

# Returning to the Kaswéntah River

## A Trans-Indigenous Reading of Land-Centred Citizenship in Thomas King's *Truth and Bright Water*

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# Returning to the Kaswéntah River: A Trans-Indigenous Reading of Land-Centred Citizenship in Thomas King's *Truth and Bright Water*

KAITLIN DEBICKI

**T**HOMAS KING'S NOVEL *Truth and Bright Water* (1999) begins with a description of the Shield River as it runs down out of the mountains and into the prairies, where it divides the American town Truth from the Bright Water reserve in Canada. A bird's-eye view of the landscape would show Truth on one side of the river and Bright Water on the other as separate and yet connected by shared waters. This juxtaposition of Indigenous and Settler spaces becomes charged with meaning when we learn that the river itself has been designated by the nation-state as a national border. Spanning this divide is a bridge that was abandoned mid-construction and left as a "tangle of rebar and wire" (*Truth* 3) with warped boards, rusted iron and large gaping holes. King explains the bridge in an interview, saying that "as these relationships between people in general and between races and between countries deteriorate . . . this bridge symbolizes that. It won't hold the weight of people trying to cross back and forth" ("Border" 173).

While the bridge and the river are fairly obvious symbols of division, difference, and failed connection, I also suggest that they speak to the possibility of unification based upon a shared ecology. Though the river marks separateness, its fluidity also speaks to the interconnection of all life and to our shared interdependence with the Earth. Conceiving of the river as both a space of difference and unity is a helpful metaphor for coming to an understanding of how difference and division — between individuals, races, and nations — can still support an inclusive citizenship: how the metaphorical bridge can become safe and crossable. Helpful in this respect is Anishinabe scholar John Borrows's notion of "landed citizenship" as a way of conceiving of citizenship rights *for* the land, and citizenship as defined by a relationship *with* the land. In other words, each of us has multiple allegiances, belongings, and responsibil-

ities as citizens of the Earth that cross national, political, and cultural borders. The side-by-side positioning of Indigenous and Settler spaces in King's text offers a perfect opportunity for exploring how our shared belonging to Mother Earth puts us into a globally shared citizenship while also allowing us our local, distinct cultures, and nationalities.

I believe this articulation of a parallel, distinct, and yet unified relationship between nations and cultures also invites a reading of King's text through my own nation's concept of the Aterihwahnira:tshera ne Kaswéntah,<sup>1</sup> the Two Row Wampum of the Hodinohso:ni. Because of my own Kanien'keha:ka background, and having studied the Two Row with Skarure historian Rick Hill at the Deyohaha:ge: Indigenous Knowledge, I immediately saw the Two Row mirrored in the geography of King's novel.<sup>2</sup> While King is not Hodinohso:ni and so is not intentionally following the Two Row, I believe the Aterihwahnira:tshera ne Kaswéntah is a way of posing questions central to his text about how differentiation and division can share the same ecology. I therefore employ a localized version of Chadwick Allen's trans-Indigenous methodology in my reading of *Truth and Bright Water* by juxtaposing Hodinohso:ni, Siksikaitstapi, Anishinabe, and Nêhiyawak knowledges in my analysis of a text produced by a Tsalagi storyteller. In my trans-Indigenous reading of *Truth and Bright Water* I trace the connection between colonial disruptions to Indigenous land relations, the loss of Two Row Wampum principles, and the resulting consequences of failing to follow the conduct of sharing and difference outlined by that agreement. I begin this discussion by looking at the role of buffalo in King's text, and then examining Christianity, history, and ecocide as examples of Settler interference in landed citizenship. I then consider Monroe Swimmer as an Elder Brother<sup>3</sup> figure who champions landed citizenship by engaging the people of *Truth and Bright Water* in land-centred ceremonies that combine both Indigenous and Settler cultures. Monroe demonstrates how knowing your relations and carrying the land in your centre enables movement back and forth across both material markers of difference, such as the bridge and the border, and cognitive ones, such as binaries of nativism or assimilation.

In *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Studies*, Chadwick Allen offers a methodology that purposefully juxtaposes art and literature from specific local Indigenous nations with that of global Indigenous ones to explore how this comparative method produces new

modes of interpretation and practices of reading across Indigenous difference and diversity. He suggests that as scholars we can acknowledge Indigenous texts' tribal specificity while also placing them "close together across genre and media, aesthetic systems and worldviews, technologies and practices, tribes and nations, the Indigenous-settler binary, and historical periods and geographical regions" (xviii). Allen describes trans-Indigeneity as "a methodology of focused *juxtapositions* of distinct Indigenous texts, performances, and contexts. Where *compare* unites 'together' (*com-*) with 'equal' (*par*), *juxtapose* unites 'close together' (Lat. *juxta-*) with 'to place' (Fr. *poser*)" (xvii-xviii). While a trans-Indigenous methodology highlights the importance of "remaining always cognizant of the complexity of the relevant Indigenous global" (xix) to the Indigenous local, I also believe that local juxtapositions of Indigenous knowledge, texts, and lifeways offer significant enrichment for reading across material and cognitive borders and conceiving of a shared citizenship with the land. Placing land-centred knowledge and stories from Siksikaitsitapi, Hodinohso:ni, Anishinabe, and Nêhiyawak nations close together affirms Indigenous alliances with the environment and with each other, their long-standing presence on and stewardship of the land, and the value and validity of knowledge that is ancestral, adaptive and alive. A trans-Indigenous approach also seems appropriate given King's easy interweaving of diverse Indigenous histories in the text: referencing the Shawnee leader Tecumseh, North West Coast traditions such as bentwood boxes and potlatches, the Tsalagi Trail of Tears, and Tsitsistas and So'taeo'o Dog Soldiers, for example. While King does not explicitly identify the nation of the fictional reserve Bright Water, its geographic location on the Alberta/Montana border suggests that it could be a Siksikaitsitapi community.

In *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing*, Betty Bastien explains that learning and embodying a Siksikaitsitapi ontology of interrelation is essential to the health and well-being both of the Siksikaitsitapi people and of the natural world. Within a Siksikaitsitapi worldview, human beings can only exist and can only live meaningful lives by connecting and relating to other forms of life — to an extended kinship network of their non-human relatives. Bastien writes, "Knowing who you are is knowing your relatives — and knowing your relatives is being in your centre. Being in the centre of the universe means knowing one's place in the universe, and that place is at the centre of our tribal, natural,

and cosmic alliances” (95). This complex social structure recognizes spirits, land, nonhumans, and humans not only as kin, but as members of a global system who each have roles and responsibilities that contribute to upholding a natural order of balance. Finding this balance is made difficult for King’s characters, especially for young people like Tecumseh and Lum, because of divisions imposed by colonialism on Siksikaitsitapi land relationships. Juxtaposing Siksikaitsitapi epistemologies of land-centrism with the Hodinohso:ni notion of having core Two Row principles gives helpful insight into the danger King’s characters face in “trying to make it in the world, [and] find a comfortable zone in which to exist” (“Border” 169).

A peace agreement made between Europeans and the Hodinohso:ni in the early seventeenth century, the Two Row Wampum features two purple rows of beads — representing a European sailing ship and an Onkwehonwe<sup>4</sup> canoe — running parallel on a bed of white beads — representing a shared river on which the vessels float. The two nations agreed to share the river without interfering in each other’s cultural and political distinctiveness. This was especially assured by the Kaswéntah space, the three lines of white beads running between the vessels that stand for peace, friendship, and respect. In a version of the story that he inherited from Cayuga chief Jacob Thomas, Skarure scholar Richard Hill narrates the Hodinohso:ni nation’s explanation of the Aterihwahnira:tshera Kaswéntah: “I will put in my canoe my belief and laws. In your vessel you shall put your belief and laws. All my people will be in my canoe, your people in your vessel. We shall put these boats in the water and they shall always be parallel, as long as there is Mother Earth, this will be everlasting” (155). Aterihwahnira:tshera Kaswéntah is therefore an expression of interrelation that says we share this river, this ecology, and as our shared matter the Earth is both a reason and means to ensure the continuance of peace between our nations and Creation. Therefore, the Two Row is a treaty that negotiates peace based on the Earth (the river) as the shared matter of the Hodinohso:ni and European nations. Thus it is not only a treaty between human nations, but also between humans and the land.

Read through the Aterihwahnira:tshera Kaswéntah, the river running between Truth and Bright Water can be seen as a metaphoric Kaswéntah space that emphasizes our shared belonging to the Earth as a basis for developing relationships of respect, friendship, and peace — a

shared citizenship with the land. Additionally, while the treaty reinforces the Earth as our shared matter and our shared responsibility, it also says that we need to agree to be different, to not interfere in each other's ways. By articulating an agreement based upon juxtaposition (placing difference close together) rather than comparison (assuming sameness and equality), the Two Row communicates a relationship of respect for autonomy and distinctness, but also for solidarity. We can each have our own individual nationalities, allegiances, and belongings that remain distinct, while simultaneously sharing citizenship with the land. This is what the Two Row expresses through its symbolism of the Kaswéntah River as the unifying force between human nations, a message that appears again in the Hodinohso:ni response to the European's question about what happens to those who chose to enter their sailing ship from the canoe. According to Hill, the Hodinohso:ni responded, "If this happens, they will have to be guided by my canoe" (155). In other words, movement across difference is possible as long as Onkwehonwe carry the principles of the canoe inside themselves wherever they go and in whomever they become. Like Bastien's assertion about the importance of "being in your centre" for Siksikaitsitapi well-being, the Two Row similarly emphasizes relationships with the land (or river) as essential for Hodinohso:ni well-being.

In *Recovering Canada: The Resurgence of Indigenous Law*, John Borrows describes the same kind of tribal, natural, and cosmic alliances with an interrelated universe as bringing the Chippewas of Nawash — and hopefully all humans — into citizenship with the land:

Our births, lives, and deaths on this site have brought us into citizenship with the land. We participate in its renewal, have responsibility for its continuation, and grieve for its losses. As citizens with this land, we also feel the presence of our ancestors and strive with them to ensure that the relationships of our polity are respected. Our loyalties, allegiance, and affection are related to the land. The water, wind, sun, and stars are part of this federation; the fish, birds, plants, and animals share the same union. Our teachings and stories form the constitution of this relationship and direct and nourish the obligations it requires. (138)

In this worldview the land and all its lifeforms are not passive resources for exploitation (as they are so often viewed in the Eurocentric tradition), but active members of a society in which humans are not superior

or separate. Though reflective of the meaningful life of relations that Bastien describes, here Borrows also marks these relationships as political; the use of the words “citizens,” “polity,” “federation,” and “constitution” in reference to animals, plants, waters, and cosmic bodies asks that we extend our sense of civic duty, and multiply the politics in which we consider ourselves citizens. Coming to understand the self within the context of this landed citizenship is what Bastien calls “being in your centre,” and what a Two Row perspective might call being guided by canoe principles. Therefore, from Siksikaitsitapi, Anishinabe, and Hodinohso:ni perspectives, a grounding in teachings and relationships with the land — in land-centrism — cultivates an internal balance for those who have to continually negotiate the space between Indigenous and Western worldviews. This allows them to do so with “an integrated mind, a fluxing and ambidextrous consciousness” (Little Bear 85) that is potentially entrenched in and upholds Kaswéntah principles of peace, friendship, and respect. *Truth and Bright Water* exemplifies both the potential of this land-centrism and its disruption by colonialism through First Nations’ relationships with the Buffalo Nation.

In all three of the Siksikaitsitapi, Nêhiyawak, and Anishinabe nations there are parallel customs, knowledges, and beliefs based upon the buffalo that while not equivalent are complementary components within a more complex Indigenous-to-Indigenous idea of a shared, land-centred citizenship. Read next to *Truth and Bright Water* the buffalo teachings of these nations create an intertext that deepens an understanding of such land-centrism and of the novel’s connections to the Two Row.

Both a significant feature of the landscape and a central place for the unfolding of events, the Horns become increasingly relevant to a discussion of relating to the land when read through Nêhiyawak oral histories of the buffalo. Acknowledging the aliveness of the land, King establishes the primacy of this geographical location: “The Horns, like Truth and the old church, are on the American side of the river, twin stone pillars that rise up from the water and meet to form a shaggy rock crescent that hangs over the river like the hooked head of a buffalo. It is an old place, silent and waiting” (*Truth* 2). In *Cree Narrative Memory*, Neal McLeod relates a Nêhiyawak story of a child who becomes lost on the prairies and is adopted and protected by buffalo. When the child’s human family search for their lost child, all they can find is a gigantic

stone in the shape of a buffalo. While there are different versions of the story, in every telling the Grandfather Buffalo who cares for the young child tells him “I will provide for you.” McLeod explains that “the stone was a physical reminder of the relationship between people and the rest of creation, particularly the buffalo,” but it was also a reminder of some of the most important values of Nêhiyawak culture, “such as the attempt to care for those who have no one to provide for them. In all the versions, kinship is stressed” (23). The buffalo represent the interdependent relationship between the Earth and the Nêhiyawak nations; both the land and the buffalo (as an extension of the land) care, provide, and protect the people as their kin. The buffalo is a symbol of the interrelation of the cosmos that tethered the Nêhiyawak to the land and allowed them to imagine kinship with their environment and ultimately with all peoples.

The buffalo stone story allows me to understand the Horns in the same way, as a signal to the people of both Truth and Bright Water (especially since they stand on the American side of things) that they have relatives in the land and that they are cared for by the land even if they no longer realize it; the Horns are waiting for the Siksikaitsitapi and Settler peoples to renew their covenant with the prairies. Though divided by the Canadian/American border, which also marks the Indigenous reserve as a space separate and distinct from the Settler town, the people of Truth and Bright Water both share an ecology. The Horns represent the possibility of this shared ecology unifying each community in a landed citizenship.

The Horns are not the only buffalo who try to remind the Siksikaitsitapi of their belonging to the Earth. Bought by the band council to increase tourism, the handful of living buffalo left on the prairies possess transformative powers that allow them to become part of the land; the small herd of buffalo “appear out of nowhere” and then just as mysteriously “they stop and turn back into rocks” (*Truth* 112). From a Siksikaitsitapi worldview, the fluidity of the buffalo’s embodiment reflects belief that “spiritual energies permeate the cosmic universe” from a shared source of life, Ihtsipaitapiiyopa, and that these “energies manifest in physical form, and from them Niitapaissao’pi (the nature of being) is created” (Bastien 3). According to this view, all life comes from one unified source and, though it may be embodied differently, these spiritual energies “are the ultimate substance of the universe



from which all life forms originate" (4). Therefore, the spiritual energy and source of life that enlivens us as humans is the same source and energy that enlivens rivers, prairies, rocks, and buffalo; this is a reality of interrelationship.

Perhaps surprisingly, Elvin, one of King's characters who most buys into exploiting and commodifying the land, reveals familiarity with the buffalo's ability to return to the source of life. Challenging history's claim that the buffalo were singularly exterminated by railroad sharpshooters, Elvin swears that "Most of them just took off and never came back." As "soon as the smart ones got a good look at Whites, they took off," he explains, before lamenting that the "Indian" did not do the same (*Truth* 95). Nêhiyawak oral history tells much the same story. According to Neal McLeod, his ancestors described "the retreat of the buffalo into the ground as kotawiwak ('they enter into the ground')" (McLeod 93). Upon the arrival of Europeans, many buffalo perceived the threat of colonialism and chose to return to the earth. Sharing a deeply interconnected relationship with Ihtsipaitapiiyopa (the Source of Life), the buffalo, while physically threatened, have not become spiritually displaced from All My Relations and therefore maintain the ability to become one with the earth; they represent the relationship the tribe should have with the land.

When we recall the protective role of the buffalo, their retreat into the land at the arrival of the Settlers could also be read as a message to their Indigenous relatives about the importance of returning to the land to ensure their safety. Nêhiyawak scholar Tasha Hubbard characterizes this return as a conscious choice of the Buffalo, a sacrifice that was made to ensure "that spirits and teachings will . . . survive, emerging out of the earth when the time is right" (78). While the Nêhiyawak may not have the physical fluidity of the buffalo, they certainly have the ability to ground themselves in land-centrism or "canoe principles." In other words, I read the buffalo's disappearance into the land with the arrival of colonialism as a teaching to the Nêhiyawak about the importance of maintaining their cultural distinctiveness through their relationship with the land. This echoes the message of the Two Row, which advises that those who have a foot in two vessels must let themselves be guided by the principles of the canoe. However, the colonial agenda to exterminate the buffalo as a strategy for ensuring Indigenous dependence massively interfered with these systems of extended kinship. In relating

oral histories about Chi-bi-shi-kee' (giant buffalo), Edward Benton-Benai portrays the terrible impact this interference has had on both Anishinabe peoples and the natural world.

In *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway*, Edward Benton-Banai outlines the sacred importance of the buffalo as spiritual guide and protector of the Anishinabe people. According to the Anishinabe, Chi-bi-shi-kee' is a very powerful spiritual guide who stands in the Western doorway of the Sweat Lodge or Sacred Hoop, the doorway to the next world and to the future (Benton-Banai 86, 112). In this position he gives strength and protection to the Anishinabe people; however, colonization has threatened the buffalo's protective purpose. Benton-Banai explains that the religious division of Indigenous people from the Creator's original instructions to live in harmony with the land, the displacement, forced relocation, and genocide of tribal nations, and the rupture of traditional relationships between elders and youth, have broken three legs of the Buffalo. In the case of each threat, Chi-bi-shi-kee' sacrificed so that the Anishinabe could survive. When "brotherhood, sisterhood, and respect ruled over this land, this buffalo was very powerful," but after the arrival of the light-skinned race who began to "turn nations against each other," Chi-bi-shi-kee' was greatly weakened. In other words, when Kaswéntah principles of peace, friendship, and respect existed between people, and between people and the land, the buffalo were strong and the future of the First Peoples was assured; however, the violation of those principles endangers the future of both Indigenous peoples and the environment (and, consequently, all peoples). Chi-bi-shi-kee' knew that "if he failed in his task of guardianship, there would be no hope for Indian people to survive. He gathered all his remaining strength and stood fast to his ground. There he stands today on just one leg, striving as best he can so that Indian people might have a future in this world" (Benton-Banai 112-13). Repeated here again is a lesson about balance. Like Bastien's emphasis on being in your centre, and Two Row teachings about carrying canoe principles within you, Benton-Banai stresses the importance of landed relationships, here epitomized by the buffalo, for maintaining balance. The loss of three of Chi-bi-shi-kee's legs evidences settler-colonialism's violation of Two Row protocols for respecting the autonomy of canoe beliefs and laws, and of Kaswéntah principles of respect, friendship, and peace.

Spiritual and physical dependence upon the buffalo has long

kept them at the centre of tribal consciousness for the Siksikaitsitapi, Nêhiyawak, Anishinabe, and Plains people, making the Euro-American slaughter of these creatures in the millions a profound and permanent blow to these nations. Recalling his peoples' relationship with the buffalo, John Fire Lane Deer affirms that for the Mnikh'owožu-Lak'hóta "The buffalo was part of us, his flesh and blood being absorbed by us until it became our own flesh and blood. Our clothing, our tipis, everything we needed for life came from the buffalo's body. It was hard to say where the animal ended and the man began" (269). Extermination of the buffalo during the 1880s allowed the government to force Indigenous nations onto reservations; with only handfuls of buffalo left to feed entire populations, most tribes were faced with starvation and therefore reluctantly moved to reservations for government food rations (Hungry Wolf 6). Whereas prior to contact tens of millions of buffalo roamed the prairies, after the targeted slaughter of them by Europeans they numbered in the hundreds. Through this attempted annihilation of the buffalo, "colonial forces were able to transform the environment of the plains, practicing a sort of ecological imperialism" (Hubbard 69-70). This ecological imperialism interfered with Indigenous peoples' relationships with the land, striking at the heart of Indigenous national, tribal, and cosmic alliances.

The disruption of relations between Siksikaitsitapi and Iiniiwa (bison) was not only a threat to traditional lifeways and subsistence, but also an assault on Indigenous knowledge, memory, and philosophies essential to understanding relationships in ecology and nature. The result is that "there has been both a physical and psychic distancing between modern Indigenous consciousness and the animal world" (Hubbard 74). Bastien describes how losing Iiniiwa as a sign and site of cosmic interconnection resulted in a corresponding objectification and commercialization of our non-human relations that has resulted in a loss of balance within the self, community, and environment:

Traditionally, Iiniiwa is seen as a gift from Ihtsipaitapiiyopa, and it is a part of the ceremonies as well as a staple food for subsistence. The relationship with the bison shifted from a ceremonial and subsistence relationship to one of commercial use. The demise of the Iiniiwa changed the overall Siksikaitsitapi relationships of alliances with all beings of the natural world. As these relationships were altered, the traditional responsibilities and alli-

ances between Siksikaitsitapi and Iiniiwa were also changed. The entire Siksikaitsitapi universe was affected. It was a violation of the natural laws of Niipaitapiysinni (the cosmic universe) or the Niitsitapi lifeworld, the interdependence and interconnectedness of life. One breath affects all other alliances. In the natural world of alliances, the physical manifestations of life are derived from connections with Ihstipaitapiiyopa. This shift in relationship with fur-bearing animals introduced the beginnings of imbalance in the Siksikaitsitapi way of life. The perception and connection to the sacred had been altered, as history after the demise of the buffalo illustrates. (18)

When colonizing forces intentionally disrupted this relationship through mass slaughter of the buffalo, they not only crumbled subsistence systems for Plains societies, but also violated natural law. Unable to honour their sacred treaties with Iiniiwa, the Siksikaitsitapi face a crisis of kinship. Thus, Chi-bi-shi-kee' strains to balance on only one leg, and those straddling the Two Row river lose the stability of land-centrism and the principles of the canoe.

In the world of *Truth and Bright Water*, Franklin's get-rich-quick schemes exemplify a switch in thinking from interrelation to commodification that signifies the failure of Two Row relationships. Nowhere is this more evident than in the attraction he devises for Indian Days that gives tourists the opportunity to chase after corralled buffalo on motorcycles and shoot them with paintballs. In an allusion that connects Franklin's money-making venture and his commodification of the sacred to the early Settlers' strategic extermination of the buffalo, Rebecca Neugin — a ghost child survivor of the Trail of Tears — expresses her disbelief at the treatment of the buffalo through a conflation of paintballing and wasteful slaughter: "We heard they were killing the buffalo for their hides and leaving the meat on the ground to rot. . . . But we didn't believe it" (*Truth* 157). Franklin has forgotten his relations and so he treats the buffalo without respect. The practice of trying to control and contain animals by corralling, fencing, or otherwise enclosing them in man-made structures (even psychological ones) reveals a hierarchical worldview (that also gets applied to Indigenous peoples) in which humans are far superior and much separated from lesser species such as animals. "Indigenous peoples are not immune to the imposition of this world view," says Tasha Hubbard, "as the Buffalo largely remains fenced and corralled out of sight, resulting in a disconnect between

our selves and the animal world” (74). Franklin’s neglect of relations unfortunately extends to his son, Lum, whose body frequently bears signs of abuse inflicted by a father who has lost the principles of the canoe. This instability and these types of broken relationships are what the Elder Brother figure Monroe Swimmer tries to address by reconnecting the human communities back to their shared kinship with the land.

I borrow the term Elder Brother from Neal McLeod, who explains that the proper term for a trickster is “kistêsinaw,” denoting the notion of the elder brother who “instantly assumes a state of kinship and relationship between humans and the rest of creation” (97). McLeod warns that the term “trickster” is reductive and implies that this Indigenous spiritual helper is little more than a buffoon. The term *kistêsinaw*, on the other hand, recognizes interrelation and disrupts human-centrism, thereby providing insight into the ways in which Nêhiyawak “related to their ecology and the environment, and with other beings” (17). Leanne Simpson further clarifies that while the spiritual helper figure “assumes a role of ‘buffoon’ in some instances in order to be an effective teacher,” there are also stories where s/he “exudes vision, brilliance, strategy and power” (74). It is important to remember therefore that Elder Brother figures like Monroe lead sometimes by good, and sometimes by bad, example, but are almost always sent to the people as spiritual guides. This is also true of the Siksikaitsitapi spiritual teacher, Naapi. While the Siksikaitsitapi do not have an Elder Brother figure, the Naapi character featured in their oral histories shares many of the same qualities as an Elder Brother. Naapi “was famous for his foibles. He could be rowdy, randy, and risible all at once,” but he is also a well-intentioned spiritual being of great power who is responsible for shaping the world of the Siksikaitsitapi (Yellowhorn 170). Like an Elder Brother, and like Monroe in King’s novel, Naapi cares for humans and reflects Siksikaitsitapi relationships with the environment.

Etymologically, Monroe means “from the mouth of the river” (Powell); thus, Monroe Swimmer speaks for the river running between Truth and Bright Water — the Kaswêntah space. Like a voice of the Kaswêntah space, and the river that has “been here since the beginning of time” (*Truth* 54), Monroe represents the rights of Mother Earth, aligning him with efforts for a shared citizenship with the land. Monroe’s efforts to encourage the return of the buffalo signify a desire

to renew land-centred ways of knowing, to break cycles of dependency, and to reconnect Indigenous people to their sacred alliances with the natural world. Monroe elicits Tecumseh's help, and together they hammer 360 iron buffalo outlines in small groups across the prairies for Monroe's "new restoration project" to "save the world" (139). Constructing a circle of 360 buffalo symbolic of the Earth's shape and the unity of Creation, Monroe uses art to mimic nature in the hopes of reminding the people of both Truth and Bright Water of their original relationship with the land. While Tecumseh seems to share Monroe's vision as evidenced by his ability to hear a "low moaning hum" coming from "the [iron] buffalo leaning into the wind like rocks in a river" (142), it is not shared by those band members who promote Indian Days by offering tourists the chance to shoot paintballs at live buffalo. Troubled by the historical relationship between people and the buffalo, Tecumseh wonders if they remember a time "before they had to worry about Indians running them off cliffs or Europeans shooting at them from the comfort of railroad cars or bloodthirsty tourists in tan walking shorts and expensive sandals chasing them across the prairies on motorcycles" (249). This insight into the suffering of the buffalo and their ancestral right to the prairies reveals a growing understanding in Tecumseh of his place within All My Relations. This growing awareness is especially apparent in his reaction to shooting a cow with a paintball: "She swings her head from side to side as if she's scolding me, and in that moment, she reminds me of my grandmother" (160). Tecumseh realizes that the buffalo is his relation. Hoping to bring similar enlightenment to the rest of the tribe, and to the people of Truth, Monroe designs ceremonies to remind the people of their place within All My Relations.

In his efforts to restore canoe principles and land-centrism to the Siksikaitsitapi, Monroe attempts to paint, sculpt and otherwise artistically intervene in the imbalanced relationship between the people and the land. He begins this restoration of All My Relations with the church, a structure clearly symbolic of colonial histories and missionizing efforts such as residential schooling. Descriptions of the church as a "ship leaned at the keel, sparkling in the light, pitching over the horizon in search of a new world" (*Truth* 2) and its steeple as a "thick spike" that has been "driven through the church itself and hammered into the prairies" (1), are obvious references to contact, conquerors, and

the systemic hurt perpetrated against Indigenous peoples by organized religion, imperial projects, civilizing missions, and genocidal government tactics. The imagery of a spike driven into the earth suggests that these histories, their ongoing legacies, and the dysfunction between Indigenous and Settler peoples damage the land itself by disrupting the relationship between the people and the land. Colonial removal policies and dislocation of Indigenous peoples from their homelands and territories — such as in the case of the Trail of Tears — combined with enfranchisement and assimilation strategies, exploitation of resources, and global capitalism, all work to alienate Indigenous peoples from their connection to the land (their canoe principles) and therefore disrupt the balance of the entire interrelated kinship network. It is fitting, therefore, that in a reversal of colonial attempts at Indigenous dispossession and erasure, Monroe paints the church in such convincing camouflage that it disappears: “It’s as if the church has never existed” (251). As the church stands for a set of religious and imperial ideologies that position mankind (particularly the white man) as superior to and separate from all other beings and the land, Monroe’s disappearance of this “colonial spike” from and into the land affirms a worldview of relational rather than hierarchal being.

Monroe employs a similar method of restoration for “Teaching the Grass About Green” (44) and “Teaching the Sky About Blue” (50), works of art in which he places a green painted platform in the Prairie grass and a blue painted kite in the sky. The platform, though repeatedly painted green, turns yellow like the dry grass, and the kite blends into thick white clouds; both give in to the “peer pressure” (134) of the environment. I suggest that Monroe’s art projects can be read as evidence of *Ihtsipaitapiiyopa*, the Source of Life from which all spiritual energies originate and become *Niitapaissao’pe* (the nature of being). Although from a Eurowestern tradition the kite, platform, and church probably appear as lifeless objects, from a *Siksikaitsitapi* perspective they are part of the same spiritual energy that enlivens everything in Creation, and so it is that, like the buffalo, they can return to the land. Read together with “Teaching the Grass About Green” and the “Sky About Blue,” the successful camouflage of the church seems to signify “Teaching Christianity About Interrelation.” With the removal of the church, Tecumseh’s vision of the land becomes fluid: “The prairies can fool you. They look flat, when in fact they really roll along like an

ocean. One moment you're on the top of a wave and the next you're at the bottom" (251). Artificial borders between person and land are replaced by the fluid interconnection of All My Relations.

In her account of the ways in which colonialism has forced distance between Siksikaitsitapi and their kinship with Creation, Bastien outlines a history of settler-colonial interference in and domination over Siksikaitsitapi culture and political autonomy. She recalls missionization, forced relocation to reserves, the implementation of the Indian Act, and residential schooling as practices that led Siksikaitsitapi "away from their alliances with the natural order" (20). This was doubly enforced by oppressive legislation that banned dances and ceremonies in the 1920s and 1930s and was used to confiscate ceremonial bundles and sell them to museums. These histories resulted in a "shift from a consciousness emanating from and connected with Ihtsipaitapiiyopa, to the consciousness of materialism" that began "an era of imbalance and colonization," the effects of which "are as evident in contemporary society as they were almost a century ago" (21). Monroe encounters these attempts at erasure and dispossession as an international art restorer. Hired by museums to restore landscape paintings in which unwanted images of Indians keep appearing, Monroe rebels and begins a new restorative mission to repaint Indians back into romantic landscapes painted by nineteenth-century colonial artists. This gets him into some trouble, as the museums never "wanted their Indians restored" but "liked their Indians where they couldn't see them" (*Truth* 261). This attempted erasure of Indigenous presence from the land — and from art and from history — represents a failure on the part of settler-colonialism, and its institutions, to recognize a Two Row relationship of independence and reciprocity with Indigenous peoples and cultures; they have repeatedly tried to seize control of the Onkwehonwe canoe.

Emphasizing the failure of museums and anthropology in respecting a Kaswéntah space of friendship, peace, and respect between nations, Monroe also confronts their appropriation of Indigenous ancestral remains: a literal removal of Indigenous peoples from the land. Traveling to museums all over the world, Monroe rescues the bones of Indigenous children: "I found them in drawers and boxes and stuck away on dusty shelves. Indian children." "It happens all the time," he continues. "Anthropologists and archaeologists dig the kids up, clean them off, and stick them in drawers. Every ten years or so, some bright



graduate student opens the drawer, takes a look, writes a paper, and shuts the drawer.” Sometimes, adds Monroe, “those idiots had even forgotten where they had put them” (265).

Establishing once more his Elder Brother role as defender of All My Relations and Mother Earth, Monroe fights for the rights of ancestral bones by challenging the notion that they can be owned, studied, displayed, or commodified. Complicating borders we imagine between humans and spirits, and between life and death, Monroe’s actions show that our responsibilities to ancestors extend beyond death. A Hodinohso:ni perspective of the land recognizes that when our ancestors pass on, their bodies become part of the Earth and so the Earth is literally our relative. Therefore, Monroe’s rescue of Native bones signifies not only resistance to Eurowestern violations of our relationships with our ancestors, but also our relationships with the Earth, since they are one and the same. Striving for Indigenous survivance against commodification of the sacred, Monroe smuggles the bones in a bentwood box back to Truth and Bright Water. The bentwood box is a West Coast tradition in which an entire box is made from a single piece of wood.

Reading King’s text across from T’anuu oral history may provide helpful context here. According to T’anuu history, a bentwood box once held the sun, and the world was one of darkness until the Elder Brother Raven, through a series of transformations and love affairs, steals the sun from the box and flies with it into the sky, where it has been ever since.<sup>5</sup> Monroe puts the Native children’s bones in a bentwood box, associating them with the sun, light, fire, and life. Like the Raven who steals the light and sets it free, the spiritual helper Monroe Swimmer steals Native bones and sets them free so that they may return to their Mother, the Earth. When Tecumseh asks Monroe why he brings the bones — which must represent countless, diverse Indigenous nations — to the river in Truth and Bright Water, Monroe exclaims, “This is the centre of the universe. Where else would I bring them? Where else would they want to be?” (265). Museums lock away the bones of these children in drawers, treating them as if they are lifeless; but when released into the river they reconnect to the oneness of Ihstipaitapiiyopa. Returning the bones to the river is reuniting them with their relatives, and as Bastien affirms, “knowing your relatives is being in your centre,” and being at the centre of tribal, natural, and cosmic alliances means “being in the centre of the universe” (95).

That Monroe treats the Shield River as the “centre of the universe,” a place where sacred alliances with an extended kinship network are affirmed, supports a reading of the river as a Kaswéntah space. Monroe gives the bones to the river to honour sacred alliances humans have with the Earth, and in doing so evokes the sacred alliances we humans are meant to have with one another. In a ceremony of repatriation that returns the bones to the rivers of the Kaswéntah space, Monroe represents the possibilities of remembering our Two Row nation-to-nation relationships through sharing citizenship with the land. The faith of our ancestors, All My Relations, is not context-bound; it has value for more than Indigenous peoples and cannot be contained by reservations or national borders. In the end, the Kaswéntah River accepts both the bones of Native children and the biohazardous bins from Truth, which also contain human remains (87). Monroe’s ceremony of repatriation is a reminder that the people of both Truth and Bright Water rely on the land and return to the earth upon their death; ultimately, there are no borders.

In formalizing their Two Row relationship with the Dutch, the Hodinohso:ni warned that for those who try to have one foot in the canoe and one in the ship, a great wind will blow the boats far apart and those people will fall into the water between the boats, and “there is no living soul who will be able to bring them back to the right way given by the Creator but only one — the Creator himself” (Hill 155). While this portrayal seems to equate the river with danger, we must recall that the Hodinohso:ni also specified that movement between vessels is possible as long as Onkwehonwe carry the principles of the canoe in their centre to give them balance in their movements back and forth. But how are members of each vessel to move back and forth across the river unless the canoe and the ship remain at a close distance? In the symbolism of the Two Row belt, that distance consists of the three rows of beads that are the Kaswéntah space. Now let us consider that these three rows, standing for peace, friendship, and respect, are not static but have been joined over the years by new qualities of our nation-to-nation relationships. Given the failure of Settler nations to respect Onkwehonwe autonomy and independence, and their repeated attempts at taking over the canoe, I believe that the three rows of the Kaswéntah have been widened by distrust, grief, and disrespect. The further apart these bad relationships blow the vessels, the more dangerous it is to cross the river. It may come as no surprise, then, that the

Shield River in King's text, the metaphoric Kaswéntah space, is heavily polluted. The recipient of the landfill that Franklin illegally operates on the reserve, by the hospital in Truth, and by individuals like Elvin whose desire for personal profit far outweighs concern for the health of the environment, the river seems at times toxic. If we read the river as a metaphoric Kaswéntah space, then the implications of this toxicity extend not only to relationships that people have, or do not have, with the Earth, but to those they have with one another.

This brings us back to the dilapidated bridge. I have argued above that crossing the river is especially risky for those who do not have land-centred relationships or an awareness of their interrelationships to balance them in their crossing. We can see this struggle play out in the crossings of Tecumseh and Lum. After Lum's father Franklin beats him severely and throws him out of the house, Lum loses even the precarious sense of who his relations are, something he had managed to hold onto at the beginning of the novel. Take, for example, Lum's first bridge crossing. After they see a long-haired figure jump from the Horns, Tecumseh and Lum climb over "the chain-link fence across the entrance to the bridge" (it no longer bears a No Trespassing sign) and Lum "leans against the wire" of the bridge and says, "It could have been my mum. She was always doing crazy stuff like that" (*Truth* 15). Tecumseh tells us that "sometimes Lum remembers that his mother is dead, and sometimes he forgets" (15). This desperate loneliness and longing for kinship leads Lum to project a mother-child relationship onto one of the skulls Monroe brings to Truth to repatriate. Tecumseh discovers the skull at Lum's camp "inside the blanket, wrapped up like a baby" (206) and later he witnesses Lum singing to the skull as if it were a baby: "I can't hear the words, just a soft melody, and as I look, I see that Lum has something cradled in his arms and is rocking it gently back and forth" (241).

This longing for relations becomes even more obvious in Lum's last encounter with the bridge. Discovering Tecumseh and Monroe as they are about to throw the skull into the river, Lum calls out to a wigged Monroe: "Is that you, mum?" (266). Invited to be part of the repatriation ceremony, Lum takes the skull to the bridge to return it to the river. Standing on the bridge with Lum, Tecumseh can see that the plywood is "weathered and split," and that it "feels thin and flimsy, hollow"; the bridge is "nothing more than a skeleton, the carcass of an enormous animal, picked to the bone" and the "whole thing's rotting" (270).

Apathetic to the condition of the bridge, Lum says his last farewells to the skull: “Baby wants to say goodbye . . . Bye-bye baby . . . bye-bye” (271). Tecumseh’s instinct in this moment is to return home to “have some of [his] mother’s potatoes” (271), but Lum, who has just been forced to part with the only sense of kinship he had left, breaks into a run and “glides along the naked girders gracefully . . . until the curve of the bridge begins its descent into Bright Water and [he] . . . disappear[s] over the edge” (272). In a tragic fulfilment of the Hodinohso:ni prophecy, King shows us the danger of trying to cross the bridge without knowing our relations, without carrying the canoe principles of interrelation in our centre to keep us balanced. Lum jumps halfway across the bridge “at a point that is neither the reserve . . . nor the world of the colonizer: a noncolonial space; a space where the potential exists for indigenes and colonizers to meet in compromise; a space that does not yet exist, although the foundations are there” (Bruce 203). This is the Kaswéntah space. The potential that exists is for a renewed covenant of friendship, respect, and peace between nations, and the foundation for such a covenant is our shared interdependence with the Earth.

Borrows suggests that if Settler society made allegiances, relationships, and obligations to land and nonhuman societies their own, and adjusted their views and actions to include Indigenous land-centred institutions and ideologies, then this could enable movement towards a more inclusive citizenship based upon a shared belonging to the land. This shared citizenship with the Earth is what Monroe tries to bring back to the people of Truth and Bright Water. His ceremonies seek to strengthen the land-centred relationships of people from both Truth and Bright Water so they can strengthen their relationships with one another, so they can strengthen the Kaswéntah space between them and the bridge be made safe to cross.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I learned this Kanien’keha word from Tehotakerá:tonh on 14 April 2015 while studying my Native language in the Mohawk Language Program at Six Nations Polytechnic. Translated, *aterihwahnira:tshera ne kahswénhtha* simply implies a treaty or agreement made in wampum. This is why the phrase *tékeni teyoha:te*, in English “the two rows,” is also used to denote the Two Row Wampum.

<sup>2</sup> The Deyohaha:ge: Indigenous Knowledge Centre (IKC) at Six Nations Polytechnic is located in Ohsweken, Ontario. I am currently a member of the “Two Row Research Team,”

a group formed in partnership between McMaster University and the IKC that seeks to bring together community and university knowledges and methodologies.

<sup>3</sup> I follow the example of Neal McLeod and Leanne Simpson in using the expression Elder Brother to refer to what is more commonly known as a trickster.

<sup>4</sup> "Original People" in Kanien'keha.

<sup>5</sup> For a full version of this story, see William Reid, *The Raven Steals the Light* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1984).

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