Witnessing the Violence of the Settler State in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song*

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For hundreds of years this country and its citizens watched us and our four-legged, winged, plant and sea relatives die without any emotional response.²

-Lee Maracle

...our [Aboriginal] books will force them [settler-descendant Australians] to see what they have refused to see in two hundred years: the very existence of Aboriginal people. This is the core of the problem about guilt. They refuse to be implicated.³

-Alexis Wright

When response is cut off, the circulation of affective and psychic energies that sustain the process of witnessing, subjectivity and life itself, is cut off.⁴

-Kelly Oliver

Introduction: Reading-as-Witnessing

I write this in the weeks leading up to and following the most publicly controversial Canada Day I have witnessed; while festive scenes unfold across the nation, the counter-voice to this celebration is loud in 2021, with slogans such as *Cancel KKKanada Day* and *Reconciliation is Dead* making their way further into the mainstream than in years past. Celebrations on Canada Day and Australia Day are always met with protests and critical outrage by First Nations⁵ peoples and those who support them. After all, the crimes of the past repeat themselves as settler nations continue to wage violence against Indigenous people. For example, there is a growing frustration amongst activists and allies with the disproportionate

¹ I am grateful to the Editor of the journal and the two peer reviewers for their comments and suggestions.

² Lee Maracle, *Memory Serves: Oratories*, ed. Smaro Kamboureli (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2015), 176.

³ Alexis Wright, "Politics of Writing," *Southerly* 62, No. 2 (2000): 18.

⁴ Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2011), 20.

⁵ I have used the terms 'First Nations', 'Indigenous' and 'Aboriginal' throughout this article, cognizant that different titles are preferred in different places and by different groups; when a specific Indigenous nation is discussed (i.e. 'Waanyi') I have used the specific name for that group.

Indigenous incarceration rates and deaths in police custody in Canada⁶ which is echoed in Australia.⁷ It is in this context that the many hundreds of children's remains recently recovered in mass unmarked graves at residential 'school' sites⁸ have increased sentiment for many to a semi-revolutionary level. Waking up to daily headlines announcing more mass graves is not only shaking the idea that many formerly complacent settler-descendant Canadians have about themselves and the very foundations of 'their' country, but it is re-opening a raw wound, over and over, for many First Nations people in various locations whose lives and families are impacted profoundly by this trauma. This article responds to this important contemporary moment by reading two Indigenous-signed novels, published respectively in 2006 in Australia and in 2014 in Canada, through the lens of literary witnessing. In juxtaposing these texts, I aim to attend, on the level of the literary, to the ongoing legacy of colonial violence in settler states across national borders. Reading-as-witnessing creates an opportunity for seeing what is forcibly obscured and hearing what is forcibly deafened – in other words, by rendering discernible the rhetorical and epistemic violence that underpins the physical and social violence of the state. It creates the conditions needed for readers to pay attention – if they so choose – which, in a settler society that screens off its violent acts behind seemingly benevolent language, is a radical thing to do.

⁶ Statistics Canada reports that Indigenous adults account for 31% of admissions to provincial/territorial custody and 29% of admissions to federal custody, while representing approximately 4.5% of the Canadian adult population. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2020001/article/00016-eng.htm>

⁷ Thirty years on from the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, more than 470 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have died in custody in Australia, says Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/14/australia-act-indigenous-deaths-custody>

⁸ After reports of the initial 'discovery' of 215 unmarked graves – of children as young as three – at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in May 2021, of which there was widespread media coverage in Canada and abroad, the remains of well over a thousand more children have been uncovered at various residential school sites in Canada. Numbers are steadily rising. Time will tell if the nation's attention continues to be on this issue or if it will fade away as so many issues do after their fifteen minutes of fame in today's age of rapid media.

My encounters with these texts and indeed with these nations is uniquely my own, imprinted by my experience of growing up as a white settler-descendant Canadian and now living and reading from another settler society, Australia. I come to these texts from a particular position in the world, and my own reading experience is, of course, not generalizable, even amongst other white settler-descendant Canadians. The movement that characterizes my journey from one of these settler spaces to another informs my reading practice of these two Indigenous-signed novels, such that any reading I provide will be not only trans-Indigenous, but also trans-settler; the story of Canada that I grew up knowing myself in relation to inflects upon the story of Australia inside of which I am now immersed. I begin with an article published on 29 June 2021, in *The Guardian* by Arrernte Elder William Tilmouth, precisely because it centres the effectiveness of a trans-Indigenous approach for making visible the violence across settler colonial nations. Tilmouth encourages Australians, in light of the news coming from overseas in Canada of unmarked children's graves, to bear witness to their own history and present-day reality. He writes: 'Until there is truth-telling in Australia about the colonisation process across the whole of the continent, the process of reconciliation remains superficial.'⁹ Urging the settler-reader to 'open your eyes, and your heart,'¹⁰ his article suggests that reconciliation and healing will never happen while the nation continues to close off Aboriginal voices and truths. It remains, as he notes, superficial, and in fact harmful, to imagine otherwise. Rather than a call for reconciliation, his article expresses solidarity with First Nations people in Canada who are reeling from the news of more

⁹ William Pengarte Tilmouth, "The children's graves at residential schools in Canada evoke the massacres of Indigenous Australians," *The Guardian*, 29 June 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/29/the-childrens-graves-at-residential-schools-in-canada-evoke-the-massacres-of-indigenous-australians>

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

and more mass graves. Tilmouth writes that ‘experiences in Canada are echoed here in Australia.’¹¹ His use of the word ‘echoed’ to describe the resonance felt in Australia of the painful reality in Canada is instructive: an echo is not a direct copy, but it nonetheless carries traces of sound across a great distance so that one nation might see or hear something of itself in another.

Studies across literary texts can also perform this function of the resonant echo for readers who are willing to listen for it. Chadwick Allen, of Chickasaw ancestry, makes a case for reading Indigenous-signed literary texts in juxtaposition with one another to redefine comparative literature in a way that privileges reading across difference.¹² Following Allen’s trans-Indigenous model for reading, I purposefully juxtapose Lee Maracle’s *Celia’s Song* and Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* in order to ask how these texts foreground practices and politics of witnessing in ways that expose settler state violence and open onto alternative definitions of justice. This article reads these two texts through and alongside one another, through the tool of literary witnessing, as sites for opening up settler colonialism beyond itself. I use the phrases *opening up* and *open onto* as a nod to postcolonial and literary scholar Pheng Cheah, who argues that, rather than a product, we can think of literature as a ‘process that keeps alive the force that opens up another world.’¹³ Thinking with Allen and Cheah allows me to move *Celia’s Song* and *Carpentaria* into relation to ask how they operate as forces that open up new worlds rather than uphold existing structures. Thinking this way also allows me to dislodge these novels from the economies of value in which they are objectified, circulated,

¹¹ Tilmouth, “The children’s graves at residential schools in Canada evoke the massacres of Indigenous Australians”

¹² Chadwick Allen, *Trans-Indigenous Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2012).

¹³ Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham: Duke UP, 2016), 212.

and examined within the institutions of Indigenous Canadian Literature or Aboriginal Australian Literature. Identifying the literary voices of Wright and Maracle as 'Australian' or 'Canadian' is itself a replication of the violence of the settler state which seeks to own and control Indigenous voices. By cutting across these categories in my readings of these novels, my aim is not to settle into a discourse of equality between them, or to attempt to balance them equally on some hypothetical scale of (national or world) literary value. Rather, my aim is to witness the texts and to engage with how they themselves move through and complicate the process of witnessing and truth-telling. The echoes I trace between two novels and two nations sound the depths of the very real violence that superficially 'nice' antiracist ideals such as 'diversity' and 'reconciliation' hide beneath the guise of their supposed equality and fairness to all.

Similarly to Tilmouth's linking of the eyes and the heart in his plea to settler-readers, Kelly Oliver brings the eyes and the heart together in her understanding of witnessing. For Oliver, love is 'the responsibility to become attuned to our responses to the world and other people...[w]e have an ethical and social responsibility to be vigilant in our attempts to open up the circulation and flow of affective energy in all of our relationships.'¹⁴ In this definition, witnessing is choosing to pay attention, to remain open, precisely because of a sense of love. Crucially, this staying open is as much a matter of love for others as it is a matter of justice for others; it involves a commitment to remaining open to their truths, even and especially when these truths implicate us in ways that make us feel guilty, disoriented or confronted. I realize that my very use of the word 'us' presumes a heterogenous community of settler-readers who are willing to witness and grapple with the challenges of witnessing in

¹⁴ Oliver, *Witnessing*, 20.

Indigenous-signed literature, a community which may or may not exist, and I note that the concept of imagined community is part of what it means to be take seriously the potentiality of other worlds-becoming.

Dori Laub and Shoshana Feldman note that readers have a particular place in what they call the 'crisis' of witnessing, opening their volume on this subject with the claim that, as readers, 'we are witnesses precisely to these questions we do not own and do not yet understand, but which summon and beseech us from within the literary texts.' The crux of the crisis of witnessing, for them, is that we are summoned to see what it is that we do not yet know and to belong to a community which has not yet come into existence; this paradoxical space in which the act of witnessing may take place for readers marks the 'common ground between literature and ethics, and the meeting point between violence and culture.'¹⁵ Oliver expands on the paradoxical nature of witnessing by explaining that it has the 'double meaning' of both 'seeing with one's own eyes' and 'testifying to that which cannot be seen', and she argues that it is this 'double meaning that makes witnessing such a powerful alternative to recognition in reconceiving subjectivity and therefore ethical relations.'¹⁶ It is in the spirit, then, of reconfiguring ethical relations and in remaining open to the flow of energy between reader and text, that I frame my argument largely in terms of how I respond and react to these novels. Rather than centring my own reaction or shock upon encountering these novels, the focus on my experience as the reader (and I can only attest to my own) is meant to demonstrate relationality between reader and text, and an orientation towards the truths that the settler state suppresses. I argue that this orientation has the potential to make the reading act political and to move

¹⁵ Shoshana Feldman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York, Routledge, 1992), xii.

¹⁶ Oliver, *Witnessing*, 16.

important questions of justice and obligations to others to the forefront, regardless of the unique position of each individual reader.

Nobody's Concern: 'Who Cares?' in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*

Nobody gave a continental that those boys were standing in the same clothes they had been arrested in. Clothes turning mouldy in the damp cell. If they had looked all sweaty-skinned from the humidity building up in the bullyman's jail, nobody noticed. That they waited sine die for justice was nobody's concern.¹⁷

Although Waanyi writer Alexis Wright has noted that she had difficulty finding a publisher for the manuscript at first, since its publication there has been substantial critical response, both within and beyond Australia, to her sweeping and mesmerising novel *Carpentaria*. *Carpentaria* (2006) won, among other coveted literary prizes, the Miles Franklin Award, an award that aims to celebrate and foster the uniqueness of the institution of Australian Literature. Many readers have looked at how it engages with the failures of official reconciliation efforts. In tracing the role of seeing and witnessing in truth and justice discourse more broadly and in *Carpentaria* in particular, I join them in a reading that highlights both *Carpentaria*'s engagement with the failures of official reconciliation and its deep commitment to exploring, through the written word, (Aboriginal) law and (meaningful) justice. The failure of Australia's laws to protect and advocate for Aboriginal lives and rights to self-govern are well-known by Wright.¹⁸ She continues to advocate for Aboriginal self-governance and a recognition of Aboriginal law while the official policies and laws of Australia continue to kill Aboriginal people and culture. She sees the role of her writing as fighting back against this killing machine called ignorance. To Wright,

¹⁷ Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (Artarmon, NSW: Giramondo, 2006), 311-12.

¹⁸ For example, for many years leading up to writing and publishing *Carpentaria*, Wright was involved in long, drawn-out land claims cases and the push for Aboriginal self-governance in Australia's Northern Territory.

‘civilised Australia [is] evil for ignoring’ the ongoing injustices against Indigenous people, and ‘ignorance is the weapon used now to kill Aboriginal people, instead of guns.’¹⁹ Describing the role of writing in forcing people to confront their deadly ignorance, she writes:

[Aboriginal] books will force them [Australians] to see what they have refused to see in two hundred years: the very existence of Aboriginal people... writing is like taking the snake out of the hole. The snake that has killed, maimed and stolen. The snake that still lives down his burrow and will not come out and account for what he has done because he is too busy thinking of new, more sneaky ways to kill.²⁰

Though Wright published this essay five years before *Carpentaria*, it certainly emphasizes how central witnessing is to how she imagines the politics of writing. In my own reading of *Carpentaria*, I am interested in how Wright exposes settlers’ wilful ignorance, their lack of interest in and response to Aboriginal people - how she implicates them in the ongoing violence and drags them, like the snake out of the hole, into the light to take a look around at what they have done. As a settler-reader who chooses not to look away, I read *Carpentaria* through a paradigm of witnessing and paying attention in order to show how Wright’s fiction ‘forces [us] to see what [we] have refused to see’ with a particular focus on the politics of watching and seeing.

Carpentaria, the story of the fictional Australian mining town of Desperance and its relationship with the Aboriginal people who live in and around it, is a novel that resists easy definition. Normal Phantom, ‘an old tribal man’²¹ and his family, are main characters, although it is hard to claim that they are *the* main characters, since this novel does not unfold in the way that Western readers might be accustomed to. The vast majority - but not all - of the major characters in this novel are Aboriginal, leaving the white settlers playing somewhat minor roles in a reversal of the official

¹⁹ Wright, “The Politics of Writing,” 16-18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

²¹ Wright, *Carpentaria*, 4.

Australian narrative. Their lives are intertwined with violence. *Carpentaria* holds together many stories, 'the big stories and the little ones in between'²², and is described by Wright as taking the form of 'a spinning multi-stranded helix of stories.'²³ Of specific interest for me in this discussion of justice and literary witnessing are actually some of the smaller story-strands. In the spirit of watching and paying attention, I focus on Norm's son, Kevin (whose story is often left unexamined by readers in comparison to his older brother Will's), and another particularly violent story that Wright confronts her readers with in *Carpentaria*, that of the three young Aboriginal boys who are falsely accused of a crime they did not commit, thrown into Uptown Desperance's jail, and beaten and killed by the town's mayor and police officer in what is either an act of grave injustice or 'just deserts',²⁴ depending on the eyes through which one sees. The narrator's focus on watching, and the repeated refrain of 'who cares/cared?'/ 'nobody noticed' is one that spans the novel as a whole and reappears in countless scenes. It is one of the ways that *Carpentaria* puts the reader in the space of the potential witness and thus implicates them in the acts of either caring and noticing, or not.

That this novel is informed by an oral storytelling tradition becomes apparent almost as soon as one begins to read it. It opens with the narrator describing the ancestral serpent creating the Gulf of Carpentaria, located in what is now called Australia's far north (and where the novel is set). The reader is instructed to 'picture the creative serpent' and addressed as 'you' – you would have seen this serpent, 'if you had been watching with the eyes of a bird hovering in the sky far above the ground.'²⁵ On the very first of its 516 pages, *Carpentaria* implicates the reader as a

²² Wright, *Carpentaria*, 12.

²³ Alexis Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*," *HEAT Magazine* 13 (2007): 84.

²⁴ Wright, *Carpentaria*, 310.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

potential watcher and enacts the politics of witnessing. Of course, as readers, we did not see it happen – we have to take the narrator's word for it, not only because this event happened long before we were born, in fact, 'long before man was a creature who could contemplate the next moment in time'²⁶, but also because we do not see with the eyes of a bird. As non-birds, we decide the degree to which we allow the storyteller to take us into the perspective she chooses: how far we lean into that perspective and do the work of picturing and imagining what it would be like, if we could have seen it, is up to us. Not all readers will stretch their capacities to see and remove their cultural blinders to the same degree, or at all. My point is that the capacity of the settler-reader to imagine beyond the borders of their ignorance is being called upon.

Kevin is the Phantom family's 'brains trust', the star pupil who does well at school but does not feel he belongs there, always 'the silent nonparticipant' amongst his white classmates. He achieves high grades, but the narrator, again addressing the reader as 'you', asks: 'but you tell me, who on earth cared?'²⁷ By asking 'you' to 'tell me', the text makes the reader into a witness by demanding that we *answer to* the story; the question of *who on earth* keeps readers cognizant, or at least questioning, of which *who* we might belong to as we read. After graduation, it is obvious that no care is taken for his well-being when Kevin suffers a life-altering injury on his first day working in the local mine, an injury which renders him 'burnt and broken like barbecued spare ribs.'²⁸ After this, Kevin descends even further into isolation and his own private world, the fissure between him and everyone else, especially his father Norm, deepening. Things only get worse for Kevin.

²⁶ Wright, *Carpentaria*, 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

In a parallel story-strand, Gordie, a white character from Uptown, is found dead, and white Desperance gathers to demand justice. There are two figures in this novel who might be argued to represent the workings of official systems of justice: Bruiser, the overtly loud, drunken, and violent town mayor, and the police officer Truthful, who claims that he tries to do the right thing and yet never does. While Truthful announces to the crowd of Desperanians that “we have to make sure we follow the letter of the law,”²⁹ Bruiser hurries to accuse three innocent Aboriginal boys, commonly known by Uptown characters as ‘petrol-sniffers’, plucked from the outskirts of town where they live in conditions that are just barely amenable to their survival. “We found the evidence, darn right we did,”³⁰ Bruiser announces to the crowd, sharing how he has arrived at his apparent knowledge of Gordie’s killers and implicating Truthful in his lies through the use of the pronoun ‘we’. As a warped echo of the Cinderella story of the glass slipper, Bruiser announces that “[o]ne of them little black bastards left his red thong behind right there on the spot, that’s what, and whoever it fits, or who- ever we find walking around with only one thong on his feet – Well! You work it out.”³¹ The novel stages a murder scene with no witnesses: the ‘evidence’ found against the three boys, chosen at random from the group of young Aboriginal people living on the edges of town, is a thong (sandal) supposedly left behind at the scene, although this thong is never produced. For the second boy implicated in the crime, Bruiser’s declaration that “one left his cap behind” serves as ‘evidence’ of his guilt, and as for the third, according to Bruiser, “[t]hat’s the proof of it...we found another thong left behind as well.”³² Three boys’ names are thrown out by Bruiser and grabbed onto by the minds of the townspeople, despite a total lack of

²⁹ Wright, *Carpentaria*, 329.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 326.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 328.

³² *Ibid.*, 328-29.

evidence or a trial, and the boys – Tristrum and Luke Fishman, brothers, and Aaron Ho Kum – find themselves quickly hunted down and locked in jail. In what an attentive reader clearly sees as an act of injustice, ‘justice’ for Desperanians is served. Upon arrival at the jail, the boys are ‘thrown around the walled space as though they [are] sacks of potatoes.’³³ Truthful watches Bruiser enjoying beating the boys, although his vision registers them as ‘limp sacks’ rather than human beings. With Truthful looking on, Bruiser makes a game out of ‘kicking and dragging up one limp sack and throwing it against the wall, then picking up another and throwing it, and another’.³⁴

Later that night, Kevin suffers a racially-motivated abduction and beating – nearly to death – and nobody claims to have noticed, although the reader is brought viscerally into the scene of the crime. The attack is described by the assailants as revenge for Gordie, even though the three boys sitting in the jail at the time are also supposedly ‘paying’ for this completely fabricated murder. In the sinister logic of this ‘justice’ system, which is a replication of the logic governing historical settler colonial massacres across Australia, four lives ‘pay’ for one; seeing as there is no evidence to incriminate any of these boys, Uptown uses Gordie’s mysterious death as a poorly-veiled excuse to act on their desire to punish Aboriginal characters for the crime of simply existing. While Tristrum, Luke and Aaron sit, terrified and beaten in the jail cell, with the narrator asking ‘[w]hy had no one walked right down there to Main Street of Uptown, to bail out of jail any one of the little petrol-sniffer boys?’³⁵ and declaring that ‘[n]obody watched for the little boys down in the jail’³⁶, Kevin is

³³ Wright, *Carpentaria*, 333.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 335.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 310.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 311.

subjected to a brutal act of violence at the hands of the boys who have picked him up on his way home one night after leaving an Uptown bar:

All Kevin could see were the white hoods each of the people in the car had placed over their heads. Then he felt the hands of someone in the back seat pushing something over his head. He reached up and felt the rough thread of the material, like a sack, and he could smell wheat or flour, like poultry feed. He knew the smell, recognising it from when he had passed Uptown people's backyard fowl coops. You could smell it from the street if you were passing by some houses... There were several voices in the car, all talking to him at the same time. 'Take this for Gordie,' fists flew at him from the front and from the back... He heard his bones break with a pain that forced him to open his shock-sealed lips, and call out through the muffling bag to his father... through the white light of pain, he witnessed his childhood, always moving back into the arms of his father... His skin was burning, he was being skinned alive, pulled behind the car, its exhaust fumes choking his breath.³⁷

In the literary encounter with this scene, readers are pushed to see, feel, smell, and hear the things that Kevin does: in this way, the text implicates readers in the moment of the attack and does not allow us to turn away or say, *I didn't notice*. The text addresses 'you' in much the same way as it does in the opening where 'if you had been watching with the eyes of a bird, you would have seen it'. In this case, when the empty chicken feed sack is placed over Kevin's head, and he smells the chickens, the narrator tells us that not only did Kevin recognise the smell, but 'you could smell it from the street, if you were passing by some of the houses'. The language of witnessing stitches the reader into the fabric of this scene, implicating us not only through the vivid sense-based descriptions of the attack in which Kevin hears his bones break and feels fists fly at him, but through addressing the reader as 'you', who also would have recognised the smell, had we ever been walking through the town. The initial shock of violence gives way to a sense of relationality between Kevin and the reader that shatters the illusion that this story has 'nothing to do' with us.

³⁷ Wright, *Carpentaria*, 344.

Ultimately, it is love that drives Kevin to witness the vision of his father, Norm's arms reaching out to protect him through the 'white light' of his pain and fear. Love and concern are also the force by which the witnessing process occurs when Kevin's older brothers drive 'all night over the slippery road in the rain, to get down to the hospital to see Kevin'; they find it 'just heartbreaking to sit there and look at him.'³⁸ It is love that makes Kevin's brothers drive all night in dangerous conditions just to sit and watch him laying comatose in the hospital; the narrator does not say that only *they* were heartbroken to see him, but implicates readers as well in the possibility of having our own hearts break open at the sight, stating that it was 'just heartbreaking.' The space of watching is left open in the narrative for us to slip into this heartbreaking moment and to register the violence done to Kevin, if we so align ourselves as readers with the capacity to witness, to join the brothers as they 'sit there and look at him' without turning away. On the other hand, there are many characters who should have noticed this attack and could have intervened, but they choose to look the other way, and this is reflective of the fact that there are many readers who would also do the same. In particular, Truthful, the police officer, who claims it is his job to 'see justice is done and done correctly'³⁹, should have noticed and intervened. While everyone in Uptown claims they didn't see it, Truthful knows that he 'should have looked' because '[h]e heard the car go past.'⁴⁰ Although there are 'dozens' of potential witnesses to this crime, they claim to have been 'too out of it to notice what was going on really.'⁴¹ Truthful hears the loud sound of the car carrying Kevin and his attackers, just as many of the bystanders would have, but his inability to orient himself towards seeing what is in front of him renders him useless

³⁸ Wright, *Carpentaria*, 346.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 329.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

as an agent of justice. Similarly, reading-as-witnessing, if it is to be an effective step towards justice, requires that the reader orients oneself toward seeing their own implication in relation to what is on the page in front of them.

Truthful's refusal to affect any justice for Aboriginal lives soon repeats itself when he finds Tristrum, Luke, and Aaron hanging dead in the jail on his watch. In what he thinks is a dream, but is more of a denigration into madness, Truthful thinks he hears something coming from outside. Despite a proliferation of phrases suggesting his keen ability to see what is in front of him (he 'looked past the darkness', 'glanced over the town', 'made a mental note', 'checked his car was locked', and 'was able to see through the darkened office' in the moonlight)⁴², in the scene that follows when he finds the boys hanging, he is in a state of denial, 'in a daze'⁴³ that he let Bruiser beat the boys to death and stage it as suicide. Although he saw Bruiser committing the violence, he is, in a way, unable to really see or register what it is that he saw. This repressed seeing, or denial of seeing, is in itself a violence, and his madness and confusion is a pathology produced by that violence. Moving through this 'daze', he takes them down, covers them 'gently'⁴⁴ in blankets and places plates of hot food in front of their bodies. The absurd gestures of care and concern here are far too late, and speak to his pathology and inability to see clearly what he is doing. Despite claiming that he cares to 'see justice done properly', in the examples of how he handles the case of Kevin Phantom and how he manages to oversee the deaths of three innocent little boys, it is clear that his sense of care and concern is severely skewed and that only *injustice* is perpetuated on his watch. He does not witness what he sees. If *Carpentaria* is a meditation on the role of truth-

⁴² Wright, *Carpentaria*, 357.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 361.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

telling in unsettling official notions of justice, then Truthful the police officer, as he suffers a breakdown blurring the lines of what is real and what is imagined, might be seen to represent not only the entire settler state but also the systems upholding it as being in an extreme state of dissociation with and detachment from what is actually in plain sight in front of them. If Truthful – and by extension, the state – is able to notice and check things, then the question becomes, why cannot he – and by extension, the state – see the depths of the violence that his actions, and perhaps more importantly, inactions, perpetuate?

In reading *Carpentaria*'s story-strands of Kevin Phantom and the three boys' deaths in custody (murders), and thinking of Truthful's place in both, we might think about Wright's note that 'the core of the problem about guilt' is the refusal 'to be implicated'⁴⁵ in the crime scene of settler colonial violence. In these violent scenes from the novel, a reader is faced, on a literary level, with a degree of implication. The challenge of *Carpentaria* is whether or not readers choose to see that implication. Through its constant refrain of 'who cares?', 'nobody cared' and 'nobody noticed', the text begs the question: who does care? Are we, as readers, part of the nobody in 'nobody noticed'? Are we part of the everybody, who knows what 'everybody knows' and yet turns away from it? Why *had* no one bailed the boys out? When Kevin 'hears his bones break' do we not hear them too? Do we not have noses to smell, eyes to watch, ears to hear? Or are we 'in a daze', 'hardly able to see' through the arrested state that is symptomatic of settler pathology, like Truthful? I use the word 'we' here not to imply a unified group, but in a way that imagines a heterogenous community of those who would listen and see what is in front of them with a commitment to staying open. Of course, the answer to the questions above depends on the reader: in these

⁴⁵ Wright, "Politics of Writing," 18.

readings of mine, the reader is a trans-settler-reader, but also a witnessing reader. As such, I am implicated in a certain way in the violence throughout *Carpentaria's* pages, and I am also called upon to expand and question my capacities for witnessing my own position within settler state violence and the degree to which I 'should have noticed' what it is that I see. And this cannot be the final step in the reading-as-witnessing process; what firstly requires paying attention and seeing clearly in the text then requires a commitment to seeing how one might contribute to objectives of justice for Aboriginal people in the real world.

Bones Demand Justice in Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song*

The bones wait; wait for burial, for ceremony, for their final resting place. They shift and rattle their discontent. I breathe deep. There is not much I can do but visit and witness for them.⁴⁶

West Coast Salish (Sto:lo) writer Lee Maracle's writing considers how Canadians need to think critically about the relationship between themselves and Indigenous people in Canada. In illustrating the feigned ignorance about the nature of this relationship on the part of settlers, Maracle uses legal terminology such as 'defence' and 'claim', and she also refers to 'becoming curious' – or not – as a mode of paying – or not paying – attention:

In Canadian people's defence, they claim not to know what was really going on. Well, everyone knew that Indigenous people came from here and non-Indigenous people came from somewhere else. No one became curious about how the shift from Indigenous authority over the land to Canadian authority over the land occurred, nor did they become curious about how our access to the land and its wealth became restricted. No one became curious about how Canadian law became the law that dominated the entire landscape.⁴⁷

Not knowing 'what was really going on' is a false claim; Maracle shows that it is a lack of witnessing, an intentional turning away from what 'everyone' knows is the truth – that Canada exists on stolen land - that creates the conditions for claims of

⁴⁶ Lee Maracle, *Celia's Song* (Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2014), 2.

⁴⁷ Lee Maracle, *My Conversations with Canadians* (Toronto: BookThug, 2017), 34.

innocence and 'not knowing' on the part of settlers. In this passage, she turns official systems of justice on their head to show, through language that implicates the reader as part of both 'everyone' and 'no one', just how guilty Canada is. As it is in Wright's work, the politics of paying attention, seeing, watching, and witnessing are central to Maracle's politics of writing. *Celia's Song* uses this sense of witnessing to juxtapose, in sharp relief, official justice systems, and Indigenous justice systems. In doing so, it points out the shortcomings and injustices of 'a trial system...a simple system that fails to count humans as variable, as spirited, creative, and emotional beings...that fails to account for catastrophe, social and personal trauma, and how humans fall off track.'⁴⁸ This novel accuses such a simple system of failing to account for people in all of their humanity. Then, it proposes an Indigenous-led alternative.

In *Celia's Song*, the character Celia is a seer, though she often does not understand why she is being shown the things that she is. Her disturbing and vivid visions are a continuation in adulthood of the visions that she has as a child in the novel's much earlier prequel, *Ravensong*, a story about a flu epidemic that hits Celia's Indigenous community hard in the 1950s. While *Ravensong* is primarily focalised through the young woman Stacey, and her struggle to understand the differences between the small West Coast Indigenous community in which her family lives (and many die) and the comparatively affluent white town in which she attends school, Stacey's younger sister Celia is ever-present in the shadows. *Celia's Song* revisits the same village; this time, Celia is a middle-aged woman, and instead of a flu epidemic, an epidemic of intergenerational trauma and family violence now grips the community. Laura Beard argues that *Celia's Song* implicates the reader in witnessing, relating this to settler Canadians' limited ability to register the injustice of

⁴⁸ Maracle, *Memory Serves: Oratories*, 1.

missing and murdered Indigenous women and children in Canada.⁴⁹ In 2021, I read *Celia's Song* also for its implications of witnessing, but with a special focus, given recent 'discoveries' of mass graves, on the history and ongoing impact of residential schooling in Canada; in 2021's potent political moment, I choose this focus also to honour the novel's dedication 'to all those children who were removed from our homes and who did not survive residential school.'⁵⁰

The novel has been celebrated in Canada as a work that offers hope for reconciliation between settlers and Indigenous people, released during a time that these conversations are at the forefront of many Canadians' minds. Maracle's oeuvre as a whole has contributed consistently to public conversations about what must be done to make reconciliation a reality rather than political window-dressing. The degree to which *Celia's Song* offers hope for healing colonial wounds largely depends on the degree to which readers understand its transformative potential. What kind of mind is able to watch someone die with no response? In *Ravensong*, the teenaged Stacey asks of her white classmate, Steve (a man who will end up as her lover and who returns as a key character in *Celia's Song*): "how did it feel to watch us die, Steve?"⁵¹ Although Stacey knows it sounds callous and mean, she does not care; in fact, she is providing Steve with the gift of confrontation in order to feel the shame and guilt that he carries for the crime of knowing about, but not watching, people in Stacey's village burying relative after relative with no help from the white town. In this way, her seeming coldness becomes the basis for Steve to begin to feel his shame and guilt and thus for the two of them to lay the foundations

⁴⁹ Laura Beard, "'This Story Needs a Witness': The Imbrication of Witnessing, Storytelling, and Resilience in Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song*," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 30, No. 3-4 (2018): 151-178.

⁵⁰ Maracle, *Celia's Song*, I.

⁵¹ Lee Maracle, *Ravensong* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars, 2012), 169.

for a future relationship. *Celia's Song*, years later, continues to work away at the challenge of making readers see what they've been turning away from and giving them the gift of confrontation.

Similarly to *Carpentaria*, *Celia's Song* holds many stories together. Again, I read through two story-strands. First, that of mink, the novel's narrator/witnesser who moves through time and space, from near Celia's Sto:lo village (in what is now British Columbia, Canada) to a group of bones that lay unburied and cry for justice in a longhouse on Nuu'chalnulth territory in what is now the city called Seattle, USA. Secondly, the story of the village getting their version of justice for a young girl in their community who is beaten, starved, and raped by her mother and step-father. While nursing this girl back from the brink of death on their own (something they are familiar with from the flu epidemic many years earlier), the community must decide together how to deal with the adults who allowed this to happen. It is mink's presence that brings these seemingly disparate narrative threads together into a story. It is mink who holds the whole story in *Celia's Song* together, sometimes speaking directly to readers and at other times retreating to the background to watch, with the reader, the human characters.

Mink opens the story by telling us that he is a solitary witness who is the only one that still visits the longhouse full of bones, the remains of people who were simply left to rot and forgotten for many years after 'everyone died'⁵² due to disease brought on by colonial invasion. Although mink watches all alone, dismaying that “*I need to witness this. There is no one else*”⁵³, as readers we are brought into the scene as potential co-witnesses, seeing and hearing what mink sees and hears in

⁵² Maracle, *Celia's Song*, 1.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5.

the old, abandoned longhouse. We become, by way our reading presence, the possibility of someone else. With *mink*, we see (if we choose to look) inside the old, abandoned longhouse where ‘everyone died’, and we hear the bones’ distress upon being neglected:

The fleshless bones whimper songs of yearning, yearning for the sea as if they continue to miss it. They missed much more. ... I am the only visitor. I keep coming back...I love them [the people who once lived here]. I can’t seem to live without them. Before I get a chance to remember them fully as individuals, rain clouds from the west gather and form a thunderhead.⁵⁴

The bones have emotions, demands, and desires. They are not only bones; having never been properly taken care of, they are still the spirits of the human beings who ‘miss’ the sea and who ‘missed much more’ when their lives were cut short. They warn Celia, although she doesn’t understand where the voices come from, that “[s]omeone has to pay for decades of neglect. Someone has to appease our need for respect”.⁵⁵ While *mink* does serve as a witness, he can only do so much, lamenting that ‘there is not much I can do but visit and witness for them.’⁵⁶ It is obvious that only human beings can give the bones the respect and the justice that they need, can pick up the burden from a tired *mink* who is dedicated to remembering them in the meantime. *Mink* attempts to show readers the scene, and urges us not to forget that ‘Se’alth’s longhouse crashed [from disease] and his village became Seattle.’⁵⁷ With *mink*, we see inside what (and who) ‘Seattle’ is hiding beneath its city streets and settler colonial modern-day reality. *Mink* is a solitary witness and ‘the only visitor’ who ‘keeps coming back’ because he ‘can’t seem to live without them.’ In the framing narrative, these neglected bones continue to cry out for justice, with *mink* always coming back to remind them that they are not forgotten and

⁵⁴ Maracle, *Celia’s Song*, 4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

that he is doing his best to make the humans pay attention. In becoming witness to mink's witnessing, readers see that it is his love for the people who lived in the longhouse that commits him to continuously returning to the bones to witness them and watch over them until some human (perhaps the reader) notices them and remembers them, not as mere evidence or numbers, but 'fully as individuals'.

From this solitary place in which only we, as readers, watch with mink, the novel then moves to Celia's present-day Sto:lo village in what is now British Columbia, Canada. This is a place which mink also watches over with care and concern. In the village, a serious crime is committed. A five year-old girl, Shelley, uses the cell phone her grandmother gave her in case of emergency, to call for help. A number of community members, led by the women, go to her house, where she has been living with her severely neglectful and abusive mother Stella and step-father Amos; they find the girl raped and nearly dead on the floor with her mother passed out in the room. While Celia's instinct is to call 9-11 for help, Shelley's grandmother stops her, saying "[t]hey take so long. She'll die. Or they'll take her away and I'll never see her again".⁵⁸ The community knows that, in the eyes of Canadian law, the blame would lay squarely on the man who did this to Shelley, and that he would be taken to jail and the child removed from the community forever. The ongoing trauma of years of Canada turning a blind eye to epidemic disease and watching them die – 'she'll die' – and forced child removal from their community – 'they'll take her away' – still runs deep, and they refuse to call for outside help from a nation that has never cared for their health or well-being. They are aware that this refusal would be construed by that nation as 'criminal negligence':

Every second they spend trying to save her will be damned in the eyes of the law as proof of negligence, criminal negligence, because it was obvious the child had been raped,

⁵⁸ Maracle, *Celia's Song*, 136.

burned and beaten. The law requires that they report this. Even if she survived, the scars will be there forever, and they will still be required by law to report it.⁵⁹

The official system of justice represented by ‘the eyes of the law’ looks only for physical proof that can be written in a report and brought before a judge. However, these eyes miss a lot. They miss, because they uphold and thus are designed to miss, the negligent structures of a settler colonialism in Canada that does not care whether Indigenous people live or die. The irony, of course, is that, in these cold and uncaring eyes, the community rallying to save Shelley without outside intervention is criminally negligent, but the Canadian settler state is not.

Left to their own devices, they do, in fact, manage to save Shelley. They also come together to save her mother, Stella. While some of them do not understand how they can show compassion to the person who allowed Shelley to suffer so badly – ‘[h]ow could he look at all this, see that child, then warm up to the woman who set in motion her terrible suffering?’⁶⁰ – ultimately, they not only watch her wash everything in the house, but they restore her house, ‘build cupboards wherever she wants’.⁶¹ The community does not put Stella on trial. The trial system is the system of justice used in an official capacity in Canada. It is also, according to Maracle, a system that fails to account for human beings’ full humanity. Through the narrator-witness mink, we see that Stella’s life, due to so many factors beyond her personal control, has been very painful. Along with mink, we watch how she has gotten to the point of living with her abuser and being severely addicted to alcohol. She is not absolved of her guilt in the crimes against her daughter, but neither is she considered evil because of what happened. In what the state systems of justice cannot achieve in their court rooms and prisons, Stella is rehabilitated by her

⁵⁹ Maracle, *Celia’s Song*, 143.

⁶⁰ Maracle, *Ravensong*, 174.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

community, who still love her. The same love that fuels their dedication to saving Shelley also saves Stella.

Perhaps it is what the community finally decides to do about Shelley's step-father Amos that speaks the most to how the role of the eyes and of witnessing, in Sto:lo systems of justice is radically different from the eyes of (the Canadian) law. Celia and her mother discuss, one morning while Shelley and Stella are still recovering, how difficult it is to come to terms with this crime that has happened in their community. Again brought in as a co-witness by mink onto private scenes of the past, we learn that Amos is a survivor of Canada's residential school system, where he was repeatedly raped and beaten as a small child in state-sanctioned crimes against humanity from which he never recovered. Although he is one of the children who survived, in a sense he also belongs to those children to whom Maracle dedicates this novel, 'who did not survive residential school', because of how sick the experience made him for the rest of his life. The punishment that the community decides to give him is something that they have not done in a very long time; he is danced to death in their recently reconstructed longhouse, an act that sets in motion a renewed sense of justice, both for Celia's community and possibly for the bones, miles away in a different village's longhouse, whose cries for justice frame the novel.

In the ceremony that serves as punishment but also redemption for Amos, he is dragged against his will by the community to the longhouse and forced to dance himself to exhaustion. This ceremonial dance allows him to shed the years of abuse he suffered at the hands of the Canadian settler state, abuse that was allowed in the eyes of the law:

He is sweating – years of toxic memories sweating out through his pores, years of alcohol, putrefied by never having given his poor body a break. He reeks of the deep toxicity of the memory of hate, of hurt. He dances faster and harder...he raises his face to his long-gone family and determines to dance himself into their arms, to dance his way to the other side.

He begs them to take him home, away from his toxic insane life and he dances some more.⁶²

When Amos dies, the truth of his 'guilt' as an individual and a rapist is brought to sit alongside his truth as a survivor of residential schooling (abuse) in Canada. He is forced to see what he did and also with what was done to him. *Celia's Song* enacts notions of truth and systems of justice⁶³ wide enough to see both contexts at once. He is not welcome in the community and must be killed after what he has done, and yet he is allowed to process his 'hate' and his 'hurt'. Witnessing here is complex. The community witnesses Amos dance and die. As readers, we witness those community members kill him by not allowing him to stop dancing until he is dead. Amos also witnesses past scenes in his life, as 'years of toxic memories sweat out through his pores' while he dances. In an echo from the scene in *Carpentaria* in which Kevin, close to death, sees a vision of his father's open and embracing arms coming to save him, Amos sees the arms of his family members from whom he was stolen, and in 'beg[ging] them to take him home' we witness him begging for forgiveness for his crimes. These ancestors also witness him in this scene; it is suggested that they are watching down on him from the way that he 'raises his face' to them. On the level of literary witnessing, non-Indigenous readers also watch this scene as outsiders to this system of justice, witnesses to a private community-based ceremony we otherwise would never see. It is up to us, through our own interpretation of justice, to determine if we have just witnessed a murder or a scene of compassion and redemption. It could be both. It is, in my personal literary encounter with this scene, not so black and white.

⁶² Maracle, *Celia's Song*, 255.

⁶³ Here I follow the literary relationship between 'notions of truth and systems of justice' from Julie McGonegal, *Imagining Justice: The Politics of Postcolonial Forgiveness and Reconciliation* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 180.

The local police see Amos' death as a murder for which someone must pay. Acting mostly out of fear of the powers of this ceremony, they decide to arrest the men who forced Amos to keep dancing, but ultimately the case they bring to court fails and the charges against Celia's community are dismissed due to the testimony of a white 'expert witness,'⁶⁴ Steve. Steve, who all those years ago was asked by Stacey how it felt to watch Indigenous people die, and who has since become a doctor and, as Stacey's romantic partner, one of only a few white people who are privy to the inner life of the village, steps up and testifies as a medical professional about 'the medical value of the dance'.⁶⁵ While this testimony means that the court case is dropped, his white patients back in town refuse his services; for them, he 'represent[s] a betrayal they could not name.'⁶⁶ It is telling of official systems of justice that only a white man could sway the judge into dropping the case because of the weight his words hold in a court of law. But perhaps it also pushes settler-readers to think about the potential powers, in the eyes of official systems of law, of allyship. While the ceremonial dance as an alternative path to justice does not include settlers in its scope, and Steve did not participate in the dance, the role of the settler-witness here might be modelled by Steve, who steps up and adds his testimony because he knows it will have weight in the eyes of the law. The reader of *Celia's Song* is left to think about negligence in the eyes of the law versus the negligence of the state that law serves, when it watches Indigenous people die without a response, and to consider wherein justice lies. The settler-reader, in particular, is called upon to consider if it is true that we (not only descendants of settlers but the ongoing beneficiaries of colonial settlement on Indigenous lands) continue to watch forms of

⁶⁴ McGonegal, *Imagining Justice*, 259.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 260.

negligence against Indigenous people with a combination of deadly ignorance and feigned innocence.

Conclusion

In the crime scenes that *Carpentaria* and *Celia's Song* depict and stage, and in the crime scene of settler colonialism, readers are witnesses. The question is: to what degree are we oriented towards paying attention to the crime *seen*, and to the forms and modes of justice that watching and paying attention open up? Irene Watson, a Tanganekald and Meintangk scholar based in Australia who was also appointed in 1996 by the Chiefs of Ontario, Canada to sit as one of seven Aboriginal judges on the First Nations International Court of Justice, has written that, by 'imposing "sovereignty" over Indigenous laws, the [settler] state through military force rapes its way into existence, creating a sovereignty of violence, and not of law that is always known.'⁶⁷ Such a 'sovereignty of violence' allows settler states to continue to get away with murder and undermines Indigenous models for justice. It is my belief that novels such as *Celia's Song* and *Carpentaria* depict models for justice more equitable and appropriate than what official laws can provide, and that implicating the reader on the level of the narrative is one of the ways in which they represent such models.

Witnessing on the level of the literary suggests that paying attention and becoming curious are particularly revolutionary acts, especially in settler societies where the scaffolding of cultural amnesia that is required to give integrity to the state is powerful. As Patrick Wolfe has famously written, colonial invasion, in a settler

⁶⁷ Irene Watson, "Buried Alive," *Law and Critique*, No. 13 (2002): 253.

state, is 'a structure, not an event'.⁶⁸ In the words of Avril Bell, settlers 'are a particular kind of coloniser, those who seek to make a new home on the lands of others'⁶⁹; this particular form of colonisation derives and maintains its sense of legitimacy from keeping invisible and inaudible the realities of those on whose home the new society is built. I use the term *witnessing* to denote paying attention to what is continuously obscured by the structure of settler colonialism, to suggest the move from indifference towards care and response, and also because of its key role in the proceedings (both officially recognised and not) of law and justice.

Before discussing 'reconciliation' in Australia or Canada, we need to address the ongoing violence of the settler state; literary works that ask, 'who cares?' and interrogate the ongoing injustice of official laws and policies are one way to begin to acknowledge the desperate need for cultural healing in our current context(s). At this moment in Canada, bones of thousands of children are being held up as powerful 'evidence' of genocide, but justice for Indigenous people, past and present, is not a reality. In Australia, some people are pointing towards Canada in the hopes that a campaign of 'truth-telling' might be revived here as well. I wonder how it must feel to have your trauma paraded as the nation's tragedy. I understand the echoes between settler states, especially the ones provided by listening for the resonant echoes between these two novels, to be forces which open and unsettle worlds and possibilities for justice and accountability across national borders. Rather than comparing atrocities or pretending that one settler state is 'better' or 'worse' than another, I see these echoes to be generative of a different and more relational

⁶⁸ Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (London: Cassell, 1999), 2.

⁶⁹ Avril Bell, *Relating Indigenous and Settler Identities: Beyond Domination* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 7.

politics. Becoming witnessing readers means beginning to take seriously, from within our own unique positions, our own implication in the continuing colonial violence that makes up our realities, or what Wright calls seeing, rather than turning away from, 'what we have all inherited'.⁷⁰

Justice demands witnessing. Witnessing points towards an ongoing paying of attention, an orientation, to truths that official discourses can never contain; it is the force that keeps the channels of responsibility and care open. The relationship between 'notions of truth' and 'systems of justice' is a complicated one, perhaps especially in Canada and Australia, where the official stance on reconciliation is that we are well on our way to healing the wounds that state-sanctioned violence has caused. Thus, in exploring witnessing in these novels and performing witnessing as I read them, I do not suggest that wounds can be healed through literature alone, but only that literature has a unique ability to simulate the conditions of seeing and responding to violence that are necessary for a commitment to justice in the first place.

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⁷⁰ Wright, "Politics of Writing," 18.

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