

# Transmitting Indigenous Traditions through Children's Literature<sup>1</sup>

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8

## Abstract

Indigenous<sup>3</sup> peoples from around the world are native to their land and share in the struggle of being dispossessed, demeaned, and eradicated by colonizing states. In the postcolonial world, children's literature has become a form of regaining Indigenous culture and identity in many countries. In this essay, I will present two picture books by Indigenous Canadian writers, *Sweetest Kulu* by Celina Kalluk and *We are Water Protectors* by Carole Lindstrom, which provide a specific Indigenous viewpoint in understanding, reconstructing, and forming contemporary identities. Representing ethnic diversity, tolerance, and intercultural awareness, they play an important role in children's literature nowadays. I will analyze the way in which the books transmit Indigenous traditions and beliefs through the combination of picture and text and adapt them to modern society. First, I will examine the connection between humans and nature represented in *Sweetest Kulu* and second, highlight the symbolism used in *We are Water Protectors*.

**Keywords:** decolonization; Indigenous literature; Canada; picture books

## Resumen

Los pueblos indígenas de todo el mundo son originarios de sus tierras y comparten la lucha de ser desposeídos, menospreciados y erradicados por estados colonizadores. En el mundo poscolonial, la literatura infantil se ha convertido en una forma de recuperar la cultura y la identidad indígenas en muchos países. En este ensayo, presentaré dos libros ilustrados de escritores indígenas canadienses, "Sweetest Kulu" de Celina Kalluk y "We are Water Protectors" de Carole Lindstrom, que ofrecen un punto de vista indígena específico para comprender, reconstruir y formar identidades contemporáneas. Representando la diversidad étnica, la tolerancia y la conciencia intercultural, desempeñan un papel importante en la literatura infantil actual. Analizaré la forma en que los libros transmiten tradiciones y creencias indígenas a través de la combinación de imágenes y texto, adaptándolas a la sociedad moderna. Primero, examinaré la conexión entre los humanos y la naturaleza representada en "Sweetest Kulu" y segundo, resaltaré el simbolismo utilizado en "We are Water Protectors".

**Palabras clave:** descolonización; literatura indígena, Canadá, libros ilustrados

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I aspire to raise awareness by capitalizing Indigenous.

## Introduction

Originated from Latin, *indigenus* means native to a place and sprung from the earth or land (Mullen, 2020, p. 14). Even though the culture of the colonized as well as their relationships to the colonizing states vastly differ from region to region, Indigenous peoples from around the world share in the struggle of being dispossessed, demeaned, and eradicated by colonizing states (Mullen, 2020, p. 1f). According to Alfred & Corntassel (2005), “oppressing Indigenous peoples normalizes privilege (unearned benefits owing to race and status), hierarchy, and White supremacy. For Indigenous peoples, overcoming internalized hegemonic control can renew tribal languages and other customs, particularly self-governance, and instill self-confidence”. Among others, some of the aims of decolonization are “to reclaim Indigenous beingness, knowledges, and epistemologies in the face of colonial threats to Aboriginality” (Mullen, 2020, p. 14). However, these colonial threats, internalized as they still are, have not ceased to exist when colonies all over the world were transformed into independent states. Decolonization is a process which takes time and needs to be reflected by media, one of which are children’s books. In Canada, picture books by Aboriginal authors have an important impact in the process of decolonization. I chose two children’s books for different age groups, *Sweetest Kulu*, written by Celina Kalluk and illustrated by Alexandra Neonakis, for the very young and *We are Water Protectors*, written by Carole Lindstrom and illustrated by Michaela Goade, for pre-school children. I will show how the authors mediate Indigenous tradition and belief to Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, helping them to form their

identity as well as contributing to the prevention of White supremacy and racism.

## Methodology

When I was asked to take part in the “Congreso Internacional de Ciencias Sociales y Humanas: Una mirada desde las regiones” at the Unicomfauca and share an international view on the topic of decolonization and Colombian Indigenous languages, it made most sense to share the perspective of a country which has also been subject to colonialism. In my research, I found out that the United States and Canada have been dealing with some of the topics discussed in this event, like decolonization, the reestablishment of Indigenous culture and languages, and “going back to the roots”. As I majored in English literature, I decided to investigate diverse children’s literature from the United States and Canada as it offers a way to deal with their background in a multicultural society to the very young. It gives children the opportunity to identify with the protagonists in the stories read to them and helps them to explore their roots in early childhood, which is one of the most important phase of forming one’s identity. Especially picture books, combining text and image, turn out to be a powerful mediating tool. The two picture books by Canadian writers I chose to analyze are examples of the variety of high-quality picture books published by Indigenous authors. In the following, I will investigate how the authors of the books mediate Indigenous culture and beliefs to children.

## Results and Discussion

### *The meaning of children's literature for Indigenous cultures*

Looking at the international market for children's fiction today, we encounter a diversity of authors, genres, and topics unheard of a generation ago, resulting in a growing canon of multicultural children's literature. But after children's literature in its modern form took shape in the nineteenth century, just like most fiction, for a long time it continued to represent nationalist thinking and the racism inherent to it. It was not before the 1960s and 1970s in Aotearoa, New Zealand and North America when Indigenous children's fiction first emerged, and since then it has become a form of regaining aboriginal culture and identity. Children's literature represents genres with an educational purpose, designed not only to entertain children but also to target "improved literacy, education, morality and emotional well-being" (Moura-Koçoğlu, 2009, p. 305). The number and impressive quality of children's books published by Indigenous writers so far support the notion that "literature for children has been recognized as playing a fundamental role in creating, sustaining, and resisting dominant socio-cultural themes, or providing a specific Indigenous viewpoint in understanding, reconstructing, and forming contemporary identities" (Moura-Koçoğlu, 2009, p. 309). While all around the world, Indigenous minority children grow up in diversified ethno-cultural environments today, mainstream fiction continues to be written from a White perspective, thus unable to represent transcultural life-worlds of children in the postcolonial world. On the contrary, classic literature is even accused of being a "means of imposing cultural patterns and enforcing

social codes of the dominant culture on ethnic minorities, while at the same time obscuring cultural diversity" (Moura-Koçoğlu, 2009, p. 306f).

However, there are children's books whose authors seem to have adopted the responsibility of grooming their young readers for a civilization in which diverse cultures coexist and learn from one another. In such a future world, Indigenous traditions will be rediscovered as a source of knowledge and insight: Moura-Koçoğlu (2009) argues that the

critical aim of children's fiction is to endow readers with the ability to reflect upon their own world, embarking on a trajectory to define themselves and their environment. In this respect, an imagining of past cultural contours has significant relevance in the field of children's fiction, which implicitly serves as a tool to imagine and discover one's culture and traditions (p. 306).

Every children's book is bound to represent a specific culture and is therefore "culturally coded". Therefore, Indigenous fiction needs to be even more culturally conscious in order to counter dominant images and transmit an ethno-cultural understanding of history, identity, and ideology. Additionally, diverse literature serves our society in general as "there is a need to provide books which reflect the diversity of traditions and values pertinent to contemporary postcolonial societies" (Moura-Koçoğlu, 2009, p. 306ff). Indigenous children's books highlight the liberal racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity, represent sensitivity, tolerance, and acceptance of difference, and give children the possibility to discuss and consider issues such as diverse perspectives, intercultural awareness, and breaking down stereotypes and misconceptions

(Nxumalo, 2020, p.139). Therefore, they can negotiate a sense of belonging and identify with their specific cultural backgrounds (Moura-Koçoğlu, 2009, p. 306).

The growing number of diverse picture books for kindergarteners and school kids shows that it is considered beneficial to minority peoples to be exposed to diverse literature from a very young age. The books might help children form their identities and develop a sense of belonging. According to Moura-Koçoğlu (2009), “aboriginal authors enable the new generation to re-imagine their past and to construct their present while offering a distinct Indigenous interpretation” (p. 305). Bradford (2002) argues that aboriginal children’s literature has many benefits such as “recovery and retelling of traditional narratives; recovery and deployment of Aboriginal languages, [...] and rewriting of historical narratives from the point of view of Indigenous people” (p. 4). Furthermore, diverse literature encourages a peaceful coexistence of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people as it “feature[s] the experience of Aboriginal people in urban settings; engage[s] with contemporary cultural and political questions; [and] produc[es] hybrid texts incorporating Indigenous and non-Indigenous traditions” (Bradford, 2002, p. 4). Additionally, Mullen (2002) argues that the critical discussion of colonization contributes in combating racist policies and practices as well as “accepting alternative histories rooted in Aboriginal knowledges and honoring narratives of indigeneity told by Indigenous peoples from their perspective, decolonizing education, pedagogy, and curriculum and aligning culturally contextualized learning with Indigenous worldviews’ holism and interconnectedness” (p. 9f).

Among other genres like graphic novels and comic books, the genre of the

picture book integrates written and pictorial text. The pictures do not merely decorate the pages but modify the meaning and add aspects which would otherwise not be transmitted. Indigenous tradition has been passed on orally over centuries. As combination of written and oral tradition seems to be transmitted more easily through a genre which includes pictures, “it is the genre of choice for an increasing number of Indigenous storytellers, many of whom are also writers of adult fiction” (O’Neill, 2001, p. 4). Through the pictures, children are enabled to interpret the stories themselves and adapt them to their own experiences and worldview.

#### *The connection with nature in Sweetest Kulu*

*Sweetest Kulu* was written by Celina Kalluk and illustrated by Alexandra Neonakis. Published in 2016, it is addressed to children of age 1 - 2 years but can also be read to older children. Kulu is a term of endearment for the Inuktitut people. As a baby, the protagonist of the story is symbolic for Indigenous peoples. The book highlights the connection between humans and nature, a connection which is the basis of many Indigenous peoples and can therefore be adapted to many different cultures. It symbolizes the ability to live in harmony with nature and shows that nature is where all humans originate. Stating that “this beautiful land gave you a foundation”, Kulus mother tells her baby about the gifts they receive from nature and animals. The first one to greet Kulu is the personalized sun, giving the child a blanket of warm light (Kalluk & Neonakis, 2016, p. 2). Then the wind spreads word that Kulu was born and invites the animals to come and pay a visit (Kalluk & Neonakis, 2016, p. 3-4). Instead of the mother, nature sings a song for the

baby at the end of the story. Snow Bunting brings Kulu flowers which he is supposed to “plant and grow with” (Kalluk & Neonakis, 2016, p. 7). The lullaby, which is a symbol of the deep connection between mother and baby, is creating a bond between the baby and nature.

Aside from being in contact with flora and fauna, the baby almost exclusively meets animals which fill the pages with their beauty and kindness, and the only human signs in the book are the mother’s face and hand. Nxumalo (2020) argues that “the challenge for early childhood education is to situate children in a complex web of relationships with all their kin”, and to teach them interdependence and responsibility (p. 146). The story shows that in Indigenous culture, humans live side to side with nature and animals. Kulu’s mother indicates that we need nature more than it needs us and should therefore protect it and help all who need help. Classic children’s literature oftentimes includes (exclusively) animals, and they mainly function as anthropomorphic, speaking and acting as if they were humans. In *Sweetest Kulu*, the animals do not slip into the role of a human but rather represent themselves. Functioning as Kulu’s teachers and protectors, they demonstrate character traits like tenderness and spontaneity and share basic knowledge of the world. The polar bear teaches the child to always treat animals with respect, which is an important aspect of Indigenous culture. The story shows “alternative ways of animal-human assemblages as well as potential disruption of colonial discourses in early childhood education” (Nxumalo, 2020, p. 145).

The illustrations in *Sweetest Kulu* are rich in color and show the beauty of nature, whether the snow topped mountains, underwater world or the deep green grass. The baby appears on almost every page,

wrapped in an embrace by nature or the animals. They either hold them in their ‘arms’ or look protectively down on them. Big animals like the ice bear or the whale make the baby appear small and vulnerable. They all seem friendly though and between the pawns of the muskox or the ice bear, nothing can happen to the child. At the end of the story, Kulu is wrapped in a blanket of grass and surrounded by flowers (Kalluk & Neonakis, 2016, p. 26). The pictures show how small humans are compared to nature, that nature cannot be possessed by humans, but that we should rather listen and learn from it. According to Indigenous tradition, we need to protect and respect it and intervene as little as possible.

Some of the character traits Kulu is taught by the animals are to listen closely, to believe in oneself, to give love, to get out of bed early, help others, to protect what one believes in, to finish well what one started, not to be lazy, as well as tenderness, creativity, spontaneity, heritage, empowerment, patience, gentleness, and kindness. There seems to be an emphasis on love and helpfulness for your people and animals in Indigenous culture. The author depicts how we receive so much from nature and other living things that we have the ‘duty’ to give something back. Furthermore, Arctic Hare shares its roots with Kulu, which also play an important role in Aboriginal tradition (Kalluk & Neonakis, 2016, p. 9). Along with the fact that Indigenous people are often affected by environmental damage, their belief to protect nature and animals predestines them to fight for the environment. The second book to be analyzed shows Aboriginal people offering active resistance and fighting for the land they inhabit.



### Symbolism in *We Are Water Protectors*

*We are Water Protectors* was written by Carole Lindstrom and illustrated by Michaela Goade. Published in 2020, a time when the status of environmental health is of high concern not only for Indigenous people, but for all of humanity. It is meant for children aged 5 – 6 years and can be used in elementary schools when talking about issues of the environment. The book was inspired by the emergence of Native American water protection movements throughout the United States. Less than two decades into the twenty-first century, “humanity face[d] radical global climate change, mass species extinctions, and unprecedented transformations to both terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems across the globe” (Cariou & St-Amand, 2017, p. 3). Indigenous peoples were particularly impacted by this state of affairs, for instance by water shortage “experienced primarily in small, usually Indigenous, communities”, the flooding of vast areas of Cree and Innu lands by hydroelectric projects in Northern Manitoba and Northern Québec, and the effects of global warming on Inuit communities (Cariou & St-Amand, 2017, p. 3). The story specifically refers to the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline which is a crude oil pipeline stretching from North Dakota to Illinois, endangering sacred sites and crucial water sources. In April 2016, youth from Standing Rock and surrounding Native American communities organized a campaign to stop the Pipeline calling themselves “ReZpect Our Water” with slogans like “Water is Life” and “United in Water”. In their resistance, Indigenous people have a very strong opinion on how we need to react to the endangerment of our resources: “We must live according to the principle of a land ethic. The alternative is that we shall not live at all” (N. Scott Momaday, *Kiowa writer*).

There are very few children’s books depicting a world seen through the eyes of Indigenous peoples in general, but there are even less written from a female perspective. The author of the book is Anishinaabe, and Anishinaabe women have a very important role as caretakers of the water. *We are Water Protectors* represents cultural beliefs of the Ojibwe culture. The water protector functions as the protagonist, the black snake as the antagonist. The protagonist is a young woman, whose grandmother tells her that water is sacred as “we come from water” and “water is the first medicine” (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 1f). Later on, she explains that “Water has its own spirit” and “Water is alive. Water remembers our ancestors who came before us” (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 29f). The girl represents her whole people, she carries within her the stories from her grandmother, the land and the water. Her hair is flooding down her body as streams of water, as the “river’s rhythm runs though [her] veins. Through [her] people’s veins” (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 6). The frightening “black snake” functions as a metaphor for oil pipelines and technological progress as it encroaches upon the untouched natural beauty of the earth and its water supply. It has the form of a pipeline with a snake’s head (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 13f). In contrast to the peaceful blue-green colors in the previous pages, the whole page is red and immediately alerts the reader of the danger: “Now the snake is here. Its venom burns the land. Courses through the water. Making it unfit to drink”. The snake’s venom is symbolic for the oil. As venom stands for death, the author paints a very strong picture, implying that the oil brings death to the Indigenous, which will no longer have fresh drinking water.

When the girl hears about the black snake which endangers her land, she

decides to fight it with her people and stand up against it. The snake is threatening the existence of life through contamination and the exploitation of natural resources, and the Indigenous people form a resistance which is repeated in the book like a refrain: “We stand with our songs and our drums. We are still here” (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 5). We see how she summons the courage from her people to protect what has always provided for and protected her people: the land and water. Just like *Sweetest Kulu*, the book encourages to protect animals and the environment: “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, The earth” (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 21-26). The beautiful picture of the earth with connecting flowers on all continents and different animals and humans walking on it and the words “We are all related” show that for the Indigenous, humans are closely connected to all living things. In harming animals and plants, they harm themselves (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 26). The story defines environmental consciousness as a constant fight and implores children to commit to retaining the purity of the world’s water and land. The author portrays the raw vulnerability of Indigenous people to Western colonial structures and paints a vivid picture portraying the violence on land as violence on our bodies. She conveys an awareness to all humans that our resources are limited. The protagonist is sparking a movement both within and among Indigenous communities across the country and the world. On the last pages, the reader is presented the Standing Rock campaign initiated by the Aboriginal, who stand up against the black snake, which is “in for the fight of its life” (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 33f).

Unlike *Sweetest Kulu*, *We are Water Protectors* makes use of an animal character in a way reminding the reader of Western mainstream children’s literature: The snake does not symbolize nature but culture, which technological progress is a part of. Whereas “the four-legged” and “the two-legged” animals in the picture book are allowed to represent the unity and connectedness of nature, the snake represents wickedness, not unlike some animal characters in traditional Western fables which deal with man’s virtues and vices. In this detail, Lindstrom’s narrative sacrifices awareness to and respect of nature to the need for an impressive image. But, rather than criticizing the author’s decision, we might appreciate it as a way of making allowances to the Western way of telling stories for children.

## Conclusion

Both stories take the reader to a place that is not often talked about or revered significant in Western society: the spiritual connection with land. “We come from water” (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 1) and “this land gave you a practical foundation to balance and build upon” (Kalluk & Neonakis, 2016, p. 25) depict nature as the origin of all life including human beings. Furthermore, *We are Water Protectors* shows a pregnant woman and Kulu is a newborn, therefore pregnancy and birth are depicted as the base of our relationship with nature. Water “nourished us inside our mother’s body” (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 3), so we are connected to and dependent on nature even before we are born. Furthermore, in both stories the ancestors play an important role in Indigenous belief. They orally pass on their stories and teach the youngest ones their wisdom. The books are supposed to teach children about the religious beliefs of different Native American cultures and

encourages pride in one's own heritage. Moreover, they raise awareness that nature and animals need our protection as nature protects us and gives us everything we need to live.

Since the time of "oral literature" which originated in the beginning of Western cultural history (Ong, 1982), it has been the storytelling which constituted societies, by creating commonality and providing an entertaining and enjoyable way to confirm an ethics of human life (Booth, 1988) which could be passed on to the next generation. In our time, this earliest and most basic form of art seems

to be living up to its anthropological function by posing the oldest of all questions anew: How can we live on this planet consistent with nature? Whatever answers Indigenous tradition can provide will be of interest to all of us, irrespective of our ethnic roots. This is why picture books telling Indigenous stories could be successful and should have a say in the matter. They share ancient knowledge most of us lack, and at the same time bring home to our Western culture an idea of Indigenous peoples and beliefs. As Lindstrom's narrative reassures us, they "are still here".

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