

INDIGENOUS ECOCRITICISM AND THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN HUMANS AND
NATURE IN CATHERINE KNUTSSON'S *SHADOWS CAST BY STARS*

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ABSTRACT

In the midst of the climate crisis, Young Adult dystopian literature offers a glimpse of the possible dark futures in store for all of us. Yet Indigenous Young Adult literature revises the natural world not as the enemy of the survival of human beings, but as a possible ally. In Cassandra Knutsson's *Shadows Cast by Stars*, a plague is raging and Indigenous blood is key to human survival. Through her journey to save her community, Cassandra demonstrates how she builds a more positive relationship with nature. By offering alternative possibilities for how to treat and interact with nature, *Shadows Cast by Stars* recreates nature as agentive and sentient rather than inert or bent on destroying human beings. Instead, *Shadows* educates its readers on the positive relationships with nature possible within Indigenous ecocritical epistemologies.

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INTRODUCTION

One of my earliest and fondest memories of experiencing nature comes from when I was just eleven. I could feel the sun on my face and a gentle breeze on my skin. My draw-string backpack bounced with my step as I crossed the backyard and headed into the woods. I walked until I couldn't anymore. There was a swamp, and I was not dressed to be walking through a foot of water. Looking out at the wet ground, I saw cranes and herons and smaller birds that I recognized but didn't know the names of. I walked along the edge of where I was and where they were. Sitting on a downed tree, I pulled the notebook and pen out of my backpack. I opened to the first page and looked at the blankness, the potential stories and emotions that could fill the page—but my pen didn't touch the paper. I was nervous because I wanted to write something real and something that made readers feel something. Then I looked out across the swamp and decided I wanted to write a story that left my imagined reader feeling the way that I felt when I looked out at the world right behind my backyard. So, I sat there on that tree and started writing. Feeling that connection with nature was inspiring to me. My experiences with nature have guided me to explore the relationships between humans and nature in literature. I am a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux tribe; however, I was brought up outside of that culture. During my time working toward a bachelor's degree, I pursued a minor in Native American and Indigenous Studies, focusing on literature and poetic practices from various Indigenous authors. These are some of the things that motivated me to further my understanding of these practices in writing, whether they were from my own Indigenous community or not.

In *Shadows Cast by Stars*, as the main character, Cassandra, is working to save her Indigenous community from the urban majority Indigenous peoples, the Others, are being abducted and killed because their blood is the antidote for the mysterious plague, which has been

terrorizing everyone except the Indigenous peoples. Cassandra is tasked to make choices that are helpful for either her brother, who is troubled throughout the novel, or for her whole community. In one moment, Cassandra is asked to travel with a different group on their journey to the border of their community, leaving her relationship with her brother tattered. Her choices are between traveling with her brother and working to mend their relationship or traveling with the other group, where she is necessary as a medicine woman supporting her community. She chooses her community until her brother's situation becomes dire, and then she tries to save both despite the odds against her success in both. While her brother is a part of her community, the whole community's needs are different from her brother's individual needs at the time. While on the journey for her brother she finds that it is already too late for him, but she manages to find the solution for her community using her own interactions and relationship with nature.

When considering the choices characters make, it is important to look at their cultural and family backgrounds as a basis for their decisions—like Cassandra choosing whether to help her brother or her community. Regardless of a family's background, every culture has standards for how people should act toward nature. Many of the rules are written into Young Adult (YA) literature. Young readers learn from the novels and books they read, whether explicitly or implicitly. Reading from a variety of authors with a variety of backgrounds is important for young readers to gain an understanding of more cultural identities. Multicultural YA literature is offering accessible plot lines and stories that offer alternate cultures as both entertainment and an opportunity to learn. Sandra Hughes-Hassell writes on multicultural YA literature “as an integral part of the social and academic context, I believe multicultural literature can act as a counter-story to the dominant narrative about people of color and indigenous peoples” (214).

Understanding the impact that literature can have on an individual makes understanding the messages of the literature that much more important.

Understanding that YA and multicultural YA literature can be a way for readers to learn, though, does not place responsibility of education on the authors. Like the concept that one person cannot speak properly for an entire group of people—there will be variances. So, understanding what makes up YA Literature, Mandy Suhr-Systma, scholar of Native studies and childhood/adolescence, explains that “YA texts from the mid-twentieth century to the present largely conform to a set of common conventions. Narrated by or heavily focalized through an individual adolescent protagonist, these works depict adolescence as a fluid, potential-rich, and rebellious stage that young people begin to move out of as they come of age and come to terms with the social institutions that shape their worlds” (“Introduction” xv). It is important to know the purpose and impact of writing for a specific age group, like these YA books. It is just as important to know the impact and purpose of the topics on the readers.

Before discussing the topics entangled here with nature, we must be clear on nature’s form. When discussing nature writing versus environmental writing, scholars Sean Prentiss and Joe Wilkins wrote, “nature and environmental writing is writing that honors the connection between the natural world and human experience, that understands them as a part of a whole, that reckons with the complex forces of place and landscape in human lives” (8-9). As nature writing, *Shadows Cast by Stars* discusses the “intricacy, beauty, danger, fear, and/or current conditions of the natural world” (Prentiss and Wilkins 9). For the purposes of this paper, and following the definitions offered by Prentiss and Wilkins, I define nature as non-human life, setting, and weather. In the novel, “nature,” such as weather, plants, and animals, interacts with the characters as separate, living entities, capable of communicating with the characters directly and

purposefully impacting their lives. Likewise, the human characters can build interactive relationships with natural entities, such as Cassandra's relationship with plant life and the ravens that appear throughout the story. To introduce ecocriticism in this context, I examine the interactions between humans and nature, which will drive the understanding of Cassandra's character as she grows. Analyzing interactions of humans and nature in texts is an ecocritical ideology. The understanding of application to the contemporary world from literature creates a kind of epistemology based in ecocriticism, which is also available in fictional worlds. Understanding ecocriticism from an Indigenous perspective includes understanding the way the relationships are viewed as familial. The Indigenous relationships go beyond creating a relationship acknowledging the familial bond of protection with nature. Scholar of American Literature, Meredith Privott explains this relationship in her analysis of a series of interviews with women who protested the Dakota Access Pipeline installation.

With the ideas of nature and of YA literature coming together in Knutsson's novel, there is a way for YA readers to have that connection with literature while also seeing themselves represented in their reading. Being able to connect with and understand the characters offers an easier way of understanding the importance of nature to many Indigenous cultures from both familiar and unfamiliar perspectives. Understanding pieces of Indigenous cultures is integral to understanding the full story in an Indigenous text, just as it is important in the reading of any novel. In any story, culture is relevant—the difference here is the way that culture becomes something that the characters are aware of. They know where their beliefs come from and why, and they cling to the communities their cultures tie them to. Deciding which parts of the Indigenous cultures to participate in is a big question for Cassandra because she was raised

outside of the cultures she moves to live with. She must learn the ways of this new community before she is able to help the members to safety.

Suhr-Sytsma analyzes the importance in classrooms and education of the inclusion of minority-authored, specifically Indigenous-authored, YA novels, using *Slash* as one example. In her article she writes, “non-Native authors’ often problematic representations continue to dominate, promoted by publishers, librarians, and educators” (Suhr-Systma 28). *Shadows Cast by Stars* will not balance the playing field but will offer a chance for an alternative narrative to be heard. Knutsson is creating an opportunity here for readers from other cultures to experience unfamiliar Indigenous cultures. While readers who are unfamiliar with Métis culture—a culture birthed from the mixing of the French and Indigenous heritages—might not understand everything, they will inevitably pick up on some of the cultural aspects of the novel. Indigenous texts lend themselves to ecocriticism because of the way the authors describe the relationships with the natural world and how nature is used throughout the plots. Knutsson’s novel demonstrates Cassandra growing in her relationship with nature as she also learns more about Indigenous cultures and practices as the apprentice to the medicine woman, Madda.

In many Indigenous-authored novels, culture becomes a main aspect of the narrative because of the awareness the characters have of their culture. In *Shadows Cast by Stars*, the majority group is typically trying to use Indigenous bodies for personal gain. As people from the group in power start dying, suddenly that majority population realizes the “Others” (Indigenous peoples) are safe from the plague that is killing non-Indigenous peoples. Then, Indigenous bodies are used to save everyone else, at the sacrifice of those Indigenous communities.

Indigenous YA novels, among other novels from minority cultures, have been getting more attention in classrooms, various curated lists from librarians, and other popular reading

venues. This Indigenous-authored text follows the well-liked plot structure of a post-apocalyptic dystopian novel. *Shadows Cast by Stars* depends on the cultures of the characters and the author; In this case both the author and the main character are Metís women. This approach makes sense with current events surrounding inclusion and accessibility for all races and cultures. Getting more attention to minority-authored texts is a good way to introduce those from majority cultures to minority cultures in an appropriate way. Having these positive interactions between cultures and readers will create a safe environment for readers and writers alike. Authors are not stepping into or volunteering for a role to educate their readers of the cultures, though a published book is available to any audience and so there must also be an understanding that the novel may be an introduction or additional narrative from a culture that the reader is less than familiar with. Readers should also focus on understanding, or at least respecting, the cultural aspects of a novel. Seeing things from a new perspective may offer a new understanding of the world.

Indigenous YA literature has been including issues from contemporary environmental issues in their plots for years. Indigenous scholar Betty Booth Donohue establishes the importance of Indigenous literature by saying, “It is becoming more difficult to deny [Indigenous authors’] burgeoning existence or to push coverage of them to ethnic themed courses. Most Americans will agree that they must be acknowledged and taught” (190). So, this approach creates space for the Indigenous stories to be understood by non-Indigenous readers. Many Indigenous cultures are highly involved in their relationships with the land, and therefore will carry that into lessons in the classroom. Indigenous YA literature builds a relationship between characters and nature that can be applied and used in the real world. The separation from reality offered from the futuristic dystopian genre allows a level of comfort for the reader as it is not perfectly applicable to their lives. Two hundred years in the future is not as far away as it seems,

so this novel offers itself as a warning to what the world might look like if people continue as they are instead of making more sustainable and climate positive choices. Applying lessons from this novel would help to prevent or delay the onset of the world that Knutsson is predicting in this dystopia. I will identify how the novel makes these human-nature relationships more accessible to people outside of the cultures that are being referenced directly in the novel.

Knutsson's novel is accessible to a non-Indigenous audience because the reader learns the culturally specific aspects of the story at the same time as the main character learns. Finding a strategy for readers to understand the cultural differences, or a way to use the relationships described throughout, even without a full understanding of the cultures, will create a more inclusive novel and a broader audience for the lessons of the stories. *Shadows* creates an access point for cross- and multicultural inclusion into the issues this novel presents. Its characterization of nature as sentient makes nature something worth saving. When the human and natural communities work together, they can succeed. This book will help young readers approach these difficult topics with interest. Young readers will see community as an important part of living, helping to heal our dividing society.

Furthermore, books like *Shadows Cast by Stars* can teach young people to create positive interactions with the world around them, whether that be human-to-human interactions or human-to-world interactions. In this book, the reader learns the cultural rules that Madda, the community's medicine woman and spiritual leader, is teaching. This is not a journey that is only meant for the character in the novel; this is an example, a teaching moment for all, that can help to build a more positive working relationship with nature.

There are characters who learn, and there are those that do not. The characters who readers are led to like are those who do or who do not learn to respect nature—those characters

who do not learn a positive relationship with nature tend to be troubled in some way or to cause trouble for the protagonists. Cedar, Cassandra's peer, at first seems like a problematic character, but as the novel continues, the readers witness respect from him toward nature. This respect grows as his positive relationship with Cassandra also grows. The reader is offered glimpses into what the world might look like if we continue down this path and survive, to how nature will take control again after humans no longer have so much power over their environment. Readers, through the novel, experience a range of natural disasters taking over old cities, and respecting a tree branch for what it could have been. *Shadows* is a great introduction to these various relationships with nature for readers to enjoy as they witness Cassandra's strength in overcoming challenges and growing in her relationship to the land.

By looking at these scenes throughout the novel, I will explain, identify, and analyze characters' interactions with nature and how those scenes are meant to impact readers. Through interactions with nature, characters are defining nature and defining themselves; interacting with the world around them builds these characters' personalities without giving readers an explicit introduction.

Cassandra has many scenes involving her and nature. Some are mere observations, but others are moments where she is interacting with nature, or vice versa. Through the main character's observations and interactions with nature and the way Knutsson writes these scenes, she creates a world that readers interpret through Cassandra's eyes. By offering alternative possibilities for how to treat and interact with nature, this novel recreates nature as agentive and sentient rather than inert or bent on destroying human beings. Instead, *Shadows* models positive relationships with nature possible within Indigenous ecocritical epistemologies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding *Shadows Cast by Stars* from an Indigenous ecocritical lens will help place the relationships between nature and humans as an example of how people should behave toward nature in our current climate. Reading culturally specific material will help to identify the specific Metís traits and traditions present in the novel. The cultural reading, paired with ecocriticism, offers understanding of the relationships formed between humans and nature. Ecocriticism has offered a sense of place to scholars within the literature they are studying, recognizing Thoreau as a nature writer that has been present in canonical literature and expanding to include many more authors and texts. Through the ways that nature is described in this climate zone, there are many scenes where nature is reclaiming the human-dominated spaces.

In an ecocritical framework, the dystopia of the novel is brought on by a plague and an environmental crisis, dramatic weather, and a change in the life in the ecosystem. The novel describes scenes of raging storms and the effects of the extinction of bees, for example. As the main characters are traveling to their new home by boat, Knutsson offers some background about the state of the environment: “They aren't friendly, those places: Vancouver, Victoria, Seattle, Los Angeles. Their deaths were sudden and painful, shaken loose from the land by terrible earthquakes. Below, in the inky fathoms, there reaching toward me, raking the water with their gridiron hands” (26). Setting up this environmental disaster, readers are left knowing that the world they are familiar with is partially drowned and knocked down by earthquakes and flooding. In our contemporary world, climate change is projected to create issues world-wide by causing a rise in sea levels, extreme weather, risks to biodiversity, deforestation, and many other issues (Bee 21-22). Specifically predicted in Knutsson’s novel is the sea level rise and the natural

disasters and earthquakes. With the sea level rising, according to foreign policy expert Ronald Bee, “In ... regions, like Bangladesh, 10% of the country's habitable land (with 6 million citizens) would be lost with half a meter rise in sea level; 20% with 15 million people would be lost with one meter” (Bee 21). Ecocriticism then, breaks down the ideas present here and offers a lens for scholars to use to analyze and understand the relationships between humans and nature.

There are multiple understandings of ecocriticism as a literary theory. What “ecocriticism” means is different to scholars in various branches of the discipline. In a conversation defining ecocriticism, ecocritical scholar, Lawrence Buell describes that “Ursula Heise rightly observes that ‘ecocriticism has imposed itself as convenient shorthand for what some critics prefer to call environmental criticism, [or] literary-environmental studies, [or] literary ecology, [or] literary environmentalism, [or] green cultural studies’” (Buell 88). These are some of the many breakdowns of the term “ecocriticism,” though I think the breakdowns that fit the following analyses the best are “literary-environmental studies” or “literary environmentalism” because of the desire to understand the relationship between humans and the non-human nature. Buell recounts that “Cheryll Glotfelty, in the introduction to the *Ecocriticism Reader*, characterizes it simply as ‘the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment’” (Buell 88). With this distinction on ecocriticism, seeing the application of the theory is clear: understanding the relationships between humans and non-human nature is possible from understanding the theoretical literary critical view of this Indigenous-authored novel.

When looking to understand ecocriticism, there is a divide between waves of ecocriticism. According to Buell, “First-wave studies resonated with its preservationist edge as traditionally understood both by historians and by activists: environmentalism equals nature

protection in thinly populated remote areas” (94). Nature protection is where ecocriticism connects with Knutsson’s novel. The way that the characters work to protect each other and the world around them equates to the environmental literary tactic that is necessary to apply ecocriticism.

Nature, through the human-driven climate crisis, is paying the price for human decisions. Ecocritical theory offers an approach for Knutsson’s story of precaution and warning. Environmental Scholar Amy Patrick interprets ecocriticism to be understanding stories of apocalypse as precautionary to their audience. The characters may not have caused the earthquakes that sank the cities, but with limited knowledge of global warming, readers might pick up on the raised sea level that covers those cities. Patrick writes, “By engaging human health issues alongside environmental concerns, writers in a precautionary tradition address not only the ‘land ethic’ promoted by Aldo Leopold and others but also more traditionally defined human ethics” (Patrick 145). This assertion is under an assumption that writers who entertain topics of environment are writing as a precautionary destruction, not just an apocalyptic story. This establishes that there are stories that are purely apocalyptic because the actions of the characters did not impact the world to create that apocalypse. *Shadows Cast by Stars*, as an apocalyptic novel, creates a dynamic that is living with the fallout of one natural catastrophe having already occurred, along with the effects of the choices humans made in the story’s past.

To see a modern application of environmentalism applied, author Carolyn Merchant investigates cities around the United States to see how they are designing plans and construction to work with nature for the benefit of the community and surrounding environment. Carolyn Merchant wrote an article titled “Partnership with Nature” throughout which she discusses different relationships that have been formed between various modern communities and the

nature that shares the space with them. She writes, “A partnership ethic is, first of all, based on equity between human and nonhuman nature... Here the partnership process involved people talking with each other in community meetings to reach mutually acceptable solutions. In partnership with nature, they reintroduced native plant communities along with new drains to resolve water problems” (Merchant 70). In the community that Merchant is describing, they worked out a way to use the runoff water to enhance the native plant life in the area. This example from Minnesota demonstrates where a partnership and positive relationship with nature took place and they were able to create a safe and thriving environment for everyone in the community. Using these ideas, Merchant shows that there are groups that are working with the natural world to have a symbiotic relationship between nature and urban life. From the real world understanding of a relationship with nature, there also needs to be a literary understanding of nature, first as a living entity, then within a relationship between nature and humans.

Knutsson’s novel entertains the concept of life and what it takes to be considered alive in spirit. In the book, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, Carolyn Merchant discusses the life of nature through art and shows how it has always been alive. Merchant writes, “Central to the organic theory was the identification of nature, especially the earth, with a nurturing mother...but another opposing image of nature as female was also prevalent: wild and uncontrollable” (Merchant 2). Throughout *The Death of Nature*, Merchant refers to plays by William Shakespeare, art by Lucas Cranach, the romantics of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Francis Bacon’s ideas of nature. She discusses the creative works in relation to how they were perceived when they were first publicized and how they might be interpreted now under an ecocritical lens. Understanding the ideas Merchant presents is a good presentation of Western understandings of nature as it has been applied to traditional canonical literature. To

understand nature in literature, there needs to be an understanding beyond the *life* of nature. Knowing nature is alive is not enough.

Like understanding human relationships to the plants and environment, understanding the relationships between humans and animals is important for readers to understand a full relationship with nature. With ravens playing such a large role in the story, understanding animism as a part of ecocriticism becomes important as well. Animism within ecocritical theory offers a way of understanding nature in Indigenous YA Literature. Alice Curry, an advocate for multiethnic YA Literature, wrote a chapter on children's literature, mentioning Knutsson's novel. She writes that this novel has "indigenous protagonists' deep spiritual connection to their roots—roots that are culturally *and* ecologically entwined" (Curry 57, original italics). In the next paragraph she adds on to this idea about spirituality being included by saying, "spirit... is in the main conspicuously absent from the majority of western-produced dystopian novels" (Curry 57). These ideas draw attention to some of the importance of this novel because of the spirit being involved in the lives of the characters, present and visible for the readers. To make a place for nature to be accepted in a world with humans, humans must have an understanding of what the medicine woman and the main character establish in the novel: "Everything has a piece of spirit in it" (Knutsson 126). While everything is not a physical dwelling-place, it is a spiritual dwelling-place. Nothing else matters in this, and regardless of human acceptance everything having spirit is an idea accepted as fact in the novel. Another concept that Curry discusses is the idea of "Ecopoiesis." She refers to Jonathon Bate as the one who coined the term to give nature a form of self-realization (Curry 59). Kate Rigby, who writes an article exploring the possibility of ecopoiesis says, "This alone would truly be a work of ecopoiesis, a making of the dwelling-place" (440). For the remainder of this paper, then, we can understand ecopoiesis as the making

of a natural space for some purpose from a place or circumstance that is otherwise considered for nothing else. Throughout *Shadows Cast by Stars*, nature is the voice of spirit in a way that human beings can interact with it. These ideas can be applied to many scenes including ravens, among other interactions Cassandra has with nature. This idea is, once again, bringing to life the nature that seems inanimate; trees, rocks, wind—all have spirit and life in them, creating a logical reason for the interactions between the human and the natural.

In Knutsson's novel, the human characters establish a relationship with the ecological world to begin to heal from trauma and to create a safe environment for all. In discussing Indigenous ideologies and human relationships with nature, there are many scholars that explain their relationships or relationships they have witnessed with nature, specifically Laura Tohe and Meredith Privott. Tohe states how women in her culture are seen, through their influence on the families and communities, to be in positions of strength and power. In *Shadows Cast by Stars*, these characters would be Madda, the medicine woman of the community, and Cassandra after she takes Madda's place. Tohe writes, "the role of the mother signifies creator and protector of life" (Tohe 105). As Tohe describes this position in her community, mothers and women are to protect life, and as established in *Shadows Cast by Stars*, Cassandra responds to Madda asking what qualifies something to have spirit: "it just needs to exist. Everything has a piece of spirit in it" (Knutsson 126). Tohe, then, is saying that Indigenous women, though not on their own, are tasked with defending nature and the world. Following the same concept, Lisa Udel argues that motherwork is also built into Indigenous cultures, as nature is often seen as a mother, and is then protected as a member of the community and family. Udel writes, "In order to do motherwork well, Native women argue, women must have power" (Udel 45). These scholars explain why Indigenous women characters are so willing to give care and mother-acts for their community.

They explain the importance of family protecting family, which goes beyond the idea of the nuclear family that most are familiar with to include the world and environment surrounding the nuclear family.

Despite protests that affected the Midwest region of the United States, the Dakota Access Pipeline was built. To understand the Indigenous protestors' perspectives, Meredith Privott, a non-Indigenous woman, writes about the #NoDAPL movement (No Dakota Access Pipeline movement) by analyzing interviews with various Indigenous women who were present and participated in the protests. Referring to one of her interviews, Privott explains, "She is calling on all Indigenous peoples— women and men— to protect the water or risk death for all" (Privott 93). Privott is referring to a desire to unite the goals of different Native and Indigenous groups to accomplish their goals. The reason that Indigenous people are so motivated to protect the water is because "water is life" (Privott 84). A good example to demonstrate the connection between humans and nature follows the positive relationships represented in the novel. Privott quotes a woman who participated in these protests saying, "'mni wiconi' which means 'water is life.' It also means respect for water— respect for river. As long as you have water, there is life" (Privott 84). Life being dependent on water is important to Knutsson's novel because of the connection that her main character has with the lake and the spirit found there—the water is the place that brings her totem, her spiritual guide, to her. Cassandra finds her totem and her more direct connection to the spirit there. Near or in the water, she is granted access to her totem, has a moment where her thoughts and prayers were answered by nature, and, in the rain and near the ocean, she finds out how to save her community's chief. Many other important scenes are also involved with bodies of water throughout the storyline.

Emily Cousins, a scholar writing about Indigenous relationships with land, starts her article by saying, “Non-Native Americans need not run their own sweat lodges or play at ‘being Indian.’ They should cultivate instead the strains within their own traditions that foster a sense of the sacred earth” (1). This is not to say that non-Native people must step away from all the Indigenous cultures; this simply means that they must find their own way to be respectful in the ways of the culture. When considering Indigenous connections with land, Cousins says, “Without a tradition of spiritual connections to the land, some nonNatives look to Native American cultures for an alternative example” (3). Having this opportunity to watch and learn from another culture is key to thriving in environments if the person is not culturally tied to the land through these relationships. For Cassandra, this means that she is learning the aspects of the cultural teachings that are relevant to what she needs in her life, but she is not taking more than she needs to her personal and communal success. She is not learning or participating in culture because of popularity; she is participating and learning it because of the connection it creates and the positive effects it has on her life. Reading novels is a way to experience cultures that are different from your own, and *Shadows Cast by Stars* offers many examples of human and nature relationships that are positive and negative and offers the outcomes of what happens when people engage in either kind of relationship.

Indigenous women in the Metís community have spoken out about their experiences in a culture that is in-between. The main character of Knutsson’s novel is identified as a Metís girl, and this in-betweenness that she carries with her is important in many aspects of her life. Toni Culjak speaks of Metís culture and the experiences of three Metís women through the analysis of their autobiographies. Culjak writes, “For most mixed-bloods, there is not a place ‘in between’; they exist in a kind of no-man’s-land. Historically, only the Metís of the Canada and the United

States have offered a distinctive culture that validates the complex ‘racial identities’ of mixed bloods” (138). This complex identity, along with moving locations, offers the main character, Cassandra, a place of in-between in many forms. She is in between identities of Other and not, belonging to the Band community and the inner-city community, and belonging to the spirit world and the human world. Establishing duality and the possibility of reaching into two at once is a way to bring those separate identities together. When considering the culture that the author and main character identify with, the duality of the cultural structure makes for adaptable situations, such as Cassandra’s many positions of in-between, like moving to a new community and understanding both the human and the spiritual. Cassandra’s character is one identity made of more, which is allowing her to unite more than one way of seeing and interacting with the world. She can share her gift of multiplicity with others. In the changing world, the Indigenous community is learning to adapt to survive but also to remain true to itself. Education professor Douaud writes, “The traditional image we have of the Metis is that of a marginal society with its own distinctive culture” (72). In Metis culture, the combination of traditional Indigenous backgrounds and the traditional French backgrounds mesh together to create a unified group that is involved in both or, depending on who you talk to, neither group. When cultures come together, parts of both are saved and parts of both are lost. Most people are concerned with losing parts of their identities because of the changing and the merging, but change can also lead to success for communities, which is eventually achieved for those characters in Knutsson’s novel.

These scholars I have included in this conversation are arguing the importance of Indigenous-authored texts and understanding and respect for Indigenous cultures. Indigenous relationships with land, through an ecocritical lens, create the opportunity for these scholars to

demonstrate some of these cultural ideas in books and novels. With these scholars, I will be expanding the idea that Indigenous authors are using their writing to create a space for young adults to experience these environmental ideas and Indigenous cultures. Understanding the variety of views and epistemologies of Indigenous cultures is important to understanding Indigenous literary art, but it is also a learning opportunity for viewers from any culture. Rather than expecting the creator, or writer, to teach their audience about the situations they write about, or novel is an opportunity to experience part of the world as someone else might experience it. Looking into cultures with an open mind is important so that some of the real-life experiences can leak in from the fictional world while maintaining a mostly stress-free separation from the real world. If readers are unable to experience the novel as it might apply to a real-life situation, they should at least be able to recognize the cultural details as they apply to the story they are reading. Being able to apply the cultural knowledge as the narrator supplies it should be useful to the reader in that way. These lenses applied to *Shadows Cast by Stars* offer a way to break down scenes for interpretation by someone with a limited base knowledge of the regional cultures in order to understand this novel as an environmental and Indigenous story.

NATURE: MORE THAN A SETTING

Throughout *Shadows Cast by Stars* there are various kinds of relationships between the human characters and the character of nature. Some of the most powerful and emotional scenes in the novel were characterized by the connection between the human characters and the characters of nature. Ecocriticism helps to connect the human and the non-human in a relationship, giving that background in how theorists recognize and analyze these relationships. In some examples, nature is a bridge between humans and spirit, or a reflection of the human character, or even nature and human characters becoming one. Similarly, to the idea that a Metis person has ancestrally been in two or more cultures, nature becomes a way for Cassandra to see more than just the natural. By creating space for herself in a “no-man’s-land,” Cassandra is creating space for the change and growth of her community (Culjak 138). Beyond building a relationship with nature, seeing a sense of self reflected in nature creates more importance in the respect that the characters show to each other. Bonding of spirit and nature creates a strength for both that is demonstrated in many situations throughout the novel.

There are a few different kinds of connections that humans and nature can have. One way that nature can be a connection to humans is as a bridge between the human and the spiritual realms. Nature acts as a representation of spirit that can be more easily interpreted by the characters. Early in the novel Cassandra is shown to demonstrate her spiritual connection through her ability to see people’s totems in spirit while also staying grounded, as Cassandra describes it. There is a connection between people and their totems. If someone’s spirit or hope or internal strength is damaged, then the damage is shown as something physical on their totem. Cassandra sees her brother’s totem, describing it by saying, “The raven looks as beaten and bruised as Paul... Today I watch Paul’s raven and worry, for there’s one thing I know: When a

shade comes to visit, something is about to change” (Knutsson 3). This connection, so early in the novel, demonstrates the bonded reflection of nature and the state of the people who live with it. Paul represents the human realm and the raven represents Paul in the spirit realm, and Cassandra has access to both representations. Cassandra shows that in-betweenness of the spiritual and the human, seeing that if the people are not well, nature will also be unwell.

As a bridge between human and spirit, there is nothing more telling than how the afterlife is described in this novel. There are a few scenes that mention the ceremonies of the afterlife but none that are quite as accessible to non-Indigenous readers. As Cassandra is conversing with Madda, she describes that “[Madda] points up at the single star that has poked its way through the clouds. ‘Some say that's what we become. Others, they say we become part of the wind until the day we are born again’” (Knutsson 271). While this scene may only include a few words of dialogue and an observation of the night sky, there is also an understanding that nature is a part of the human condition. Humans are made of, and consume, nature to survive, but nature also consumes humans when the time comes. This understanding takes the body and the spirit and offers some sense of calm and reassurance to Cassandra and Madda in this situation. In comparison, other cultures might spread the ashes of loved ones or bury them in the ground. No matter the culture or the belief, the human body must always return to the earth and to nature, but the spirit is less certain—and to Cassandra and Madda, it finds a home among the stars.

Like how Cassandra bridges two cultures, both in her ancestry and from her own life, nature creates that bridge between the spirit world and the human reality in many scenes of the novel, other moments where nature becomes that connector between the two. When Cassandra is faced with the challenge of saving her friend Bran’s father, she needs to be rejoined with nature.

She is unsure how to heal this man, so she runs out into a raging storm, feeling the rain and electricity in the air:

Above me, the clouds shift back and forth, rubbing together, and a low rumble comes from the east... The gods don't bowl. They dance. They writhe and twist and meld together until positive and negative become something more, something without a name, something that gives birth to lightning and her sister, thunder, and that's when I know what I have to do. (Knutsson 426)

In this, the bowling, dancing, and movement of the gods represented as clouds, is the connection between nature and humans. The spirit, being so strong in this storm, can offer Cassandra strength and knowledge. But this connection builds in with the Indigenous culture as well. The dancing of the clouds, of the gods, unites them with humans through this simple action. Dancing is an important spiritual aspect of many Indigenous cultures, so seeing this represented in nature is a clear bond between the human and the natural. Seeing those human actions reflected here is signifying a bond beyond just being a part of the same world; this bond is showing a common spirit between humans and nature.

In *Shadows Cast by Stars*, nature is used as a reflection of humans to show another layer of their character and personality. This layer of Curry's descriptions of ecopoiesis, creation of place for humans in nature, is an example that demonstrates these other layers that Knutsson is sharing with the readers. Having this example will be helpful to readers because they will allow readers to see nature connecting to the characters. It will also show the reflection of nature in those human characters. Using nature as a descriptor makes an unmistakable unity between the shape of one with the shape of another. While Cassandra is watching her brother and her friend, she sees in them a reflection of nature. Cassandra observes, "They spring from the same branch,

Bran and my brother, matching each stroke with the same strength, the same cadence” (70). In this moment, there is a direct correlation between the way that Cassandra is seeing these boys and the way that she sees the shape of a tree. The way that this correlation connects the boys to nature is reassuring and grounding. Cassandra is seeing them like they are: strong like a tree—they are connected somehow deeper, like the roots of a tree. This connection is something that can only be understood in this way through the connection of nature and these characters.

Another way that Knutsson narrates ecopoiesis is through the way she narrates Cassandra’s thoughts of her brother. She sees her brother in the ravens that frequent her: in the early scene of the raven on the beach, the raven as Paul’s totem, the ravens as they perch on the railings of Madda’s house. Cassandra narrates, “I’m beginning to think the raven that’s been dogging me is actually Paul... And, if he really is that raven, I’m a little afraid of him, too” (Knutsson 209). This fear of the raven, and of her brother, comes from the cultural image of the raven as a trickster—someone who is there to cause trouble and teach lessons. The raven as her brother’s totem has her constantly surrounded by this trickster, a spiritual creature vying for her attention. The raven, in this quote, is there to remind Cassandra she is not alone and that she is being watched. This connection between the raven and her brother created an opening for her to describe how she feels about her brother in that moment by the connotation of the raven. Even without cultural knowledge, which is mentioned throughout the novel, the raven in mainstream American culture is seen as pesky and cunning, so even someone outside of Indigenous cultures would understand the connection Cassandra is making between the bird and her brother—trouble is always around the corner. Human reflections in nature demonstrate the bond of understanding and unity between humans and nature, just as the raven totem understands the spirit of Paul.

Reflection of humanity and humanness in nature is often seen as something that humans see of their own characteristics in nature, but it is also shown as a similarity of what each is made of—a twist of ecopoiesis. Humans and nature share the same forms—a physical form and a spiritual form. Madda recognizes the differences, but also acknowledges the similarities between natural beings—whether they are considered alive by any epistemologies, she explains her logic by saying, “these stories are living things, as alive as you and me. Just in a different way, that's all... like this stone. It's got a soul, and I've got a soul, so in that, we're the same, but what houses the soul, that's completely different” (Knutsson 279). Recognizing that the beings are made up of different kinds of bodies and beings, there is also an understanding that they came from the same and will go back to the same. There is an understanding that there is more beyond the realm that humans can see and there is more to understand about any natural object than merely what meets the eye. The reflection of the human is not just a recognition of humanness but of what makes up a human, and it is seen in everything.

Another kind of connection that the characters have with nature is through seeing themselves becoming nature. There are many times that Cassandra's body and mind become one with nature. In one moment, she describes, “in my mind, great roots creep down from my body” (Knutsson 186). To reach down from the mind and metaphorically grow roots, Cassandra is changing the way she sees her body to be a more connected part of nature. Connecting with nature is a partnership and a relationship that can be an advantage to everyone in the relationship. Cassandra becoming nature not only holds her to the physical ground but also holds her in herself. The connection is benefitting her for many reasons, and she wouldn't be able to do that without the image of nature in her mind.

In a moment of danger, Cassandra feels safety in her connection with the earth—she felt that within the earth was a safe place to hide. She feels she must become the earth. She thinks, “the only way to survive is to get down low, hide, become a stone, a worm, a root” (Knutsson 262). Here, to be safe amid danger, Cassandra and the others had to get low, close to the ground. To feel safe is to feel strong like a stone and hide in the earth like a worm or a root. This metaphor of becoming the earth creates a sense of unity and oneness with the earth. Becoming the earth is something that protected Cassandra in her mind and body. The earth holds her close and defends her in moments of spiritual and mental journeys and in this moment of possible capture by the militant forces of the urban majority.

While many of the connections, of human becoming nature and nature becoming human through spirituality are clear throughout the novel, some of these moments of connection are less obvious. Cassandra is seeing her little group become the stars, though she does not necessarily make that observation out loud. In a moment seeming without hope and full of sacrifice, Helen, Cedar, and Cassandra find themselves alone with the stars. In this moment, the three of them are shown hopeful in the brightness of the three stars in Orion’s belt:

Above us are the three stars of Orion’s Belt—Mintaka, Alnilam, Alnitak. The last time I saw them was the night Paul and I sat on the windowsill at our house, before we left for the island. The stars look different now, bright and shiny, like someone spit-polished them, and I realized Helen’s right. Hope’s a pretty powerful thing, and taking hope away from a person is the surest way to destroy him. (Knutsson 404)

This section of text is equating hope with brightness and shininess. Hope is something that is seen in the darkness, which is referred to in similar ways in other mainstream novels. It is easy to

understand that light in the darkness more easily than it is to write how hope feels. These three teenagers are rebelling against what their community has requested of them, and they have struck out on their own. This connection with nature is something that can be seen from anywhere—ocean or land. While the hope they are referring to in this passage is the hope of Cedar to be with Cassandra, they are all hopeful for something. This is what creates the brightness of the trio of stars for the trio of people.

The bond between humans and nature is shown to be mutually beneficial and strengthening for each when done in a respectful and caring manner. *Shadows Cast by Stars* has demonstrated the connections between nature and humans that might go unnoticed by many casual readers but hold much significance in the story and the relationship of the characters with nature and with each other. The power of emotion that these scenes hold is immense, because of that relationship between humans and nature, shown so many times throughout the book. Ecofeminism creates that basis to grow to understand the ways that the Indigenous characters are seeing the nature around them. Rather than one mimicking the other, humans and non-human nature become one and the same. These examples from the novel offer various ways that the characters experience connections with nature. From bridging between the humans and spirit experiences, to reflecting human characteristics in an alternate way of viewing, to nature and human characters uniting, humans and nature are connected, and this novel makes that undeniable.

INERT NATURAL INTERACTIONS

Throughout the novel there are encounters during which nature acts more as a setting, the traditional view of how nature is used in many novels. Nature sets the scene, allowing for natural challenges to arise, but these natural challenges are also expected and not something that nature is thought to have planned or decided for the human characters. Of these interactions where nature is acting as an inactive part of the story, Cassandra, and other characters, can be seen observing nature around them, looking to nature to maintain a bond between the spirit and the human world, looking to nature for help, seeing how nature reclaims spaces, and seeing how people could respect nature. This novel is a fictionalized version of the environmentalism we see in the examples from Meredith Privott from her work with peoples involved in the #NoDAPL movement—people are creating a space for a protective and advantageous relationship with nature through their positive interactions toward it. The protection of the environment and the protection from the environment are artful ways to play with ecocriticism and environmentalism in this literary world. Some human characters demonstrate high levels of respect in *Shadows* that work as an example to the readers on how to act with and think of nature.

Throughout the novel there are examples of characters simply seeing nature in front of them, but it is in the way they see the nature that brings in the model of positive interaction. Characters can be seen observing nature to connect to place. One of the early moments of an observation of nature is upon arrival to a new setting. When Cassandra first arrives at this Indigenously populated island community, she was helping her family unload from their journey and noticed movement down the beach:

On the beach a short ways down, something catches my eye as I work—a blur of black against the thick, dark firs. I squint. It's a raven. He's tugging something

from under a rock. He cackles and hops, dancing his awkward, funny jig, until he finally pulls his prize out. Then he rises in the air, a black arrow, and drops something small, something white, to its death. An oyster, I think. (Knutsson 35)

This simple interaction is more than just a girl seeing a bird in its own habitat. This is a respectful observation of a display of the cunning and power of this raven. This moment of observation is also a moment of powerlessness for Cassandra. She watches the raven, unable to intervene to help it find food or to save the thing it is killing. Because Knutsson has already established that the raven is equated to Cassandra's brother, this scene is also a form of foreshadowing to the end of the story when her brother makes whatever cunning sacrifices he needs to make in order to help save the community. As Cassandra watches this scene unfold, she is taking in the new land, and this observation is a form of foreshadowing to what she will experience there. In environmentalism, there is also the layer that she is seeing a natural course of life and she is allowing it to remain unchanged by human interaction. Observing nature through this raven on the beach is Cassandra's way of being introduced to the natural ways of the island, living with the land in ways that are mutually beneficial.

In many moments of observation, Cassandra is not simply experiencing the world as it is. Cassandra finds herself becoming a part of the world around her, holding the space of both self and worldliness, and she is seeing more than she had seen of the earth before. She describes one of these experiences by saying:

The stiff leaves of a poplar rustle in the wind. A jay cackles in the cottonwoods, and if I concentrate hard enough I can make out a subtle hum just below the level of hearing, as if the earth is singing a song of its own. It's... beautiful. "It's like a hymn," [Cassandra says].

“See? You belong here,” [Bran says]. (Knutsson 90)

In this example, Cassandra is truly noticing the nature around her and can hear the hum of the earth. Her experience shows how the earth is more alive than it seems to be at first glance. She also sees the world in this way, and so Bran tells her that she does belong in that community and in nature in that way. Bran is identifying a cultural connection and a personal connection to nature through his Indigenous epistemology and understanding of the natural world. As Cassandra furthers her relationship and understanding of nature, she is demonstrating ways that others could use to grow a closer connection with nature as well.

Nature, in many scenes, is used to connect the human and spirit worlds, though Cassandra is another link in that connection—another duality in her identity. Spirit is understood by humans through Cassandra who interprets it from nature—another space of in-betweenness that Cassandra is holding. Nature is an anchor or a gate between worlds, where there is passage allowed, but it also might keep those two worlds separate. There are many situations throughout the novel that represent a calling of nature toward Cassandra—like nature reaching out to pull Cassandra into itself. During one of the first times Cassandra sees the lake behind her new home, she feels drawn to it. Cassandra narrates, “but the real problem is that I can't seem to take my eyes off the silvered lake. Reluctantly, I turn away” (Knutsson 48). This moment is powerful because of the following importance of the lake. It is as if she knows the lake will play a large role in her near future. This moment by the lake is drawing readers in a foreshadowing that the lake will be the host of some very important events. Cassandra wants to go to the lake but is pulled away by her responsibilities of moving into her new home. This interaction with the lake is showing that the lake is important for Cassandra and will end up impacting her journey. This pull that the lake has on Cassandra is not only foreshadowing, but also a gate for Cassandra to

later experience the spirit in her world. This calling of the lake is her spirit being pulled toward that experience. In her being pulled toward nature, there is also a way of accepting that calling that Cassandra feels. When she is being called, she must follow it, which is a good example from the book on how to respond when people are being called to nature in some way.

A few scenes in the novel display nature offering a representation of the spirit world in Cassandra's human world. Emily Cousins discusses the idea of spirituality in nature and participating in the aspects of culture that feel connected to the self, rather than adopting the ideas of someone else. There are various moments where the spiritual qualities of the stars hold true for the main character as she travels. Throughout the novel, stars seem to represent the feeling of the people in that scene. Stars are one idea of an afterlife for some of the Indigenous groups in this community. To help explain how she is feeling in a moment, Cassandra narrates, "I can't see the stars. A fog has swept in, smelling of salt and kelp, and I'm so soul-sick, my chest aches" (Knutsson 297). As she describes her physical feelings, she recounts that she can't see the stars. It seems that for Cassandra, the stars show a sense of the spirit—hope, dread, happiness, sadness. Those emotions that are best described in light and darkness. The stars are hiding, which shows her feeling alone and hopeless. As the characters of the novel hope to know that their friends and family have found a safe place in the spirit world, they look to the sky as a constant reminder of the spirit world and the loved ones they lost. Nature, in this case the stars, is representative of the way that these characters see a form of afterlife. While looking to nature is a representation of Cassandra's spirituality, this scene is also an example that shows how this interpretation and relationship with nature is included in this fictional circumstance.

While nature provides for human characters, the reverse is also true. In one scene, there is a moment of nostalgia, of remembering Cassandra's previous home. She remembers caring for

her garden and imagines what might be happening with it in that season. She thinks, “The apple tree had already bloomed and would, with luck, produce some fruit, for I'd fertilized it by hand myself” (Knutsson 60). This scene is a way of showing the effects Cassandra had on nature when she was there to care for it. The lack of pollinators created a need for her to fertilize the plants in her garden, and she brought life and food into her home through her actions. This models the difference between the contemporary view of man versus nature and the Indigenous view of a nature that is powerful and beyond the control of humans. In this scene, nature is seen as a provider of necessity, and Cassandra helped bring it to a position where nature was able to carry out that role. The readers can be left imagining that without Cassandra there to care for the plants they will suffer from her absence because of the lives missing from the ecosystem.

While nature is often seen helping or observing humans in the novel, some scenes have nature reacting in a way that is slightly more involved. Acting as a natural warning, plants cause Cassandra and Cedar to leave a forbidden place. Leading up to that interaction with nature, in a moment of panic, Cassandra fled from Cedar into the woods: “I continue to run until he tackles me. We fall into a thicket of stinging nettle and I claw at his face” (Knutsson 216). This moment is interesting because where they fall is considered sacred and is a forbidden area to trespass on. There should have been, and had previously been, human-made protections to warn them not to go into the area, but the signs were gone. The earth created a natural defense to keep the humans away—the nettles. While the earth is not portrayed here as active, there is plant life here that is impacting the lives of the humans who are interacting with it. While the two people falling into the plants is most likely damaging to the plant, they are also trespassing on spiritual land so in this situation nature is a bridge by maintaining that separation between human and spirit.

Carolyn Merchant, in one article, discusses the mutually beneficial relationship of some real-world communities working with nature to create a more efficient, safer, and cleaner environment for all. This togetherness can be seen in the novel as well. Even though nature does not always have the answer, or the solution, Cassandra and other characters are often looking to nature to answer their toughest questions. Cassandra is tasked to save some of the Band members from something they are considering to be a plague mutation. The plague is not known to be caused by environmental factors, but it is identified as the disturbance that causes the events of the novel to unfold. Without having knowledge of a cure for the plague beyond the blood of the Indigenous, which is obviously not working in this moment, she turns to nature. She narrates, “I lift the lid and scan the contents. Devils club. St. John’s wort. Mint. Lavender. No silver bullet. No secret antidote. No magic potion” (Knutsson 30-03). This reach to nature allowed her to feel some sense of direction. She looked to what she knew; these plants have been the solution for her in the past, but this time they do not have the answer she is looking for. She needs more than what nature can give her, here, and this is starting a conversation about going beyond just needing and using what nature can give you. This situation is an example of acknowledging that there could be and are sometimes answers found in nature’s resources, but they are not always going to be able to help people solve the problems they have. Contemporarily, looking to nature for help is something that humans have seemed to have forgotten, when it is so easy to find synthetic and human-designed products, but in the novel humans have built a relationship and sustainable way of life with nature, and Cassandra is modeling that trust in nature in this scene.

In our contemporary world, nature has a way of overtaking the places where humans have tried to push it out. Where nature is pushed out for roads and houses and cities, nature

eventually takes back that space. Something that might catch the attention of a reader is the way that nature, in the novel, is shown to reclaim human-dominated spaces.

Knutsson incorporates this knowledge when Cassandra is out with the Band, observing, “but the road is no longer a road. Asphalt lies in heaves and gullies, and trees are strewn about like spent matchsticks. An earthquake is always a reminder that we humans are as expendable as anything else, and if a fir that has weathered five hundred years of existence can be toppled, so can we” (102). This moment shows a catastrophic natural event, and it shows the power that nature has. This is a moment where the humans have no control over the results of the earthquake. The powerlessness of the people gives them the opportunity to see the fragility of human communities. This scene is showing that nature has the power to destroy these towns and human-made things, so nature must be lived with and not stifled out. Scenes of nature’s reclamation in this novel might make images and memories of nature reclaiming spaces more relevant in the mind’s eye of the reader. Remembering moments of natural disasters, or simply the decay of abandoned buildings, or other situations, might be familiar in one way or another to the readers. Another example of nature reclaiming places where human-made structures are dominant is demonstrated while Cassandra is out on one of the journeys. Cassandra observes, “our path snakes through dark woods. Nature has reclaimed this place, burrowing her roots through the burned-out shells of houses, ripping through asphalt” (Knutsson 256). In this example, Cassandra is explicitly acknowledging the reclamation of the space by nature. Instead of reacting in a human versus nature perspective, she is reacting in a humans *and* nature perspective. She sees that both have the right to life as she fights for her community’s right to life and recognizes the way that her community and nature are both reclaiming space for themselves in a world where they have been somewhat pushed out and stifled. The way that

nature's actions are described in this observation is aggressive— “ripping” and “burrowing” take strength and force for any animate thing to do, and nature does this slowly, seeming to be calculating the route that will most support it. This is an acknowledgement of nature's strength and fortitude. Cassandra's acknowledgement that nature is “reclaiming” the space is evidence that she understands nature was there first and humans changed the landscape to fit their needs. Modeling this understanding without fear and anger is important—Cassandra models respect and understanding as nature takes back the spaces it was pushed out of.

In a few scenes of the novel, there are examples of characters either respecting nature or disrespecting nature. To the readers, the characters model a lesson in behavior in natural spaces and how to respect the resources it offers humans. In a lesson of respect, the medicine woman of the community, Madda, makes a comment on the actions of Cassandra as she arrives to her home. On Cassandra's walk to Madda's, she observes, “another hatch of gnats rises over the road where it dips close to the lake, so I break off a branch of cedar, using it as a broom to clear a path. I like cedar, its strong, resinous scent, so I keep the branch, swinging it back and forth until I reach Madda's” (Knutsson 121). This scene is showing a common action of taking from nature without a thought of how the action might impact it. Madda says, “Just think of what this branch might have become if you hadn't taken it—a nest for a bird, for example. Its cones might have fed a squirrel. Maybe, one day, if the tree was tall enough, this branch might have held someone's body after they passed over” (Knutsson 122). In this, Madda is identifying the carelessness of Cassandra's action in not understanding the importance that one branch might have on the world, while she took it from life for a moment to shoo away some gnats. Cassandra is modeling a chance to learn and an opportunity to change the way that she interacts with nature.

Cassandra demonstrates the respect and interaction that is supposed to be present when humans take from nature, unlike Avalon picking a daisy without necessity. Cassandra narrates, “My next stop is the forest, Madda’s herbal in hand. As I give thanks and sever a bow from the nearest cedar, I remember Madda's advice” (Knutsson 384). These moments are showing that humans can choose to continue to be ignorant of the impact we have on nature, or we can see how our choices and actions impact nature and choose to be more respectful. Cassandra shows her growth and respect for nature from her lessons with Madda. She interacts with nature in these two scenes growing from taking without a second thought to taking for a purpose and thanking nature for its use.

The interactions with nature demonstrate how human characters are and should be interacting with nature. There are lessons that Cassandra learns, and there are characters that show Cassandra’s growth and the changes that have occurred in her actions. Nature becomes a setting, but it also shows the characters growth and gives readers an example of a positive relationship with nature and how one might obtain that relationship. That relationship, again, directly stems from the understanding granted from ecocritical theory. While some of the scenes Knutsson writes might be used as setting, many of the scenes demand a deeper relationship with nature than merely the place. Nature, even without actively changing the course of the characters in the novel, holds a lot of power over determining the course of the story and how the readers interpret the characters and the spaces they occupy. Nature must be alive for the scenes to really function, and these scenes show what happens when people interact with nature. Throughout these scenes from the novel, Cassandra is modeling behavior that is either in the form of a lesson or a demonstration of learned behavior.

ACTIVE NATURAL INTERACTIONS

In contrast to the inactive interactions that nature has with the characters, there are also the active interactions that nature has throughout *Shadows Cast by Stars*. Going beyond becoming a scene, nature impacts the choices of the characters throughout the novel. Influencing characters' decisions on what to do and where to go, nature has power to change the course of the story. Some of the main ways nature has conscious interactions with human characters is through inanimate nature becoming animated and humans communicating with nature. The sentience of nature here might be a stretch of ecopoiesis, but the scenes I will analyze work through environmental personification of nature to influence the plot of the story. While the past two chapters have embraced many of the known aspects of nature in ecocriticism, this idea of the sentience of nature's actions stretches the ideas of ecocriticism to a new level of conscious interactions from both sides of the relationship. In the novel, Madda and Cassandra identify the qualities of life in nature. The actions that come because of life in nature are not ones that we might recognize in the real world, but the ways that the characters interact with nature stands as example of how to live in concurrence with nature as an ally.

Cassandra sees more of nature than most characters do, as nature interacts with her in a more active and sentient way. Looking, again, at Merchant's examples of humans working together with nature, these scenes show the decision that nature has in this story to influence the character's decisions and the arc of the plot. Plants become active and animals interact with Cassandra in human-like ways. In moments of personification, nature comes to life more than just being alive through the way it affects Cassandra in her actions and decision making. When Cassandra and her family are in the car, leaving their old home, Cassandra says, "Trees reach out toward us, snatching at my hair, at Paul's arms, as my father drives over potholes faster than he

should” (Knutsson 23). Paul and Cassandra feel like they are being held back by everything around them. In two moments of narration, Cassandra describes what the trees and mountains are doing as she leaves. And later, when they are packing their things into the boat, Cassandra listens to the mountains. She describes the trees as reaching for them, and they try to hold Cassandra and her brother. Nature is acting through pathetic fallacy here, though Cassandra interprets this as a true action from nature. Knutsson writes, “Behind us, to the east, mountains rear up, demanding that we return home. *There is no coming back once you cross to the west, they say. We will remember that you abandoned us, and we will exact revenge if you return*” (25, original italics).

Like the events with the trees, there is a moment where the mountains also try to persuade Cassandra to stay. They are warning her against leaving. What they do not say is whether staying away will be her choice or not. Nature is showing her the comfort of staying in the same place and staying the same. Moving, changing, is difficult. It is a challenge. There are obstacles and weights holding Cassandra back from wanting this new life in this new place, but she must go. This example gives nature agency and represents how Cassandra feels through the actions she sees it taking toward her. Nature is more than just a background idea; it is acting and being felt by a character that the readers can relate to by age and emotion. Cassandra is also interpreting these moments and narrating them to the readers, so there is that relationship that is holding her back, demonstrating a strong relationship with the environment around her.

There are several situations where active nature is present in many ways. In some of those situations, nature is interacting in sentient ways and reaching out for Cassandra. In one example, she related her interaction with nature by describing, “but a breeze ruffles the hair at the base of my neck, reminding me that I’m only a moment away from spirit taking hold of me

and using me as it chooses, so I hold tight to my brother's hand until the raven releases its grasp on me" (Knutsson 47). In this scene, Cassandra has interactions with the breeze and the raven, though the raven is an embodiment of the spirit in the representative form of nature. This is an interesting situation for Cassandra, because nature is pulling her out of her physical body and into the spiritual realm, but nature is also the thing that is reminding her to hang on to her body. Nature connects the parts of her that she is unable to reach on her own. It is helping her choose to stay in her body because nature is giving her that power. This scene is applying decision-making to the breeze, actively interacting with Cassandra. Her ability and awareness to communicate with the breeze in this way is what Cassandra is modeling toward nature, the openness of the interactions that nature has; the personification here is offering Cassandra reminders of how to stay grounded in these stressful times.

The active descriptions that Knutsson writes creates a conscious and active natural world that many people do not consider as such. Knutsson's verb choices create an image of nature that is full of life, to be shown in the following scenes. Cassandra's active relationship with nature creates a strong tone of environmentalism. Knutsson is writing authority into nature. Many of the interactions with nature that Cassandra encounters are her interpretation of nature being active in her life. In one scene, she takes a warning from a plant as she is traveling in a new place. Cassandra narrates, "corpse plants spring out of the loamy ground, their ghostly flowers a warning that we're in strange territory now, and wandering too far from the path might lead us into a sinkhole full of mud" (Knutsson 395). Plants are living in a place where they can get the nourishment and conditions they need to survive, and Cassandra, knowing their requirements of life, can use that information as a warning or a path marker to make sure that she and her group stay safe as they travel through this unfamiliar territory. She does this through her understanding

of plant-life preferences based on the location of the plants in the ground. She knows based on where the plants are growing that sinkholes may be nearby and to remain on the path.

Understanding nature gives clues that can tell of many things that might otherwise be a danger to her, and this understanding applies outside of the novel as well. Cassandra is recognizing the plants and animals that are around them to see what they need to survive. Not only should we watch and learn from them, but also recognize their perfect conditions of life and make sure there are places in the world that can sustain everything, as Cassandra is demonstrating throughout the novel.

As nature has a way of being active, this novel also shows a way to communicate with nature. More than just caring for nature, the main character is shown talking to and hearing from the world around her. As Cassandra is getting closer to the island, the trees

aren't happy that we are disturbing their slumber, so I close my eyes and wish for them to rest, to sleep. *We mean no harm*, I say. *We only want to pass through*.

Whether the forest understands my silent request, I don't know. I have no idea whether it does any good at all, but an offering, even one as meager as a thought, is something at least. (Knutsson 38)

In this moment, Cassandra is offering kind thoughts to the trees. She is caring about them as living creatures worthy of that respect. In this example, the character is showing the reader that there is more to the trees and the forest than what is first seen. It is important to acknowledge all life as worthy of respect and kindness, and this example of caring thoughts being offered shows a frame of mind that creates a positive relationship with nature, even if the trees are not impacted by her thoughts. The importance is not on whether the trees understood her, but the fact that she was able to use that relationship in a positive way. Unsure of the impact, Cassandra attempts to

communicate with the trees around her. The forest might hear her and take care of her and those she is traveling with because of her “silent request.” Cassandra is demonstrating the importance of people knowing and understanding their intentions for nature.

There are times when Knutsson writes that Cassandra wished for nature to behave a certain way, and then it does. This is an example of the spirituality that Cousins refers to. These scenes could have been written in a way that nature was not the driving force of the plot, but it is. Cousins explains that spirituality should be cultivated from your own beliefs rather than copied from others; Cassandra is the only character mentioned in the novel with this relationship of the earth giving her what she wishes for. There are moments when Cassandra feels like she is connected to the earth and to nature in a way such that nature might grant her wishes. She feels like there is some sort of solidarity between herself and nature, as can be seen in this passage:

Sometimes, I think the earth can hear my thoughts. There are days when I wish for a storm, or for a clear sky to see the moon, and the wish arrives.

Today I wish for wind—a brisk wind, fierce, even—to bear us across the lake, to raise whitecaps so high that Bran is trapped at our house, and it comes, rushing over the hills, bending the firs, showering the lake with needles as Bran and Paul paddled the canoe toward home. (Knutsson 96)

In this scene, nature is giving her what she wants. Nature can be an ally for humans. Cassandra feels powerless to convince her friends to stay home with her, but nature helps accomplish her goal. Nature has a way of affecting human lives through the weather. Nature is uncontrollable but offers and forces change which impacts human lives, both positively and negatively, depending on what people choose to do with it. Having that communication with nature is what makes these things possible—reading nature and understanding its response. Cassandra is

modeling a trust in nature to have her best interests in mind. Knutsson writes, “Later, against my wishes, the wind dies and Bran leaves” (98). Cassandra is communicating with nature her desires, but there is an understanding that she might not always get what she asks for.

In the end, much of the novel comes down to respecting nature in all circumstances. That is how the relationships are built and how the solutions are discovered. As Privott and Tohe discuss, the responsibility that people have is to protect and share the world with nature because nature provides for humans—maintaining mutually beneficial and caring relationships. Considering a conversation between Cassandra and Madda, readers will find that these Indigenous characters are seeing nature through a very specific lens. Nature is full of life. Madda asks Cassandra what it takes to be considered alive, and Cassandra responds, saying, “but if you ask me, it just needs to exist. Everything has a piece of spirit in it” (Knutsson 126). This is a prime example of *ecopoiesis* being explained by the characters in the novel. Nature contains and creates life in more forms than what many mainstream Americans are used to. Wind, with no DNA or reproductive capabilities, among other qualifiers, is not something that is usually considered to be living. In this Indigenous epistemology, wind is alive with spirit because it is natural, and it exists. That is all nature requires to be respected as a form of life. Cassandra, throughout the novel, is demonstrating a respect for life, no matter what form or body it has.

Connecting with nature in a way that becomes bodily and physical is more than just humans seeing nature. Nature is also present in the connections it has to humans; nature makes choices and experiences through human interactions just as humans interact with nature. Nature is more than scene background and setting. Nature has a way of influencing decision-making. It has conscious interactions with the human characters through the inanimate nature in nature becoming active in the plot. These are the expansions from the more traditional view of

ecocriticism that is being applied. Ecocriticism is continuing that analysis of the relationship between these two stated categories and going into understanding how the author is interpreting the intentions of non-human nature toward humans. There is a constant stream of information coming from and going to nature through the communication and actions that the characters have with nature. Life is determined to be in all things, purely because they exist. Nature influences the story that is told. Without nature, without the place and the plants and the air that make up the story, it could not be the same. Through Cassandra's interactions and relationship with nature, there is a clear example that growing and nurturing a relationship with nature is mutually beneficial to humans and nature alike.

CONCLUSION

Cassandra, through so many moments, shows a beautiful way of learning through and growing in a positive relationship with nature. The ecocritical lessons shown throughout this book demonstrate that when you find a way to work with the world around you, the world will be more likely to support you throughout life, instead of working against you. Nature is something that moves with you. It can share the space, it can impact people, and it can change people. But humans can also share space, impact, and change nature. The consequences of the group's previous negative interactions might impact the collective through plagues and pandemics, but there is also a sign of hope in this novel, by building that positive relationship. Knowing how to interact with nature requires positive examples, and with a limited number of interactions with nature being presented in popular media, novels like Catherine Knutsson's *Shadows Cast by Stars* are important to show young people positive interactions with nature and the consequences of what might happen if an abuse of nature continues.

In the connections between humans and nature, there are demonstrations of respect and care for nature. Cassandra is an example for readers to learn from and to take as a model into their lives. Young readers might miss the models that are being offered to them as explicit examples of how to act with nature, but *Shadows Cast by Stars* brings up the relationship that Cassandra has with nature on so many occasions that it is impossible to miss as a theme of the novel. Through Cassandra's narration, nature offers a new way to see the novel, through the perspective of an apprentice medicine woman—a young girl becoming an adult in her community. The interactions show that nature helps carry emotion from the novel's characters to the readers. Nature becomes connected with the characters through the plot—they cannot be removed from each other. Nature has a way of bridging the spirit world to that of the human

characters. It gives them and the readers the ability to see deeper into the situations. Nature offers a way for the readers to see the characters in a new way or adds to their personality—the way that the characters act with nature is telling of who they are. This novel embraces the connectivity of humans and nature.

When readers see the inert interactions with nature, the mundane and everyday interactions, there are many examples of how people should always be seeing and behaving toward nature. As in many of the textual examples, as Cassandra learns kinder ways to interact with nature, readers can see her growth as a character. Nature is what shows that growth—her relationship with it depends on her state as her character. The more she learns about her culture and the world around her, the more connected to nature she becomes. In Cassandra's observations, there is also an example for readers to witness—readers might also cultivate a positive relationship with and an impact on nature. They could be the protagonist in Earth's story. Nature often influences Cassandra to make certain decisions in this novel, therefore causing some of the outcomes and controlling portions of the course of the plot. Nature is also an interpreter for the reader about how to understand the characters and the plot they are reading. The agency that nature has in this novel is vital to the understanding of the story.

In this novel, Knutsson writes about a connection with nature that goes beyond the usual bodily experience with nature—it is emotional and connected and trusting and so much more. Cassandra becomes increasingly aware of the effect humans have on nature and the consequences that taking from nature in the present has on the future, like the example Madda gives when Cassandra stole the branch without asking. But nature is not only a recipient of those thoughts; nature is also aware of the relationship it has with people. It remembers the ones who are kind and those who are not. It has a way of influencing the decisions that characters are

making—that people are making. Nature’s interactions with humans are purposeful and intent. Nature works for a positive environment between itself and those who respect it. All of nature holds life and spirit simply because it is. Nature is here; nature is necessary. Without it, there would be nothing. Throughout *Shadows Cast by Stars*, the author crafts a sense of allyship, friendship, and a strong healthy relationship between humans and nature, and Cassandra is demonstrating one path toward this.

This novel leaves a lot for the reader to consider—and I have done just that. Readers can learn more about the characters through their interactions with the world around them. Their success comes from their positive relationship with nature. Cassandra is constantly interacting with and living in and with nature. Though the way she has these interactions may vary, she builds her understanding of the natural world and learns many valuable lessons that she shares with readers through her narrations. Not only through Cassandra, but through all the characters, nature provides a way into this future dystopian society. Using these interactions that are healing and mutually beneficial will show readers what to take with them from this novel into their own lives to start building their own relationship with nature in a positive way. Through an ecocritical understanding of the novel, Cassandra goes above and beyond demonstrating how people can learn to live with a mutually positive relationship.

I don’t remember, now, what I wrote that day in the woods behind my house, but I remember being there and I remember what I was feeling. I remember feeling the beginning of my relationship with nature.

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