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Settler-Author Allyship in Centering Indigenous Ecologies:
Communal Will Through Collective Environmental Guilt
in *This Tender Land* and *Caleb's Crossing*

Elena Marie Arana

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Settler-Author Allyship in Centering Indigenous Ecologies: Communal Will Through Collective Environmental Guilt in *This Tender Land* and *Caleb's Crossing*

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Master of Arts

The January 2021 edition of *PMLA* housed an entire cluster on "Indigenous Literatures and the Anthropocene," in which at least four of the eight non-Indigenous contributors directly addressed and supported a call for learning from and collaborating with Indigenous voices. The unanimity of the discussion dissolves somewhat drastically when considering exactly how this should be done, leading Melanie Taylor to voice one of the framing questions of the cluster: "If it is increasingly clear that not all members of *Anthropos* are equal drivers of the Anthropocene, and that not all are uniformly compromised by its havoc, how can we begin to manufacture a communal will to redress it?" (Taylor 10). My thesis presents as a potential solution collective environmental guilt—collective guilt responding to the specifically ecological violence enacted by settler-societies. William Kent Krueger's *This Tender Land* and Geraldine Brook's *Caleb's Crossing*, two works of settler-authored historical fiction, utilize collective environmental guilt to manufacture a communal will in their popular readerships by demonstrating and assigning guilt to the settler-collectives of their protagonists before guiding readers to embrace and center Indigenous ecologies as a potential path to mitigating that guilt and promoting positive environmental change. As settler-authored works, the texts offer an alternative mode of engagement with Indigenous knowledges for an audience traditionally outside of scholarly discourse's reach in a way that models a path for ally authorship supporting Indigenous environmental movements.

Keywords: collective guilt, environmentalism, Indigenous ecologies, allyship, historical fiction

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Introduction

God's right here. In the dirt, the rain, the sky, the trees, the apples, the stars in the cottonwoods. In you and me, too. It's all connected and it's all God. Sure this is hard work, but it's good work because it's a part of what connects us to this land, Buck. This beautiful, tender land.

—William Kent Krueger, *This Tender Land*, 151

Preaching to the bone-weary band of orphan-runaways amongst the apple trees of his dilapidated orchard, William Kent Krueger's one-eyed Jack—a troubled supporting character of the 2019 novel *This Tender Land*—exposes a deep-rooted connection to Land centered in Indigenous environmental epistemologies.¹ As Potawatami scholar Kyle Powys Whyte and Chris Cuomo explain, Indigenous conceptions of care emphasize the reciprocal obligations that accompany the interconnectedness and interdependence of “humans, non-human beings and entities, and collectives” (236). As Jack attempts to restore, in part, the ancestral knowledge denied to the Sioux orphan Mose during his time at the Lincoln Indian Training school by sharing a Sioux creation story, he demonstrates respect for and ownership of this reciprocal relationship to the Land.² He defends the Land against accusations of cruelty. He preaches a permeating connection between humans, other-than-humans, and the more-than human natural world. Perhaps most significantly, Jack admits his own failure to honor and care for the Land of which he is steward when Buck (a pseudonym of the protagonist Odie O'Banion) questions the sincerity of his sermon: “Those orchard trees were in pretty bad shape before we got here. You love this land so much, why'd you let them go to hell?” (Krueger 151). Jack's reply, in its blatant

¹ My capitalization of “Land” acknowledges Indigenous conceptions of Earth as a sentient being—a vital partner in a reciprocal relationship that is central to cultural and legal Indigenous identities. See the introduction of Harjo, Joy, ed. *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry*, W.W. Norton & Company, 2020.

² Krueger's Lincoln Indian Training School is a fictionalized representation of the American Indian residential schools (also called industrial or boarding schools) established by the United States government in the mid-to-late 1800s with the goal of complete cultural assimilation.

acknowledgement of personal culpability, points toward the parallel blameworthiness of the settler-collective to which he belongs: “Failed ‘em, Buck, plain and simple. Failed ‘em” (151).

This scene from Krueger’s *This Tender Land* is but one example of how contemporary settler-literature participates in the Indigenous environmental discussion Whyte and Cuomo have conceptualized. Not at all surprising, as environmental circles the world over are swiftly coming to perceive Indigenous knowledges as key to solving our current ecological spiral. Despite certain institutions’ continued efforts to delegitimize Indigenous environmental efforts, attempting to invalidate the land rights, legal sovereignty, and ancestral knowledges of Indigenous communities worldwide, responses to the call for learning from and collaborating with Indigenous voices continue to flood Land-centered discourses. Consider the January 2021 edition of *PMLA*, which housed an entire cluster on “Indigenous Literatures and the Anthropocene,” in which at least four of the eight, non-Indigenous contributors directly addressed and supported the call, arguing that “Indigenous, more-than-human political ecologies” are the key to reversing, or at least mitigating, the Anthropocene’s increasingly devastating impact on marginalized communities, both human and nonhuman (Arias 115). The unanimity of the discussion dissolves somewhat drastically when considering exactly how this should be done, leading Melanie Taylor to voice one of the framing questions of the cluster: “If it is increasingly clear that not all members of *Anthropos* are equal drivers of the Anthropocene, and that not all are uniformly compromised by its havoc, how can we begin to manufacture a communal will to redress it?” (Taylor 10).

The solutions offered by the cluster are wide-reaching, some proposing changes to existing narratives and discourses with others presenting ones that have yet to be widely considered. Benjamin Balthaser, for example, argues for the decentering of the Native-Settler

binary as a potential unifier, while Iyko Day identifies apocalyptic imagery as a primary problem with current Anthropocene narratives. Both of these suggestions point towards what we should be rid of, what should *not* be part of creating a communal will, whereas Arturo Arias speaks to what should. Acknowledging the fantastic environmental work forwarded by Indigenous communities in Latin America, Arias points to the power of shared Indigenous beliefs in manufacturing communal will. “By reconceptualizing the epistemic structures of ancestral Indigenous knowledges, ways of thinking, and spirituality,” he explains, “they have crafted alternatives better suited to solving many problems the planet now faces, to replenishing earthly resources according to parameters in their genealogies of thought” (Arias 111). While an enlightening example of communal will leading to collective action towards combatting environmental change, and very much in line with Indigenous-centered trends in environmental discourse, increasing ontological diversity makes manufacturing communal will through ideology-based motivation on a larger, cross-cultural scale difficult, if not impossible.

Until widespread, ideology-driven solidarity can be achieved, Krueger’s *This Tender Land* (2019) and Geraldine Brooks’s *Caleb’s Crossing* (2012)—two recent works of settler-authored fiction—proffer an alternative approach to manufacturing communal will with the potential to direct settler-readers towards participation in the ongoing Indigenous-led environmental efforts Arias describes: what I term *collective environmental guilt*—collective guilt responding to the specifically ecological violence enacted by settler-societies.³ Recent applications of collective guilt in literary scholarship tend to focus on racially motivated crimes, such as North American Settlement (Weaver-Hightower), British Imperialism (Pladek),

³ My use of the term *collective guilt* refers to the guilt that is felt by an individual for an immoral action taken by, or assigned to, a larger group with which they identify. Acknowledging that the reality, extent, and precise definition of collective guilt remains under debate in legal, philosophical, and other fields of study, my use of the term falls in line with Anita Ziv’s discussion, “Collective Guilt Feeling

Orientalism (Leroux), the Holocaust (Moses), and the South African Apartheid (Robinson). In these contexts, some scholars see the writing and acknowledgement of collective guilt as providing a cathartic effect that temporarily relieves emotional pressure from the author and that portion of the readership that holds membership in the collective.⁴ This constitutes a large portion of the reasoning behind why many environmental scholars and authors have chosen to refrain from assigning collective guilt in recent scholarly discourse.

However, there is also the potential in collective guilt for motivating positive social change. Pladek's observations affirm that "the guilt felt by a single person can reveal meaningful relationships of responsibility beyond that person's individual culpability" (72). When not artificially released through catharsis, collective environmental guilt could motivate settler-audiences to alleviate their guilty feelings by working to correct or, at least, mitigate the adverse effects of their membership groups upon the environment. By encouraging the vicarious admission of collective guilt in popular settler-audiences and demonstrating the failed, and inarguably immoral, historical attempts to mitigate said guilt, *This Tender Land* and *Caleb's Crossing* present Indigenous ecologies and environmental movements as a more tenable solution. Where the motivational power of collective guilt too frequently ends at a simple apology, these texts promote a form of reconciliation focused on solidarity and collective action that, ideally, would develop mutually beneficial environmental and climate change solutions while ensuring Indigenous futurity through validating the legal sovereignty and ideological authority of Indigenous peoples.

By turning to settler-authored texts, there exists a concern that Native characters and cultures are being written by non-Native authors. On the one hand, both of these novels

⁴ See Leroux, Robinson, and Weaver-Hightower.

participate in the frequent appropriation and misrepresentation of Indigenous knowledge by settler scholars and writers, a trend that continues to grow, especially in terms of current environmental conversations. Stephanie LeMenager’s apprehension of appropriating Indigenous knowledge goes as far as causing her to doubt whether it is “possible for us settlers to think alongside Indigenous scholars and writers, or merely to listen, without enacting theft in the form of translation and misuse” (104). Many scholars, however, believe that the ethical engagement of settler-scholars in support of and alongside Indigenous scholars is vital to the development and maintenance of Indigenous scholarship. Algonquin Métis scholar Lindsay Morcom and Kate Freeman promote cross-cultural collaboration as prerequisite to true reconciliation. Eve Tuck (Unangax̂) conveys frustration with the “onus of all responsibility” resting on Indigenous peoples to capture the attention of white scholars and make more palatable current Indigenous scholarship, calling for allies to share the burden of this work (Smith, et al. 15). As Morcom, Freeman, Tuck, and others suggest, to retreat from engaging with Indigenous ideologies out of fear of misuse would be to reject any possibility for relationship and settler responsibility, negating potential opportunities for contributing to, collaborating with, and supporting the initiatives of Indigenous scholars, communities, and environmental activists, like *This Tender Land* and *Caleb’s Crossing* themselves and the engagement the texts advocate for.⁵ Rather than appropriating or retreating from reciprocal Indigenous relations, these novels model a processing of collective environmental guilt that leads to collaborative, Indigenous-led action.

The question that *This Tender Land* and *Caleb’s Crossing* pose is not ‘should?’ but ‘how?’ How are settlers to share, even carry, the burden of settler-induced environmental

⁵ Both authors performed significant research to ensure the historical accuracy of their tales; Krueger scouring through personal narratives of youth who lived in Indian training and boarding schools (Krueger 449) and Brooks supplementing the lack of surviving Indigenous-authored historical documents with materials prepared for her by the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head/Aquinnah (Brooks 316).

change? How do settlers hold one another accountable, and encourage each other, to change attitudes and practices? Within a current system that continues to have positions of power filled by largely non-Indigenous members, guided by non-Indigenous principles of ecological engagement, how do settler-allies go about guiding others to listen to Indigenous voices, center Indigenous knowledges, and support Indigenous movements? In what follows I address these questions by demonstrating how *This Tender Land* and *Caleb's Crossing* utilize collective environmental guilt to manufacture a communal will that combats ecological change by guiding readers to engage with Indigenous ecologies. In the first section, I will examine how each text engages collective environmental guilt as a tool, assigning settler environmental violence and acknowledging it through character judgements and acknowledgements while simultaneously encouraging the development of collective guilt in settler-readers. The second section outlines a number of unsuccessful methods to mitigate this collective environmental guilt that are approached in the texts, primarily through avoidance and justification. Engagement with these morally and ethically problematic histories work to prevent their recycling, eliminating them as viable methods in the minds of the readership. This paves the way for Indigenous ecologies, examined in the final section, to be presented as a promising alternative for enacting positive environmental change—one with potential to mitigate collective environmental guilt while fostering opportunities for cross-cultural solidarity and true reconciliation.

Collective Environmental Guilt

To engender both interest in and desire for Indigenous ecologies in the audience, *Caleb's Crossing* and *This Tender Land* first cultivate collective environmental guilt by clearly defining, assigning, and acknowledging the environmental violence committed by their respective settler-groups. Environmental consequences of colonial settlement are woven into the texts as

prominent subplots through the observations of each novel's protagonist. About halfway through *Caleb's Crossing*, the young Bethia leaves her home island—what is now known as Martha's Vineyard—and accompanies her brother to the mainland so that her brother can attend school in Cambridge, Massachusetts circa 1661. She describes how “the townsfolk do not trouble where they tip their slops, the air reeks, and everywhere the middens rise, rotting in steaming piles of clutter and muck” (Brooks 108). Along with the mass refuse of the town came disease and an astonishing overuse of natural resources. Although the Americas were heralded by European explorers as lands of abundance, the people of Cambridge suffered for lack of both water and wood: “The creek is brackish, but even were it not, its waters would be unwholesome, since the township uses it as a drain . . . Since there is no wood to spare for warming bathwater, the master expects the boys to wash in an outdoor trough from which they have to crack the ice each morning” (108). Observations of settler-driven environmental changes like these consistently bring the ecological implications of the text to the surface of the otherwise unrelated plot movement.

Beyond defining the extent of the environmental changes described in the novel, *Caleb's Crossing* indicates clearly who is responsible. In most cases, the settlers are shown to be suffering at their own hands; it was their negligence that allowed the river to become polluted and the forests to be destroyed; the widespread disease was a direct result of their lack of consideration for properly disposing of their waste, not to mention the immense refuse produced by the extractive capitalism upon which they economically relied. As the lead Wôpanâak character, Caleb Cheeshahteaumauk attempts to adjust to life on the mainland while attending the preparatory school with Bethia's brother, but he is unable to find an unsullied place to give

his morning greeting to Keesakand, the sun god, because, as Bethia surmises, there did not exist one spot of soil unmarked by “the smear and stench of English industry” (Brooks 109).

This Tender Land, too, places settler-culture directly in relation to environmental consequences of capitalistic industry and American “progress.” Making their way along the Gilead and later Mississippi Rivers, the children having run away from the Lincoln Indian Training school in the midst of the Great Depression, the settler-protagonist Odie describes a bathhouse as completely empty due to the “foul run of sewage” that made the water literally “shit brown,” noting that the city would eventually become a “better steward of that precious resource” (Krueger 383). Reaching St. Louis, he watches the “industrial chimneys” sending up columns of smoke and sees the “oily . . . iridescent . . . foul” smelling river water, declaring it to be “its own kind of hell” (402). Odie’s focus on the presence of specifically industrial pollutants leaves no room to consider the environmental changes as stemming from any source other than the settler-collective of which he is a part.

Although Bethia and Odie seem not to directly assign collective blame on the settler-collective of which they are members, the disgusted tilt to the language they use to describe their observations implies the direction of their moral judgement while simultaneously leaving room for and guiding audience members to pass judgements of their own. Their tonal acknowledgement of culpability prompts feelings of collective guilt in both characters and, potentially, readers, as only allegiance to or membership in the collective is necessary to cultivate collective guilt, not actual participation in the harmful action. Readers who consciously or subconsciously align themselves with the settler-characters share in the collective guilt they experience; as Margaret Gilbert explains, if a reader were to “respond with a feeling of guilt to the blame it encounters . . . this response would act as an acknowledgement of its guilt by the

agent itself” (117). Bethia and Odie, as settler-protagonists, foster through their own acknowledgement of collective environmental guilt an audience aware of their own roles and responsibilities related to settler-driven ecological change.

If personal identification with the protagonists is not sufficient in convincing audience members to place blame on the settler-societies for the environmental abuses described, non-settler characters in the books make the source of the fault inarguably clear. As Summer Weaver-Hightower explains, collective guilt can be and is often assigned by others, a role filled especially well by Caleb in Brooks’ work (30). Speaking to Bethia, his long-time friend and almost-sister, in confidence, Caleb responds to her naïve claim that there is room and resources enough for both Indigenous and settler communities by detailing the immense consequences settler presence has already dealt:

Your stone walls, your dead trees, the hooves of your strange beasts trampling the clam beds. My uncle sees . . . that worse is coming. Your walls will rise everywhere until they shut us out. You will turn the land upside down with your ploughs until all the hunting grounds are gone. This, and more, my uncle sees. (Brooks 147)

Caleb does not omit his friend but includes her as part of the larger society when making his accusations. He lays the current and future denigration of his homelands at her feet and the feet of any who identify with her.

Another of Caleb’s declarations from the same scene, “They crush the life from us,” reveals a second point of access for collective environmental guilt in the novel: violence against Native Americans as environmental harm (Brooks 146). The Native as nature concept is nothing new to Western narrative, which frequently depicts Native Americans as either “paragons of ecological virtue,” one with nature in purpose and action, or a lower species of human, more akin

to animals and therefore belonging to the wild (Dunaway 84). In *This Tender Land*, Krueger emphasizes the motto of the Lincoln Indian Training School, “Kill the Indian, save the man” (42). This phrase, coined by Captain Richard H. Pratt in his 1892 speech on the education of Native Americans, became the foundational mindset and eventual policy of the United States’ federal Indian boarding school system. By mirroring the nature/culture dichotomy that, like other hierarchical forms, positions dominant Western culture as superior to all others, the motto places Indigenous peoples in that non-Western, non-civilized, and therefore non-human role.⁶ The Natives are grouped by Western discourse in the novel within the larger body of the natural “other,” making clear a narrativized connection with Land and animal through references to “connection” to the Land (Krueger 151), “kinship” with the Land (159), and Mose’s telling of the “U.S. Dakota War of 1862,” wherein 38 Sioux Indians were hanged for retaliating after settler-agents had failed to supply the allotments of money and supplies promised them, the agents telling them, instead, to “*eat grass*” like cattle (332).⁷ These small reminders are distributed consistently throughout the entirety of the work to ensure that race and nature are constantly, though often subtly, intertwined.

Although Western depictions of Indigenous peoples as representatives of, and kin to, the natural environment are often marked by extreme prejudice and ignorance that fuel all-too-common misconceptions of indigenous deficiency—what Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) views as an “externalization of settler colonial guilt and shame” (4)—these novels utilize the Native-as-nature connections to gesture towards the sacred and unique position of Native Americans as the

⁶ For a deeper look at the historical context and manipulation of Pratt’s original phrase—“kill the Indian in him, and save the man”—see Lomowaima and Ostler’s “Reconsidering Richard Henry Pratt.”

⁷ Mose’s speech is italicized in *This Tender Land* to differentiate his use of sign language; Mose was found “beaten, unconscious, and tongueless, in some reeds in a roadside ditch along with his shot-dead mother, not far outside Granite Falls” when he was four years old (29).

original inhabitants of the American continents.⁸ Many Indigenous cosmologies include some form of animism: the belief that plants, animals, inanimate objects, natural phenomena, and the like are embedded with living souls. Mohawk scholar Sandra Styres explains that “Land is more than the diaphanousness of inhabited memories; Land *is* spiritual, emotional, relational; Land *is* experiential, (re)membered, and storied; Land *is* consciousness—Land *is* sentient” (27). The novels move non-Indigenous readers towards a recognition of Earth as deserving of honor and respect as a cognizant being that is intimately connected in a relationship of reciprocity with Indigenous peoples. And because all living beings are joined in a reflexive relationship to their places, as Kelsey John (Diné) explains, “animals are relatives or kin, and we must respect them the way we respect ourselves” (54). Styres even more explicitly links Indigenous peoples as part and parcel of their homelands, declaring, “We are in place as much as it is in us” (27). With this understanding, acts of physical and cultural abuse towards Indigenous peoples, such as mass genocide and forced assimilation, can be seen in these novels not only as acts of racial injustice but simultaneously as environmental violence as well.

Throughout both *Caleb’s Crossing* and *This Tender Land*, the forced acculturation, rape, displacement, and mass death from war, disease, and starvation of Indigenous peoples is attributed with clear moral judgement to the settler communities, thereby cultivating a second layer of collective environmental guilt. Both novels’ settler protagonists undergo multiple epiphanies about the horrific actions of their respective collectives. Bethia, on the one hand, recognizes the mortal consequences of Native treatment at the Harvard Indian College—“no

⁸ “According to this story, Indigenous peoples are in a state of constant lack: in morals, laws, culture, restraint, language, ambition, hygiene, desire, love . . . Rather than see lower life expectancy, employment, and education rates, and higher rates of homelessness, substance abuse, and suicide as being rooted in generations of sustained and intentional colonial assaults on all aspects of our lives and identities, we’re blamed for our supposed lack of basic human decency” (Justice 2–3).

sooner did word come to us of these young men and their great promise than the black-bordered message followed to tell us they were dead” (Brooks 309). Odie, on the other hand, comes to understand the racially motivated mass murder of Native American children as “a darkness even greater” than the worst evil he had yet come to know (Krueger 273). One of the most powerful attributions of collective blame comes near the end of *Caleb’s Crossing*, when Bethia finally grasps the potentially irreversible damage dealt to Caleb via forced assimilation with which she was complicit during his stay with the English.

In what most settlers of the time would consider to be a reckless and dangerous decision, Bethia seeks out the Indigenous *pawaaw* who was deemed by the settlers to be responsible for the untimely death of her father to ask for help in aiding Caleb’s spiritual passing from the mortal world to next, pleading in the Wampanaontoaonk language for him to share his wisdom with her.⁹ Although the audience understands that Bethia did not bring about Caleb’s conversion to Christianity all on her own and that his physical sickness was not a direct result of her actions, the *pawaaw* singles her out as representative of her larger community to take the blame: “My nephew has been sick—indeed, he has been marked for death—from the day he commenced to walk with you” (303). In recognition of her guilt, Bethia humbles herself and casts off her Puritan inhibitions to perform the rituals necessary to help Caleb find peace before his passing. This act is a visible and active acknowledgement of her collective guilt for the environmental harm—that which was directly enacted upon the environment and contributing to Caleb’s physical deterioration and that which was enacted upon Caleb himself through forced

⁹In *Caleb’s Crossing*, Bethia’s father likens the *pawaaws* to “wizards—kinfolk of those English witches whom we burned at the stake,” though Caleb’s later reference to Bethia’s father as *pawaaw* places the meaning of the word in the text more akin to a spiritual leader (34).

assimilation, cultural eradication, and disease—for which she (as representative of the settler collective) was responsible.

By developing environment-centered subplots marked by the tonal acknowledgement and direct assignment of collective-culpability, both *This Tender Land* and *Caleb's Crossing* demonstrate collective environmental guilt as taking hold of their settler-protagonists on two levels: guilt for the violence perpetrated against the physical environment and guilt for the violence perpetrated against Indigenous peoples and cultures as representatives, stewards, and protectors of the environment. Through the clear definition and assignation of environmental harm of Bethia's and Odie's settler-collectives, an opportunity arises for feelings of collective guilt to take hold of readers. And, with the presence of collective guilt comes the inherent desire to mitigate said guilt, opening a path to cultivating a communal will to combat negative ecological change.

Collective Guilt Towards Communal Will

Having established the presence of collective environmental guilt in both characters and readers, *This Tender Land* and *Caleb's Crossing* present a number of potential paths to mitigate or otherwise effectively process collective environmental guilt, the most prominent of which I categorize as avoidance and justification. Avoidance, as a strategy, consists of erasing any and all reminders of the collective guilt so as to repress the acknowledgement of the guilt and the accompanying, uncomfortable guilty feelings. In the case of collective environmental guilt on the North American continent, avoidance was and is still being enacted through the mass genocide and forced cultural assimilation of Indigenous peoples.

Building upon the previous “Native as nature” discussion, Native Americans are positioned in the novels as the ultimate reminders of the environmental wrongs of settler-

collectives on this continent, as Indigenous peoples both receive the environmental violence dealt to them and stand as representatives and protectors of alternative ecologies, more harmonious than the capitalist consumerism upon which Western cultures rely. Native Americans have historically been narrativized as the world's first conservationists by both environmentalists and capitalist producers, for better and for worse, and though environmentalist sentiments are not shared equally by all Indigenous peoples, the roots of the narrative hold true (Snodgrass 10). Environmental biologist Robin Kimmerer, for example, details the cosmological ties her Potawatomi people have as defenders of the Earth in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Telling the story of Skywoman — the first human “guest” to come to Earth, for which the animals created Land so she would not drown—Kimmerer links Indigeneity directly to environmental stewardship: “It was through [Skywoman’s] actions of reciprocity, the give and take with the land, that the original immigrant became indigenous. For all of us, becoming indigenous to a place means living as if your children’s future mattered, to take care of the land as if our lives, both material and spiritual, depended on it” (9). Skywoman’s story illustrates a reciprocal relationship, millennia in the making, that continues to be integral to the identities of Indigenous peoples today. This relationship not only solidifies Native Americans as unwelcome reminders to settler industries of wrongdoing but also as powerful, agentive threats to the dominance of the extractive capitalism upon which Western culture relies as they encourage the adoption of more harmonious ecological practices.

Both *Caleb’s Crossing* and *This Tender Land* depict methods attempted by settler-cultures throughout history to thwart the Native American threat to Western environmental practices and thereby mitigate collective environmental guilt. One option engages in

epistemological erasure through mass genocide. Diseases brought by settlers into the New World devastated Indigenous populations and often directly related to environmental change. For example, Arias explains that “when Spanish pigs were brought into Mesoamerica, the pathogen salmonella enterica . . . introduced deadly outbreaks beginning in the sixteenth century, resulting in nearly unparalleled demographic catastrophes” (112). *Caleb’s Crossing* also addresses the catastrophic impacts of newly introduced diseases to Indigenous populations. First, the novel describes the similar impact of smallpox on the island where Bethia’s family settled. The nearby Nobnocket community, once “a band numbering some hundreds,” was reduced to “less than three score souls remain[ing] alive, and most of those were sore afflicted” (77). Seen also with the diseases stealing Indigenous students at the Harvard Indian College later in the novel, Indigenous populations coming in contact with Bethia’s settler-collective are shown to be swiftly removed in a manner “conveniently” in keeping with the common phrase “out of sight, out of mind.”

Beyond the biological impacts of settlement on Indigenous populations, *This Tender Land* focuses on the more explicitly intentional genocide of Native American peoples previous to and during the so-called “War of 1862.” While camping on the outskirts of Mankato, Minnesota, the group of children encounter a headstone memorializing the execution of 38 Sioux who rebelled against broken treaties that placed their community at risk of starvation. Mose tells the story of December 26, 1862—explaining how the “crowd of white spectators, cheered” as his ancestors swung on their ropes for their perceived crime—in a way that emphasizes the gross inhumanity of this method of guilt avoidance. Because collective guilt relies upon the acknowledgement of one or more wrongdoings that are characterized as morally problematic, sickness, starvation, execution, and other forms of mass genocide were (and are) used to

eradicate those who would acknowledge the fault of the settler-culture, thereby forcing them to face their feelings of collective environmental guilt. Indigenous peoples, as both representatives of the environment and keepers of morally superior environmental practices, were violently removed so the settler-collective could ignore, or otherwise avoid, taking ownership of their environmental sins.

In addition to physical genocide, the United States settler-culture further avoided their guilt feelings by way of culture and ecological erasure via Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) like *This Tender Land's* Lincoln Indian Training school (Althusser 130). Functioning as part of a national assimilation campaign, the Lincoln School's ideological re-education of Native youth is introduced in the first chapter of the novel, wherein the superintendent tells the children the story of the turtle and the hare. When Odie, Krueger's settler-protagonist, questions the superintendent's interpretation of the tale, she replies: "The stories you hear now are the ones I tell you. And they mean just what I say they mean" (7). This scene highlights Indian training and boarding schools as sites of re-education where Indigenous cultural knowledge is rejected and replaced with Western ideology in a way that could be easier for settler-audiences to understand. Because Odie is a settler-character, his initial interpretation of the well-known children's tale likely matches that of settler audience members. Thus, when his interpretation is immediately denied and an alternative belief is forced in its place by threat of isolation and starvation, readers may feel the sting of re-education as it would apply to themselves without any potential hinderance of existing biases against the validity of Indigenous knowledges. Though the novel engages with Indigenous knowledges elsewhere in the text, the strategic placement of this scene within the first few pages engages readers' empathy for the Indigenous students immediately before demonstrating the ISAs targeting of Indigenous culture.

When a child first arrives at the Lincoln School, they are stripped of their cultural attire, any photographs or other connections to home and family are confiscated, and they are forced to abandon their native languages by threat of lashings, solitary confinement, and withheld meals (Krueger 42,49). A nit comb is run through whatever is left of their hair after the long braids, symbolic ties to Indigenous culture, are cut (14,80). In these practices, common to boarding schools across the nation, the institution paints for the stolen children Indigenous culture as being inherently criminal, inferior, and dirty, rooting out the next generation's ties to their culture and drastically impacting their ability to raise their own future children in the language, customs, religion, and ecologies of their ancestors.¹⁰

In the novel and in the broader continental reality, Indian training and boarding schools, like the Lincoln, are doubly powerful in that they create a false justification for their continued environmental violence to accompany their erasure of Native American reminders of collective environmental guilt. As part of the ISA's role in maintaining the forces and means of capitalist production, the Lincoln school not only sought to eradicate Native cultures but also to replace them with non-threatening, Western-approved skills, beliefs, and behaviors. Odie describes early on what he sees as the ironic reprogramming of his Native peers through weekly Boy Scout meetings. Each Sunday afternoon, all the male students were filed into the school's gymnasium to be taught wilderness survival skills like knife sharpening, plant identification, and tracking by their volunteer scoutmaster. He remarks: "If the situation hadn't been so tragic, I'd have found it funny, this heavy white man showing a bunch of Indian kids things that, if white people had never interfered, they would have known how to do almost from birth" (Krueger 50). The Boy

¹⁰ As Sarah Robbins explains, "Although some Native parents 'chose' to send their students to residential schools, they did so in response to overwhelming material and political pressures that had deprived tribal communities of land, resources for sustaining life (including basics such as food, clothing, housing), and self-governance" (138).

Scout curriculum taught in place of traditional Indigenous knowledge systems includes nothing of the reciprocal relationship to Land that is so integral to Indigenous identity and ecologies, serving to educate the Native youth with skills useful in a capitalist economy while withholding the ancestral knowledge that would arm them to resist ecological assimilation. In short, the re-educated students are made incapable of raising their own children in the traditions of their fathers, gradually removing any morally superior body for which to compare and judge the settler-collective in environmental matters.

To further justify continued environmental harm, in case a lack of ecological alternatives is not enough, ISAs portray Indigenous peoples as corrupted by way of integration within the capitalist system of production. The forced adoption of settler values and ecologies transforms the “Native threat” into a body of compliant and submissive workers, who are then inserted as low-wage laborers in capitalist systems of production. Training and boarding school curriculums were centered on preparing students for lives of menial labor. For the girls, vocational studies consisted of the cooking, cleaning, the particularly feared laundry of the entire institution along with other homemaking skills that would transform them into wives and mothers and domestic workers of Western caliber (Dejong 259). “Lucky” young men were taught trades like shoemaking or woodworking, the unlucky ones hired out as unpaid day laborers to surrounding non-Native employers to learn about Western ways of farming and animal care. In Odie’s words, the male students at the Lincoln school “didn’t learn anything except that [they’d] rather be dead than farmers” (Krueger 18). Either option, death or farming, was sufficient in the eyes of the superintendents of the school. Where the former eradicates the threatening Native American reminder in its entirety (avoidance), the latter portrays whatever remnants of Native ecologies that survive as relics of an idyllic past, out of reach forevermore, and treats the proletariat end-

products of the boarding schools as corrupted individuals who failed to live their ideals, polluted voices with no more authority to speak as representatives of the environment they now (forcibly) participate in exploiting. Essentially, the young “paragons of ecological virtue” are Westernized so as to generalize environmental violence as a characteristic of all humankind instead of the moral failure of solely the settler-collective (Dunaway 84). This pollution of alternative ecologies makes room for a bandwagon argument, justifying the sins of the settler-culture by showing that it isn’t just the settler-collective sinning, but everyone.

Due to the continuing strength and resilience of Native peoples, neither avoidance nor justification were successful methods for eradicating Indigenous peoples and knowledges, and thereby mitigating collective environmental guilt—a point that both novels make clear.

Avoidance through genocide is depicted as, and acknowledged by each novel’s protagonists to be, a gross infraction upon human rights and, as argued in the previous section, can be seen as additional layers of environmental violence that only exacerbate feelings of collective environmental guilt. Avoidance through cultural erasure and justification are likewise depicted as violent and immoral acts of racial and environmental harm that have ultimately failed in their attempt to drive Native culture and the threatening ecologies that accompany them to extinction.

And Indigenous characters like *This Tender Land’s* Mose and *Caleb’s Crossing’s* Caleb demonstrate the continuing fecundity of Indigenous cultures despite continuous opposition.

So, if avoidance and justification are ultimately failed methods for mitigating collective environmental guilt, why present them in texts aimed at cultivating a communal will to combat negative ecological change? One reason could work in relation to historical amnesia as a major obstacle of progress. In a 1980 colloquium at Amherst College, Black feminist scholar Audre Lorde called for unified efforts to examine and preserve past and current knowledge: “By

ignoring the past, we are encouraged to repeat its mistakes” (2). Without needing to rinse and repeat each failed solution to approach collective environmental guilt, or other social and political movements, up-and-coming generations will have an ever-growing base upon which to build, beginning one step closer than the previous one to enacting significant, positive change. In addition to the various references to memorials, monuments, and the sacredness of knowledge preserved by writing in each of the texts, this interpretation is supported by the manner of each novel’s framing. Both *This Tender Land* and *Caleb’s Crossing* are shared as recollections, the former addressed specifically to the reader by an aged Odie O’Banion and the latter chronicled in Bethia’s personal diary at various points in her life. The passing on of personal histories is integral to the building up of community archives upon which both popular and scholarly discourses can be built and demonstrates the two novels’ formal engagement with one characteristic of Indigenous ethics of care, discussed in the next section: valuing the wisdom of grandparents and elders (Whyte and Cuomo 236).

A second reason for the necessity of these inclusions rests in maximizing the power of collective guilt. Benedict Anderson, in his discussion of narrative within the biography of nations, argues that identity is a constructive process of remembering and forgetting—selective amnesia and mass conceived narrative (205). In a reversed ventriloquism of the dead, historians select events, persons, and places in time to act out a story from start to finish, fashioning upstream from an originary present a History that not only gives the illusion of a complete and cohesive whole (birth, life, and death/beginning, middle, and end) but creates an identity for the person, group, or community that shares in it. Some events on the timeline are emphasized in the plot and others are left out entirely to serve the narrative purpose of the author: paint the picture most beneficial to the dominant ideologies of the time. By including the mass genocide and

cultural erasure of Native American peoples as prominent subplots of their historical fiction novels, *This Tender Land* and *Caleb's Crossing* refuse their too-common exclusion from mainstream History and simultaneously validate the ecological sins motivating them, affirming the rightness of collective environmental guilt and setting forward this guilt as integral to settler-culture History and identity in the United States. Avoidance and justification are, thus, shown to be insufficient to the task of mitigating collective environmental guilt, pushing readers past them as viable methods for clearing their own consciousness before presenting them with an alternative: centering Indigenous ecologies.

Communal Will to Center Indigenous Ecologies

After illustrating the many failed attempts to mitigate collective environmental guilt, *This Tender Land* and *Caleb's Crossing* present, in contrast, Indigenous ethics of care as a potential path to positive ecological change. Kyle Powys Whyte and Chris Cuomo outline ethics of care as “understand[ing] moral agents as deeply and inextricably embedded in networks of ethically significant connections and conceive of caring as exercising responsibilities and virtues that maintain and positively influence relationships and general flourishing within those overlapping networks” (234). While many cultures and peoples espouse ethics of care unique to their individual ideological values and epistemological beliefs, Indigenous care emphasizes the position of non-human beings and entities as integral members of interdependent relationships with humankind, forming the basis for the contemporary ecological practices championed by Indigenous environmentalists and activists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (236).

Indigenous concepts of care:

- (1) emphasize the importance of awareness of one's place in a web of different connections spanning many different parties . . .
- (2) understand moral connections as

involving relationships of interdependence that motivate reciprocal responsibilities; (3) valorize certain skills and virtues, such as the wisdom of grandparents and elders, attentiveness to the environment, and indigenous stewardship practices; (4) seek to restore people and communities who are wounded from injustices by rebuilding relationships that can generate responsibilities pertinent to current environmental challenges . . . (5) conceive of political autonomy as involving the protection of the responsibility to serve as stewards of lands . . . (236)

Rather than overriding or even appropriating such ethics, Brooks's and Krueger's novels present these characteristics of Indigenous ethics of care to their readers as inherently valuable for their potential mitigation of collective environmental guilt as well as for continued harmonious living for Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities and our collective descendants.

In *Caleb's Crossing*, Bethia learns from Caleb how to provide for her family while living in harmony with the island she calls home. He teaches her how to gather with an awareness of seasonal cycles, guiding her to forage in some places in the summer and others in the fall for sustainable harvesting (Brooks 24). He teaches Bethia's family Indigenous farming techniques that rely upon the nutrient relationships between plants to grow food more efficiently and without overtaxing either land or human cultivator (103–104). Caleb's guidance eventually leads to Bethia's own mindful recognition of the care and respect due to her other-than-human kin. In one passage, after a whale washes up on territory belonging to the Wampanoag, Bethia's settler-collective decides to whisk it away and process it for their own needs. Bethia feels "a great heaviness as one does, when one knows oneself engaged in an act of greed and sneakery" (28). Though she does not specify whether her feelings are linked to taking the life of the whale itself or taking the living resource away from the Indigenous peoples who would use it to its full

potential, she recalls a previous passage wherein she observed Caleb thanking a fish for its life and noted the Wampanoag's dedication to utilizing all of the plants and animals they took for sustenance, wasting nothing (24, 27). Caleb's actions demonstrate an awareness of the interrelationality spoken of by many Indigenous scholars, including Carol Edelman Warrior (Dena'ina Athabascan, Alutiiq, and of Gros Ventre descent) and Kelsey Dayle John. Not only are non-human beings and entities participants with us in the continuing cycle of life and death—nourishing our bodies until our bodies nourish the ground and so on—but their partnership with us demands respect in their use and care. It is this knowledge of a better, more harmonious alternative to the settlers' wasteful use of resources that cultivates in Bethia collective environmental guilt that prompts recollection of Indigenous methods of respecting and caring for the natural environment.

This Tender Land demonstrates Indigenous ethics of environmental care as they relate to and function in a more highly industrialized society akin to the one in which we currently live. Alongside the gentle reminders of environmental consciousness Mose provides for his companions are his assurances of fundamental, universal relationships between all living and non-living things. Years after the tale's completion, Odie speaks of a time when he was able to release the anger and hatred he held for Mr. Brickman (the husband of the Lincoln School's corrupt and abusive superintendent) because of the Indigenous knowledge Mose shared with him: Odie "began to have [his] first inkling of this great river we are all apart of and to see how right Mose had been when, comforting a grieving Emmy on the banks of the Gilead, he'd told her she was not alone" (Krueger 440). Though he was unable to fully comprehend Mose's teachings of universal connection in the moment, his friend's words carried with him until he was able to healthily process the great web linking him to humans, non-humans, and entities

alike and obtain the peace that comes from living in balance and harmony with his connections (John 54). The responsibility for caring for the environment that Mose espouses throughout the novel is shown to be but one side of a relationship of reciprocity—we care and we are cared for. We support and we are supported. And, as Robin Kimmerer relates so succinctly, “All flourishing is mutual” (15).

Mose is not the sole Native character to present Indigenous ethics of care in *This Tender Land*. As the children make their journey along the river, Mose encounters Forrest, another Sioux, who teaches him about the cultural heritage and ancestral histories Mose was denied as a resident of the Lincoln Training School. Forrest demonstrates the fourth attribute of Indigenous ethics of care that Whyte and Cuomo outline in their chapter as he seeks to “restore people and communities who are wounded from injustices by rebuilding relationships that can generate responsibilities pertinent to current environmental challenges” (236). Not only does he return to Mose the knowledge that was stolen from him but he also cares for the other children—Emmy, who is part Sioux, and the settler-characters Odie and Albert—even when it means risking his own life and freedom. He does not allow himself to be limited to fighting solely the injustice suffered by his own community and reaches outside of it to care for any of the oppressed who cross his path, “caring for human beings as a way of caring for nature” (Whyte and Cuomo 235). Mose, Forrest, and Caleb are but a few of the countless examples in which Indigenous ethics of care are presented by Native characters in the two novels as methods of successful, positive environmental change.

That the novels direct readers towards Indigenous ethics of care is key to avoiding the central obstacle for collective guilt in promoting positive change: catharsis. Recent applications of collective guilt view its acknowledgement as primarily cathartic—providing psychological

relief through the expression of emotions—which, unfortunately, holds the potential to temporarily rid emotional pressure from author and reader without motivating or cultivating any communal will for collective actions (Weaver-Hightower, Robinson). Articulating feelings of guilt and remorse for complicity in a collective’s violence or misdeeds can be viewed as a form of penance that relieves collective guilt feelings temporarily. However, Whyte and Cuomo point out that a crucial tenant of Indigenous ethics of care centers upon reciprocity and mutual obligation: “Indigenous peoples’ understanding of interdependence forms the basis for justifying and motivating ethical responsibilities in human and ecological communities” (238). Inherent to Indigenous ecologies is the understanding that any attempt “to separate individual well-being from the health of the whole” is impossibly misinformed, and that includes our natural environment and other-than-human kin (Kimmerer 16). As a result, the end-focus on centering specifically Indigenous ecological practices engrains within *Caleb’s Crossing* and *This Tender Land* the potential to break through cathartic obstacles and cultivate a communal will to combat negative environmental change through the use of collective environmental guilt.

Conclusion

With the accepted responsibility for collective action in *Caleb’s Crossing* and *This Tender Land* comes questions of what environmental action should be taken and how, which the novels attempt to address with varying levels of success. While *Caleb’s Crossing* promotes acts of solidarity and understanding on an individual level, the characters fail to come together as a community to enact any clear environmental change. The diary-type format of the novel instead affords, through Bethia’s final reflections, a lens into the consequences of a failure to mitigate collective guilt: a life story that is, in Bethia’s own words, “a dissonant and tragical lament” (311). *This Tender Land*, too, is lacking in its demonstration of successful collective action at

work, perhaps a consequence of each novel's setting being firmly rooted in the historical past, though more successful in establishing the possibility for both individual and collective change. About halfway through the novel, while camping on a small island in the middle of the Minnesota River, the children come across the skeleton of a Native American child. When Albert, Odie's older brother, claims that there is nothing to be done, that it happened "Maybe a hundred years ago" and "there's nothing anyone can do about it now," Mose rejects the validity of that perspective (268). He responds with empathy, imagining what he would desire were he himself the victim and encourages the others to participate in simple burial and funeral ceremony. His actions in this scene acknowledge the inability of changing or completely fixing past wrongs while at the same time establishing the potential for correcting current behaviors and ways of thinking to value and respect what has previously gone without and prevent future tragedy.

The scene further argues for the importance of uncovering voices that were accidentally lost and intentionally hidden, buried, or removed from dominant histories in contemporary social and environmental justice movements. Indeed, where these novels best succeed is in their representation of Indigenous people who are active agents, powerful in their positive influence of those around them. Emmy, the part-Sioux orphan girl in *This Tender Land*, holds the unique power to "look into the future and wrestl[e] with what she sees there ... dramatically chang[ing] the lives of many" (Krueger 443). Mose "parlayed his fame into an advocacy for Native American rights" and "was a not infrequent visitor to legislators' offices, where, with the words that flowed from his eloquent hands, he worked at raising the consciousness of the nation's lawmakers" (442-3). At the end of *Caleb's Crossing*, Bethia makes a point of outlining the immense potential for change Caleb would have carried had his life not been taken by the

diseases cultivated amidst the settler-community's irresponsible treatment of Land and natural resources. She dreams that he "wins for his people a measure of justice, turning hearts from war and the devastation that has flowed from it" (310). In lieu of calling readers to engage in specific kinds of collective action or advocating for praxis of their choosing, Brooks and Krueger direct readers towards Indigenous voices with the authority to teach Indigenous ecological principles and guide environmental movements in enacting significant collective change.

In this way, *This Tender Land* and *Caleb's Crossing* model one path of sharing the burden, pointing popular readerships towards and preparing them to more sincerely engage with Indigenous voices. The use of collective environmental guilt within a historical fiction base allows the novels to sidestep the debilitating nature of apocalyptic imagery Day outlines while utilizing the Native-Settler binary Balthaser sees as separatist to encourage readers to join together in solidarity. Furthermore, the texts build upon the ideological potential Arias outlines in Indigenous peoples across South and Central America to include non-Indigenous popular readerships in the movement for positive environmental change. They offer an alternative mode of engagement with Indigenous knowledges for an audience traditionally outside of scholarly discourse's reach. In establishing feelings of collective guilt, drawing upon the inherent urge for members of the collective to mitigate those feelings, the texts offer Indigenous ecologies as a method for environmental healing and bring forward Indigenous characters that are active, agentive, and adaptive; individuals who hold positive influence over those Native and non-Native characters with which they form relationships; voices that should be sought after for wisdom and guidance. In these novels, Native Americans are positioned as teachers and role models for environmental activists without perpetuating the stereotypical "paragons of ecological

virtue” myth that has been so abused by Western environmental initiatives past and present (Dunaway 84).

Recalling Taylor’s framing question of the 2021 *PMLA* cluster, “Indigenous Literatures and the Anthropocene,” we can see *This Tender Land*, *Caleb’s Crossing*, and other contemporary historical fictions as contributing to the manufacturing of a communal will by engaging popular readerships to the cause. Representations of settler-Indigenous environmental collaboration such as these, made easily accessible to a network of influence beyond what is available to current environmental discourses, expand the potential impact of Indigenous ecologies in enacting positive social change while encouraging greater accountability of settler-communities from within settler-communities themselves. The texts challenge readers to reevaluate collective guilt as a tool to work towards systematic change in lieu of a retrenchment into our own silos of comfort, and though it is not clear whether readers will follow through in seeking out and joining with Indigenous environmental movements, the curiosity encouraged by *This Tender Land* and *Caleb’s Crossing* could be enough to motivate meaningful change.

By centralizing Indigenous characters and voicing Indigenous ecologies through Indigenous voices, the novels increase mainstream representations of competent and inspired Indigenous leaders and persuasively argue for increased respect for, attention to, and involvement with Indigenous knowledges in environmental and other social and political matters. Ally authorship like the examples discussed in this thesis “help us bridge the gap of human imagination between one another, between other human communities, and between us and other-than human beings” (Justice xix). In repurposing collective guilt away from shame towards relationships of humility and reciprocity, the crippling concept of *the Indian saving America* is replaced with a call to join in cross-cultural efforts of solidarity, long-lasting

reconciliation through the adoption of shared goals, and environmental healing through centering and embracing Indigenous ecologies that will ensure collective futurities. Ending where we began, *This Tender Land's* one-eyed-Jack articulates a final call to continue seeking out paths for effective and empathetic allyship with Indigenous environmental movements, rooted in Indigenous ecologies and centered in personal- and community-based settler-accountability: “That’s on me” (Krueger 151).

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