INTERPLAY OF INDIGENOUS REPRESENTATION AND ECOLOGICAL ISSUES IN CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS: AN ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS

by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to Sacheen Littlefeather (Apache and Yaqui), who raised her voice for those who have been silenced.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines children's picture books authored by Indigenous creators published between 2012 and 2022 through an ecocritical lens.

This study applies ecocritical theory to analyze three picture books addressing ecological issues about water availability, reservation land, and Indigenous food and recipe loss. This analysis demonstrates that Indigenous creators provide actionable lessons to young readers. They do so by portraying culturally accurate Indigenous relationships with nature through their visual, verbal, and peritextual narratives. I argue that by presenting accurate portrayals of Indigenous characters and their connections with nature in modern settings, these picture books encourage young readers to take action in order to protect the environment.

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1995, Disney's animated film *Pocahontas* told young viewers and their guardians that "You can own the Earth and still / All you'll own is Earth until / You can paint with all the colors of the wind" (*Pocahontas* 00:40:28-00:40:47). Disney's *Pocahontas* ended up epitomizing Indigenous representation issues that commonly appeared in children's stories popular in the 1990s: misrepresentation of Indigenous history, culture, and relationships with the environment. In the years since *Pocahontas* was released, misrepresentation of Indigenous history in stories for children has been studied and addressed by multiple scholars and educators to call for better portrayals of Indigenous characters and culture in works for children. Research continues into the importance of representation and its effect on young readers such as Amina Chaudhri and Schau's 2016 study focusing on Indigenous representation in Scholastic Reading Club books, which noted that "[i]n addition to being underrepresented in the realm of publication of children's literature, the Native American population is often misrepresented. Of those texts that are published and distributed, many contain stereotypical images, biased or prejudiced language, one-dimensional characters, and formulaic plots" (21).

Multiple popular books and series for children have been criticized for inaccurate representation of history and culture, such as the Dear America series, the Little House series, the American Girl series, and more. These critiques have resulted in demonstrable change in children's book publication. Dr. Debbie Reese (Nambé Pueblo) has been a significant actor in providing scholars and educators with the tools to evaluate Indigenous representation in children's books through her website *American Indians in Children's*

Literature and her implementation of "The Red X on Book Covers." This simple initiative calls for speakers discussing problematic books to put a red X on the covers when showing them during presentations or on handouts, with the goal of not just bringing negative attention to the titles but to encourage audiences to choose other stories for their young readers. This brought attention to issues in older, popular children's picture books such as Gerald McDermott's *Arrow to the Sun* (1974) and Tomie dePaola's *The Legend of the Bluebonnet* (1983) and *The Legend of the Indian Paintbrush* (1988), to name but a few. In addition, in 2018, the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) "changed the name of the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award to the Children's Literature Legacy Award because of 'anti-Native and anti-Black sentiments' in the author's work" (Eyre). Calls for more Indigenous authorship continue to be made today, and while Indigenous authors accounted for only forty-seven of 3,183 children's books reported in 2021, that number was near double the number of Indigenous authors reported in 2020 ("Books By And/Or About…").

Despite the many changes seen in response to these issues, more research is called for, and cultural accuracy is needed in the portrayals of Indigenous characters and culture in narratives for children in the future. This is partly due to the various modern Indigenous cultures there are to consider. In North America alone, Indigenous culture does not fall under a single umbrella of "Native American culture" but instead spans several hundred different cultures, each with their own history and traditions. One might suggest the answer to attaining cultural accuracy in children's books and media is to hire a consultant who specializes in the culture being represented. Unfortunately, these experts are sometimes poorly chosen or dismissed by decision makers, such as publishers

or film staff, altogether. In Ann Rinaldi's *My Heart is on the Ground* (1990), an entry in the Dear America series, Rinaldi thanks "Genevieve Bell, Ph.D., Department of Anthropology, Stanford University, for fact-checking the manuscript" (Rinaldi 201). Despite having a dedicated fact-checker, this title received severe criticism for its portrayal of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School (Atleo et al.). The softening of historically gruesome details for young readers in the narrative clearly went well beyond anything that could be considered accurate representation. In addition, suggestions made in the historical note after the conclusion of the narrative that residential schools like Carlisle were created with positive purpose have been called out for inaccuracy as well. Recalling *Pocahontas*, Walt Disney representatives took a step in the right direction and hired Shirley "Little Dove" Custalow McGowan (Mattaponi) as a consultant. However, the company "inadvertently alienated their chief Native American consultant…by sending her mixed signals about the kind of guidance they were seeking from her" (Edgerton). While efforts to listen to Indigenous voices were made on paper in these situations, Disney and Rinaldi clearly missed their mark.

Knowing the massive amount of information contained in Indigenous culture, I direct attention to one specific area of it: representation of Indigenous relationships with nature. This relationship has been portrayed repeatedly in Western media: be it in *Pocahontas*, with "Grandmother Willow," or *The Legend of the Bluebonnet*'s She-Who-Is-Alone. Both stories show supposedly historical characters who have an almost supernatural relationship with nature. Pocahontas goes to Grandmother Willow to converse and seek advice, and the willow tree answers her. She-Who-Is-Alone sacrifices her beloved doll to the Great Spirit of the novel to avert a drought. Some Indigenous

cultures such as the Potawatomi, as described in Robin Kimmerer's *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses* and the Ojibwe, as described in Carole Lindstrom and Michaela Goade's *We Are Water Protectors*, do maintain a profound relationship with the natural world, but not necessarily in the way represented by the Powhatan and Comanche people in *Pocahontas* or *The Legend of the Bluebonnet*. This type of misrepresentation deserves the same scrutiny as historical and cultural representation. Now is a particularly important time to discuss it due to the growing need for climate action due to the politicization of the earth's rising temperature and the need for action-oriented change rather than passive outcry. Some organizations dedicated to environmental science in the state of Texas have adopted the term "climate action" over other options to avoid politicization, and it will be used for the duration of this discussion.

The need for climate action might seem like a discussion that lies beyond children's stories. However, along with the increasing need for climate action, there has been a rise in the use of ecocritical theory to study children's literature. Kidd and Dobrin's 2004 collection *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism* illustrated the previously shallow research in this particular field in their introduction, saying "Thus far, children's culture studies and ecocriticism have been largely separate undertakings" (Kidd and Dobrin 3). The authors go on to note that *Wild Things* is the "first book-length project to address their intersection(s)" and acknowledge a handful of earlier attempts (Kidd and Dobrin 3). Introduced in 1978 by William Rueckert in "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" and popularized in 1989 by Cheryll Glotfelty, it was not until 2004 that a book examining children's culture and ecocriticism together

was released. While more studies in this area have surfaced since then, the amount of scholarship available at this "intersection" remains shallow–it is my hope that my research will add to the conversation of ecocriticism and children's literature. The need for study in this area also adds to the timeliness of discussing representation of Indigenous relationships with nature as an ecocritical lens lends itself especially well to the conversation.

Greg Garrard provides an insightful definition of ecocriticism, noting the interdisciplinary aspect of the theory, stating that ecocriticism "is unique amongst contemporary literary and cultural theories because of its close relationship with the science of ecology" (5). Cheryll Glotfelty adds a quick explanation in *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), that ecocriticism is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment…an earth-centered approach to literary studies" (xviii). It is this interdisciplinary nature that makes the theory so appropriate for the discussion of relationships with nature during a time when nature is changing and relationships with it will need to change as well.

Accurate representation of Indigenous relationships with nature are important to this discussion not just because these stories are deserving of accuracy, but also because their accuracy could provide better guidance to young readers, both Indigenous and other. The relationship often portrayed between Indigenous cultures and nature is similar to those previously mentioned in *Pocahontas* and *The Legend of the Bluebonnet*: they are passively mystical and framed solely in the distant past. However, Indigenous relationships with nature are very much a part of their modern cultures, and more active than the ones commonly shown in children's media. In the preface to her 2003 book

Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses, Potawatomi author Kimmerer describes this relationship thus: “In indigenous ways of knowing, we say that a thing cannot be understood until it is known by all four aspects of our being: mind, body, emotion, and spirit. The scientific way of knowing relies only on empirical information from the world, gathered by body and interpreted by mind…I need both approaches, objective and subjective” (vii). This blend of spiritual and scientific knowledge of nature is one decidedly absent from the children’s titles mentioned earlier.

In the explanation of methodology, I must first disclose my place in this narrative: I make no claim to Indigenous heritage. Therefore, I have made it my goal in this work not only to address the topic of Indigenous representation in nature, but also to elevate as much as possible those Indigenous voices that have approached the topic in hopes that more scholars will be directed to their work through this one.

The picture books I examine in this analysis were all published after 2010 and involve either an Indigenous author or illustrator. In addition, every book includes historical or informational notes pertaining to culture that further enhance the stories that the authors and illustrators chose to tell. Supporting Indigenous authors’ decision-making power over the stories they choose to tell and how they tell them results in demonstrably more accurate stories than those projects that chose to use consultants rather than seeking Indigenous creators to tell stories first-hand.

In her article on multicultural literacy, “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” Rudine Bishop detailed the ways readers experience their own or other cultures in the stories they read. Reese added a new element, curtains, to this discussion, explaining why it is important for Indigenous creators to choose which stories they share.

Reese highlights the importance of that choice in this talk: “we’ve had hundreds of years of white people looking in our windows and not understanding what we’re doing, and then writing about what they saw in an authoritative way, with that authoritative way being taken as fact. As truth. And as a weapon that was used against us over and over again” (Reese, “Mirrors” 03:09-03:34). The authors and illustrators whose works are the primary focus of this discussion chose the stories they wanted to share and the informational notes that accompany them. This ensures the accuracy of not only their stories but also what they want readers to learn about Indigenous culture alongside the narratives. This results in a variety of differences between these texts and those previously authored by non-Indigenous creators. One of those differences is how nature, and Indigenous characters’ relationship with it, is shown.

I turn now to a brief overview of my forthcoming chapters and how each works to meet my larger goal of filling the gap in research about representation of Indigenous connections to nature. While it is true that misrepresentation of Indigenous relationships with nature is part of the larger discussion of the representation of Indigenous characters and culture, it does not necessarily follow that adequate terminology currently exists to brings these two issues into conversation. I illustrate this lack of prior study and foundation in a literature review in Chapter II. This chapter examines past scholarship on Indigenous representation in children’s literature, and the use of ecocriticism in children’s literature, and highlights the minimal intersection that has so far taken place between these two areas of research. My own ecocritical analysis of the primary texts is presented in Chapter III, where I delve into the portrayals of Indigenous characters and their relationships with nature in both the text and visuals of the picture books. By extension,

this chapter also looks at the time periods represented in the stories, and the connection to modern ecological crises that inspire the narratives. This analysis is extended to the peritextual content of the primary texts in Chapter IV, detailing what effects format and post-textual notes have on the representation of culture and modern Indigenous relationships with nature.

My primary texts for this study are *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!* (2018) by Dr. Rose Ann Tahe (Diné) and Nancy Bo Flood, Sibert Medal winner *Fry Bread* (2019) by Dr. Kevin Maillard (Seminole), and Caldecott Award-winning *We Are Water Protectors* (2020) by Carole Lindstrom (Ojibwe). Each of these contemporary titles illustrates the difference between stories told by outside observers of a culture and those told by members of one. Of these differences, the portrayal of nature is one that stands out and, when examined with an ecocritical lens, provides not only more accurate representation of history and culture, but a connection that inspires a potentially positive step toward climate action. In my analysis, I observed that the characters interacting with nature exist in the modern world that contemporary child readers are familiar with, not in an imagined past. Due to this, characters play an active role in their environment and those environments are recognizable, not unnamed or generic forests or plains. I also noticed that historical notes include information about how traditions are honored today, not just how they were treated in the past.

In examining this issue, I do not intend to press the idea that including ecological issues in children's literature is merely preparing them to take on the environmental issues that previous generations could not. Instead, I aim to highlight the inextricable connection between the presentation of culturally accurate stories to child readers and

environmental justice, to “look for both ideological and empirical links between environmental and social ills” (Platt 185). The following chapters will bring both the use of ecocriticism and the need for Indigenous representation in children’s literature into conversation with each other in order to highlight the necessity of both in children’s literature.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The history of Indigenous misrepresentation in children's literature is as old as is the history of children's literature itself. I found in my research that scholars have been offering suggestions for improved representation and discussing the effect of misrepresentation on Indigenous and non-Indigenous child readers for just as long. This chapter discusses existing scholarly conversations addressing misrepresentation during the 1990s and 2000s. Additionally, it also examines the emergence of ecocriticism following the publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 and ecocriticism's recent emergence in children's literature.

Critique of Indigenous Representation in Children's Literature 1980-Present

The term "Indigenous" encompasses an enormous number of countries and cultures and lived experiences. While misrepresentation has plagued many of these, this discussion will focus on select Indigenous cultures from the United States. The primary works are English versions from U.S. publishers, though the cultures they represent may span the borders of what is today the U.S. and Canada, or the U.S. and Mexico. Indigenous cultures within the United States are also known by other all-encompassing terms, such as Native Americans or American Indians. This work defers to guidance offered by Reese on the main page of her website with regards to the terminology I use in this thesis: "American Indian? Or, Native American? Or, Indigenous?! You will find Native scholars using the three terms. It is best to be tribally specific." I reference specific cultures in place of the other generic terms whenever possible to maintain authenticity, since traditions unique to certain cultures may not be shared by others.

Criticism of misrepresentation of North American Indigenous groups in children's

literature gained momentum within the larger discussion of the need for diversity in children's books in 1982, with Wakim (Cherokee) et al. publishing *American Indian Stereotypes in the World of Children*. This significant title, which has since been updated, discussed in detail how inaccurate images of Indigenous peoples and cultural stereotypes that children see in their formative years affect both Indigenous child readers and non-Indigenous children. Wakim et al. note that "[t]hese Native children are hindered in developing healthy self-images and racial identities … By the time [non-Indigenous children] are seven years old, they probably have seen hundreds of images of mean, silly, or noble Indians" (xiii). The authors conclude that it "should come as no surprise that non-Indian children programmed on these stereotypes at early, formative developmental stages grow into adults who may unwittingly or knowingly discriminate against Indians" (xiii). This book also addressed the need for Indigenous representation specifically, noting that, "[i]t's no joke when a dominant group, with a sorry history of oppression towards its minorities, expropriates a shallow version of a subordinate, relatively powerless group and promulgates that imagery as valid" (Wakim et al. viii). This expression pushed back against voices suggesting that calls for better representation were over-sensitive, an argument that continues to plague scholars regarding representation even today. Wakim et al. point out that the damage done to modern Indigenous peoples through inaccurate representations of their history and culture has far-reaching consequences, not only in terms of literary representation, but in government and legal matters as well.

In 1990, Bishop examined the experience of young non-white readers seeking representation in children's literature, writing that reading "becomes a means of self-

affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. For many years, nonwhite readers have too frequently found the search futile" (Bishop 1). Bishop's article has since been used by many other scholars to succinctly illustrate the importance of how children interact with books about their own cultures and others. The framework of "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" provides a starting point and terminology that is still used by educators and scholars. Ten years after the publication of Bishop's article, Taylor and Patterson introduced the theory of information literacy, which is "a pedagogical approach that can effectively combat the entrenchment of stereotypes of Native Peoples, by assisting students in developing critical thinking skills, and thus enabling them [children] to do problem-solving, decision-making, and creative thinking" (9). In their approach, Taylor and Patterson consider the impossibility of educators and librarians deciding to "pull classics from their shelves because of the inclusion of racial/ethnic stereotypes" or every new or emerging work being free of stereotypes (10). By teaching children to think critically about what information they receive from literature and the world around them, they are more likely to recognize stereotypes and push back against them, Taylor and Patterson argued. In addition to her push for integrating critical thinking skills, her method also called for educators and librarians to embrace a three-part thinking skills sequence that involved 1) recognizing problematic texts or other media, 2) devising a solution, such as integrating stereotype discussions in classrooms, and 3) modify concepts, such as pushing back against the common issue of texts about Indigenous cultures being exclusively historical, with little connection to modern stories of Indigenous peoples.

In 2006, Doris Seale (Santee Dakota) and Beverly Slapin published *A Broken*

Flute: The Native Experience in Books for Children, which once again looked in part, at the classroom experience that Indigenous children are subject to when their curriculum includes books and other media with racial stereotypes. A significantly effective aspect of Seale and Slapin's book was the inclusion of personal accounts of parents witnessing the degradation and disappointment that their school-age children felt when they were subjected to stories rife with stereotypes of their culture. In one such account, a parent describes their child being ostracized by classmates after reading *The Courage of Sarah Noble*. The parent noted that upon confrontation, "[t]he teacher's response was 'I can't believe you're taking this so seriously'" (Seale and Slapin 10). Neither the child's teacher nor the other school staff supported the parent or the student. In another account, a parent related her child's reaction after the child's school staged a play that perpetuated stereotypes: "our kids, the Indian kids, were just sitting there–you could just see their little shoulders turn in and their heads just hung down" (Seale and Slapin 10). In several accounts, parents or their children confronted teachers or other school officials about using works perpetuating stereotypes of Indigenous characters, and they rarely received support.

Additionally, in 2006, Reese made a significant contribution to the discussion of Indigenous misrepresentation specifically when she started *American Indians in Children's Literature*, a website dedicated to "critical analysis of Indigenous peoples in children's and young adult books" as stated on its homepage. The tools Reese has been providing to date on the site for evaluating representation in books for children, such as the use of the red X mentioned previously, along with a multitude of articles on representation on the website written by Indigenous scholars, have been heavily

referenced by both educators and researchers. Reese revisited the topic of stereotypes and children's mental health in a 2007 article in which she cited the American Sociological Association's statement on sports mascots perpetuating stereotypes of Indigenous peoples as undermining real education about their cultures. Additional studies on the effects of misrepresentation on children are undoubtedly being undertaken currently, whether by literary scholars, anthropologists, sociologists, and more, but the points have been made time and again: stereotypes of Indigenous characters and culture hurt Indigenous children. As Chaudri and Schau note, when the history and lived experiences of Indigenous peoples are minimized or omitted in children's literature, especially in the classroom, less value is placed on that culture.

Contemporary readers need only to look as far as the toll that Indigenous communities felt during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to see the consequences of devalued culture outside of erasure in literature. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) published a study showing that not only did COVID-19 have a "disproportionate" impact on American Indian and Alaska Native populations, but that a higher percentage of cases were reported among children from these populations than in other groups (Center for Disease Control and Prevention). The CDC stated that "[p]ersisting racial inequity and historical trauma have contributed to disparities in health and socioeconomic factors between AI/AN and white populations that have adversely affected tribal communities" (Center for Disease Control and Prevention).

Scholarship on Indigenous representation continues to be published. Special emphasis has been placed on combating misrepresentation in classrooms (Chaudri and Schau; Reese; Seale and Slapin, Taylor and Patterson; Wakim et al.) and change has

resulted, but slowly and not without resistance. Both *We Are Water Protectors* and *Fry Bread*, despite being accepted as picture books with accurate representation of Indigenous characters, have been banned by some school districts. Caregivers in one school district went so far as to suggest that the representation in books like *We Are Water Protectors* and *Fry Bread*, among others, imply segregation by representing one group so closely (Titus). This is certainly not the case; however, banning books that show accurate representation is a stark example of how much farther the struggle for representation has to go.

Ecocriticism and Nature in Children's Literature

The discussion around misrepresentation of Indigenous characters and culture and its effects on young readers has been in progress for decades. In this paper, I will add ecocriticism into this conversation already in progress. For as long as poets have written odes to trees and flowers, scholars have looked for meaning through the leaves. Real interest in an interdisciplinary approach to literature and ecology was awakened by the arrival of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, first published in 1962. Carson's work was a combination of extensive scientific research and passionate literary prose. The unique combination of these forms was lauded by reviewers, and one of them suggested that "the rhetorical strategies, use of pastoral and apocalyptic imagery and literary allusions with which Carson shapes her scientific material may well be amenable to a more 'literary' or 'cultural' analysis" (qtd. in Garrard 3). Carson's "literary" or "cultural" analysis saw tremendous attention, eventually leading to additional research into dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), the pesticide whose effects on animals she described in *Silent Spring*. The aftermath of this research led to the complete banning of

DDT and closer monitoring of pesticide use in the United States (Environmental Protection Agency "DDT").

The massive influence of *Silent Spring* led literary scholars to more closely examine the possibilities that came with an interdisciplinary approach to literature and ecology. Joseph Meeker, scientist turned literary scholar, put forth a theory for the practice in 1972, which he called "literary ecology." In his theory, Meeker used coexistence with or removal from the natural world to define comedy and tragedy rather than humor or sadness. He argued that comedy promoted survival, existence with the natural world, while tragedy estranged characters from other life forms and took them away from the natural world. Only a few years later in 1978, William Rueckert took "literary ecology" and molded it into what he called "ecocriticism." Rueckert described his goal, saying he meant to "experiment with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for a human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we all live in of anything that [he had] studied" (107). Modern ecocriticism largely stems from Rueckert's definition, though many scholars have sought to define it further since some considered Rueckert's theory to be too broad. Glotfelty offered a rephrased definition of her own in 1989, noting that "ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the culture artifacts of language and literature…it negotiates between the human and non-human" (xix). Glotfelty's goal was to include ecocriticism in her critical approach to studying nature writing, and her work helped popularize the term "ecocriticism" significantly, though scholars have often sought ways to tighten her definition as well as that of Rueckert.

Of the scholars who took up Rueckert's ecocritical theory, only a few ventured to use it to analyze children's literature. In 1995, the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) published a special issue dedicated to "Children's Literature and the Environment." In the same year, *The Lion and the Unicorn* published their own special issue with the theme of "Green Worlds: Nature and Ecology," edited by Suzanne Rahn. Rahn included in this issue a discussion of nature writing for children translating to activism. She illustrated her point using the prevalence of children's stories featuring animals portraying a positive rather than dangerous attitude, noting that "because it is difficult to generate much public interest in abstract concepts such as biodiversity or large entities such as ecosystems, environmentalists choose an endangered 'flagship' species of animal to stand for the whole" (Rahn 164). Rahn also emphasized the importance of youth advocacy for the environment, writing that when "aware of a threat to the green world and its creatures, children can be its most passionate and committed advocates" (165). She also cited multiple environmental organizations and campaigns led by environmentally conscious children, highlighting the effect that childhood investment in the environment has on the real world. Literature has an effect on this investment, as I will show when discussing *We Are Water Protectors* in Chapter III.

These publications served as a springboard for interest in environmentally conscious children's literature and the potential power it has for effecting change in the real world. In 2004, Dobrin and Kidd took up the challenge of applying ecocriticism to literature, publishing *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism*, a collection of essays highlighting "the interplay of children's texts–literary, multimedia, cultural–and

children's environmental experience" (1). In their introduction, Dobrin and Kidd tie together the varied history of ecocriticism in children's literature, comparing the past goals of using ecocriticism to better understand nature writing to the goal of understanding animal stand-ins for children in books for youth. They go on to suggest that "childhood experience in, of, and with the natural world are often deeply formative" (Dobrin and Kidd 5). At the same time, the authors acknowledge that "[m]any of the activities that occupy the time of young children take place in settings that isolate them from the natural world or present only simulations of that world…We believe both that children are naturally close to nature and that nature education, even intervention, is in order" (Dobrin and Kidd 7). The sixteen essays that follow make up a collection of landmark texts contributing to the use of ecocriticism in children's literature. Of particular note for this study is Kamala Platt's discussion of "Environmental Justice Children's Literature" in which she highlights "environmental racism" (185). She suggests that "our interpretations of the physical environment in literature might also engage an understanding of the roles of activists and artists in social and natural history, of political relations of domination such as colonialism, of structural oppression such as environmental racism" (Platt 185). The children's titles that Platt analyzes in her argument were put together by non-white creators and "guide readers in viewing and critiquing the world from perspectives that support the well-being of both people and the rest of nature" (188). This is an important distinction to make when taking an ecocritical approach, and one that Platt works seamlessly into her argument: that the good of nature is not at the expense of the humans who are a part of it. A more intricate symbiosis exists between nature and humanity, an idea that harkens back to Meeker's *Comedy of*

Survival–separation from nature is a tragedy for humanity, while coexistence with nature is necessary for survival. Platt concludes that the “children’s ecocritical literature for environmental justice that this essay describes suggests that stories of victories over environmental contamination and racism, stories from diverse parts of the world…must be told and retold, must be rephrased for new generations, so that indigenous tradition melds with the postmodern” (196).

In 2018, Aïda Hudson edited *Children's Literature and Imaginative Geography*, which includes works examining the use of ecocriticism on fantasy environments in children’s literature and how they evoke interest in the real environments on which they are based or seek to mimic. In 2020, Rachel Sakrisson sought to add to the work published in Dobrin and Kidd’s *Wild Things* and defined what she called the “benevolent forest,” a concept that engages with the space that lies in between the endangered and dangerous forests previously approached by scholars. Sakrisson argues that the “benevolent forest is a departure from the norm. It neither presents an excessively domesticated space conquered by humans, as largely seen in British literature, nor exhibits the excessive danger that characterizes the wild, humanly uninhabited American forest” (13). This is just one more example of the trend of ecocritics seeking a symbiotic relationship with nature over narratives that simply romanticize nature or focus solely on reactionary activism. This trend toward a harmonious relationship with nature provides “a model for how such an egalitarian relationship can persist into adulthood” leading to more eco-conscious generations that combine reactive activism with the responsibility of protecting the environment (Sakrisson 16).

While other important works doubtless exist or are currently in progress, those

discussed in this chapter illustrate a timeline of the conversation around Indigenous misrepresentation in children's literature and nature representation. Little work exists at the intersection of misrepresentation and ecology, that field Platt calls "environmental justice," but it remains a topic within a growing body of work yet to be explored.

My thesis fills a gap demonstrated in this review of literature, such as the still emerging use of ecocriticism in picture books and the study of how Indigenous characters' relationships with nature are portrayed. The discussion of Indigenous relationships with nature has not been deeply explored in scholarship on Indigenous representation despite it being a significant aspect of many Indigenous cultures. This project will examine these relationships in the primary texts. It will also add to the still emerging field of ecocriticism and children's literature since I utilize this framework in my own analysis in the following chapters in order to illustrate that the depiction of Indigenous characters' relationships with nature. These depictions provide an accurate portrayal of Indigenous culture and highlight the ecological issues these cultures face, inspiring readers to act on behalf of the environment.

III. ANALYSIS OF THREE CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS:

VERBAL & VISUAL

In her 2004 chapter on environmental justice, Platt notes the importance of "texts that are created to promote both environmental well-being and social justice, texts that expose environmental racism and the closely linked degradation of the earth" (184). A number of children's picture books produced by Indigenous creators accomplish both of the ideas Platt brings up. Rather than exposing child readers to topics concerned exclusively with culture or nature, Indigenous creators combine them to illustrate how their cultural relationships with nature can make a difference to the environment. These stories also concentrate on lived experience in Indigenous cultures in contemporary settings rather than historical ones. In examining these works, this study categorizes them into stories dealing with environmental issues pertaining to the presence and absence of water and those relevant to food. Stories focused on ecological issues surrounding the presence of water demonstrate both the need to protect it, and the need to ensure that it is available to everyone. Those that focus on the absence of water highlight desertification of regions that exacerbate scarcity issues. Bringing food into the conversation will address unequal distribution of natural resources that leads inevitably to food insecurity, the extinction of certain crops, and subsequently, the loss of traditional recipes leading to the erosion of a culture.

Representation and Ecology: Presence of Water

We Are Water Protectors (2020), written by Carole Lindstrom (Ojibwe) and illustrated by Michaela Goade (Tlingit), presents a healthy Indigenous representation and promotes ecological awareness among children. The book has seen widespread attention

and won both the Caldecott Medal and the Golden Kite Award for Picture Book Text in 2021.

The book's narrator, a young unnamed Indigenous girl, introduces her people's traditional relationship with water and their responsibility to fight against a "black snake that will destroy the land" (Lindstrom 8). The black snake is revealed to be an oil pipeline contaminating the water that the narrator and her people are protecting. This situation is reminiscent of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) protests that began in 2016. However, rather than being a historical account of the 2016 protests, *We Are Water Protectors* emphasizes the ongoing struggle the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe faces and the need for action on behalf of the environment they seek to protect. The DAPL is still active despite a pending environmental review as of 2022 (Lakhani), so the need for awareness of the issue and activism certainly still exists, and Lindstrom's book makes this clear on every page. *We Are Water Protectors* paints a contemporary struggle while utilizing a combination of Indigenous characters, Indigenous lore, and awareness of current ecological issues, all the while making every element accessible to child readers.

The characters in *We Are Water Protectors* are depicted in a combination of modern and traditional clothing throughout the story. While the main character is not introduced explicitly in the text as Ojibwe, clues in the text and illustrations indicate that she is. She mentions "Nokomis" early in the story in text combined with an image of a woman with white hair wearing a flower print dress (Lindstrom 2). "Nokomis" is the Ojibwe word for "my grandmother" ("Nokomis"). Even for readers that come to the story without knowing the word "Nokomis," the illustration of the woman with white hair speaking to the main character tells readers that this character, Nokomis, is the narrator's

grandmother. In addition to this verbal clue, the main character eventually dawns a traditional Ojibwe ribbon skirt, and other unnamed female characters that support the main character wear the skirts throughout the book as well. A distinct floral motif also appears in many of the illustrations (and on Nokomis's dress). The illustrator, Goade pointed out in an interview that this motif was a purposeful nod to the Anishinaabe tradition from which Lindstrom comes (Lindstrom). Some characters don traditional Ojibwe clothing and designs while others wear more nondescript but distinctly modern clothing. Hoodies, blue jeans, and plaid shirts all make various appearances throughout the illustrations. The main character herself experiences an important evolution in clothing across the book. She initially wears a sleeveless purple top and undecorated red pants, or a red skirt only partially shown (readers are unable to see if it is a ribbon skirt) until the pivotal full-spread illustration in which she first stands up with her community against the black snake. The movement from generic clothing to traditional clothing visually demonstrates the connection between the main character and Ojibwe culture and between Ojibwe culture and water. Ojibwe culture, as described in the book, is deeply entwined with water. When the main character realizes she must take a stand to protect water and the environment, she draws strength from her culture.

Two illustration spreads portray the most dramatic progression of the main character's transformation, in both her clothing and her attitude (Lindstrom and Goade 15-18). Before this transformation, the main character is depicted as both listening to and learning from Nokomis and interacting with nature herself several times. Early in the book, the main character stands with Nokomis in a river while Nokomis pours water into her granddaughter's hands (Lindstrom and Goade 2). In a later illustration spread the

main character stands in a field at the edge of a forest watching the sunset. Water birds are depicted in the river in the foreground while the main character is further removed, and half hidden by tall grass. She is portrayed as physically enmeshed in the natural environment but still an observer (Lindstrom and Goade 7-8). The two illustrations portraying the main character's transformation change her role from observer to protector. The text takes on both an active and urgent tone: "TAKE COURAGE! / I must keep the black snake away / From my village's water. / I must rally my people together," the narrator says (Lindstrom 16). This is the first time the main character says, 'I must do something,' and changes from observer to activist. The illustration accompanying the text highlights the urgency in the narrator's words by showing her with a hand raised as though leading a charge, and in the act of running. She runs toward the right edge of the page, both facing the unknown and urging the reader to continue the story with her. The main character's hair flows behind her, forming a living body of water, complete with fish, a turtle, a beaver, plants, and flowers, making her connection to the water a physical one. Once the reader turns the page, the next spread shows a variety of transformations. The text reads: "To stand for the water. / To stand for the land. / To stand as ONE. / Against the black snake" (Lindstrom 17). It is on this spread that the main character's clothing undergoes a transformation. Her hand is still raised, but unlike the previous spread, in which she wears red pants, she now wears a red, traditional ribbon skirt with a floral design above the ribbon. She also sports medicine wheel earrings. Aisha Ray notes in a review that the medicine wheel earrings that the main character dons "represent (among many things) – all people across the world." Ray suggests that the meaning of the earrings is to connect readers to the story and to remind them that they "belong in this

relationship with the water, too.” Though the main character stands on her own in the foreground of this scene, in the background she is supported by others, Nokomis being among them. The combination of the call to “stand as ONE” in the text and the main character’s clothing transformation, along with the presence of people behind her work together to say something deeper: the main character’s people and culture are supporting her, helping her when she must be at her strongest.

The two spreads also include a transition through background color. In the first, the background of the image is white (Lindstrom and Goade 15-16). In the second, the background is fully colored (Lindstrom and Goade 17-18). Aside from the human characters, there is the grass they stand in, and traditional dwellings shown hazily behind them. The dwellings are depicted by lightened areas in the colors of the sky, without their own outlines. Some are connected to the earth while others are not. This gives the sense that these are not physical objects but represent the longevity of the culture supporting the main character. Finally, the main character holds a feather in her raised hand. Like the other elements on the page, the feather is also a part of the transformation that takes place between the spread on pages 15-16 and that on pages 17-18. In the first spread, the main character holds the feather in her right hand by her side with her left fist raised. In the second spread, she holds the feather in her raised left hand. Goade explained the significance of the raised feather in an interview, stating that it “is a symbol of peaceful protest. One of the essential principles was the need to stay peaceful even though they were going up against awful forces” (Lindstrom). This transformation of the main character shows her moving from the position of an observer to activist, and from plain clothing to traditional Ojibwe clothing and jewelry, both an internal and external change.

She is courageous on her own and strong when supported by her people and her Ojibwe culture.

Nokomis is the only character named by the narrator, though only by the generic identifier for a grandparent, not by a specific name. There are many other characters also depicted in the illustrations who are neither named nor titled. These characters support the main character, but they also help ground the story as one taking place in a modern time period. While every character appearing in the illustrations could be individually analyzed, this discussion will focus on two different groupings of characters. The first is a grouping that occurs three times throughout the book (Lindstrom 5, 19, 31). The similarities and differences among these three pages add richness to the story. Of the similarities, the text and general page framing are nearly identical. On each of the three pages, the text is the same: "We stand / With our songs / And our drums. / We are still here" (Lindstrom 5). The text alone tells the readers a lot. It is the only text in the book that is italicized which, along with the wording, evokes the memory of a song. In the illustrations, each page includes a circle of characters facing out at the reader and holding a drum, another reference to traditional music and songs. The characters in each iteration of the illustration wear a variety of clothing, from skirts and long dresses to blue jeans and sweaters. The pages are all framed by illustrated turtles in all four corners of the page and plants surrounding them. The repetition of the italicized text, along with the drum imagery, evokes song. The line "We are still here" tells readers that even if the idea of drums and song has been represented as a historic tradition, it is still a powerful one that is carried on in the present, one that the child narrator herself has experienced in her young lifetime.

Over the course of the book, the image's background color changes. In the first image, the background is shaded purple. In the second version of this illustration, the shading is green, and in the third it is a brownish orange. The illustration of plants and turtles that frames the pages are the same across all three pages, but rotated clockwise, so that the pattern that appears on the top of the page in the first iteration of the illustration is to the right of the page in the second and on the bottom of the page by the third and final repetition. The shift in colors and rotation of the foliage frame portray an attractive progression of the seasons, from purple spring to green summertime and orange autumn. This progression of time by season tacitly shows that activists have fought against the DAPL for a long time, one that readers can experience just as the main character does, by observing the passing seasons. Another significant change among the pages is the increase in the number of characters present on each page. In the first version of the page there are five characters surrounding the text; in the second version there are six; and in the third and final version there are eight characters. The addition of characters suggests the growth of the environmental movement of which the main character is a part: to protect water threatened by the DAPL.

The second significant grouping of characters is the final illustration spread of the narrative. This two-page illustration depicts a wide variety of characters. Age, clothing, jewelry, skin tone, and poses spread across both pages, along with protest signs with different messages. The main character's traditional earrings and ribbon skirt are visible, and the medicine wheel on her earrings is replicated on another character's jewelry but other designs are also seen on the pages. Some young characters wear modern clothing while others wear traditional clothing, and the same is true for the older characters. It is a

true mix of people from different cultures, mostly Indigenous, and they stand together in front of a white background that could be filled in with any of their homelands. The text reads “We are water protectors. / WE STAND! / The black snake is in for the fight of its life” (Lindstrom 33-34). The use of “we stand” complements the image, tying all the different people and cultures in the image together, reminding readers, particularly Indigenous young readers, that they, like the main character, have the support of many people right here in the present.

The careful visual representation that Goade gives of traditional dress, jewelry, and symbols (such as the feather) creates an inclusive narrative for Ojibwe readers while still inviting non-Ojibwe readers into the story, both to enjoy as a narrative and to spark environmental activism in a world clearly shared by all the people and animals depicted. This same care is used in the portrayals of nature in the story. Since *We Are Water Protectors* has such strong themes of environmental activism woven throughout it, the depiction of nature is integral to the success of the narrative.

The majority of illustrations in *We Are Water Protectors* favor shades of blue in large sections. From indigo to teal, blue dominates the images and even the dust jacket of the book. The choice to use blue highlights water on one level. Many pages show water itself in the illustrations. The main character is first introduced standing in a flowing river with Nokomis, both interacting with the water and joined by three other women. In two illustrations the main character is illustrated as though she were part of the water, her hair changing from black to indigo and incorporating aquatic plants and animals. These incidents show the main character’s deep connection to water. The stark contrast between the blue of the water and the red background used behind the black snake of the oil

pipeline are visually at odds with each other, highlighting the struggle between the two. But more than all of these visual cues, the blue theme is used to connect the Ojibwe with water. In two illustrations a celestial scene is depicted. In the first of these, the main character describes the origin of her people, saying "We come from water. / It nourished us inside our mother's body. / As it nourishes us here on Mother Earth. / Water is sacred, she said" (Lindstrom 3). The illustration on these two pages shows water surrounding a sliver of moon encircling a pregnant woman against a background of stars. The woman's body is the same color as that used for the water on the page, but at the juncture where the water meets the moon, the water itself is a darker color of blue, almost blending with the background of the sky (Lindstrom and Goade 3-4). In the later illustration the earth is depicted in the center of a starry space with celestial creatures surrounding it (Lindstrom and Goade 25-26). On these pages the earth is the same teal color as the water used on other pages, enclosed by the darker color used for the sky and space. The use of these colors creates intentional connections between the main character and water and between water and the earth itself. The importance of this connection is made clear by the abundance of blue used in the book's color scheme. One might initially assume that all the blue implied an abundance of water. However, the choice of color and its integration into the illustration of the main character, as previously discussed, and into the portrayals of her people, also hints at an abundance of connection rather than just presence of water.

An abundance of water is not a reality for many North American Indigenous nations. In June of 2022, the EPA estimated that 15% of the Navajo Nation do not have access to piped water in their homes (Environmental Protection Agency "Providing Safe Drinking Water"). The 2021 picture book *The Water Lady* written by Alice McGinty and

illustrated by Shonto Begay (Navajo) highlights the struggle that Cody, a young Navajo boy, faces while living in an arid region where water must be delivered individually to homes that would otherwise have no water for drinking, cooking, cleaning, or other everyday needs. Given the tribal inclusivity shown in the text and illustrations of *We Are Water Protectors*, it seems unlikely that Lindstrom and Goade would ignore these issues that face so many Indigenous people in the United States today. It is more likely that the water portrayed in their picture book represents a strong connection between the narrator's people and the life that comes from it.

The main character's relationship to water is represented as strong and natural, but also as both historical and contemporary, another step taken by the author and illustrator to ensure that the story is not read as an ecological event of years past instead of one unfolding in the present. This relationship is related a little more strongly in the text and is profoundly supported by the illustrations. The first thing the narrator tells readers is "Water is the first medicine, Nokomis told me" (Lindstrom 2). "Medicine" is a term not to be used lightly when discussing Indigenous culture. Readers of picture books from the 1990s and before likely remember seeing or hearing the phrase "medicine man" used in a story at some point in their lives, and likely recall it being presented as a very simplified concept. Reese even wrote that "Medicine people ought not be in children's books--especially those written by people who are not Native. There are things there that non-Native writers do not fully understand and should just stay away from" (Reese, "Not Recommended…"). Lindstrom does not include any medicine people in the narrative, nor attempt to explain the concept of medicine to young readers in the text, but the illustrations help readers understand that medicine here is a positive element and that the

loss of water is also the loss of medicine.

In the illustration, Nokomis pours water from her hand to that of her granddaughter's while standing in a wide blue stretch of water, with a kind smile on her face. From the beginning of the story, three other women are seen standing in the water interacting with it. The two women who appear farther away have darker hair, while the woman closer to the reader has white hair like Nokomis. However, this woman doesn't wear the same outfit that Nokomis is always shown in, indicating that this is either another character or a past version of Nokomis. That the younger women are shown farther away, apart from the main character, and the older women are shown closer implies the passage of time. Women have recognized water as medicine and have cared for it since time immemorial. In a later spread, Nokomis is shown educating her grandchildren again. The accompanying text reads "When my people first spoke / Of the black snake, / They foretold that it wouldn't come / For many, many years" (Lindstrom 12). In this spread, the text is situated away from the main colors of the illustration that spans the pages, and they both tell a slightly different story. The text introduces us to the black snake, while the image works to connect past and present. On the right-side page of the spread, Nokomis sits in a chair with the main character and three other children sitting on the floor before her. Nokomis is gesturing with her hands while the children watch with rapt attention. Nokomis is telling them stories of the past. From her hands a trail the color of water flows upwards and away onto the left-side page, where it forms a group of people in front of a fire on a riverbank, with traditional dwellings in the background (Lindstrom and Goade 11-12). The entire scene is created from the same colors used to represent water throughout the book, signifying the narrator's people's connection to it

once again. The image shows the past informing the main character's present, both through the image of people from the past, and using Nokomis as the one imparting knowledge to the next generation.

The combination of Lindstrom's written text and Goade's illustrations in *We Are Water Protectors* highlights Ojibwe culture from inside perspectives while also discussing Indigenous ecological activism. Instead of stereotypical depictions of generalized Indigenous clothing, readers see both modern clothing and traditional ones, such as the ribbon skirt. Other traditional Ojibwe elements such as the floral and turtle motifs, both part of Ojibwe tradition, exist as well. While this picture book represents this specific culture and specific ecological event surrounding water pollution, it also invites readers to be part of the story in the final illustrated spread that shows more cultures, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Readers are invited to connect with the narrative, but also called to pay attention to the real-life environmental threat posed by the DAPL and are invited to partake in social action.

Representation and Ecology: Absence of Water

While *We Are Water Protectors* focuses on water pollution and Indigenous response to it, other children's picture books put a focus on what the absence of water means for Indigenous peoples in North America. Recall *The Water Lady*; While McGinty's story also revolves around water, it is the lack of this resource that is highlighted. The illustrations show landscapes in browns and oranges, with sparse vegetation. In *The Water Lady*, readers learn that the main character, Cody, lives on a reservation on page 4 when his "two older brothers race out the door for school on the reservation" (McGinty 4). The trend of reservations depicted as arid, waterless, treeless

regions is not unique to *The Water Lady*. While McGinty provides multiple sources for the information in her story, including personal interviews with the Indigenous subject of the book, Darlene Arviso, McGinty is not an Indigenous author herself and hence, I will not be performing an extensive analysis of this picture book. In looking for Indigenous authorship alongside depictions of reservation landscape, I turn to Rose Tahe (Diné) and Nancy Flood's picture book, *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!* illustrated by Jonathan Nelson (Diné). *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!* tells the story of a Navajo baby and his family's quest to get him to smile (the text of the book uses the term "Navajo" rather than Diné, so the term will also be used in this discussion). "In Navajo families," the dust jacket tells readers, "the first person to get a new baby to laugh hosts the First Laugh Ceremony" (Tahe and Flood dust jacket). The notes following the conclusion of the narrative elaborate further that the First Laugh Ceremony is a "tradition that is a child's first formal welcome into a family and clans" (Tahe and Flood 28). The very premise of the book invites readers to visit a Navajo Nation reservation and witness a Navajo tradition in a modern rather than historical context. The initial setting of the story places the narrative firmly in the present day. Both text and illustration set the time period as one that could be today or the recent past. The text describes the family's "skyscraper home in the big, busy city" (Tahe and Flood 3). The two-page illustration complements the text, depicting both the baby's room and a view from the baby's window that reveals multiple tall buildings. The tops of several of the buildings are visible, not just the walls, suggesting that the family's home is, as the text says, in a skyscraper. There are several more scenes inside the skyscraper home before the setting changes to one in the country. Here, the text informs the readers that the baby "often [visits his/her] grandparents on the Navajo

Nation" (Tahe and Flood 9). Two later illustrations show the largest landscape of the Navajo Nation during the baby's visit with the grandparents. Both images depict an orange and brownish landscape with mountainous steppes in the distance. Some sprigs of grass are shown, some small bushes, and some trees, few and far between (Tahe and Flood 9-10, 13-14). The contrast between the images shown of the skyscraper home and of the grandparents' country home invert the common literary theme of a pastoral countryside being a kinder environment than cities where access to nature is limited.

Meeker's *Comedy of Survival* touches on this when he posits that coexistence with nature was required to thrive, and that eschewing nature led to tragedy. Healing through nature has also been studied in children's literature: Emma Schneider explains the use of natural soundscapes in her 2020 article on ecological healing in *The Birchbark House* and *Mama Day*. Schneider suggests that in *The Birchbark House*, the protagonist is healed "emotionally as well as physically" by her learned ability to listen to the environment (54). While Schneider's discussion centers on the voices of plants in the novels she examines, expanding the importance of sound to animals provides interesting insight into *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!*. There is a distinct lack of any environmental sounds in the verbal text. Though trees are shown on a few pages, their leaves never rustle. Not even wind is heard. Instead, only animal sounds are described on the reservation. The baby's mother is shown as she "weaves bluebirds and thrushes into her tree-of-life rug" but no birds appear in the illustration (Tahe and Flood 9-10). A raven caws on the next page and while it does not frighten the baby, the baby's mother is depicted in open-mouthed alarm watching the raven fly away, a change from her peaceful smile on the pages before (Tahe and Flood 11-12). Later, more animal sounds are

depicted as alarming. “Uh-oh. Dogs bark. Coyotes yip and yowl. Little fingers curl around Grandmother’s hand” readers discover (Tahe and Flood 13). The baby’s grip on Grandmother shows the distress caused by the barking and yowling, and these unfriendly sounds are all readers hear while the baby is visiting the reservation. Rather than being healing, the environment is depicted in illustration and text as alarming.

What is not shown is any body of water. In the illustration, far in the distance is a windmill (Tahe and Flood 13-14). The next two pages show separate illustrations in which the windmill gets progressively closer until the baby and grandparents meet at the foot of it. The text provides background information for modern young readers, conveying that the grandmother “points to the windmill bringing up water for cows and their calves” (Tahe and Flood 15). Later, the grandfather attempts to tease a smile out of the baby by splashing water from the stock tank. While the water is only depicted in simple blue waves in the illustration, it is important enough to describe: “your cheii, splashes water sparkling with sunshine” (Tahe and Flood 16). While it may seem a small entry, this is a deliberately romantic depiction of this type of water. The water in stock tanks is often hot and murky, but here the water is described as “sparkling” only, something pretty. Water is the centerpiece of the illustration and the written text, and it is clearly important in the otherwise arid-looking landscape. As seen in *The Water Lady*, water security is a common issue in the Navajo Nation. The romanticization of water combined with the land’s exaggerated harshness through its soundscape highlights the complete absence of literal water and the happiness associated with it.

In addition to placing value on water, *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!* also promotes a connection between historical and modern tradition. This is accomplished most notably

through cultural references woven throughout the narrative, similar to *We Are Water Protectors*, though the cultural nods in this book are to the Navajo tribe rather than Ojibwe. On one page, the text tells readers that the baby's grandmother "tucks you under a Pendleton blanket" (Tahe and Flood 3). The illustration shows the baby in a crib, covered with a blanket of stripes in alternating blue and green with little figures of sheep appearing on it. Sheep are shown in the illustrations detailing the baby's visit to see the grandparents on the Navajo Nation. This little detail featured on the blanket that the grandmother tucks the baby into adds an extra layer of intricacy to the story–perhaps the grandmother made this blanket? Cherokee blogger Adrienne Keene described the importance of Pendleton blankets in an article, writing that in "many Native communities, Pendleton blankets are associated with important events, and have been for hundreds of years. They are given as gifts at graduations, at powwow give-aways, as thank you gifts, in commemoration of births and deaths" (Keene). The blanket could have been given as a gift for the baby's birth. In another instance of cultural inclusion, I would like to recall the first pages showing the Navajo Nation landscape. While the landscape dominates the background of the illustration that spans these two pages, in the foreground the baby and the baby's mother sit. The text on the lefthand-side of the spread, where the mother is also situated, informs readers that she is weaving a "tree-of-life rug" (Tahe and Flood 9). The mother sits before a loom, actively engaged in weaving the rug. The cradle board and the tree-of-life rug present in the text and illustrations indicate historical traditions brought forward into the present, connecting both together. The text on the right-side page elaborates on the purpose of the cradle board: "Ribbons of buckskin hold you snug so your legs grow strong and your back straight" (Tahe and Flood 10). This not

only provides background information to the reader, but also highlights the importance of the traditional cradle board. It is an item with meaning.

An additional blending of the past and the future revolves around the grandparents themselves. The narrative of *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!* follows the baby's family's attempts to coax a laugh. The baby's parents, siblings, and grandparents all try various methods to get a laugh, but it is the grandfather who finally gets the first laugh when he "holds [the baby] up high" (Tahe and Flood 21). On the following spread, the text on the lefthand-side of the spread begins "Like babies everywhere–long ago and today–you laugh!" with the final two words presented in a slightly larger font than the rest to emphasize the denouement of the story (Tahe and Flood 23). The grandfather being the first to bond with the baby through laughter is another connection made between past generations and the present one. The connection is also depicted in the illustration in which the grandfather holds the baby up, as described in the text, in the center of the page, where the two smile happily at each other, making for quite a poignant scene (Tahe and Flood 23-24). As explained on the book's inside front dust jacket flap, the first person to get the new baby to laugh will host their first laugh celebration. After the laugh is coaxed out of the baby, the next and final spread of illustration shows the celebration in progress at the grandparents' house at the Navajo Nation. The two-page spread is busy, depicting the landscape far in the background. The grandparents' house, a traditional hogan home, is complete with a cat peeking out the door, and the party outside where dozens of people of all ages interact. Some eat, some talk, and groups of children simultaneously pet one of the grandparents' sheep, climb one of the few visible trees, and play basketball at a hoop with a ragged net. The baby and the baby's family are in the

middle of it all, in the act of observing another tradition, though this one is more understated than others in the book. No explanation is given in the text on the two pages that the illustration covers, and closely observing the image itself reveals that the baby's parents each have a hand on a bowl held before the baby, with a light-colored substance in it. For readers unfamiliar with the First Laugh Celebration, the informational note following the text again provides insight, explaining that "During the ceremony the baby holds (with some help) a woven Navajo basket filled with special salt crystals. Guests are given a pinch of salt to renew their good character. Giving away precious salt is the child's first act of sharing" (Tahe and Flood 28). This is the bowl depicted in the illustration of the First Laugh Ceremony that the grandparents hold, and another instance of Navajo tradition being depicted. Like Lindstrom and Goade, Tahe, Flood, and Nelson do not exclude through their details, but invite readers to be part of the celebration. In the final illustration of the First Laugh Ceremony, the perspective that the reader gets originates from within the crowd of attendees, with some of the crowds' backs shown in close up as though the reader is standing among them. For young Navajo readers, *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!* is an opportunity to experience the "mirror" that Bishop described (Bishop 1-2), and for non-Indigenous readers the story is a way to learn more about Navajo tradition through Navajo storytellers.

The celebration hosted at the grandparents' home also serves a secondary purpose. While it connects tradition with modernity, it also connects a harsh landscape with the joy of family. The celebration is depicted with the same yellow, orange, and brown colors as earlier illustrations, the colors indicative of drought. Sparse vegetation is another repeated visual. However, in this scene the addition of a crowd of people waiting

to celebrate the new baby changes the mood of the images. The smiling expressions of the people with visible faces make it clear that they are happy to be together in that moment. Additionally, the partygoers' clothing adds more color to the illustration than in previous images of the reservation landscape. The pastel purples, blues, and greens are reminiscent of those in illustrations of the baby's home in the city. As in *We Are Water Protectors*, the people gathered together provide support for the new baby, working together to make the environment welcoming.

Though *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!* is not as deeply concerned with ecological issues in its verbal text as *We Are Water Protectors* is, it depicts water scarcity more heavily through illustration. The combined depiction of dry land using orange and brown colors and the specific visual and verbal romanticization of the water that the grandparents' windmill supplies relays the preciousness of water. The consistent use of pastel tones in depictions of the baby's home in the city, though not used specifically in connection with water, contrast with the colors of drought in the landscapes of the Navajo Nation, highlighting the scarcity of water in parts of the land. Once again, this depiction of scarcity can be traced to real struggles for water access in the Navajo Nation in part due to uranium mining operations that took place there between 1944 and 1986. The mining "left the Navajo Nation with a legacy of over 500 abandoned uranium mines (AUMs), four inactive uranium milling sites, a former dump site, contaminated groundwater, structures that may contain elevated levels of radiation, and environmental and public health concerns" (Environmental Protection Agency, "Providing Safe Drinking Water" 4). It was not until 2008 that a plan to address the environmental and health issues posed by the mining was created. At that time, that Navajo Nation EPA

estimated that “up to 30% of the population on the Navajo Nation is not served by a public water system. This represents approximately 54,000 people” while the rest must haul water or have access to wells (Environmental Protection Agency, “Providing Safe Drinking Water” 17). Access to water is a serious issue for residents of the Navajo Nation, and *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!* shows young readers a modern setting in which people are plagued by this ongoing issue.

Representation and Ecology: Food

Though not as well known, environmental movements go beyond clean water and healthy land on to the topic of food activism. In their article on erosion and revitalization of Indigenous food systems, Leigh Joseph and Nancy Turner note the serious degradation of food systems caused when “colonial forces instigated a systematic dismantling of Indigenous Peoples' food systems through banning access to important cultivation and harvesting landscapes, imposing restrictions on fishing practices and on landscape burning to maintain particular habitats, privatizing land, and, ultimately, through food-related abuses carried out through residential schools and Indian hospitals” (n.p.). This dismantling caused health problems, food scarcity, and significant loss of culture for Indigenous peoples across North America. Removing access to land led to the loss of availability of historical crops that Indigenous groups use in traditional recipes, essentially upending Indigenous food systems over the years. Where historical foods survive, they may be “commercially exploited, raising their monetary value to the point where Indigenous people are unable to afford their own ancestral foods” (Joseph and Turner).

Movements to restore and renew Indigenous food systems have grown in recent

years, resulting in organizations such as the nonprofit North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems (NATIFS), whose mission "to promote Indigenous foodways education and facilitate Indigenous food access," is stated on their website homepage. The Decolonizing Diet Project that began in 2012 at Northern Michigan University. Such movements seek not only to bring back traditional Indigenous food and recipes, but to revitalize the culture that was lost with them. Joseph (Squamish) and Turner give a succinct description of some of what is lost when traditional food is removed from a culture, noting that "the diversity of Indigenous foods has both cultural and nutritional significance. The harvesting, preparation, serving, and consuming of these foods has in many ways shaped, and been shaped by, First People's social institutions, worldviews, languages, customs, and ceremonies." Customs, language, ceremonies, and more related to food acquisition and preparation have been lost, and not all can be regained, but organizations like NATIFS continue to work toward revitalization of Indigenous food systems.

While *We Are Water Protectors* has no explicit mentions of food beyond a mention of how water "nourishes us here on Mother Earth," *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!* does include a nod to Indigenous food (Lindstrom 3). With a scene of cooking, the written text reads "Big sister, your nadi, sprinkles salt cedar ash into bubbling blue cornmeal mush" and is paired with an illustration of the sister at a stove, her hand over a pot of, as the text reads, "bubbling blue cornmeal mush" with ingredients set out beside her (Tahe and Flood 7). That the sister prepares the dish, rather than a parent or grandparent, suggests that the recipe has already been passed down by parents and learned by their children. This reference highlights a recipe, but other picture books have

gone further in highlighting Indigenous foods. For evidence, I turn to Dr. Kevin Maillard (Seminole) and Juana Martinez-Neal's 2019 book *Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story*.

Fry Bread has enjoyed acclaim since its publication. The book won the Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal and was chosen as an Honor title of the American Indian Youth Literature Awards, given by the American Indian Library Association (AILA). *Fry Bread* teaches young readers about the tradition of making fry bread, from how it is made to how it came to be and what it means for the people who make it, all in small snippets of text simple enough for young readers to understand and appreciate. All but one page spread throughout the book start with the phrase "Fry bread is…" followed by the focus of the page, such as the first page's "Fry bread is food" (Maillard 1). The phrase is always capitalized, giving it the appearance of a chapter title, or a heading introducing the contents of the page. Throughout the narrative, readers learn something unique about fry bread: it is a food that represents resilience and also the forced loss of culture. It is a large idea to tackle in a picture book, but the message is relayed by the text and illustrations across the pages. The content of *Fry Bread* can be sorted into three sections: pages dealing with function, with togetherness, and with history. All of the pages in *Fry Bread* are situated in spreads in which text and visuals work together across two pages, so, unless otherwise noted, all references to illustrations will reference the full two-page spreads.

Maillard's book uses these three sections to tell not only the story of how fry bread is made, but also what it means to the Indigenous people who created it and still make it today. The first section–function–includes pages that show the practical process

of making fry bread and utilizes simple descriptions such as touch and sound in the "Fry bread is…" page headings. This section begins: "Fry bread is food / Flour, salt water / Cornmeal, baking powder / Perhaps milk, maybe sugar / All mixed together in a big bowl" (Maillard 1-2). The illustration accompanying the text shows a woman with a small child on her hip and a bowl in her hand leading a group of older children who happily carry all of the ingredients for making fry bread. The ingredients visually depicted on the pages do not exactly match those in the text. While the text calls for flour, salt water, cornmeal, baking powder, milk, and sugar, the illustration shows the children holding labeled containers of flour, salt, yeast, cornmeal, and sugar, along with a pitcher with a splash of white escaping, marking it as the milk. Interestingly, neither the text nor the illustration presents ingredients that match exactly those in the recipe shared by the author at the back of the book. This shows that, rather than trying to provide an accurate list of ingredients, that variations on the recipe are being presented (Maillard 1-2).

It is also a chance to embrace how the recipe may differ among groups since, although Maillard tells us the Navajo first made fry bread, the food is not specific to them, and other groups also make it. It is also relevant that the ingredient listed in Maillard's recipe does not appear in either the text or illustration is coconut oil. This ingredient is used for frying the bread and is the part of the cooking process that is not participated in by the children in *Fry Bread*. This ingredient that child readers would be unable to use on their own is excluded, allowing children to remain part of the process described at the beginning of the book. The children in the book become even more involved in the following pages. The text says, "Fry bread is shape / Hands mold the dough / Flat like a pancake / Round like a ball / Or puffy like Nana's softest pillow"

(Maillard 3-4). The illustration complements the text in these pages, showing the older woman along with the children working with the dough on a vast table where some of the ingredients are still visible. The characters are recognized only by their hands in this spread, except for the youngest child who was previously carried. The presence of only hands on the table in the illustration gives the perception to readers that they are also at the table, looking down to work with dough so that all they see are the other hands at the table, and a small child's curious face. The next pages, and the last ones I categorize as being part of the function section, show the dough being fried. The text describes both the process and the sensory elements that go with it: "Fry bread is sound / The skillet clangs on the stove / The fire blazes from below / Drop the dough in the skillet / The bubbles sizzle and pop" (Maillard 6). The illustration enhances the text, showing a few of the older children engaging in the moment as best as they can. One cups their ears, trying to listen to the sound of the bread more closely, one closes their eyes to smell the scent coming from the pan. The smell itself is represented in the illustration by fluid streaks that are the same color as the dough moving from the pan to where the children sit. Another child stands with more dough ready to be given to an adult, whose hand we see controlling the pan. Readers can see Seminole symbols tattooed on the wrist of the person handling the pan, so they know it is not the older woman previously shown, but someone else who is joining the fry bread process. Later images that include the adult with the tattoos show them to a be those belonging to an older man. The image again invites the reader to participate, waiting patiently for the bread while listening to the sounds of it cooking (Maillard 5-6).

These few spreads detail the functional process of making fry bread and are also

careful to depict the few children's participation in the creation, not only assisting, but observing where they cannot help directly. The children's inclusion by the creations of this text is part of passing on a recipe from one generation to another–not just the list of ingredients, but the entire tradition of preparing fry bread. It is important to note here that while fry bread is treated as warm and comforting in Maillard's text with a baking process full of family and history, the food itself has negative connotations for some Indigenous individuals. Devon Mihesuah (Choctaw) describes the widely varied opinions on fry bread using her own experience when she writes "about the repercussions of losing traditional foodways knowledge and opined against the overconsumption of frybread" she states that she was assailed by frybread fans as "anti-Indian" and "not really Indian" (45). She includes other, similar instances of harsh reactions to writers and fitness advocates who spoke about the unhealthy qualities of the food. Mihesuah's warning about the overconsumption of frybread is not without merit. Joseph and Turner point out in their own article that "many Indigenous people are now eating mostly imported, refined marketed foods that are generally less healthy, and many are at risk of diet-related diseases such as type 2 diabetes" (n.p.). Mihesuah also pushes back against the history of fry bread's creation, surveying numerous historical accounts of Indigenous foods around the time the bread was supposedly added to Indigenous diets. Without reiterating Mihesuah's full argument, it is clear in her conclusion that, rather than a story of survival, fry bread is a "representation of oppression and colonization" as well as an unhealthy addition to Indigenous diets (63).

It is important to acknowledge this argument in discussing Maillard's *Fry Bread*, particularly regarding his choices surrounding the presentation of ingredients. In *Fry*

Bread, the ingredients portrayed in text, illustration, and the recipe following the text are not all the same, varying in each iteration. By doing so, Maillard presents a lived Indigenous experience, both his own from the recipe he provides, and the experience of others whose fry bread recipes may vary. *Fry Bread* is not an argument for or against the bread itself. It is instead a representation of sharing history and experience through food preparation, using a familiar dish that many people could relate to making and eating, creating togetherness through food.

Togetherness stands out as another section theme in *Fry Bread*, and examples of togetherness can be found on almost any page of the book in text and illustration. There are two-page spreads that are almost entirely devoted to the depiction of togetherness in text and illustration. On the first spread, the text introduces togetherness in the line "Rise to discover what brings us together" (Maillard 9). The use of "rise" has a double meaning. First, fry bread needs to rise, so it can be a reference to the bread itself; however, the illustration on the page counters this meaning since the fry bread depicted is already cooked and therefore no longer has a need to rise. The second meaning of "rise" should then be considered. This meaning is closer to a call to "rise up," for children to actively "discover what brings us together" (Maillard 9). The illustration supports this by depicting all of the children together with the older man, revealed for the first time, but this time the adult is independently carrying the fry bread off the page, while the children remain together interacting with other food items displayed on the table in front of them. The children take an active interest in the food preparation together. Additionally, one child stares directly out of the page instead of at the food, again inviting the reader to be part of what is happening. The togetherness introduced on these pages increases

significantly in the next spread. The text starts to push readers toward the metaphorical meaning behind fry bread, no longer calling it something concrete, like food or shape or sound. “Fry bread,” the text begins “is time / On weekdays and holidays / Supper or dinner / Powwows and festivals / Moments together / With family and friends” (Maillard 11). The illustration on these pages enhances the text, showing several of the children now joined by two more adults: the man who fried the bread and another woman. The adults and children are physically close, depicted in hugs or connected by casual touches of the arm. They are together as closely as people can be and seated around a large table which is shown only halfway, preventing the reader from being excluded from the moment by the boundary of the table. Instead, it stretches off of the pages, with no edge shown between the reader and the characters. A plate of fry bread sits on the table with other food, suggesting the characters are together for a meal, as suggested in the text. The idea of togetherness pervades the entirety of *Fry Bread*, but it is brought to the forefront of the reader’s attention the most on these pages (Maillard 3-4).

The final section, history, is approached more explicitly than either of the two previous sections. Like togetherness, traces of history can be found throughout the book, though they become more obvious toward the second half of the book. Sarah Jackson et al. discuss the use of narratives about food in the classroom to encourage discourse on diversity. One of the texts they examine is *Fry Bread*, which they point out “uses fry bread as a focal point to describe the ways that American Indians have resisted colonization and sheds light on the atrocities committed against Native Americans” (Jackson et al. 12). The history pages of *Fry Bread* demonstrate this idea most clearly, so I limit my discussion to focus on two specific page spreads on which references to history

are particularly strong. In the first, the text wastes no time in introducing history as the focus of the page, starting thus: "Fry bread is history" (Maillard 15). Like the depiction of Nokomis educating the main character in *We Are Water Protectors*, this illustration in *Fry Bread* shows older characters faced with a small crowd of interested children. There are two older characters depicted instead of one, and the youngest child, too young to sit still on his own presumably, is held by the older woman as she speaks and gestures. The text supplies the content of what the children are learning about, continuing from the heading "The long walk, the stolen land / Strangers in our own world / With unknown food / We made new recipes / From what we had" (Maillard 15). The illustration highlights what is told in text, with shadowy figures of crows and an undecorated group of people walking together.

Historically, Indigenous reliance on certain resources commonly used in their foods "was actively targeted as a strategy of colonialism…People were in many ways blocked from accessing and using these very resources that their ancestors had cared for over generations" (Joseph and Turner). This loss is highlighted alongside the resiliency that brought fry bread into existence, that Indigenous families made "new recipes / From what we had" (Maillard 15). The shared story of the historical past is combined with knowledge that details the present: "Fry bread is nation / Abenaki, Apache, Arapahoe / Ojibwe, Onondaga, Oglala Sioux / Narragansett, Navajo, Nipmuc / Seminole, Shoshone, Sac & Fox / Hundreds and hundreds of tribes" (Maillard 20). The list of tribes in the text is mirrored in the illustration, the background of which depicts a huge wall with many more tribes listed than those in the text alone. The characters on this page are again a mix of children and adults; however, their positions are more intimate. The woman on the

left-side page holds the youngest child from previous pages and stands beside only one older child, who she is talking to while pointing to the wall. On the right-side page the older man kneels beside another one of the older children, also speaking and gesturing to the wall of tribes.

These one-on-one interactions, rather than depicting the children in a group, emphasizes the importance of this moment for the children, that this is knowledge that must be taken to their hearts. In this spread, fry bread does not make a visual appearance; instead, its use in the text simply ties these many names together. The solidarity outside of actual fry bread is an important idea to include. Though Maillard doesn't go into expansive detail, he is aware of the varied opinions on fry bread, as he acknowledges in his endnotes. The bread's visual absence from several pages in the history section of the book show an emphasis less on the bread and more on the history and culture that come from cooking and passing down recipes. This emphasis is what brings *Fry Bread* into discussions of ecocriticism. With movements such as NATIFS gaining attention, research such as that by Joseph and Turner is increasing. These researchers seek to reclaim Indigenous methods of food preparation and harvesting. This, Joseph and Turner note, also requires the revitalization of the original foods that were once the main part of Indigenous diets. Joseph and Turner describe the connection between food revitalization, culture, and the environment, noting that "[c]ulturally-rooted plant practices have the power to heal relationships with the land … Indigenous people are finding renewed strength, pride, and grounding through cultural practice and re-establishing our connections to the land" (n.p.).

In Indigenous reclamation of original food systems, there is also care for the

environment. Joseph and Turner point out that many of the Indigenous "tools and technologies developed to harvest plant and animal foods had, and have, respect, responsibility and reciprocity built into them" (n.p.). They go on to explain some of these techniques, including tools built for individual root selection (Joseph and Turner). The resurgence of Indigenous harvesting techniques brings with it the associated sustainability practices. Titles such as *Fry Bread* that applaud the culture around Indigenous food add support to growing food activism movements that call for food system reclamation and the improved sustainability practices that come with Indigenous harvest techniques. *Fry Bread* is not alone in this focus. Danielle Greendeer (Mashpee Wampanoag) published *Keepunumuk: Weeâchumun's Thanksgiving Story* in 2022, in which she "told the tale of the harvest feast shared by the newcomers and the Wampanoag people in 1621" (Author's Note). The narrative focuses heavily on the food used in the feast, drawing attention to original Indigenous food systems, though in a historical context rather than modern one. This recent publication shows that the conversation about Indigenous food systems continues to gain attention. Its presence in children's literature illustrates the need for future generations to continue fighting for the return of cultural food practices. Like the focus on water in *We Are Water Protectors* and *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!*, *Fry Bread* also calls for action that affects the environment, though through the revitalization of food systems instead of water protection.

The three main titles discussed here, *We Are Water Protectors*, *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!* and *Fry Bread* all accomplish several things at once. They portray modern Indigenous culture, bringing historical traditions into stories clearly rooted in the

present; they respect those traditions without limiting the narrative focus to them, ensuring that the cultures represented are those that young readers could interact with in their own lives, not just read about in a narrative. Each book also includes references to ecological issues currently plaguing Indigenous peoples in the United States. The most clearly stated of these is *We Are Water Protectors*, which states the ongoing struggle against the DAPL's water pollution plaguing the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!* points to water quality and scarcity caused by uranium mining on the Navajo Nation, while *Fry Bread* subtly addresses the need for reclamation of Indigenous food systems. The modernity in these picture books makes them more effective at evoking young readers' interest in these issues. In addition, Indigenous creators developed each of these stories. Rather than just consulting, these creators tell the stories they want to be shared how they want to share them. They provide Indigenous readers a chance to see themselves mirrored in the works, and non-Indigenous readers an accurate depiction of cultures that currently exist alongside their own.

IV. ANALYSIS OF THREE CHILDREN'S PICTURE BOOKS: PERITEXT

The narratives of picture books are commonly made up of a combination of words and illustrations. Picture books with little to no text exist, such as Alexandra Day's *Good Dog, Carl*, in which only two lines of text appear. However, the majority, and all those discussed in this study, feature the combination of text and visual elements. Novels may even feature both elements, such as illustrated versions of popular children's tales like J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Illustrated novels and picture books may share some of the same elements, "such as titles, covers, or endpapers. These elements are, however, still more important in picturebooks than in novels" (Nikolajeva and Scott 241). Because picture books rely so heavily on the interplay of their verbal and visual components, the elements that accompany them sometimes convey information that can dramatically affect the story. Chapter 3 touches on a few of these instances: the information about the First Laugh Ceremony on the inside dust jacket of *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!* and the recipe for fry bread included in the back of *Fry Bread*. In this chapter, I will focus on these peritextual components to show what they add to the stories in terms of environmentalism and authenticity.

Nikolajeva and Scott suggest that "[a]lmost nothing has been written about the paratexts of picturebooks" (241). The paratext that Nikolajeva and Scott mention is the combination of peritext and epitext. Peritext is the material that surrounds the body of a book, including the cover, front material, and authorial and historical notes. Epitext is additional material pertaining to the book but not contained within it, such as details added to the narrative through author interviews (Genette 1991). More scholarship has been published on paratexts in the twenty years since Nikolajeva and Scott's book came

out, but it has largely focused on paratexts in comic books rather than those in picture books (Gjellstad 2010; McGunnigle 2018). Addressing peritext in picture books is a large task. Analyzing the meaning of everything from the size of the book to the designs on the endpapers and determining which element of the peritext was created by the author and which ones they did not contribute toward could be a tedious task. However, in the case of the picture books used in this study, parts of the peritext are integral to the success of the book, and not examining them would make the readers lose part of the narratives' impacts. In each picture book, different elements of the peritext add meaning to the main narrative.

In *We Are Water Protectors*, three elements of peritext contain the most profound additions to the story told by the main character and indeed, would change the book were they absent. These are the title and cover, the endnotes, and the pledge page found at the back of the book. Nikolajeva and Scott note that picture book titles "are a very important part of the text-image interplay and contribute to all the types of interaction…observed inside the books themselves," and *We Are Water Protectors* is no exception (244). In this case, the title of the book is a narrative one, "that is, a title that in some way sums up the essence of the story" (Nikolajeva and Scott 243). The importance of this narrative title is that is sets the narrator's goal before the book even opens. If the text on the pages were to start with a repetitive refrain, such as in *Fry Bread*, the title of the book could easily fit in this space. Additionally, the phrase "We are water protectors" appears only once in the narration of the story, and that is on the final two-page spread of the story (Lindstrom 33). Not taking this phrase into the book from the beginning would risk lessening the main character's transformation into a protector and environmental activist. Readers

might be left wondering what she was working toward instead of understanding what she is trying to accomplish from the beginning and grasping the elements that lead to the main character's evolution. The illustration on the cover of the book also teases the transformation the main character will undergo. She is depicted on the cover in the flower-patterned red skirt she wears to protest, as well as the medicine wheel earrings. She also carries the feather, the sign of peaceful protest, and the silhouettes of other characters holding hands and supporting her appear in the background. This illustration depicts the main character at her most courageous, how she looks by the end of the book, but not in the beginning. This visual preview, like the title, makes readers invest in her transformation rather than passively waiting for a change to take place. For a story promoting environmental activism, this investment is integral. An additional way the book promotes environmental activism is through the informational endnotes provided after the conclusion of the narrative. These are supplied by the author and the illustrator separately and add relevant facts to the story.

The discussion of endnotes is not complete without a momentary pause to examine the dual audience for picture books. "The intended audience" Nodelman explains, "for these books is young and inexperienced," but that picture books "can and do give pleasure to viewers and readers, both children and adults" (3). It is the adults that must now be considered in the discussion of picture books. Adult readers are implied almost automatically in picturebooks: after all, many children need an adult to supply a book to them and adults are often the decision makers about what stories a child will read. In addition, picture books lend themselves to being read aloud, which requires an older voice, if not an adult one. It is these adults that are likely to delve into the endnotes

and explain them to their children. The endnotes then must include elements that will benefit both young readers and adults. In the case of *We Are Water Protectors*, Lindstrom aims at both audiences in her note, “More on Water Protectors” that follows the narrative. The text in her note is smaller than that used in the narrative, spaced closer together, and uses less lyrical language. She details the Anishinaabe prophecy that supplied the concept of the black snake and gives background information on the Standing Rock protests against the DAPL. Lindstrom’s wording suggests both caregivers and children are the target audience for the information. She says in one line that “It is time that we all become stewards of our planet so we can protect it for our children and our children’s children” (35). This phrasing seems to target an adult audience, one that can easily envision generations beyond their own and consider that their actions may affect that generation. Shortly after, Lindstrom says she has “hope that the next generation, YOU, will continue to see the importance of preserving our precious planet by pledging to be a Water Protector with me!” (36). This is clearly targeted at the next generation reader, one who may have had the story read to them.

Taking these two instances together, Lindstrom’s note is targeted to both adults and children who might have the book read to them and the endnotes explained, aiming to inspire environmental awareness and action from both generations. The page following the endnotes carries a somewhat unique addition to the peritext: an “Earth Steward and Water Protector Pledge” which begins “I will do my best to honor Mother Earth and all its living beings, including the water and land…” and ends “I pledge to make this world a better place by being a steward of the Earth and a protector of the water” under which is space for the reader’s name and the date (Lindstrom 37). This pledge not only asks but

directs young readers to take on an interest in their environment. The size of the text is larger, more like the text that appears in the narrative, indicating its target audience to likely be young readers again instead of adults. For caregivers reading to children, Lindstrom presents this opportunity to help a child make a promise to the environment, and in doing so makes the adult reader even more aware of the need for protecting the environment for youth. While environmental movements, such as the protests against the DAPL, can be started by youth, adults must support those movements as well by helping youth voices be heard. *We Are Water Protectors* promotes this by providing end notes for its dual audience.

In *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!*, there are also peritextual elements that enhance the story outside of the main narrative text and images. For this book, the cover illustration, the information on the inside front of the dust jacket, and the endnotes all add to the experience of the narrative story, and in the case of the dust jacket, the reader's comprehension might be altered. The cover is the first introduction readers get to the story. Along with the title, the cover illustration depicts the baby and the baby's parents, but instead of their skyscraper home being the background, they are shown in front of the Navajo Nation, complete with the grandparents' sheep and house. If one were to crack the spine in order to view the full illustration stretching across the front and back covers, more information is revealed. The windmill can be seen in the illustration that appears on the back cover. In the distance, the skyscrapers from the city can be seen. The immediateness of the Navajo Nation landscape with the city far removed suggests the baby's deep connection to that land, as opposed to the baby's connection to the city, which is distant, literally and metaphorically. Additionally, one small detail appears on

the back cover illustration that never makes an appearance in the illustrations that make up the main narrative. This is the tiny addition of an oil pumpjack and a few gray containers near it. The ground around the pumpjack and the containers is darker than the land around it or on the front cover section of the illustration. The dark land stands out, catching the viewer's eyes on these spots instead of the smaller details in the illustration. The addition of this pumpjack on the darkened spot of land also suggests a reference to drilling in the Navajo Nation. In 2016, two years before the release of *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!* drilling equipment on Navajo Nation land caused a large fire. Though there were thankfully no casualties as a result of the incident, the fire burned for four days before it was controlled, and the accident greatly alarmed residents nearby (Thompson). Since the fire, local Indigenous environmentalists have pushed harder against oil drilling, but, similar to the DAPL incident, the struggle is ongoing. This tiny acknowledgement of that struggle adds to the environmental commentary seen in the narrative portion of *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!* and brings it more firmly into the category of texts providing environmental critique and acknowledging ongoing environmental activism.

In addition to the cover imagery, the main narrative story of *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!* is enhanced by information relayed on the inside front cover of the dust jacket. It is here that the reward for coaxing the first laugh out of the new baby is detailed, in the text that reads: "In Navajo families, the first person to get a new baby to laugh hosts the First Laugh Ceremony" (Tahe and Flood). This information is later detailed in the endnotes that follow the narrative portion of the story but reading it before the main narrative gives readers background for why the baby's family members are

trying to get a laugh. They are not only trying to see the first laugh, but also to be the one to host the ceremony that follows it. This information is not spelled out within the main narrative. Though family members are clearly competing for the baby's first laugh, it is the correlation between the grandfather being the one to elicit the first laugh and the grandparents being the ones to host the celebration afterwards that is not clearly stated. It could be just as possible that the grandparents meant to host the ceremony regardless and the family members simply wanted to be the first one to get a laugh for unrelated reasons.

Whether or not the choice of the written text on the dust jacket was made by the creators or by the publisher is unknown, but regardless of the decision-maker, the result can still be seen. However, the endnotes following the main narrative are certainly supplied by the authors and illustrator. Informational notes are included that discuss the setting of the book, the tradition of the First Laugh Celebration, and other celebrations around new babies in ten other countries and religions. One of these notes discusses the city and country change within the book, noting "Like many Navajo families, some of the people in this baby's family live in the city and others in the country. Native Americans live and work in many different places across the United States" (Tahe and Flood 27). This factualizes information that was previously presented in the fictional narrative, ensuring that readers understand this particular message about Navajo culture in the present. There is also a note about the First Laugh Celebration. It reiterates and elaborates on information that appeared in the main narrative, telling readers that "[t]he celebration expresses the parents' hope that their child will always be friendly, kind, and caring. Laughter is celebrated as an important, healthy, and healing aspect of the human spirit" and that the person who succeeds in making the new baby laugh first "begins a special

relationship with the child and has the honor of hosting the First Laugh Ceremony" (Tahe and Flood 28). In Tahe and Flood's note about the First Laugh Celebration, some of the information they include that wasn't stated in the story is the parents' wishes for the new baby. Similar to *We Are Water Protectors*, this indicates that the note is intended for a dual audience of child and adult readers. The information is presented simply so it can easily be explained to young readers, but the additions are still profound enough to draw in adults and inspire interest in the modern Navajo Nation.

In *Fry Bread*, informational endnotes and covers are important parts of the peritext that affect the narrative as a whole. The endpapers are also illustrated. These two pages, one that is part of the front matter that appears before the title page, and one that is included in the back matter in the pages following the conclusion of the main narrative, contain a list of Indigenous tribes. The list is not exhaustive, but the font used is smaller than that used in the main narrative, and the names follow each other closely, fitting as many as possible on the two pages. In addition, the two lists are alphabetically connected, with the first (the one preceding the narrative) ending with the Native Village of Ekuk, and the second (the one following the narrative and endnotes) beginning with the Native Village of Ekwok. These two pages work not only to include the names of the many tribes unable to be mentioned in the main narrative, but also to show the vastness of the Indigenous peoples that still exist. There are so many that even after the story is said and done, the list continues. While non-Indigenous readers might find the pages visually appealing, Indigenous young readers have an opportunity to look for their own people's name, thus providing yet another chance to see reflections of themselves in a story.

The endnotes that follow the conclusion of the narrative in *Fry Bread* are longer

than those in either of the titles mentioned previously. The first endnote information is a recipe for "Kevin's Fry Bread," with an ingredient list on the left-side page and the steps of the detailed recipe on the right-side page. This fulfills the act of sharing a recipe, following the same tradition seen in the narrative of *Fry Bread* and highlighting the importance of passing recipes from one generation to the next. The story not only encourages sharing this knowledge, it also actively engages in it. Following the fry bread recipe is an author's note that spans eight pages on its own. The author's note is split into sections corresponding to the textual headings used throughout the main narrative (the variations of "Fry bread is…"). Maillard essentially provides additional historical background for every double spread in the book. The information in his notes gives more details about cultural food loss first: "In strange, unfamiliar lands, exiled Natives strived to retain those old traditions and they created new ones, especially for food. Survival meant adapting, and those ancestors, isolated from familiar meats, fruits, and vegetables, got by with what they had. Without the familiar indigenous crop of corn, historic farming practices and dietary traditions drastically changed" (Maillard 31). This snippet ties together the meaning given to fry bread throughout the book–that it is a symbol of both resilience and loss. He goes on to provide more background about Indigenous access to healthy foods: "there are some Natives who strongly oppose fry bread because it exacerbates existing health problems. For these critics, fry bread is an easy target for a much larger problem of being forced to deviate from a traditional Indigenous diet. Some, but not all, communities have no fresh market or a convenient place to buy fruits and vegetables" (Maillard 33).

Maillard's inclusion of these details highlight a problem that has not received the

same attention as other environmental crises. Without downplaying the importance of either issue, it only takes a quick look online to learn that the DAPL protests received more attention than the issue of Indigenous access to certain types of foods. Both problems are ongoing, with the DAPL still active and Indigenous food access still a struggle. It is possible that some adults reading *Fry Bread* to young children may learn about the difficulties associated with Indigenous food access for the first time in this author's note section. In another segment of the author's note, Maillard addresses the Seminole history depicted in the spread that shows three children helping a woman construct a coil basket, and another admiring what Maillard tells readers in his notes are handmade dolls, "part of a rich inherited history of both Seminole Nation of Oklahoma and the Seminole Tribe of Florida" (13-14, 35). He carefully describes the history of both the doll- and basket-making, ensuring that readers understand that these items are part of Seminole tradition and not simply unnamed remnants of unspecified Indigenous origin. In the "Fry Bread is Nation" section of the author's note, Maillard mentions the wall of tribal names shown in the background, and in the process those in the end pages as well, noting that the creators "researched or reached out to each nation listed here to confirm the common usage of their tribal name. We wanted to be as accurate as possible and to include tribes in the process" (19-20, 37). This dedication to accuracy ensures that readers seeking a "mirror" in the book will see an accurate depiction of Navajo culture (Bishop). He also includes an important message on the final page of the author's note, in the "Fry Bread is Us" section, which says "Native America is not a past history of vanished people and communities. *We are still here* [emphasis original]" (Maillard 38).

The combined focus on history and modern food system issues in *Fry Bread*

reiterates the blend of environmental representation and modern awareness of Indigenous struggles that *We Are Water Protectors* and *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!* emphasize. These stories tell young readers that they are growing up alongside Indigenous children and that those children and their communities are struggling against significant environmental threats. In *Fry Bread*, Maillard provides a full page of notes on what sources he used in his author's note, making it simple for readers to pursue additional information about any of the details he provided, from tribal histories to Census data. This is a "window," offering non-Indigenous readers the chance to see more and learn more about Indigenous culture in the present day (Bishop).

While all three texts discussed here have at least two pages of additional information following the main narrative, its inclusion in stories about Indigenous characters and cultures is not new, especially in children's books with a didactic leaning, such as the Dear America or American Girl series. There are several deviations from these past texts that make *We Are Water Protectors*, *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!*, and *Fry Bread* differ significantly. First, Indigenous creators, not consultants, were part of each of these three books. The information they bring to the work, especially from their own cultures, is firsthand, providing knowledge and an authentic representation of lived experiences. Young Ojibwe, Navajo, and Seminole readers can really see a "mirror" of their own cultures, and Indigenous readers from other groups will likely see more of themselves than they would in a non-Indigenous creator's work (Bishop). Second, the information provided in the additional notes that follow each of the texts discussed here is not limited to historical information. Instead of sharing only what Indigenous cultures were like in the distant past, the notes provided by Lindstrom, Tahe and Flood, and

Maillard predominantly focus on contemporary traditions and issues faced by their respective cultures. The decision to include this information, and other additional sources following the narrative encourages readers to take away not just the modernity depicted in the verbal and visual elements of the main narrative, but to continue learning about the cultures they exist alongside. This applies to both young readers, who may gain knowledge from about these cultures that they will carry into their lives as they mature, and to adult readers who may be learning some of the facts presented in these books for the first time. Whether they are adults or children waiting to grow into adults, going forward with accurate information about the cultures with which they share a lifetime encourages increased responsibility to act when these cultures are faced with threats, especially when those threats are environmental. Not every child will have the opportunity to make a difference in legal policies that still work against Indigenous groups in the United States, but every child does have the chance to be environmentally conscious as they grow. As stated in *We Are Water Protectors*, "We fight for those / Who cannot fight for themselves: The winged ones, / The crawling ones, / The four-legged, / The two-legged, / The plants, trees, rivers, lakes" (Lindstrom 22-24). Lastly, having Indigenous creators' added notes encourages additional research from the stories' dual audience. While the picture books discussed here provide awareness of environmental issues facing Indigenous groups, awareness does not equate to activism and change, as Carson's *Silent Spring* led to decades ago. The stories told in each book inspire investment in the environment through the illustrations and the journeys of the characters, but it is the peritext that pushes for action. While these stories may not directly inspire political or legal change, they encourage children to affect that change themselves. *We*

Are Water Protectors asks readers to sign a pledge to protect the environment, and *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!* and *Fry Bread* provide citations for readers to investigate and learn more. The push to action is what prior representations of Indigenous relationships with nature lack, and what makes the texts examined here stand out as authentic. Instead of a passive, observant relationship with nature, the Indigenous characters in these three books demonstrate reciprocity in their relationships with nature. The environment provides and therefore requires diligent protection, and that diligence is a part of both past and contemporary Indigenous tradition.

V. CONCLUSION

I set out with the goal to examine how children's picture books written after 2010 feature more accurate historical and contemporary representations of Indigenous relationships with nature using ecocriticism. Studies addressing Indigenous representation in children's literature already exist, and the use of ecocriticism in children's literature is slowly increasing as well. However, examination of Indigenous representation with a focus on their relationships with nature is still lacking. Amidst environmental degradation and crises relating to the climate, the environmental concern and protection implicit in many Indigenous peoples' relationships with nature is an important facet to consider, especially in texts for children.

My thesis addresses this gap in Indigenous representation through interaction with nature by focusing on the authentic portrayal of Indigenous experiences in picture books that deal with contemporary environmental issues. I suggest that the modernity of the stories depicted in these books shows a shift from representation of Indigenous peoples in historical scenarios to depictions of present-day Indigenous experiences. It also inspires interest in environmental protection from the dual audience of the books through the pressing nature of the ecological issues presented.

The texts discussed here accomplish authentic portrayal of Indigenous interactions with nature in ways that older books written by non-Indigenous authors did not. *We Are Water Protectors*, *First Laugh–Welcome, Baby!*, and *Fry Bread* bring readers Indigenous experiences from the twenty-first century that are both authentic and steeped in nature. Not only are Indigenous traditions depicted more authentically due to the own voices behind them, but Indigenous relationships with nature are painted to be

practically reciprocal instead of passive. For example, in *We Are Water Protectors* the Ojibwe connection to water is clearly stated, and the main character evolves into an activist in order to protect the water that is so important to the Ojibwe. Conversely, in *The Legend of the Bluebonnets* mentioned in Chapter I, the main character relieves a drought through a symbolic sacrifice of her most prized possession. The importance of portraying environmental activism that can be replicated today is to teach young readers what actions they can take to help.

Examining the change in Indigenous representation and depicted relationships with nature in picture books over time tracks improvements in authenticity and in what lessons didactic literature offers to young readers. The improvements are not just what are offered to children either, but also what attract the caregivers who provide reading material. Using ecocriticism in this conversation highlights the specific type of representation examined in this study and adds to the still growing field of ecocritical analysis in children's literature.

Despite being an addition to a currently small field, this analysis still has limitations. My own positionality is one. While I sought to highlight Indigenous voices in this study, I do not claim to be one myself. An Indigenous voice speaking on this topic would undoubtedly yield results with additional depth.

Another significant limitation in this study is the lack of vocabulary around the topic of Indigenous representation specific to nature. Attempting to create a vocabulary to fit this need was not in the scope of this study, but future studies would certainly benefit from terminology specific to this area, such as working definitions of eco-representation in literature. The language surrounding the reciprocity of Indigenous interactions with

nature would also benefit from further definitions, not just for the study of picture books but also in works for middle-grade and adolescent readers. Middle-grade novels did not feature in this study, but these books are relevant to representation and ecocritical discussions in children's literature.

This study was also limited by the information currently available regarding Indigenous food systems and the benefits that their renewal will bring to Indigenous cultures and the environment. While Joseph and Turner added significant material to this field, their article focuses on only a small section of the United States, not encompassing even all of the North American tribes mentioned in this study. In addition, children's books that touch on Indigenous food systems are still gaining traction in publishing. For example, Greendeer's *Keepunumuk: Weeâchumun's Thanksgiving Story* was published only this year, not in time for inclusion in this study even though it is relevant to my project.

The limitations of this study open options for further research in Indigenous representation and ecocriticism in children's literature. In the future, I plan to further the goal of determining more encompassing terminology for representation through relationships with nature. I maintain that this would provide more foundation for future scholars in Indigenous and ecocritical fields. As more Indigenous authors are published, more examples of this type of representation will also be available for analysis, giving future researchers more opportunities to examine these topics.

Future research will also provide additional insight into the benefits of representation and ecocriticism to the many audiences of children's literature, particularly studies on the use of books with accurate portrayals of Indigenous nature representation

in classrooms. Scholars have already addressed the effects of misrepresentation and of the need for critical assessment of the books used in classrooms (Wakim et al.; Taylor and Patterson). The books made available in classrooms affect both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers, and accurate representation gives readers a better understanding of modern Indigenous culture, the environmental issues facing Indigenous groups, and how readers themselves can take action to protect the environment.

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