s notebooks suggests contemporary time is a part of larger epochs, Silko’s novel similarly emphasizes that all characters play a role in the epoch by including the non-Native writing of Trigg and Seese alongside others. The events in twentieth-century Tucson and elsewhere are directly connected to those of fifteenth-century Mesoamerica. The “mythic” is no less real, or even past; all periods belong under the reign of the Death-Eye Dog.

Silko’s *Almanac* ultimately does not render a clashing or succession of temporalities or worldviews so much as it does a more inclusive depiction of them. The collected stories connect disparate communities into an indigenous alliance against colonization, as seen in Escapía’s long chronology of Native rebellions (527). The trick to using the almanac as a seeing instrument is not to see a linear history in its compiled lists and fragments, however tempting chronological lists like Escapía’s might make that interpretation. Rather, the almanac includes the list in a horizontal presentation of multiple notebook fragments that link together multiple temporalities. Threading the fragments together with the narrative conventions of the novel, Silko is able to achieve her original presentation of time: “I knew that I wanted to shape time inside my *Almanac,*” she writes, “I wanted to use narrative to shift the reader’s experience of time and the meaning of history as stories that mark certain points in time” (“Notes” 140). Overlooking the novel-almanac’s particular depiction of and emphasis on time likely
contributes to some readers’ frustration with the book, including a sense of an unresolved ending. An expanded understanding of time offered by the text’s prophecies and material objects recalibrates these expectations.

Prophecies in Time

Silko has encouraged the observations made about the plot’s premonitions, particularly the arising of the Zapatistas. Indeed, when she writes that in the book “somehow the characters would foretell the future” (“Notes” 140), it is debatable whether she means the future within the fiction or the future of the wider world. Elsewhere, she presents the fictional almanac in Lecha and Zeta’s possession as a legitimate almanac belonging alongside extant Mayan codices: “Recently this old almanac of theirs correctly predicted the Zapatista uprising. Their old almanac even purports to explain the unfortunate assassination of Señor Colosio in Tijuana” (“Books” 158). Continuing my examination of the novel-almanac while entertaining this potential, it is interesting to extend its prophetic potential into the twenty-first century. Particularly, I use Almanac to read the ongoing actions of the Zapatistas and massive grassroots movements like Occupy Wall Street and Idle No More.

Writing after the 1994 emergence of the EZLN (the Zapatista Army of National Liberation), Joni Adamson uses the popular Zapatista spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos as an example of the attempt by governments and media to delegitimize Native voices. Adamson points out how those who criticize Silko’s novel as being insufficiently

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6 Trying to ascertain whether the novel is “actually” prophetic is mostly beside the point, just as prophecy itself is less about predicted events coming to pass than it is about the influence it has on present actions and people.
Native resemble similar critiques of Marcos as “inauthentic” for being non-Mayan. These are both instances of the colonial imperative to maintain power by authorizing only those Native voices and images that reinforce settler nostalgia and do not trouble the status quo. Both Silko and Marcos remain consistently defiant. Adamson notices the strategies Marcos uses to subvert expectations and gain attention, including an interview for *Vanity Fair*, “a savvy act of twentieth-century political articulation aimed at garnering international sympathy for the Zapatistas” (135). Called a postmodern Che Guevara, Marcos deployed an even savvier act of representation when, in 2014, he dismantled his existence and pointed out how its political relevance no longer served the Zapatistas.

In a communiqué that could have come from the pages of *Almanac*, Marcos briefly recounts the actions of the EZLN since its emergence: “When we erupted and interrupted in 1994 with blood and fire, it was not the beginning of war for us as Zapatistas. The war from above, with its death and destruction, its dispossession and humiliation, its exploitation and the silence it imposed on the defeated, we had been enduring for centuries” (“Between Light and Shadow”). While describing the ongoing struggles of the Zapatistas, Marcos also portrays his own celebrity as a tactic. Marcos explains his prominence as a strategy the EZLN undertook in order to gain more attention; the only way the media would attend to the Zapatistas is if they had a figurehead. He describes their construction of the character Marcos as “a complex maneuver of distraction, a terrible and marvelous magic trick, a malicious move from the

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7 This statement echoes Silko’s praise for the Zapatistas. In “An Expression of Profound Gratitude to the Maya Zapatistas,” she writes, “This is no new war; this war has a five-hundred-year history; this is the same war of resistance that the indigenous people of the Americas have never ceased to fight” (153).
indigenous heart that we are” (“Between”). Their ruse of using a figure has garnered them attention but it has also fooled people: “Those who have loved and hated SupMarcos now know that they have loved and hated a hologram.” Marcos mentions how the media creates and destroys celebrities to suit itself, but he also says that social media and the continued growth of the Internet has displaced that power. Similarly, in *Almanac*, El Feo “laughed whenever he saw newspapers or satellite television because the government thought the saboteurs, rioters, and looters were part of a single group or organization. . . . But this time the story was going to be different because the people no longer believed in leaders. People had begun to gather spontaneously” (513). Such gathering can be seen in flash mobs and mobilizations inspired by social media. For the Zapatistas recognizing the promise of social media, the figure of Marcos has outlived its usefulness: “It is our conviction and our practice that in order to rebel and to struggle, neither leaders nor bosses nor messiahs nor saviors are necessary. To struggle, one only needs a sense of shame, a bit of dignity, and a lot of organization” (“Between”). Marcos ends the communiqué by announcing the termination of his existence, signing off and renaming himself Galeano to commemorate a teacher at a Zapatista school who had been murdered earlier in May 2014 (Oikonomakis).

Such a moment well suits the continued alignment of the Zapatistas to Silko’s *Almanac*. The symbolic action of dissolving a recognized spokesperson for the EZLN recognizes the collective, autonomous nature of *zapatismo*, and it befits Silko’s predictions in *Almanac* that the revolution will be leaderless, despite the fact that the novel features several revolutionary, potential leaders. For instance, although the Barefoot Hopi is one of such characters, attracting large groups as he travels, he sees
himself as a messenger more than a leader and believes that people would on a single day rise up “everywhere at once, spontaneously . . . . The urge to rise up would come to them through their dreams,” not through select leaders (617). This spontaneous organizing suggests an alternative to the easily coopted iconography of leaders. Given that “Almanac foregrounds the role of visuality in colonialist and capitalist destruction” (Huhndorf 150), a visual media politics is equally evident in the Zapatista communiqué. Media’s exertion of power via the construction, manipulation, and destruction of celebrity is deliberately subverted by the hologram of Marcos, much in the way that the novel describes the use of photographs of Geronimo in the nineteenth century: rather than capture this figure and pinpoint Apache resistance to the U.S. government, photographs of Geronimo “only generate further confusion” (Huhndorf 153). Marcos describes himself as hologram, while Silko depicts the photographs of Geronimo as a proto-hologram. David Moore also comments on the “Geronimo joke”: “After her shell game of signification, after pages of play with the reader, Silko’s narration unravels the semiotic comedy and dismisses the question of Geronimo as an abstraction that obscures the heart of the issue: power” (170). Likewise, the EZLN communiqué announcing the end of Subcomandante Marcos refuses to accept the power relations entrenched in traditional media, proclaiming instead the autonomy of the Zapatistas and embracing newer forms of social media that complement their horizontal organizing.\footnote{The “Galeano” whose name the former Marcos adopted had in turn chosen his nom de guerre after Eduardo Galeano, the Uruguayan writer who composed his own almanac-like work \textit{Memoria del fuego} (\textit{Memory of Fire}), which recounts the history of the Western Hemisphere from Mayan and Aztec histories to the twentieth century. Virginia Bell notes how several of \textit{Almanac}’s main characters “engage in counter chronicling projects rather similar to the one \textit{Memoria del fuego} constitutes” (7).}

While the characters and events in \textit{Almanac} anticipated the Zapatistas and
continue to resonate with their visual politics, the novel-almanac further anticipates the sporadic, leaderless movements that have continued to emerge since 1994, hallmarked by protests like the 1999 World Trade Organization protest in Seattle, Occupy Wall Street, and Idle No More. By explicitly linking the expectation of uprisings to traditional prophecies, Silko underscores a layering of contemporaneous worldviews. If the prophecy leaves us with “nothing” at the book’s conclusion, it is a radical “nothing” of vast potential. The revolution could come tomorrow, or in a hundred years; the text’s apocalypse lifts its veil not to reveal a fixed, determined plot of a single world but instead acknowledges a pluriverse with multiple temporalities. By refusing a strictly linear, unified temporality, Silko frustrates utopian and dystopian anticipations alike.

This pluriverse is reflected in the characters as well, who occupy roles within both mundane and mythic realms. Menardo’s driver Tacho, for instance, is simultaneously Wacah, keeper of the macaws and twin to El Feo (alluding to the Sacred Twins of the prophecy and also to the twins in the Popul Vuh): “Only Tacho and a few others knew about the macaw spirit beings that followed him, always roosting in nearby trees . . . . The blue-and-yellow macaws shrieked Tacho’s new name over and over from dawn to dusk: ‘Wacah! Wacah! Wacah! Wacah! Big changes are coming!’” (339). Tacho/Wacah serves as Menardo’s chauffeur but also interprets his dreams. The unease with which Menardo and his mistress Alegria regard Tacho intimates their semiconscious recognition of his belonging to these other realms. Characters’ multiple affiliations are also intimated through the sense many of them have of prophetic changes afoot, evident in the preceding

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9 I use the term “pluriverse” as Marisol de la Cadena defines it, borrowing form Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Marilyn Strathern, to refer to “partially connected heterogeneous socionatural worlds negotiating their ontological disagreements politically” (360).
quote and also in Menardo’s thoughts: “Changes were all around. The phrase repeated over and over inside Menardo’s brain. The old man had always put the phrase at the beginning of the story about Prince Seven Macaws, who had been undone by two sorcerer brothers” (494). When Menardo dies soon afterward in an attempt to prove the safety of his bulletproof vest, this story of two sorcerer brothers seems to repeat because Tacho/Wacah, twin brother to El Feo, is the one to “undo” Menardo by shooting him. While Menardo’s allegiance to Euro-American imperialism ultimately seals his doom, he is able to use his partial awareness of these multiple temporalities to his advantage; knowing that big changes are coming supports his Universal Insurance business, but he can only arrive at such knowledge if he “combines political and prophetic modes of reasoning” (Irr 235). As I have argued, this reasoning includes recognizing and learning from different scales and kinds of time.  

References to prophecy link the disparate plots and ideologies of the characters; in their passing thoughts and comments on changes afoot, they use prophecy to comprehend their sociopolitical actions and to build solidarity. The constant exposition of characters’ beliefs and theories about these changes ultimately connects their diverse philosophies. The text uses a lot of “noise,” a lot of seemingly random plot, to recreate the cacophony of globalized life and to build the reader’s suspicion that something is definitely going on underneath it all, some occult maneuvering that the characters only catch in glimpses, dreams, and memories, that the almanacs record in notebook fragments, and that readers

10 Similarly, Alegria’s creeping paranoia in the narrative present resonates with the madness of Charlotte, wife of Emperor Maximilian; these two historically distinct time periods are woven together closely in the narrative to further emphasize the continuity of imperialism and the legitimacy of the prophecies.
better comprehend when they recalibrate their attention to encompass wider timescales and multiple worldviews. Such altered perceptions required in reading the fictional revolution in *Almanac* are also those, in Silko’s understanding, that support real-world revolution: she states, “The only kind of revolution I really believe in is one of awareness of perception” (Kelleher). The din of the rambling plot and the shared sentiments of the cast of characters are two formal strategies in the narrative for representing a diffuse and leaderless global movement, which at its most abstract represents the movement of life against death caused by the Destroyers, figures whom the novel casts as supernatural entities recognized by multiple tribes and whom it embodies in some of its villains. The movement also urges coalitional activism. According to the character Clinton, a revolutionary descendant of Cherokee Freedman, “Nothing could be black only or brown only or white only anymore. The ancient prophecies had foretold a time when the destruction by man had left the Earth desolate, and the human race was itself endangered. This was the last chance the people had against the Destroyers, and they would never prevail if they did not work together as a common force” (747).

The best tactic of the Destroyers (also called Gunadeeyahs) is their ability to separate people, aided by essentialist conceptions of identity. Silko resists such

11 We might read the grim depictions and evils in this book as part of its prophetic hermeneutics. Take for instance, the persistent alignment of the book’s Destroyer characters with homosexuality. While I ultimately agree with Huhndorf that these depictions are “indefensible” (159 n.12), the depictions are also abhorrent because they promote the same kind of essentialism so favored by the Destroyers to separate and alienate people. That is, besides reading the depictions as indicative of homophobia on Silko’s part—an argument perhaps not easily dismissed—we might understand the book’s tone aligning with the character of the Death-Eye Dog epoch, in which essentialism aids the ongoing exploitation of people. Yet however *Almanac* seems to hold fast to these portrayals of essentialized identity, it also subverts essentialism in its calls for collective action that draws upon and recasts the identities of many kinds of people. I also acknowledge Dorothea Fischer-Hornung’s criticism that scholarly discussion of *Almanac’s*
conceptions by subverting all struggles to one of life versus the Destroyers, a theme repeated throughout her work. This Manichean dichotomy might appear to reinforce essentialized identities; however, although Destroyers might seem more keenly associated with particular identities (i.e., white, European), Clinton’s sentiments above are echoed throughout Silko’s fiction: anyone could be (or become) a Destroyer, or they could work on the side of life and “the people.”

This latter category includes those concerned with integrity of the Earth, entailing diverse kinds of environmentalism, from deep ecology to monkeywrenching. Even here, being an environmentalist doesn’t guarantee one isn’t aligned with the Destroyers; as Sarah Jaquette Ray astutely notes, “despoilers use the environment as a rhetorical device to support the colonial-capitalist status quo” (129). Ray rightly reads Silko’s ironic engagement with environmentalism in *Almanac*. Environmentalism is not an automatic ally for Native issues and can even promote colonialism. As Ray writes, “*Almanac* illustrates how environmentalism can both support and thwart social justice, and that environmental discourses accomplish the latter by treating colonialism’s others as ecological others” (93). Environmental movements tied explicitly to decolonization efforts stand a better chance of succeeding.

**Environmental Coalitions and Lively Earth-Objects**

Silko remains keenly ambivalent in her imagination of different communities or cultures coming together. But however skeptical she may be of coalitional activism,
Silko does write scenes portraying the potential for mutual understanding between Native and non-Native people and for their forging alliances against the Destroyers. An early instance occurs in the book as the white protagonist Seese and the Laguna protagonist Sterling become acquainted. At first, they exchange stories about their pasts. Soon after, Sterling guides Seese through a tour of downtown Tucson and gives her a bit of a history lesson on John Dillinger, Geronimo, and others. When Sterling points out that Dillinger’s extradition from Arizona was illegal, Seese waves it off as irrelevant, given Dillinger’s crimes. Thinking of his own banishment from Laguna by the tribal court, Sterling gently points out to Seese that justice is sometimes served unfairly; Seese apologizes and confesses that her bias comes from her time spent with “scum” (79). Soon after, Sterling tells Seese about how Tucson merchants profited off the Apache wars. This time Seese says, “Now I know what you meant a little while ago. About judges and courts” (80).

Considering the racism and injustice pointed out by Sterling’s revisionist history, Seese begins to review the factors in play in her life’s primary ordeal—the loss of her son—for which she largely blames herself. In this moment she begins to question her guilt and sees the old Tucson mansions as proof of larger systemic evils. This moment, beyond showing a preliminary bonding between two characters, further suggests the injustices they experience have a shared culprit, the Destroyers, further conflating the mythic and historic temporalities at work in Almanac.

If the Destroyers are difficult to pin down, so too are those who resist them. A few characters deliberately and explicitly oppose them, like Clinton and the Barefoot Hopi.

on Almanac, is the International Holistic Healers Convention. Reinforcing the meeting of multiple temporalities, the convention scenes offer equal measures of potential prophecy and humor at New Age white shamanism.
Others inadvertently resist the Destroyers in their pursuit of other goals, such as the Green Vengeance group in attendance at the Holistic Healers Convention, who according to Zeta “would make useful allies at least at the start” of the coming revolution (726). The Destroyers also feature in the prophecy of the arrival and disappearance of all things European when Montezuma and Cortés are described as fellow Destroyers (760). The resistance to the Destroyers intensifies the revolutionary fervor and the apocalyptic anxiety that Heather Houser identifies as an affect of the text (and an affect in apocalyptic environmentalist rhetoric more widely).

Houser compellingly argues that *Almanac*’s importance as an environmentalist work derives from its depiction of how such anxiety hinders change, and she rightly identifies the recurrent idea that the Earth itself as a geophysical force will effect the revolution. She reads the anticlimactic ending (Sterling’s homecoming to Laguna) as a way to banish the anxiety the text produces, writing, “The novel’s account of the geophysical agents of revolution fulfills one wish: if humans are not the arbiters of the future, there is hope that the Earth itself will bring about regeneration. ‘Home’ expresses another wish: that the text’s own story will melt into air, leaving only a conventional protagonist as the sentimental locus of redemption” (215). Although I agree with Houser’s reading, I would like to expand the interpretation of the “geophysical agents” she describes and associates with the planet Earth itself. Specifically, I wonder if Houser’s interpretation suggests an Earth that is more separate from human action and agency than the book intends. Although Silko is clear on several occasions in her writing that the Earth has its existence apart from human beings, she nevertheless uses “Earth” to signify more dynamic assemblages of human and nonhuman action. Surely the Earth can
work on its own, but it also works with and alongside humans. These forces of the Earth often appear interchangeable with spirits—ancestors or deities whose interactions with humans are prominently featured in the text.

Spirits are just as responsible for the revolution. When Angelita speaks about the changes to come, her words “filled El Feo with rapture. The Earth, the Earth, together they would serve Earth and her sister spirits” (468). El Feo blurs the distinction between the Earth and spirits. Near the end of the book, Lecha observes how “affluent, educated white people” come to her with a sense of loss: “Lecha knew the loss was their connection with the Earth. . . . Once the Earth had been blasted open and brutally exploited, it was only logical the Earth’s offspring, all the Earth’s beings, would similarly be destroyed” (718). Reading this line in light of Silko’s observations that humans only desecrate themselves when they degrade environments, the reciprocal nature of the human relationship with the Earth becomes clear.

In this sense, Earth, land, and spirits are related agencies influencing collective human action. Reading the Earth as arbiter of change does not necessarily absolve humans of action; indeed, sharing the view of Earth as an agent might spur people into deeper commitments to the lands in which they live. El Feo notes, “People had begun to gather spontaneously and moved as a mob or swarm follows instinct, then suddenly disperses. The masses of people . . . no longer believed in so-called ‘elected’ leaders; they were listening to strange voices inside themselves. . . . voices out of the past . . . voices of the ancestors” (513). Describing these gatherings—uncannily reminiscent of flash mobs made possible by social media—El Feo attributes them to the participants following their intuition and the voices of spirits; when compared to his statement above about the
people serving the Earth, it is not a leap to suggest that these voices mentioned are also the Earth’s voice. Silko herself takes the view that humans belong to Earth, writing, “Human beings also are natural forces of the Earth. There will be no peace in the Americas until there is justice for the Earth and her children” (“Expression” 154).

The intimately interwoven agencies of humans and the Earth are well illustrated in three significant material objects in the book—a pair of stone idols in the first third, the opal in the middle, and the stone snake at the end. Each object demonstrates a vitality of its own, though each is also tied to human agencies both in its fashioning and use.

The third chapter of the book, “The Stone Idols,” recounts the theft of two small basalt figurines from Laguna Pueblo by anthropologists and their eventual rediscovery. Told from Sterling’s perspective, the story helps explain his present banishment. The theft is an instance of cultural exploitation, and another instance occurs when the Hollywood film crew Sterling is charged with supervising photographs a sacred stone snake. This third chapter and its featured objects also establish the narrative’s multiple temporalities and the prophecy announced by the opening map. Tying together the Laguna people, the Earth, and longer timescales, the idols are an example of the “storied matter” Iovino and Oppermann champion as the hallmark of material ecocriticism, “a material ‘mesh’ of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces” (“Introduction” 1-2).

Called “Little Grandmother” and “Little Grandfather,” the figures “had been given to the people by the kachina spirits at the beginning of the Fifth World” and “lived

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14 Though other lively objects could qualify for analysis, including Clinton’s knife and Menardo’s vest, I choose these three because they are all fashioned from stone and because they best exemplify the connection between the spirits and the Earth.
in buckskin bundles” (31). The figures are fed offerings, held as tenderly as babies, and given to different elder caretakers each generation. “Old as the Earth herself” and called “esteemed and beloved ancestors” by their caretakers (31), the figures simultaneously connect people to preceding generations and to the land, emphasizing the unity of ancestors and Earth. Given these descriptions, histories, and relationships, the figures resist the ontological category in which Western anthropology places them: “There were not merely carved stones, these were beings formed by the hands of the kachina spirits” (33). The anguish resulting from their loss remains for generations, so that when the figures are rediscovered at a museum in Santa Fe after being bought from a private collection in Washington, D.C., the tension between the white curator and the Laguna delegation is palpable. The idols in this moment enmesh with the Earth and ancestors as they indicate wider legacies of dispossession and anticipate the book’s prophecies and persistent contestation of land claims: the curator “looked around at all of them as if he were afraid they had come to take back everything that had been stolen. In that instant white man and Indian both caught a glimpse of what was yet to come” (33). Soon after, another reference to prophecy relates to the uranium mining at Laguna: “The old ones had stuck to their predictions stubbornly. Whatever was coming would not necessarily appear right way; it might not arrive for twenty or even a hundred years. Because these old ones paid no attention to white man’s time” (35). While this expectation is linked to the mine, it echoes the book’s wider prophecy that the disappearance of all things European occurs on ambiguous timescales. “White man’s time” is that of the curator, who insists the delegation must undertake expensive legal-bureaucratic proceedings to sue for the return of the idols, an approach that also safeguards colonial amnesia, while the
delegation holds to timescales that ground their legitimacy as a people. The loss of the idols and the arrival of mining are related disturbances that the older Laguna see producing long-term disturbances. The stone idols are thus the first objects to index the multiple temporalities of the book.

The stone beings influence Sterling’s life as well. Although throughout the rest of the book (and even this third chapter) readers understand Sterling is banished due to the incident with the film crew photographing the stone snake, the second paragraph begins, “The stone idols had got Sterling banished” (31). Though the sentence refers more to the events involving the stone idols than the idols themselves influencing the banishment, the grammatical construction prepares and reinforces the chapter’s later insistence on their liveliness. The chapter goes on to describe how frequently the idols were mentioned during Sterling’s hearing; even though they had been stolen decades before, the theft remains clear in the minds of the Councilmembers, reinforcing the understanding of both events as related colonial transgressions as well as the power of the stone idols to sustain the deep memories of the people.

After the theft of the idols, the tribe draws on its knowledge to determine their whereabouts, including calling on “all those able to gaze into blurry opals to identify enemies” to use their skill to search for the stolen figures (32). Scrying with opals reoccurs later in the book, when the next object, an opal carried northward by Peruvians, comes into Tacho’s custody.

When Mexican police arrest the Peruvians, they are more interested in the plants, roots, and seeds they carry, overlooking a newspaper-wrapped bundle left in the weeds nearby. Tacho inspects the bundle closer once the police leave: “The bundle was waiting
for him to pick it up; Tacho could feel this more strongly than he had ever felt anything before. Tacho felt an urgency as if a beloved or person of great importance were waiting for him, *expecting* a welcome, expecting hospitality” (477). Tacho senses in the opal a vital subjectivity akin to that the Laguna perceive in the stone idols. He immediately attributes this material stone with spiritual importance, once more linking Earth objects with spirits; he checks himself before picking up the bundle, believing he “must not go to the bundle if his motives were selfish” (477). The opal catalyzes Tacho’s transformation in *Almanac* from Menardo’s cab driver to one of the Sacred Twins.

When Tacho and his brother El Feo examine the opal later, they note that it “had been ‘dressed,’ wrapped in red wool string and downy, white feathers. Twelve big coca leaves and a pinch of cornmeal had been packed with the opal to feed it” (478). The brothers also note, “The opal did not appear to be a fake, wrapped up to fool rich society women. They both knew the danger of looking at the opal unless they were prepared; the eye of the opal might show them anything; the ‘eye’ might take them anywhere” (480). Given the emphasis on the wrapping here, the question of the opal’s authenticity is not whether it is an authentic semiprecious gem but if it is an authentic fetish. Not all opals qualify as lively scrying tools; perhaps, like this particular opal and the stone idols and snake—who are also fed cornmeal and pollen—they require being invested with story and spiritual significance.

Like the spirit macaws in his charge, Tacho finds the opal reassuring his sense that important changes are to come and that he will play a role in them, especially when it shows him visions and begins to secrete bodily fluids: Tacho breathes on the opal “to feed the opal’s spirit his own breath” and sees the entire western hemisphere, “the coastline of
the Pacific all the way from Chile to Alaska,” with cities burning (480). Later, Tacho discovers the bundle emits sweat and urine: “He was not sure if the opal or the coca leaves had been responsible for the night sweat and urine. Tacho worried the police had killed the bundle’s Peruvian caretakers and the bundle had been angered and desired revenge. The twelve coca leaves belonged to a powerful spirit” (502). After he shoots Menardo dead in Menardo’s test of his not-quite-bulletproof vest, Tacho soon discovers “[b]lood was oozing from the center of his bedroll where he kept the spirit bundle. . . . Tacho had been chosen by the macaws’ and the opal’s spirits; for better or for worse, had had to take the spirits with him, like wives” (511-12). The spirits are attached to their material objects. This moment “expresses an urgency for Tacho” to reconnect with tribal elders and his brother (Olmstead 469).15 As the opal moves northward, it inspires Tacho’s own movement. His sense of matrimonial duty shows the deep kinship he feels to forces and materialities that extend beyond the conventionally human.

The idols and the opal fit the same category as arguably the most significant object in the book, the thirty-foot-long stone snake that appears near the tailings of Jackpile Mine at Laguna Pueblo. All three objects are connected to spirits who are fed with offerings, and each demonstrates broader (geologic and mythic) temporal scales. The various dressings of the figures, and the way human characters address the figures through cultural stories, illustrates their material-discursive being. While their use and treatment by human characters in the novel invests them with liveliness, their strange actions and agencies emphasize the vitality of materiality beyond exclusively human

15 Olmstead also draws on Donna Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledges” to explain the masses of different characters drawn together in the prophecy; situated knowledge can be another way to comprehend the multiple temporalities of the book.
agency.

The stone snake is the most significant object because it looms large in Sterling’s story, which frames the book, but even more so because it appears both in the book’s narrative portions and its almanac fragments. Its prominence in Silko’s imagination may relate to the fact that a similar real object was discovered at Laguna Pueblo in 1979. Silko has written about this discovery in *Artforum* (later reprinted in *Yellow Woman and a Story of Spirit*), which inspired a snake mural Silko painted while she was working on *Almanac*. Silko writes, “In a way, one might almost say that I had to write this novel in order to figure out for myself the meaning of the giant stone snake that had appeared near the uranium mine” (“Notes” 144).

Silko’s search for the meaning of the snake is replicated in the almanac fragments of her book, particularly the “Snakes’ Notebook” that Yoeme tells Zeta is key to understanding the rest of the almanac, but which Zeta thinks is just Yoeme’s “madness” (134). Yet this fragment tells in verse the story of the serpent messenger spirit Maah’ shra-True’-Ee, who lives in the lake near Laguna village until it is cracked and drained by jealous neighbors. This fragment echoes the same story told in an earlier narrative portion focalized through Sterling: “The giant water snake that had always lived in the lake and that had loved and cared for the Laguna people as its children could not be found after the jealous ones had drained the lake” (92).

The snakes in the Snakes’ Notebook hint at the novel’s recurrent syncretism between various serpent messengers, one that links together Maa’ shra-True’-Ee with the Mesoamerican Quetzalcoatl and the Afro-Caribbean Damballah. The correspondence between these mythic snakes suggests global revolution. The spirit snake’s message in
the notebook informs people of the identities of the days and years and announces the revolutionary prophecy, and it appears before a much-discussed portion of the almanac that begins, “One day a story will arrive at your town” (135). This story and the stone snake at Laguna are both attached to the prophecies that Sterling recognizes by the end of the novel. Materiality and story infuse each other; as with the other objects, the snake at Laguna is storied matter.

The snake, in choosing to appear so near to the degraded, mined landscape, reaffirms for Sterling (and for Silko) that the Earth is inviolable and will outlast human desecration. While other characters speculate that the snake appeared in order to escape the mine and pointed itself towards the next planned mining location, Sterling realizes, “The snake didn’t care about the uranium tailings; humans had desecrated only themselves with the mine, not the Earth” (762). The snake thus represents both spirit and land as unified, refusing to comprehend spirit in purely immaterial terms, as a spirit/matter dichotomy would insist. The snake points itself in the direction not of the next mine, but the direction that the sacred twins would come and toward the emergence of the Sixth World that titles this final part of Almanac.

My argument that the novel-almanac deploys multiple temporalities offers another way to read its ending. Rather than perceiving the final chapter, “Home,” as narrowing from an epic level to a comforting personal level (i.e., the plot resolution of Sterling’s life story), we can read the final lines as radically expansive. That is, they focus on the stone snake in order to indicate a geologic timescale that befits the snake’s lithic materiality as

16 The same sentence repeats in a later portion of the almanac, connecting the story to a call for slaves to rise up against their masters (578).
it signals the turning over of the Death-Eye Dog epoch and the coming of the sacred twins. The snake, comprised of both human story and stone, confuses any neat boundary between human agency and geophysical forces. Closing the novel-almanac with the stone snake explains why no prophesied global revolution occurs explicitly in its pages. The snake demands that readers take a longer view, one that accommodates multiple dimensions of time and recognizes the spiritual dimensions of revolution. These material objects all influence the actions of the characters; similarly, the text bears down relentlessly on readers, causing readers and reviewers to squirm.\(^{17}\) As a novel-almanac, the book is itself a seeing instrument, provoking the changes it promises but does not guarantee.

The Columbus Quincentennial has passed, as has the much-discussed completion in 2012 of the Mayan calendar’s baktun cycle, ushering in a new epoch. Groups as disparate as the attendees of Almanac’s Holistic Healers Convention have seized upon this moment to promote their causes, interpreting its prophetic potential for signaling global awakening and change; the moment has galvanized much activist organizing in the twenty-first century. These movements continue to be strongly influenced by their use of social media and less hierarchical organizing, as the Zapatistas acknowledge in their dissolution of Subcomandante Marcos. Prophecies, meanwhile, serve as “organizing fictions” in the sense that their “reality” need not be guaranteed fact for them to be persuasive; they are persuasive as narratives. Less about predicting the future than about

\(^{17}\) Houser astutely notes this verb being used by Malcolm Jones in his Newsweek review to predict the reader’s experience. Squirming, a motion that demonstrates anxiety even while it “strap[s] the reader to his chair,” serves as a fitting parallel for Houser’s argument about the immobilizing influence of Almanac’s hyperbole and affect of anxiety to spur environmental activism (206).
marshaling the present, prophecies organize. As Mishuana Goeman remarks in her reading of *Almanac*, “The prophecy referred to . . . is not a magical happening but rather the processes of language and communal sharing” (199; emphasis in original). As prophetic as it was upon its publication, *Almanac of the Dead* continues to offer a relevant message to movements that utilize both the rhetoric of prophecy and the innovations of social media while organizing for social and environmental justice. The next section looks at one of these prophecies in particular, the Anishinaabe Seven Fires, and its relationship to the movement Idle No More.

**Networks and Prophecy in the Round Dance Revolution**

In the fall and winter of 2012, several Canadian Aboriginal women gathered to raise awareness and plan resistance to Canada’s omnibus budget bill Bill C-45, which would amend the Indian Act as well as remove protection on the majority of the country’s waterways.18 And though the bill passed on December 14th as the “Jobs and Growth Act, 2012,” in this short time the movement Idle No More had flourished and would continue to expand with protests and teach-ins, as well as the hunger strike of Attawapiskat First Nation Chief Theresa Spence. While the movement began in Canada and continues to be most focused there, it has also spread globally, with people supporting First Nations in Canada and using the momentum of Idle No More to raise awareness about other indigenous issues around the world.

Since its beginnings, both social media and prophecy were key influences to

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18 Bill C-45 came on the heels of Bill C-38, which had been passed in June 2012 and also featured extensive restrictions on environmental policies.
organizing. The 2014 collection *The Winter We Danced*, which commemorates the movement thus far, features many selections reprinted from blogs and websites, and many include references to Twitter hashtags and other social media. In the book’s “Timeline of Major Events,” for instance, the first entry for the resistance to Bill C-45 is Jessica Gordon’s initial posting of the #IdleNoMore hashtag on Twitter on November 4th, 2012 (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 389). The ubiquity of social media in Idle No More reflects preceding movements and attests to the potential for such technology to shape and advance popular organizing in the twenty-first century.\(^{19}\) Despite critiques that such movements are short-term populist uprisings fated to vanish quickly whatever new technologies they might use, Idle No More has demonstrated more staying power; many participants see their actions directly connected to eras of Native resistance stretching back to the beginning of European colonization of North America. Additionally, participants are encouraged by the cultural connections the movement provides, which connects people to ceremony and promotes decolonization. Traditional prophecies aid these connections, encourage people, and assist coalitional activism.

Recurrent in the contributions to *The Winter We Danced* is the sentiment that social media benefitted the movement, not only as a way to work around the mainstream media’s disregard or misapprehension, but especially as a way to build transcultural Native identity. Tanya Kappo says of the importance of social media to Idle No More, “Because of the nature of our societies now, it’s really an ideal medium for important

19 Manuel Castells most recent work, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, explores the structures and textures of network societies and the use of the Internet and social media to influence social transformation. He discusses early twenty-first-century movements influenced by social media (including Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, the Spanish *indigenistas*, and political reform in Iceland) but one group he omits is Idle No More, perhaps because it is the most recent example of this kind of network-driven social organizing.
conversations” (68). She also sees social media as more trustworthy a way for participants to express themselves: “Because we could write and create our own blogs and our own stories, everything was ours and nobody could take it or use it against us. But when the mainstream media took notice, that’s exactly what started to happen” (70). Idle No More co-founder Sheelah McLean’s contribution describes how social media sparked her involvement; author Richard Van Camp’s contribution catalogues the first posts and tweets he made regarding the movement; and the collection’s coeditors affirm in their introduction, “A unique aspect of the Idle No More is that the movement often went around mainstream media, emerging in online and independent publications as articles, essays, and interviews. This was the first time we had the capacity and technological tools to represent ourselves and our perspectives on the movement” (Kino-nda-niimi, “Idle” 25). These and other voices in the collection show that Idle No More is “a loosely knit political movement” but also “a meme tweeted about thousands of times a day” (Kinew 96).

At the same time that the movement-meme grew through social media, its spiritual character and use of prophetic rhetoric spurred deeper commitment. In addition to social media, prophecy is a recurrent theme in The Winter We Danced. For Nina Wilson, the prominence of women in the movement indicates its prophecy: “We know we are now in that place of prophecy, because the women stood up, and they stepped forward with a gift, so we could all live” (108). For Andrea Landry, meanwhile, the enactment of prophecy is indicated in the prominence of youth in leadership roles speaking before governments around the world: “It is through this that we know that this movement is prophecy, but it hasn’t been encased within the colonized borders of Canada—it has
surpassed those borders, it decolonizes those borders, and it reaches out to the brothers and sisters globally” (365). Combining these two statements, it can be said that prophetic rhetoric further legitimizes voices that have long been marginalized within colonial heteropatriarchies. Such rhetoric also emphasizes inclusivity: for Wilson, the prophecy shows women acting for the life of all people, while for Landry, the rising of youth leadership around the globe shows the failure of the movement to be restricted within the boundaries of the nation-state. The prophecies are at once tribally specific yet encourage transcultural networks.

In a call originally posted to Revolution Per Minute and as a Facebook event, Ryan McMahon (Ojibwe/Métis) matches this inclusivity with spirituality: “One Heartbeat Across Turtle Island Idle No More has called on all Nations to drum and sing across Turtle Island on December 21, 2012 at 12:00 p.m. Central Standard time, for a global synchronized Spiritual Awakening” (101). In choosing this date, organizers drew on the excitement about the 2012 winter solstice and the completion of the Mayan baktun cycle, linking them in a pan-American call. Paul Seesequasis also aligns one Idle No More action, the Nishiyuu walk, with pantribal indigenous resistance. He compares it to the 40,000-member Zapatista Walk of Silence that also took place on December 21, 2012 in Chiapas: “They came and left in silence. Similarly with the Nishiyuu who walked south, across open country and highway, a long column inspired by the idea of the journey” (210). Like Silko’s hemispheric transformation and awareness, connecting these moments gave participants the sense of prophecy being enacted, as recounted in Lee Maracle’s

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20 Despite speculation about its accuracy, this date remained prominently associated with the end of the cycle.
poem “Blind Justice”:

In the millennia that we have lived here there are

Constants

The tide will retreat and it will return

The fishes that are threatened will return

The people who died during those epidemics are

returning (216)

Maracle’s implied hope, one shared by many other participants, is that Idle No More signals a shift towards Native recovery and resurgence. And just as the Canadian legislative bills threatening Native sovereignty also entailed removing environmental protections, so Maracle affirms that Native resurgence happens alongside the resurgence of a broader community of life (here, the fish). Without rehashing noble savagery or the deploying the trope of the ecological Indian, Maracle asserts that health of the land and that of human communities are interrelated.

Prophecies about Idle No More—its timeliness, women’s leadership, indigenous resurgence, and coalitional disposition—encourage participants to see transcultural connections and to interpret its successes as signs of resurgence. Prophecy also motivates participants by changing the tenor of popular social movements, affirming that it is more than a movement. Leslie Belleau’s contribution to The Winter We Danced draws on John Burrows’s Anishinaabe description of Pauwauwaein, an awakening or revelation. Belleau sees Idle No More enacting such an awakening, one that “has deep implications

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for the future of the Idle No More movement. The last couple of months . . . we took a
long look at our future if we do not protect our lands and waters, and we opened our
hearts, minds, and spirits to a place of awakening where we could accept the potential of
a new vision” (352). For Belleau, then, Idle No More as an instance of Pauwauwaein
distinguishes it from concepts such as “movement” or “revolution,” terms that
mainstream media, academia, and politics can smoothly address, critique, and dismiss.
Grounded in spiritual traditions and prophecy, “Idle No More has unleashed a
responsibility that was living inside of us, but needed prompting and awakening” (354).

While others might not use the concept of Pauwauwaein, Belleau is far from the
only participant to invest Idle No More with spiritual, prophetic significance. The
Anishinaabe Seven Fires is another prophecy that has gained wide use in Idle No More
and Canadian First Nations discourse. Jenna Wirch—who as a young Native woman
embodies both the female leadership and youth leadership that Nina Wilson and Andrea
Landry find hopefully indicative of prophecy—sees Native resistance as a thoroughly
natural phenomenon. Speaking on what motivated youth in Idle No More, Wirch says,

It’s in our DNA and it always has been. Our skin is brown; we belong to
our Mother Earth. The eighth fire has been lit under our asses, and has
woken us up. It woke us from this oppression. We are living out a
prophecy right now, in this time and era. I believe that this generation that
is born right now is going to grow up and change a lot of stuff. . . . Once
young people turned up at these rallies, got empowered, and started being
on the news all of the time, this really gave them a sense of hope, crushed
that hopelessness, and stopped the self-loathing. (170)
While naturalizing identity and resistance may be problematic, it also empowers Wirch and encourages other Native youth to become involved. Like Wilson and Landry, Wirch also sees her actions as part of living out prophecy. By aligning herself and others with the eighth fire, she connects herself to a tradition that goes back to the migration stories of the Anishinaabeg.

In speaking of the Seven Fires, I refer to the version told by Bawdwaywidun/Edward Benton-Banai (Ojibwe). The prophecy gained wide popularity thanks in no small part to Benton-Banai’s *The Mishomis Book*, which aimed to provide Anishinaabe teachings in an accessible format especially geared towards youth. Benton-Banai’s respected status as an elder and a member of the Midewiwin grants him further authority. Each “fire” represents different prophets speaking about different eras, suggesting the migration of the Anishinaabeg from the East coast through the Great Lakes and other challenges.

Benton-Banai’s account splits the pronouncements of the first six prophets from that of the seventh in order to emphasize his interpretation: the first six fires refer to events of the past, while the seventh attends beyond Benton-Banai’s and his readers’ current moment, or perhaps to a time that is just now beginning.22 Placing the seventh fire in the current moment is significant for its inspiring affects on contemporary organizing, not least because it involves both Natives and non-Natives:

In the time of the Seventh Fire a Osh-ki-bi-di-zeeg’ (New People) will emerge. They will retrace their steps to find what was left by the trail.

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22 I follow Benton-Banai’s interpretation here because it is the one most widely taken up by current Native organizers and scholars.
Their steps will take them to the elders who they will ask to guide them on their journey.

If the New People will remain strong in their quest, the Waterdrum of the Midewiwin Lodge will again sound its voice. There will be a rebirth of the Anishinabe nation and a rekindling of old flames. The Sacred Fire will again be lit.

It is at this time that the Light-skinned Race will be given a choice between two roads. If they choose the right road, then the Seventh Fire will light the Eighth and Final Fire—an eternal Fire of peace, love, brotherhood and sisterhood. If the Light-skinned Race makes the wrong choice of roads, then the destruction which they brought with them in coming to this country will come back to them and cause much suffering and death to all the Earth’s people. (91-93)

The Seventh Fire prophecy announces the coming of a new people, implying they will be a younger generation who return to cultural traditions and ask questions of their elders. It invites young people to think about their potential to be part of the present prophecy. Indeed, The Mishomis Book’s chapter on the Seven Fires prophecy ends with the question, “Are we the New People of the Seventh Fire?” (93). Allusions to the prophecy have appeared in titles of numerous books and documentaries on language revitalization and treaty rights. As seen in the words of activists like Wirch, these references incite participation in decolonization and resurgence movements such as Idle No More.

Prophecy also addresses the roles of non-Natives. Although a narrower
interpretation might emphasize racial categories, the roles need not be essentialist, as Benton-Banai himself articulates in his inclusive understanding of the New People. He says when he first heard the Seventh Fire prophecy, “I thought perhaps it meant only Indian people. But I realize now that what was prophesized was that there’s gotta be a new people, because the people that we’re dealing with now are going to destroy the earth, and along with that destruction is going to be the destruction of all of us” (“Ojibwe History”). Reminiscent of Silko’s Destroyers and her own complicated use of “whiteness,” the races in this prophecy resist oversimplifications and suggest that colonial racial categories (and the power relations they entail) will not be tenable in the advent of this Fire.

Prophecies like the Seventh Fire allow for further coalitional activism between Natives and non-Natives. Its popularization is one among many; other famous examples include Black Elk Speaks, Hopi prophecies, and “Eagle and Condor” prophecies attributed to indigenous cultures in Central and South America. Such popularizations frequently serve questionable ends, particularly when they are divorced from their connections to Native people and lifeways or prove to be non-Native fabrications profiting New Age schemes. In other cases, however, they are a valuable way to start dialogues about Native resurgence, ongoing settler colonialism, and the futures of communities. The prophecies are used to mobilize Natives, but they also stage a transcultural call for engagement with those outside of Native cultures in order to reanalyze settler-Native connections.

Many organizers within Idle No More readily adopt the spirit of the Seventh Fire prophecy, finding the acts of decolonization consistent with the action of the New People
returning to traditions lost or “left beside the trail.” Co-founder Alex Wilson, for instance, exemplifies this process when she draws on her Cree heritage to describe Idle No More. She uses her traditional knowledge of a specific plant, *Weegess*, to convey her vision of the movement, representing a specific nation without foreclosing transcultural potential:

> Every bit of *Weegess* has been nurtured by and holds within itself the past and when we take that root into our bodies as medicine, it is our past—our origins—that brings us back to wellness.

Like *Weegess*, Idle No More is a rhizome, nurtured and nurturing in an intricately connected non-hierarchic system of land, water, and people. This revolution grew quickly, reaching out through social media, reclaiming public spaces with our bodies and our voices, spinning out new connections with people, and reaching down roots to draw up the ancestral knowledge that each of us carry in our bodies. That knowledge is bringing us back to the practice of relational accountability. Those of us who are part of Idle No More recognize that there is no us or them. (329)

Drawing on the past enables a return to wellness promised by decolonization initiatives and also shown in the Seventh Fire prophecy. Using social media, Idle No More (like *Weegess*) draws strength on its non-hierarchical, rhizomatic organization. The movement also draws strength from ancestral knowledge. Wilson describes a kind of knowledge that is powerful, generational, and deeply embodied—similar to Wirch, who uses her Native identity to naturalize her activism (“it’s in our DNA”). This recourse to embodiment further affirms the legitimacy and persistence of Native knowledge despite violent colonial attempts to discredit and eradicate it. Wilson’s metaphoric depiction thus
encapsulates those components of Idle No More that render it a prime example of grassroots, transcultural organizing nourished by embodiment and prophecy.

Wilson’s embodied knowledge also demonstrates the kind of identification that Chadwick Allen articulates in his reading of the “blood/land/memory complex,” which “articulates acts of indigenous minority recuperation that attempt to seize control of the symbolic and metaphorical meanings of indigenous ‘blood,’ ‘land,’ and ‘memory’ and that seek to liberate indigenous minority identities from definitions of authenticity imposed by dominant settler cultures, including those definitions imposed by well-meaning academics” (16). Emphasizing the “land” aspect of Allen’s formulation, Wilson’s understanding of Idle No More organizing also extends beyond the human to include land and water. She shows how communities are not humans placed in environments, but systems or assemblages of plant and animal life (including humans), entwined further with waterways and vibrant inorganic matter.

Equally significant, Wilson speaks to the breakdown of an us/them dichotomy, which she elaborates elsewhere in this essay and in other writings using the Cree term Sahkihiwawin, “love in action,” resonant with philosophical principles in other nonviolent movements, such as Gandhi’s use of ahimsa. Love in action invokes “relational accountability” and points to renewed and evolving relationships, the same sort evoked by Benton-Banai’s account of the Seventh Fire prophecy. Thus, when Wirch says, “the eighth fire has been lit under our asses,” her allusion to the Seven Fires prophecy means the plural “our” should refer to all people.

Detailed in Benton-Banai’s Mishomis Book and echoed in Wilson’s explanation of Idle No More, the Seventh Fire prophecy becomes an astute and valuable way of
perceiving and promoting contemporary organizing. More than just philosophically appealing, its coalitional view is confirmed by actual activist work. Rick Wallace’s sociological account *Merging Fires* demonstrates the tenor of such organizing between Native and settler groups in Canada. He writes that “community-based relationship-building can be seen as an ‘ontology of becoming,’ engaged in a practice of reorganizing power. It is an intertwining of reciprocity, trust and knowledge embodying alternate paradigms of collective relationships and solidarity within asymmetrical conflicts” (134). Wallace’s language resembles Wilson’s because it underscores the process-oriented, mutually transformative effects organizing has on everyone involved with it, including the land. In his case studies, Wallace recognizes that land plays an active role: “In the case of Tunnel Island, the land has multiple histories and meanings, not just the separate and interactive histories of Anishinaabe and Euro-Canadians, but the land itself, as an entity, has its own stories” (153). As these stories entwine with personal and cultural narratives, they emphasize differences; storytelling remains a crucial form of self-expression and a way of pursuing solidarity in difference.

For Wallace, recognizing that the land is storied also has consequences for repairing relationships: “Reconciliation also involves reconciling with the land. This is a complex point missed by the parochial universalism of many Western-based peacebuilding theories located outside local contexts. Similar in some ways to deep ecology perspectives, Anishinaabe relationships with the land are deeply spiritual and symbiotic” (162). As Wallace’s case studies show, matter and meaning are thoroughly intertwined, and land itself is an agent in coalitional peacebuilding. Of course, Western-
based deep ecology is not without its own kind of parochial universalism. Yet Wallace’s turn to deep ecology in order convey Anishinaabe perspectives on land resembles the move made by material ecocritics to compare vital materialisms to Native worldviews. Material ecocriticism can help make room for the land and for multiple voices because it provides new language with which to do so, and because its diffractive approach encourages working together, respecting differences while also enabling new worlds. Material ecocriticism doesn’t approximate Native thinking any more perfectly—seeking approximations is not the endeavor of diffractive approaches—instead, material ecocriticism connects with Native worldviews while affirming differences. Material ecocriticism and Native studies can grow together, pursuing arrangements and shared conversations that amplify progressive scholarship.

Focusing on prophecy’s mobilizing influence (instead of trying to dis/prove its predictions), I have avoided mystification. The spiritual need not mean “supernatural”; rather, as material ecocriticism and Native ontologies show, it reflects a deeper respect for the kinship of all life, the liveliness of matter, and the “spirits” of place, ancestry, and cultural heritage. Prophecy encourages people to take action, and it also helps them feel connected to environmental issues without necessarily trapping them in abstracted mysticism. As Wildcat articulates, “Wisdom-keepers within our tribal traditions have passed down warnings and prophecies about the world in which we live that correspond quite well with what scientists are now finding out about the current state of planet Earth”

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23 Timothy Morton’s quasi-critique of deep ecology offers one example of the trouble with a deep ecology that universalizes life. By aestheticizing Nature, Morton argues, we distance ourselves from it, against the aim of deep ecology: “I long to characterize what I am aiming for as ‘really deep ecology.’ . . . How deep does deep ecology want to go? In a truly deep green world, the idea of Nature will have disappeared in a puff of smoke, as nonhuman beings swim into view” (204).
Prophecy offers narratives for apprehending our embeddedness in a lively world and persuades further participation. For Natives, it fuses this ecological understanding with a decolonizing imperative.

Decolonization is also a responsibility for non-Native scholars, which they assume by learning to be genuine allies who produce and promote anticolonial scholarship. To understand and make room for intellectual and social engagement with the New People of the Seventh Fire, academic traditions heavily figured under Western worldviews must continue to make their language flexible enough while also contributing to Native language revitalization.24 Scholars should be prepared to relinquish specialized academic language when it prohibits conversation, in order to recognize affinities with indigenous scholarship. In *This Is Not a Peace Pipe*, Dale Turner likewise stresses a dialogic process for all scholars to undertake regardless of their backgrounds:

> There are many non-indigenous intellectuals who can help indigenous peoples make their arguments count. Indigenous peoples need some of their own people to engage the European history of ideas; in just the same way, the dominant culture needs some of its own people to listen and learn from indigenous philosophies. (120)

Through dialogue, committed scholars can pursue decolonization strategies that enrich their own academic interests while supporting sociopolitical changes in settler-colonial states. This collective action echoes the promises of the prophecies mentioned above, and it would also invite continued revaluation of how we perceive and live on land.

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24 Greg Cajete writes that Western scientists “must concede that the verb orientations and highly metaphorical nature of Indigenous languages may be better suited than European-based scientific language for expressing quantum reality” (*Native Science* 286).
Many ecocritical projects offer sympathetic readings of land; material ecocriticism stretches the (non)dualism Nature/Culture in order to acknowledge and engage the vitality of matter. Furthermore, its feminist-informed ethics resists collapsing difference into the worn oppositional categories of self and other. Merely describing how new materialist ideas are “just like” Native traditions is not responsible scholarship, and neither is simply contrasting them. While comparing and contrasting keeps things at a distance or otherwise assimilates them, diffraction can benefit new materialist thinking as a methodology that promises to bring together ways of thinking, acknowledging their difference but also creating something new. As ecocritics further employ new materialisms to read global and comparative literatures, they should continue to benefit from resonances with other worldviews without assimilating them. More than a promising methodology, diffraction is a model for responsible activism, a praxis that affirms Wilson’s Sakihiwawin by inviting complexity and dialogue and affirming solidarity in difference. Diffraction organizes studies and people in ways that enhance the potential for new subjectivities and for progressive relations. Diffraction thus serves decolonization as a difference in methodology that makes a difference, fitting for this present era, long prophesied and still being born.
Conclusion:
The Future of Traditional Ecological Knowledge
and Environmental Justice Struggles

One of the thrills (and anxieties) of working on literature in the present century is watching the speed with which ideas disseminate. Over the course of this dissertation’s writing, material ecocriticism has gained a foothold within the wider environmental humanities. At the 2013 Association for the Study of Literature and Environment conference, thirty-two papers referenced the new materialisms in their titles. And in the fall of 2014, the collection *Material Ecocriticism* was published, with several prominent ecocritics contributing essays. It seems safe to say that material ecocriticism has arrived, and that its particular emphases and tools will continue to influence the direction of ecocriticism.

Wider fields of English literary scholarship are also taking note. Jonathan Culler, respected not only for his own work on structuralism and deconstruction but also for surveying the shifting field of critical theory over the several decades, posited in a talk in 2014 at the University of Nevada, Reno that there were six primary themes to current trends in theory; his final three items were animal-human studies, ecocriticism, and the “post-human” (Culler). He asked the audience to consider what the relationship might be between the last two items.

Material ecocriticism serves as one answer to Culler’s question. Culler seemed to frame the relationship between ecocriticism and the posthuman as oppositional, because he interprets the posthuman as more interested in exclusively technological or mechanical
subjects and ecocriticism as more exclusively interested in nonhuman species and ecosystems. Yet there is more to posthumanism than cyborgs. The posthuman includes interspecies collaborations, the reshuffling of species as a category altogether, and the acknowledgement of our trans-corporeal selves as ecosystems (for example, consider the commonly cited fact that nonhuman bacterial cells and DNA vastly outnumber human cells and DNA in the body). Material ecocriticism, by considering nonhuman agency and recalibrating anthropocentrism, shows a new synthesis between the concerns of ecocriticism and posthumanism. It shows how the posthuman does not mark the advent of “unnatural,” inorganic technology so much as it reconceptualizes the human to suit current understandings of matter’s vitality and the agencies of nonhuman beings.¹ Furthermore, relational ontologies of Native worldviews, though not identical or easily interchangeable with posthumanism as conceived through Western philosophies, assert in strikingly similar fashion to posthumanism that the human is part of larger biotic communities with other-than-human entities who also possess the cultural and communicative capacities supposedly exclusive to humans. Such beliefs are not antiquated animisms but contemporary worldviews (e.g., Wildcat’s “indigenous realism”) that actively shape Native environmental discourse as well as non-Native coalitional environmental discourse. The attention to Native worldviews can help with comparative and decolonizing literary projects, given that these perspectives are embedded in

¹ Cary Wolfe writes that when we talk about posthumanism, “we are not just talking about a thematics of the decentering of the human in relation to either evolutionary, ecological, or technological coordinates . . . we are also talking about how thinking confronts that thematics, what thought has to become in the face of those challenges. . . . the point is not to reject humanism tout court—indeed, there are many values and aspirations to admire in humanism—but rather to show how those aspirations are undercut by the philosophical and ethical frameworks used to conceptualize them” (xvi). As an intellectual project, material ecocriticism encounters these challenges of changing thought.
commitment to land and to Native sovereignty. Fortunately, they also come without the
jargon or intellectual elitism to which arcane new materialist philosophizing occasionally
succumbs. As such, Native worldviews have and continue to make differences on Turtle
Island.

And they may never have been more needed. The speedily shifting intellectual
terrain of the present era is matched and fueled by the speed with which extractive global
capitalism operates. The lands and waters I have discussed have witnessed significant
changes over the course of writing this dissertation. On the Yellow Dog Plains (the site of
Migi zii wa sin discussed in chapter three) the first saleable shipment of nickel and
copper ore has been mined and removed, with eight more years projected, and with new
mineral leases being sought for projects nearby. Meanwhile, global climate change,
biodiversity loss, and ocean acidification continue apace, as meteorologists consistently
report record-breaking temperatures and changing weather patterns. Alongside these
harrowing concerns are equally historic acts of resistance, such as the historically largest
climate march in New York City on September 21, 2014, drawing over 400,000
participants and millions more in other marches and events around the world.
Significantly, indigenous people led the march, many carrying banners linking climate
change crises to broken treaties, human rights violations, and (neo)colonialism. As these
issues continue, how will we continue to draw on traditional worldviews and current
critical theory to inform cultural criticism? Academic projects continue to show promise
as scholars are increasingly willing to put their work in conversation with wider concerns
of justice, and to think about how their work communicates with other fields. A
promising demonstration of such communication can be witnessed in the evolving
discourse around Traditional Ecological Knowledge, or TEK, a term which has been used in scientific circles since the 1970s. The most recent Native and non-Native scholars to engage with TEK demonstrate refined, coalitional approaches.

In this conclusion I examine the discourse of TEK as a way to revisit the dissertation’s core concerns. TEK, like the diffractive framework I have established, also fosters interactions between Native and non-Native worldviews. Its proliferation as a term demonstrates the numerous attempts to bring together different systems of knowledge and to promote exchanges between them; however, some of its iterations also show the trouble with dualistic presuppositions that heavily reinforce the idea of culturally distinct knowledge systems. When TEK interpretations stay merely within a compare-and-contrast approach that fails to consider how these knowledge systems overlap, intermingle, and especially how they co-constitute and modify one another, it often leaves entrenched power relations unchecked. While those who utilize TEK discourse may genuinely intend mutual benefits for both Native and non-Native communities, TEK can nonetheless serve as a colonial tool when it frames indigenous ways of knowing as concrete bodies of knowledge, which can then be extracted from communities and lands and used freely by non-Natives. As such, material ecocritics stand to learn from these preceding engagements of different kinds of knowledge production and dissemination. In what follows, I delineate a few articulations of TEK that highlight the cultural complexities and ethical issues at stake, before showing a literary rendering of TEK by writer-botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer.

Fikret Berkes composed a popular definition of TEK as “a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down
through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment” (8; original emphasis). It is a broad term, encompassing a wide variety of practices, places, and cultures. It appeals to non-Native researchers and others because it represents an array of useful knowledge about plant medicines, land and water use, and, most recently, climate change. For Native peoples, it has obvious value as part of traditional practices and wellbeing, but it also has positive associations within current sociopolitical arenas as a way to support decolonization (returning to and privileging traditional understandings and practices) and self-determination (affirming sustainable, self-sufficient ways of being).

But however mutual these exchanges between groups can be—and however helpful in collective planning for adaptation in the face of anthropogenic climate change and other historically unique environmental situations—they do not necessarily promote egalitarian power structures. TEK has been routinely dismissed or undervalued in the past, tokenized in environmental policy without genuine incorporation. It has also been exploited by private industries, as when companies hawk “Native secrets” of plant medicines to cure ailments. Addressing such incongruities and power disparities requires first recognizing the challenges that various legal and political discourses pose to fair, equitable utilizations of TEK. As Williams and Hardison point out, “Knowledge exchanges occur within powerful and compelling legal frameworks that often conflict with and take precedence over social arrangements” (536). Similarly, material ecocritics who develop theories primarily using Western worldviews and intellectual traditions must heed related inequalities as they work with associations they or others make between their work and Native traditions.
TEK is not always a term Native knowledge holders themselves use. Furthermore, it is important to point out that “TEK” as a term threatens to objectify knowledge practices: “Traditional knowledge is a noun phrase, turning knowledge into an object. Traditional knowledge holders commonly think of knowledge as a contextualized process connected to dynamic, evolving relationships” (Williams and Hardison 533). To use the term responsibly, then, requires recognizing its anthropological origins and to stress the changing, particular, and relational qualities of such knowledge.

Although Berkes’s definition can indeed lead to objectified understandings of TEK, especially using the word “body,” he is careful to insist on its dynamic, adaptive nature. Indeed, later references to TEK in *Sacred Ecology* drop the word “body” in favor of the more dynamic “complex.” Berkes is aware of the dangers of overgeneralizing Native or Western culture and of overemphasizing differences between them. He recognizes Western traditions that demonstrate more harmonious coexistence with nature than dominion over it, and he also picks apart common ecological stereotypes of Natives. While acknowledging the complexity lost in overgeneralizing of these cultures, Berkes does affirm the tendency in Western science to favor positivist and reductionist research; he also notes Western science’s lack of an ethical or spiritual dimension, which is integral to many indigenous knowledge systems. While skeptical of any future consilience between Western science and TEK, Berkes suggests that their trajectories can run parallel and that more holistic versions of ecology informed by environmental ethics can support beneficial exchanges.

Berkes also affirms that the primary benefit of TEK to indigenous communities is political “because it threatens to change power relations between indigenous groups and
the dominant society” (164). By asserting the value of indigenous knowledge for present and future ecological concerns, TEK also supports prophecies that support Native resurgence and also call for changes in oppressive power relations.

Berkes’s suggestions for the future of Western ecology and TEK anticipates contemporary interdisciplinary science in the early twenty-first century. Berkes writes, “A fundamental lesson of traditional ecological knowledge is that worldviews do matter. Positivist science, despite claims to the contrary, is not value-free” (182). Indeed, ecocritics have well demonstrated this point; perhaps the more pressing task for the current era is not to prove that biases exist in Western science, but to notice the emergence of concepts and fields that could run alongside TEK and Native sciences. For instance, though Berkes observes that Western science by definition avoids ethical or spiritual dimensions, Barad’s “ethico-onto-epistemology,” derived from her understanding of theoretical particle physics, suggests that Western science is finding within its own processes and approaches an engagement with ethical and spiritual dimensions.² If Berkes, writing at the close of the twentieth century, finds a challenge for Western science “to cultivate a new kind of ecology that rejects the materialist tradition and questions the Newtonian, machinelike view of ecosystems” (182), contemporary science has been doing just that, a fact recognized and celebrated by material ecocritics. This new materialist tradition is surely different from the “materialist tradition” Berkes has in mind in the above quote, because it promotes a radically different understanding of

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² Robert Nadeau further argues that prominent religious and spiritual traditions must be utilized in order to help shift economic and political systems into accord with environmental sustainability. Such dialogue between faiths and between religion and science “can serve as the basis for articulating and disseminating an environmental ethos with a profound spiritual dimension,” which could support a rapid, effective movement of religious environmentalism (7-8).
matter and its lively exchanges with discourse and ethics.

But as environmentally promising as these ontological shifts in Western traditions might be, it is crucial to acknowledge the many Native traditions that have always maintained a more relational and spiritual approach to environments and nonhuman life, and which continue to develop innovative strategies for articulating scientific research and methodologies from these ethical and cultural perspectives. Native-led iterations of TEK exemplify this approach, and their history and development offer an object lesson for new materialists in recognizing and negotiating the relationships between these different forms of philosophical inquiry and knowledge production.

TEK continues to evolve in dialogue with non-Native traditions in the twenty-first century. Philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte addresses TEK within wider frameworks of social justice. His work comes from an ethics background, but works well within literary and sociological studies. He considers how Native communities negotiate their TEK as part of environmental justice struggles, pointing out how different conceptions of justice complicate the process and stressing the importance for different groups to share participatory values when coming together to make environmental policy decisions. His work decouples justice from its formal, retrospective connotation within Western juridical systems. Rather than seeing justice as something applied to preceding situations, such as punishments meted out to resolve a crime, Whyte encourages a forward-thinking, relational justice, a kind that resonates with Native communities (especially some versions of tribal courts) and with relational systems such as Daniel Wildcat’s indigenous realism—and, as we’ll see, with new materialisms.

Whyte suggests strategies for reframing institutional practices so that they can
more equitably incorporate TEK, rather than maintain the asymmetrical power relations Williams and Hardison warn about. He proposes the term *collective continuance*, “a community’s capacity to be adaptive in ways sufficient for the livelihoods of its members to flourish into the future” (518). As such, collective continuance is “composed of and oriented around the many relationships within single communities and amid neighboring communities” (519). Collective continuance depends on honoring the responsibilities required by these relationships. These “relational responsibilities” include relationships between governments and those between species. Whyte argues that these responsibilities are hindered by certain systems that maintain retrospective justice.

Whyte’s keen focus on relational responsibilities echoes Daniel Wildcat’s indigenous realism, which emphasizes “inalienable responsibilities” that community members hold with one another and their environments. Whyte states, “Leaders, scientists and professionals . . . are responsible for doing what is in their power to affect institutions through actions that can be shown to shelter or amend persisting and emerging systems of responsibilities” (528). Scholars in the environmental humanities can heed this call by continuing to investigate the efficacy and applicability of new materialist theories to environmental justice discourse: concepts like Barad’s intra-action and Alaimo’s trans-corporeality, by underscoring the dynamic and extensive relationships we form with matter and other lives, can work alongside these TEK perspectives to amplify thinking about emerging systems of responsibilities.

Whyte’s focus on systems of responsibilities helps redefine TEK:

It is sometimes assumed that TEK is only instrumentally valuable to climate science because it is observational knowledge collected over
generations. However, TEK best refers to a persisting system of
responsibilities. . . . TEK actually refers to entire systems of
responsibilities that are intrinsically valuable insofar as the systems are at
the very heart of communities’ worldviews and lifeways. . . .
Collaboration across science and TEK systems must involve conversations
about how different groups of people understand the nature of reality and
responsibility. (527)
This definition of TEK as comprising relationships corrects for any misunderstanding in
Berkes’s definition about it being a “body of knowledge”; while the latter makes sense
for instrumentalist applications of TEK, Whyte’s emphasis on relationality encourages
scientists to consider their responsibilities to knowledge holders. It also signals the need
for scholars in the environmental humanities to undertake comparative studies of
ontologies and ethics.

Seen in this light, Traditional Ecological Knowledge is less “ecological” in the
sense of belonging to a natural world somehow disconnected from human culture. It is
instead thoroughly grounded in human communities, even as it comprehends community
as inclusive of multiple species. Furthermore, TEK can work in the service of cross-
cultural understanding. As Whyte recognizes, “we need to cultivate attitudes of awareness
that the concept of TEK plays a role as a collaborative concept, which is what I call a
concept that invites people to engage in a process of respectful learning about significant
differences” (Whyte, “On the Role”).

Whyte’s emphasis on TEK as collaborative informs my reading of coalitional
environmentalism, and it is why TEK resonates with prophetic rhetoric about the future
of Native and non-Native communities. For example, TEK exchanges that underscore responsibilities fit with chapter four’s emphasis on community. The Anishinaabe Seven Fires serves a prophetic function even while recounting origins and a migration history, proclaiming a future point in which Native and non-Natives must make a choice about reconciliation. As told by Edward Benton-Banai, this story fits with collaborative understandings of TEK because it also insists upon relationships and duties. Anishinaabe practices and ceremonies acknowledge humanity’s place within a wider biotic community, figuring land and water not in instrumentalist terms, but more relational and respectful ones honoring the vitality of matter and the agency of all life.

Traditional ecological knowledge thus resonates with posthumanism, at least the particular variety I and many material ecocritics are most interested in, what Heather Sullivan terms “ecological posthumanism,” which “contextualizes the human being within the material environment of the biosphere” (83). This version of posthumanism evolves from other definitions, which tend to privilege either cyborg studies or animal studies, and it invites new materialist reformulations of matter. This type of posthumanism is also resonant with TEK discourse that emphasizes broader communities of beings than that seen in Western science and political discourse. TEK and posthumanism amplify each other.

The preceding chapters on land and water in environmental justice struggles all point in the direction of a posthumanist vision of community that includes other-than-human beings. As Giovanna Di Chiro writes, “Environmental justice groups, while strongly criticizing mainstream conceptions of nature, also produce a distinct theoretical and material connection between human/nature, human/environment relations through
their notions of ‘community’” (310). Of the multiple ways environmental groups articulate these relations, Aldo Leopold’s land ethic is a recurrent inspiration, and it is a good example of the alliances and differences this particular Western environmental ethic has with Native ones.

At first glance, Leopold’s ethic seems quite agreeable with the common Native value of acknowledging and respecting one’s relations. However, Whyte is keen to point out the limits to drawing comparisons between such an ethic and Traditional Ecological Knowledge. Whyte observes that “comparison should not establish common ground that masks some significant differences between Leopold and contemporary tribal members” and further argues that “collaboration, in a sense invoked by Simon Ortiz, serves as a better basis for forging sustainable, multicultural communities” (“Indigenous North American Ethics,” n. pag.). While Whyte extensively considers the differences between Leopold’s land ethic and TEK, Berkes’s work anticipates such dialogue. Drawing insight from his work with Cree elders in St. James Bay, Berkes was able to see where Leopold’s ethic diverges from Cree environmental ethics: Leopold’s prescriptions exclusively apply to humans and thoroughly reflect the conception of humans as stewards. What Whyte and Wildcat suggest in their sense of community responsibilities, and what Berkes understands from his work with Cree elders, is that non-human species also hold responsibilities in their relationships (e.g., animals offering themselves in hunting or fishing, plants offering their medicines). The responsibilities are reciprocal and deepen the relationship among community members.

Material ecocritics can learn from models and utilizations of TEK that reinforce relationality. Instead of merely arguing for similarities between new materialist and
Native thought, more productive work can be done by more closely reading these theories for the differences they make together—to read them diffractively, as Karen Barad might suggest. In order to avoid propagating entrenched colonialisms, those who espouse similarities between material ecocriticism and Native worldviews should also demonstrate a trained attention to the differences that emerge in such comparisons. Diffractive methodologies offer one conceptual framework with such vigilance built in. A better way to conceive of TEK is not so much as an act of translation between discrete and irreconcilable knowledge systems, but as a site of meeting between Native and non-Native epistemologies. New projects, such as Robin Wall Kimmerer’s ethnobotanical writing, demonstrate the potential of responsibly engaging difference and complexity among multiple knowledge systems.

Diffracting Native and Non-Native Knowledge: Kimmerer’s *Braiding Sweetgrass*

Kimmerer effects relationality in her project of merging Western science and Anishinaabe wisdom. Kimmerer particularly emphasizes relationships with the plant world. Sweetgrass (*wiingashk* in Anishinaabemowin, *Heirochloe odorata* in Linnean taxonomy) is a sacred plant for many Native cultures, including Kimmerer’s, and it becomes the key metaphor for reciprocity and meeting worldviews, as well as the organizational metaphor for the book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. The five main sections are titled with actions involving sweetgrass (planting, tending, picking, braiding, and

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3 Kimmerer’s apparent ease with blending approaches is not one shared by all Native scientists. For example, Debra Harry soberly critiques Western models and concepts, particularly intellectual property rights, as she observes how Western science and research has plundered indigenous property for non-Native research goals and corporate profits.
Kimmerer uses the image of braiding sweetgrass to express her intent to build relationships: she offers the book as “an intertwining of science, spirit, and story—old stories and new ones that can be medicine for our broken relationship with earth, a pharmacopoeia of healing stories that allow us to imagine a different relationship, in which people and land are good medicine for each other” (x).

Kimmerer’s work advocates for renewal, both for ecological restoration and for improved relationships between Natives and non-Natives. As a botanist and professor, she has commitments to Western academic ways of knowing and their potential to improve ecosystems. As an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and Director of the Native Earth Environmental Youth Camp, she is also invested in recovering and expanding Native traditions. Her collection of vignettes all point to renewal through reciprocity.

Kimmerer’s audience seems to be environmentalists. *Braiding Sweetgrass* was published by the green press Milkweed Editions, and her work has also appeared in *Orion* and *Whole Terrain*. Its style has much in common with American nature and science writing, with many ornate passages about the beauty and brilliance of the natural world. Sensuous landscapes and lyrical constructions enliven explanations of natural processes, as when she describes the effect the scent of humus has on the human nervous system: “Breathing in the scent of Mother Earth stimulates the release of the hormone oxytocin, the same chemical that promotes bonding between mother and child, between lovers” (236). And her sentiments might be taken for an iteration of deep ecology, were it not for her expressly Anishinaabe perspective; the book’s first section commences with a retelling of the Anishinaabe story of Skywoman, and each subsequent story threads back
to her understanding of cultural traditions. But in addition to featuring both Western and Anishinaabe knowledge, Kimmerer’s act of braiding produces something new. As she observes in this passage on bees:

There was a time when I teetered precariously with an awkward foot in each of two worlds—the scientific and the indigenous. But then I learned to fly. Or at least try. It was the bees that showed me how to move between different flowers—to drink the nectar and gather pollen from both. It is this dance of cross-pollination that can produce a new species of knowledge, a new way of being in the world. After all, there aren’t two worlds, there is just one good green earth. (47)

Kimmerer valorizes the commingling of ecological knowledge systems. Her metaphor of cross-pollination emphasizes her understanding that bringing these systems together will produce a new one. She dramatizes her shift from a schizophrenic approach to nature into one synthesizing multiple perspectives, and in doing so she invites readers into a dialogue requiring a holistic approach to environment that validates diverse experiences and backgrounds. Affirmed by the image of a unified earth, she further intimates the complementarity of ecological perspectives.4

But if she imagines a synthesis between Western and indigenous knowledge systems, Kimmerer also echoes the point of difference between environmental ethics such as Leopold’s and Native ethics: stewardship, if it is to be advanced at all, needs to be

4 Meanwhile, contemporary anthropological discourse in cosmopolitics entails multiple worlds. Rather than a unified “nature” underlying many “cultures,” Edward Viveiros de Castro argues for perspectival multinaturalism in his observations of Amerindian cultures: “One single ‘culture,’ multiple ‘natures’” (478). Multinaturalism aids cross-cultural exchanges, but Kimmerer’s wording here need not be read as a refutation of such ideas; rather, she uses “one good green earth” to affirm that plural views coexist.
understood within a web of mutual responsibilities. She writes, “Restoration is imperative for healing the earth, but reciprocity is imperative for long-lasting, successful restoration. . . . We restore the land, and the land restores us” (336). Restoration through reciprocity forecloses the possibility of a stewardship ethic harboring the sort of anthropocentrism that could transform it into a “dominion-over” stewardship. Reciprocity acknowledges mutual interdependence and cocreation.

Kimmerer’s teachings from Potawatomi plant knowledge and oral traditions weave together her ethnobotanical work. TEK utilization foregrounds the importance of recognizing and working with diverse and sometimes divergent worldviews, not forcing their similarities or assuming they are readily translatable. Reading literature can do the same: fiction is a resource for appreciating different worldviews and for dramatizing how they inform social and environmental movements.

Reading literature also invites our scrutiny of popular tropes or images. In American Indian literature, including Kimmerer’s work, the trope that looms large is the ecological Indian. When Natives speak specifically about the environment, they frequently negotiate this trope, one that critics have long been rightly skeptical of, and which the wider public may either uncritically celebrate or deride as historically false (often in attempts to discredit Native voices or political claims). The dissonance surrounding the ecological Indian arises in part because it, like many iterations of TEK, requires the reductive, dichotomous split between Western and Native traditions. The cognitive pitfalls multiply from here as discourse for or against the ecological consciousness of Native peoples too easily assumes concepts such as environment or minobimaatisiiwin can seamlessly translate across the created divide.
The insubstantiality of the ecological Indian has made it an easy target for all sides, but simply dismissing it forecloses important dimensions to the critique of coalitional environmental organizing. Paul Nadasdy points out the failure of many critics to address the fact that many Natives themselves strategically use the image of the ecological Indian; he addresses others who “have argued that Indian people invoke the stereotype not out of false consciousness but as an opportunistic political strategy” (312). Indeed, the preceding chapters also demonstrate how the trope can be used to muster political power, as when water walkers or Idle No More activists speak out in defense of the land by also calling on treaty rights. Rather than dismissing these voices as pandering to stereotypes, critics should be willing to reconsider the ecological Indian. As Joni Adamson points out, Natives have been strategically deploying this image long before it became fashionable for scholars to critique (“Cosmovisions”). How can environmental humanities scholars continue to recognize the unique and profound relationships to land that Native cultural worldviews sustain without losing specificity or promoting stereotypes that reductively tie Natives to land or construe all Natives as environmentalists? This dissertation’s answer is to more directly engage the robust field of Native studies. Disciplinary translation is no easy task, but patiently diffracting ideas and projects has the rewards of new alliances and frameworks. The theoretical ferment of material ecocriticism, refined by the decolonizing impetus of Native studies, can contribute to TEK discourse by rehashing and presenting new language to assist egalitarian exchanges of knowledge and development of mutually progressive systems of ecological management.
Organizing for the Future

Literature offers a way to more deeply engage with the living systems that surround and suffuse us, whether we call those systems cultural, ecological, or material-discursive. Kimmerer understands this when she writes, “We may not have wings or leaves, but we humans do have words. Language is our gift and our responsibility. I’ve come to think of writing as an act of reciprocity with the living land” (347). Kimmerer’s understanding of writing starkly contrasts with other writers, who find writing a dubious project, whether Timothy Morton’s critique of ecomimesis or David Abram’s pessimistic claim that writing has supplanted the immediacy of oral traditions and cultures. Kimmerer’s Potawatomi identity confounds Abram’s alignment of indigenous knowledge with ancient, oral traditions as she participates in the continuation of Anishinaabe knowledge. And akin to Vicki Kirby’s scholarship, Kimmerer’s understanding of writing as an engagement with land demonstrates that there is no “outside” to nature; writing isn’t necessarily a distancing or distraction from environment, but part of it.

As the crises and challenges of the Anthropocene continue to emerge, scholars of the environmental humanities offer invaluable resources for analyzing how narrative continues to shape our lives and worldviews. Properly undertaken, the investigation of our ontologies—our “organizing fictions”—has the potential to deepen awareness of decolonization struggles and strategies. The future of ecocriticism, material or otherwise, should aim for further alignment with these concerns. Like the activists of Klein’s Blockadia, scholars should continue forming and strengthening coalitions that recognize the interwoven causes of our environmental dilemmas. In sharing our traditions and stories, we use our differences together to make a difference that matters.
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Appendix


And If We Cry

If we cry,
We are not weak,
We are healing,

If we cry,
We are not powerless,
We are learning our power,

If we cry,
We are not silent,
We are speaking through our tears,

If we cry,
We are not beaten down,
But rising up,

For it was not long ago,
When our tears,
Fell to the Earth in silence,
The Earth listened,

Our tears turned inward,
A violent rage,
An unnecessary oppression,
Internalized oppression,
Onto ourselves,
Families,
Communities,

Overflowing onto the our reservations,
Trickling down the street,
Into the forest,
This isn't right,

In city streets,
Urban areas,
We fight with other races,
We become even more invisible,
Because we were supposed to be dead,
Annihilated,

To be “normal,” in suburban towns,
Looks like we are picture perfect,
White middle class,
Reaping the benefits of white culture,
Turning inward,
Outward,

We are outcasts,
The fire inside,
The fire inside our homes,

If we cry,
We are releasing generational pain,
The burden of the ancestors,
We cannot describe the sorrow,

If we cry,
We have no shame,
We have no guilt,
We are not to blame,

The culture gives us no space,
To cry,
Sometimes we cry alone,
Filling up our pillow with tears,
Crying over the kitchen table,
Pacing back and forth,

If we cry,
We are gaining back our identity,
We are integrating the pieces,
There is no order to integrating the soul,
The order is chaotic at times,
Its our job,
As we fight with the majority culture,

If we cry,
We are not crying alone,
We cry with the ancestors by our side,
We cry with the future generations alongside us,
When we cry we are reclaiming who we are.
Idle No More, Youth

Idle No More,
Youth voice,
Youth power,
Youth visibility,
Youth speaking,
Youth listened to,
Youth honored,
Youth uplifted,

Writing,
Drawing,
Sketching,
Doodling,
Dreaming,
Attaining,
Scheming,
Believing,
Realizing,
Achieving,

Dynamic processes,
Achieved,
Through,
The hands,
Heart,
Feet,

Dance,
Sing,
Shout,

Be proud of your culture,
Regalia,
T-shirt,
Native pride,
Show up,
Howeva you wanna be,

Dive,
Deviate,

Retrofit the ill formatted system,

Cut,
Divide,
Shred,
The parts of the system,
That don’t fit with decolonizing youth,

Celebrate,
Rejoice,
Empower,
As you build,
Rebuild,
Renew,

Soil,
Touch,
Silence,

Earth,
Peace,
Ancestors,

Sky,
Expansiveness,
Spirit,

Water,
Grandmothers,
Healing,

Idle No More,
Rising,
Standing,
Beautiful,

Idle No More,
Youth,
Voice,
Seventh generation,

Idle No More,
Youth,
Community,
Fierce!
The Healing of the Women of Our Nations

The healing of the women of our nations,
Removing the chains of oppression,
Removing the chains of marginalization,
Removing the chains of racism,
Removing the chains of sexism,

Grounded firmly into the Earth,
Grounded into the wisdom of the ancestors,

The healing of the women of our nations,
Traditions,
Language,
Culture,
Visibility,
Voice,
Rising up,

The healing of the women of our nations,
Is the healing of us all.
Women, Water, Spirit

Anishinaabekwe was born into the water,
Swimming,
Listening,
Tending to,
Healing,
Home,

Women,
Water,
Spirit,

Around Gitchee Gumee,
Holding hands,
Around Michigami,
Holding hands,
Around Odawa Gaming,
Holding hands,
Around Chi Nibiish Zaa’igan,
Holding hands,
Around Wahbeshkego Kecegame,
Holding hands,

She carries the water in a copper bucket,
For her people,
Grandmothers,
Speaking,
Journey,
Healing,

She sees the water,
For her children,
Aunties,
Guiding,
Directing,
Facilitating growth,
Change,
Bounty,

She listens to the water,
For her community,
What does the water say?
How does the water feel?
If it is hurt?

She feels her heart,
It is connected to the water,
To her home,

Women,
Water,
Spirit,

We hold hands around these waters,
We hold hands in unity,
We hold hands for healing,
We hold hands for justice,
We hold hands as keepers of the water.

She touches the water,
For her people,
Mothers,
Listening,
Walking,
Communicating,
Wounding of Our Womb

She played classical music,
Lightly,
Sweetly,
At 8:00 am in the morning,
Lightly,
Sweetly,
Drank her coffee,
Made the bed,
Lightly,
Sweetly,
The dark woodwork,
Lavender,
Vanilla,
Floral colors,
Country feel in a suburban home,
Simplicity,
Love,

She played classical music,
To ease her day,
Maybe to,
Ease my day,
Down the industrial freeways,
Like a race,
But to survive was a skill,
Small car,
Old car,
Old Ford,
Love,

She played classical music,
It filled up the home,
A home that was once filled up with noise,
Violence,
Pain,
Fear,
Hands on the face,
Hands on the face,
Love underneath,
Love,
She played classical music,
The wounding of my womb,
Dreams,
It was painful,
The wounding of my womb,
The wounding of a young girls womb,
I had felt like I was crippled,
Cuddled up in a ball,
Beyond oppressed,
Although speaking,
I could not speak,
Beneath it all was the strength of love,
Love,

She played classical music,
It was healing,
It was light,
Sweet,
To travel down the industrial freeways,
To the urban core,
To feel what I felt,
In the wounding of my womb,
Our womb,
We cried,
There was pain,
Oppression,
Violence against Native women,
Young women,
Learning to be powerful,
Learning to be role models,
Learning to love,
Love,
She played classical music,
Sometimes I turned the station on in my car,
All the way down,
Down the industrial freeways to the urban core,
The urban core which wounded my womb,
Wounded her womb,
Wounded our womb,
I’ve wrapped myself in a bubble,
A bubble or protection,
A bubble of healing,
A bubble of healing love for you,
My friend,
To heal,
To be free,
To undo the chains of violence on your body,
Oppression,
Colonization,
One day,
Free,
Love,

She played classical music,
One day it stopped,
It was divine timing,
Or right on time,
I still play classical music,
For healing,
For the healing of the wounding of my womb,
For the healing of the wounding of your womb,
Love can heal,
Love can decolonize,
Love can free up oppression,
Native sister to Native sister,
Anishinaabekwe supporting another Anishinaabekwe,
Love.