

Narratives of Place and Relationship: Bev Sellars's Memoir *They Called Me Number One*

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What is often forgotten in discussions of residential school policy is that one of its fundamental purposes was to dismantle Indigenous resistance through a direct, sustained attack on families and the full network of relations and practices that enabled health and self-determination ... But what the authorities didn't take into account was the capacity for old bonds to be rewoven and new links to be formed as people began to share their stories and experiences, in person and in print. Shame and silence were no match for story; the suppressed truths couldn't remain hidden forever.

Daniel Heath Justice

THEY CALLED ME NUMBER ONE: *Secrets and Survival at an Indian Residential School* is a discursive articulation of land and relationship from the perspective of the Secwepemc writer and former chief of Xat'sull First Nation, Bev Sellars. The memoir depicts place and relationships before, during, and after being at St Joseph's Mission Residential School, a Roman Catholic institution near Williams Lake, British Columbia. Demonstrating a critical self-reflective stance early in the text, Sellars shares her process of deciding to tell. Aware of the complexities, she is purposeful in her telling "the residential school and non-Aboriginal institutions had a drastic effect on me, and I am eminently qualified to speak on that" (xvi). The 2015 release of the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

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of Canada is initiating some awareness on the part of Canadians of their responsibility to listen and act in response to stories about residential schools. Even as we applaud the national attention, we along with other critical scholars (Henderson and Wakeham, Simon, Corntassel, Chawwin-is and T'lakwadzi, Million, Coulthard, Eigenbrod, Rymhs, McKegney) are asking what kind of attention, and what is being learned?

Indigenous memoir offers much in challenging such attention. As Jo-Ann Episkenew argues, “having been denied access to the discourse of public policy, Indigenous people have made public their life stories as eyewitness accounts that critique colonial policies and record the effects of these policies” (73). Sellars’s memoir is unique among other residential school memoirs (Merasty, Fontaine, Metatawabin, Knockwood, Johnston) in that her perspective is Secwepemc, woman, and from the 1960s—a time of great change in the residential school system after nearly one hundred years of violent stagnation. One major change in the late 1960s included the shift from schools jointly operated by the federal government and churches for almost exclusively Indigenous children, typically far away from children’s home communities, to secular, non-residential provincially funded schools for all students—a dramatic change fueled largely by finances rather than a newly enlightened reconsideration of colonial education (Milloy 195, 208). In 1972 Indigenous leaders published the policy paper *Indian Control of Indian Education* (National Indian Brotherhood), which called for parental control, culturally relevant curriculum, support for Indigenous teachers, and improved facilities: demands still relevant even after the termination of church–government partnerships (Pidgeon et al.). These changes came after hundreds of years of Indigenous resistance, particularly by parents and students. Sellars’s memoir documents this time of change and aligns with Helen Raptis’s research on the mid-twentieth century transition in British Columbia from federally funded residential schools to provincially funded integrated schools: a modified system did not necessarily mean Indigenous children had better health or educational outcomes.

Providing readers with a unique glimpse into the home from which she was taken and the community to which she returned, Sellars documents what can be overlooked in many accounts of residential schooling: Indigenous children were taken from loving, capable families and returned to families and communities reeling from the impacts of residential school violence and colonial oppression. Residential school policies were informed by a perceived need to provide Indigenous children with a civilizing education aimed at assimilation. Sellars shows how it was in

actuality her ancestral teachings that made her survival possible, leading more broadly to her and her community's own resistance and recuperation. In the telling of her story, Sellars contributes to what Sara Ahmed might call "a violence that shapes the present" (200). In no way does Sellars suggest the violence is over. Rather, her work as a writer, leader, and activist shows the persistent colonial violence that continues to inform her and our present.

Reading Sellars through a lens made possible in a post-TRC (but not post-truth or postreconciliation) Canada is tempting; however, Sellars is careful not to lock Indigenous peoples within the time or the terms of residential school history. Doing so would require Indigenous people to occupy the position of perpetual victim. Sellars expands capacities for understanding the place of residential schools, teaching readers that Indigenous children were taken from families and communities who wanted them. Her memoir focuses on the relationships that existed in the place before school, relationships that were made im/possible in the place of residential school, and the place today. Yet place is not abstract for Sellars: she engages readers in learning how ancestral teachings—teachings learned at home—sustain her and others through the residential school experience and contribute to recuperation during the postresidential school years. Her memoir is fundamentally about how Indigenous knowledge, learned in relationship with land, kin, and community, nurtured survivance and sovereignty.

We present our analysis prompted by reading and teaching the memoir. We pose these considerations from two perspectives. I, Susan Dion, grew up with my five siblings basking in the warmth of my parents' love for each other. But that warmth was eclipsed by the shadow of colonialism. While my father shared stories of his childhood, stories of an Irish-Catholic family leaving home and arriving in Quebec City, my mother was silent about her childhood experiences growing up at Moraviantown Reserve Number 47. My strongest memory when I finally found a way to talk with my mother about her life was her sense of insult. Her words stay with me: "they judged us incapable, as if we didn't know how to take care of ourselves and our children." The disdain she expressed reflected a deep sense of pride in her own and her family's capacities to take care of themselves and each other.

I, Jane Griffith, as a white settler never had the experience of the state regarding my parents as inherently inadequate. I grew up in a small coastal community that borders Tseycum First Nation, which we would often drive through to get to the main town of Sidney, currently named after a

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British naval lieutenant whose boat had surveyed the peninsula in 1859. Many fellow settlers who also drive through the reserve would often ironically comment, “Waterfront property! For free!,” never needing to reflect on the violence that made it possible for us to name this place home.

In this paper we consider how place informs relationships and relationships inform place in Sellars’s memoir. We attend to descriptions of experiences and relationships at home, at residential school, and back in the community where the place of residential school profoundly impacts the place of home. Rather than the more common discourses of reconciliation or resistance, we instead use in our reading of Sellars the organizing framework of recuperation. Although the word may invite unintended connotations of medicalized or pathologized and actionless convalescence, its earliest etymology invokes the act of taking back. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “recuperate” as to recover or to regain something. Its Latin roots include the prefix *re-* (“back from a point reached”) and the root *capere*, meaning “to take.” Informed by theories of place and relationship by Gregory Cajete, Glen Coulthard, and Mishuana Goeman, we argue that Sellars recuperates—takes back—the place and relationships disrupted by colonial institutions.

While the Indian residential school system and state institutions more generally attempted to dismiss and even eradicate Indigenous knowledge and ways of being, Sellars shares stories of how children drew on their ancestral teachings to survive. For us, Sellars invites all readers to understand how Indigenous knowledge has sustained Indigenous people through five hundred years of attempted genocide. While stories of residential schools that focus on pain and suffering of Indigenous children may evoke in settlers feelings of pity and sorrow, cultivating a desire to help the unfortunate other, *They Called Me Number One* offers the potential to learn from Indigenous knowledge acquired through place and story to act on obligations to live in relationship premised on reciprocity, protection, and care. We begin establishing how Sellars equates place with relationship and her home before residential school. We then argue that *They Called Me Number One* reveals a set of institutions throughout Sellars’s life not limited to only residential school, and we end the paper by arguing that Sellars recuperates—takes back—land and relationship because of her initial teachings from place and relationship. As Daniel Heath Justice writes in *Why Indigenous Literature Matters*, residential schools were meant to stamp out resistance by attacking families and relations; yet as *They Called Me Number One* reveals, “shame and silence were no match for story.”

Place and relationship

Indigenous world views are formed by lives lived in relationship with land (Deloria, Coulthard, Cajete). This life-sustaining relationship prioritizes balance, reciprocity, protection, and care. These values are not limited to life on the land, but as Cajete articulates we come to know ourselves through our relationships with the places where we live. On the topic of history and place, Vine Deloria Jr writes, “What appears to have survived, as a tribal conception of history almost everywhere was the description of conditions under which the people lived and the location in which they lived” (102). Glen Coulthard observes Deloria’s position “that land occupies as an ontological framework for understanding relationships” (70). Recognizing the significance of place to ways of being in relationship, Coulthard clarifies that “place is a way of knowing, experiencing, and relating with the world; and sometimes these ways of knowing can guide forms of resistance against other rationalizations of the world that threaten to erase our senses of place” (79). Ethically, this means that humans hold certain obligations to the land, animals, plants, and water as well as obligations to other people. Mishuana Goeman further examines the connections of land, relationship, and storytelling. She warns of how “Native relationships to land are presumed and oversimplified as natural and even worse, romanticized”—abstracted and commodified (*Mark My Words* 28). Instead, Goeman draws attention to how “the stories that connect Native people to the land and form their relationships to the land and one another are much older than colonial governments ... Stories create the relationships that have made communities strong even through numerous atrocities and injustices” (28).

Secwepemc scholarship further reiterates the roles of land and relationship: as Janice Billy states, “Secwepemc pedagogical principles, practices, and methods are rooted in Elders’ teachings and in the land” (38). Marianne Ignace and Ronald E. Ignace, too, relay how “narrative connects human experience to land, ancestors, and the Indigenous laws of living on this land” (10). They further state that “the ‘land,’ what we call *tmicw*, is not about real estate or private property. It is about Secwepemc land in all its dimensions: it is the land our ancestors experienced and marked out for us, and it comprises the living creatures on our land in their relation to humans, as well as the way that this land spoke back to countless generations of our ancestors” (3). For them, “stories are about relationships” (23). Andie Diane Palmer, too, describes “the strong associations of Peoples to Place, Language, and Story” in Secwepemc territory (4). But as Arthur Manuel articulates, Secwepemc lands, “given to us by our Creator and inhabited by us for thousands of years, were transformed into a British

‘possession’ not only without our consent and without our knowledge, but also without a single European setting foot on our territory” (4) using the doctrine of discovery. Manuel further highlights the *lack* of relationship on Secwepemc land between Secwepemc and settler peoples.

Lessons learned at home

For Sellars, before residential school the place is Deep Creek and Soda Creek, and her memories focus on relationships with the people who love, care for, and protect her. Her home includes her siblings and uncles as well as Xp’e7e (grandfather), and Gram (grandmother). This home is a place where people worked hard, took care of each other, and for the most part did not interfere with each other. The enduring memories are of being cared for, particularly by Gram. She remembers how “even though Gram’s hands were muscular from the hard work I remember them being soft” (12). Sellars recalls that Xp’e7e was “a hard-working man. It was rare to see him relaxing. When we had company, he would sit and talk, but usually he was out working” (15). While he worked, Sellars would play close beside him. As Sellars writes, “we were part of a family that loved us and provided for all our needs” (40). In her stories of home Sellars brings to life her experience of learning within her Secwepemc family. Justice addresses the specificity of learning within Indigenous families, explaining how “kinship makes peoples of us through responsibilities to one another” and “how the contexts of our relationships determine who we understand ourselves to be and what our duties are as a result” (43). Through their actions Sellars’s family teaches her about belonging, reciprocity, and balance. A strong sense of self was nurtured within the context of learning about responsibility to family and community.

In her family Sellars learned about hard work by watching her grandparents and extended family. She learned about being part of a family that provided love, care, and protection, and she learned about her responsibilities as a member of that family. Sellars’s experiences as member of a Secwepemc family are echoed by Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson’s observation of her children’s experience: “they were born into a centuries-old legacy of resistance, persistence, and profound love that ties our struggle to other Indigenous peoples in the Americas and throughout the world” (6). Simpson goes on to explain that her work is to ensure that her children have their needs met so that they are prepared “to uphold their responsibilities to land, their families, their communities, and their nations” (8). Sellars, Justice, and Simpson argue that Indigenous people

often centre Indigenous conceptions of kinship and responsibility to take care and protect each other.

Sellars's description of her return to her childhood house later in life is telling. As an adult, when her house at Deep Creek no longer physically exists, Sellars remarks how with only the foundation left she was amazed "to see how small it was. It further amazed me to think that it was never too small to accommodate all those who happened to be around at the time. Everyone came, went and got along without interfering in each other's lives. All the children slept on the floor together on mattresses created by Gram from denim and down feathers collected after a hunt" (40). Sellars describes her Uncle Ray and how his work hunting and trapping provided food for the family—hides that could be traded for household goods and feathers Gram would use to make mattresses. Home was a place of making and making do. These detailed descriptions reflect a life, respecting and accommodating each other, doing one's share, contributing to the collective wellbeing of the extended family: a way of living that recognized and valued interdependence, simultaneously respecting non-interference. Throughout her life, Sellars saw Gram's house as a place to return, explaining Gram would "just let me be. I would stay, and just her presence always made me strong enough to go out and face the world again" (161). Sellars reveals how the capacity to take care of others is critical to how people live in relationship to place and each other, establishing a standard of care and respect in human actions and interactions and articulating an Indigenous ethic of relationship. Sellars reveals that she did not have access to language, ceremony, or traditional Elder relationships for many reasons, including residential school. Yet she still learned what it meant to be Indigenous on Secwepemc land and in the home of Gram: lessons that taught her how to live in relationship with self, family, and community.

While residential schooling as part of the larger project of settler colonialism set out to eradicate Indigenous ways of being, in many ways it was these lessons learned at home that allowed Indigenous children to survive. In spite of the harsh conditions within the schools, children found ways to take care of and protect each other, to find joy in each other's company, and to maintain family and community relationships. Sellars's access to Indigenous teachings comes primarily through her experiences growing up with her grandparents. Her memoir provides the possibility of learning what it means to live in balanced relationship according to an Indigenous ethic learned on the land and shared through experiences and stories at home. Her detailed descriptions of life at the residential school, St Joseph's Mission ("the Mission") are told alongside her stories of home, family, and

community documenting survivance. Anishinaabe scholar and writer Gerald Vizenor defines survivance as “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (6). The memoir is not only an assertion of Indigenous presence but an assertion of an Indigenous ethic for living a good life rooted in care, protection, and responsibility.

Recuperating from institutions and the disruption of land and relationship

As Sellars carefully establishes, multiple disruptions challenged both place and relationship—they took away, necessitating recuperation. In her bibliographic notes section, Sellars states that “institutions of all sorts were used as a method of control over Aboriginal people” (202). This insistence may direct some readers to Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, or Erving Goffman for theories on the place of institutions. Foucault’s theories on panoptic control, surveillance, biopower, and micro-penalties all offer lenses for considering troubling scenes in the memoir, where Sellars describes how students were taught to be “just little robots, programmed to do everything on cue” (45). Yet as Robert J.C. Young states, “Foucault’s work displays a virtual absence of explicit discussions of colonialism or race. Foucault remained curiously circumspect about the ways in which power operated in these arenas” (41–42). Gayatri Spivak notes that for Foucault, institutions “all seem to be screen-allegories that foreclose a reading of the broader narratives of imperialism” (86). Particularly for Foucault, institutions share techniques of surveillance and power but are themselves distinct. Sellars instead reveals significant institutional overlap and many instances of indistinction. Sellars insists that institutions were and are used by the state not only as attempts to control bodies and minds but also to attempt to wrest Indigenous peoples from their land by disrupting relationships. In these ways, Sellars’s memoir renders such theories inadequate for understanding settler colonialism.

Sellars describes the disruption of Indigenous relationships within colonial institutions most acutely within residential school. Her focus begins earlier than herself: she offers how the residential school system differed in detail but not degree for earlier generations, including her grandmother. By the time Sellars attended, her residential school had changed to at least ostensibly following the provincial curriculum; yet the role of the school in disrupting relationship remained. She recalls students did not see their families except in the summer even though the

school was only twenty-five miles from her home and five miles from the homes of many other students (29). Student mail home was screened and censored (68), and even though the priests went to the children's home communities each Sunday they never returned with news for students. When family did visit the school, Sellars describes how they had to meet in a parlour next to the principal's office with a priest present. As Geoffrey Paul Carr's archival research and survivor interviews reveal, Catholic residential schools frequently had an "Indian Parlour" for Indigenous visitors, which would decrease the ability to enter or even see into the main building (99–104). Sellars describes her only visit from her grandparents in five years as uncomfortable and painful. She recalls how in this parlour "we were scared to do or say something wrong with a school authority sitting there, so we all sat quietly in our chairs. The priest did most of the talking. Gram and Xp'e7e didn't stay long. They probably felt the strain of the visit too" (67). Although Sellars attended residential school with her siblings, they were often separated and were not free to communicate with one another, even when one of her brothers came to class one day with welts on his body (104). Separation from siblings was one thing; knowing that their brothers and sisters were suffering and they were not able to protect them was an attack on their capacity to fulfill their responsibilities to each other. The school disrupted relationships of care, and this imposed violence resulted, as Sellars describes, in judgment, competition, bullying, taunts, and gangs. What does it mean to contain that much hurt? Who can and does bear it and at what cost?

The school continued to disrupt intergenerational family relations beyond its walls through language. Sellars's grandmother spoke Carrier and her grandfather spoke Secwepemctsin, but neither their children nor grandchildren spoke either (44). Her grandmother "did not teach her children how to speak Carrier because she knew they would be attending the schools and she wanted to spare them the agony of being punished with the strap" (44). As is widely documented, such language disruptions have resulted in "widespread social and psychological upheaval in Aboriginal communities" (Battiste and Barman viii). Prohibiting and punishing Indigenous languages was an attempt to eradicate Indigenous knowledge and disrupt relationship to each other and to land, and that served as a long-term strategy for continuing these disruptions long after school ended.

As Cindy Blackstock asks, have residential schools really closed or did they "just morph into child welfare?" (71). Such an important question is another example of how Foucault does not serve us well in understanding Sellars's commentary on institutions. Connections amongst institutions

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are reflected in nearly the first half of the TRC's ninety-four Calls to Action, which demand changes to present-day systems of health, justice, education, child welfare, and language and culture. Sellars makes the point that, for Indigenous peoples, encounters with one colonial institution often led to another—a related but different point than Foucault's that institutions share techniques of surveillance, or his concept of the "carceral archipelago." One clear example of this archipelago in Sellars's world is how while everyone else cried during their first nights at school, she at age seven did not because of her earlier stint at the hospital for tuberculosis (34). Sellars describes Indigenous men who die in custody, officially declared homicides with no repercussions (169), and accepts police brutality directed at her uncles and brothers because earlier at school she learned "we were totally at the mercy of White authority" (165).

Many of the institutional links in Sellars's text are between the school and hospital. When it comes to light that her brother Ray may have died because of negligence in a hospital, Sellars identifies how her experiences at residential school required her "not to ask questions. Just accept" (212). Sellars lists multiple members of her immediate family as well as herself who faced serious complications or who even died after encountering the healthcare system. Sellars makes the necropolitical logic of the healthcare system clear when she relays the professional reactions of indifference and heartlessness at the hospital after she attempts suicide. Sellars is separated from her family at age five to attend a TB hospital two hundred miles south of them; when her mother and later her grandmother visit, Sellars could not recall who they were. Blackstock's insistence on the ongoingness of residential school policy is most relevant as Sellars explains how when she gave birth to her first child—a time period after most residential schools were closed or closing—a nurse presented adoption papers, assuming an inherent inability for Sellars to be a mother (147), not unlike the state's presumption of parental inadequacy when Sellars was originally sent to residential school.

In addition to school and hospital, the text also focuses on the law—another institutional critique commonly associated with Foucault. When Sellars's Uncle Ray runs away from school, Gram hides him from the RCMP (95). In the next generation, Sellars's brother Bobby runs away from sexual abuse at school and an Elder similarly hides him; this time the RCMP and their dogs chase him into the home of the Elder and return him to school (98). The TRC's final report further documents how the RCMP were complicit in child apprehension. These encounters with the law early in

life because of the school later set up Sellars for future encounters: when Sellars turns to the RCMP for protection from an abusive partner, her statement is read aloud to a room full of acquaintances without her permission (140). Sellars recalls another time an RCMP officer came to her door when she was alone and invited her into his car, which she resisted (209). The earlier iteration of the RCMP, the North West Mounted Police, was created in 1873 for the express purpose of quashing Indigenous threats to settler claims to land (Marquis, Monaghan). Sellars recalls how her brothers and uncles “learned at an early age that the RCMP were not friends of the Native people and, if I were ever in trouble, they would be the last people I would go to for help” (164). Sellars witnessed police brutality directed at men in her family. And during a 1993 justice inquiry in her community, Sellars witnessed RCMP attempts to block Indigenous testimony and use their lawyers to intimidate anyone coming forward (166). Like the hospital, the law in the form of RCMP both greases the machinery of the school by facilitating child apprehensions and also sets up Sellars for a well-earned mistrust later in life.¹

Sellars further points to archives as colonial institutions that disrupt Indigenous relationships. Archival documents during the TRC were sometimes missing, redacted, forged, or destroyed, and access was limited in other examples. As of March 2013, over fifty thousand survivors had their claims to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) rejected or modified because of missing archival documents (Barrera “Ottawa,” Barrera “Residential,” Ghaddar). The TRC itself faced barriers accessing federal documents, requiring a legal challenge (Canadian Press, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 13, 16; Truth and Reconciliation of Canada 27). While conducting research for her memoir at Library and Archives Canada, Sellars discovered three letters attributed to her grandmother, great-aunt, and another woman from her community. Sellars describes her archival finds as “all glowing letters home about how happy they were at the school and how good the [religious] sisters were to them” (68), letters her Gram denied writing. And as Sellars points out, “it’s interesting to note that these letters ended up in the archives. Why weren’t they ever sent home if they were meant for Gram and Auntie’s dad?” (68). She also learns through archives that her French great-great-grandfather upon his death, after a life lived in Canada, had left all of his money to relatives in France (4–5, 201). Sellars reveals how archives, like

1 For further context on colonialism and healthcare in Canada, see Ian Mosby; for context on deaths in custody, see Sherene Razack.

other colonial institutions, are never neutral repositories but instead contribute to disrupting connections of relationship and land.²

The text further includes references to settler colonial media for its targeting of Indigenous relationships. As an adult, Sellars recalls a phone-in radio program where white settlers participated. For Sellars, “those comments always made me physically and emotionally ill. It was at those times that the shell I used to protect myself came up and I retreated deeper inside myself” (82–83). But her experiences with settler colonial media began much earlier. According to Sellars, students at her residential school greatly valued watching movies on Saturday night (39), and sometimes as many as a hundred of them would convene on wooden benches (29, 80). Movie night was so compelling that some students used it as an opportunity to run away while everyone else was distracted (94). But Sellars remembers how “even something as simple as where to sit at the movies was not a decision we made. There was always some sort of order, and the nuns or priests placed you where they wanted you to sit” (95). Much of the media Sellars recalls was explicitly anti-Indigenous and “reinforced the myth that being Indian was something to be ashamed of” (81). Sellars recalls watching *Daniel Boone* (17), as well as *The Silent Enemy*, a film from 1930 that advertised itself as an “authentic” depiction of pre-colonial Anishnaabe people. However, another memoir by Madeline Katt Theriault, an extra in the film, described *The Silent Enemy* as inaccurate because the film crew “made their own rules about Indian way of life and we Indians had nothing to say. We just took our orders and went along with them” (72). The film depicts an Elder being banished from the community and fighting for scraps of food with dogs. Sellars recalls watching *The Silent Enemy* when she was so young that she therefore believed “somewhere in my ‘Indian’ world we were that cruel” (81). Other film showings at the school included an Elvis movie, which included an anti-Indigenous slur (82), and racist Western films selected by Mission administrators. For Sellars, settler media also included the inverse as well: “the ‘perfect’ White families shown on TV.” In Sellars’s analysis, institutions reveal the specifically colonial attempts to disrupt Indigenous relations with family.

In these disruptions that extend beyond school but are directly tied to school—health, law, archives, and media—Foucault falls apart as an appropriate lens through which to understand Sellars’s text. For one, Sellars locates these institutions as attempts to sever Indigenous ties to land. Through Sellars, colonial institutions appear as attempts to literally

² See Verne Harris, Achille Mbembe, Ann Stoler, Laura L. Terrance, and Crystal Fraser and Zoe Todd for more on colonialism and archives.

remove Indigenous peoples from their land: residential schools were often purposely located far from home territories, further limiting access to children's families and communities; hospitals and jails often also further remove Indigenous peoples from their lands, in the long-term altering family and community relations. The purposeful disruption of Indigenous ways of being in relationship with the land is ultimately an attack on Indigenous ways of knowing and being in relationship to self and each other. What is more, Ann Stoler presses Foucault's concepts—in particular the carceral archipelago—for its lack of engagement with colonialism. Stoler recasts Foucault's concept of the carceral archipelago more broadly as a tool of empire (78). Stoler's reframing helps to view “a geopolitical topography that joined policies, visions, institutions, and practices directed at the containment of people, the strategies of displacement, the definitions of security, the tactics of defense, and, not least, the ever present doubts about what combination and balance of restrictions and license would work best” (82). For Stoler, “agricultural colonies, penal colonies, resettlement camps, detention centers, island military bases, and settler communities (temporary and permanent) were nodes in an imperial network—nodes that were strategically connected and detached to produce unique and unanticipated effects” (78). Stoler assists in understanding Sellars's points that these institutions she experienced were overlapping and co-constitutive; Sellars goes much further in not only identifying this phenomenon but also displaying how these institutions worked in the service of separating Indigenous people from land and each other. Blackstock asking whether residential schools actually closed or have been simply replaced by the so-called child welfare system gets an answer, then, from Sellars: her text decentres residential school as the one and only form of colonial violence. In these ways, Sellars reveals that institutions operate in cahoots with one another, disrupting relationships premised on care, protection, respect and instead imposing hierarchy and regulation. The violence she experienced at residential school prepared her to anticipate future violence and imprisonment, buttressed throughout the text by examples of recuperation.

Recuperation

In her memoir, Sellars outlines the attempts at disruption to land and relationship throughout her life. But these disruptions are twinned with scenes of recuperation—taking back land, taking back relationships, or revealing that the land and relationships could never be taken in the first place. Some examples of recuperation happen after residential schools,

after Sellars is an adult and there are changes in the law. For instance, Sellars discusses recuperation in relation to what Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird call “reinventing the enemy’s language” (19). For them, it has been because of languages such as English “that our lands have been stolen, children taken away” (20), but Indigenous peoples have also “transformed these enemy languages” and made them “usefully tough and beautiful” (20–24). This concept of reinventing English is found in various texts from residential school survivors (Griffith). Ignace and Ignace discuss the importance of Secwepemc toponymies, highlighting how such place names “anchor Secwepemc history to the land in ways that connect people to the history of long ago” (236) as well as to “the history of dispossession” (249). They state that “as long as we maintain the connection between our landscape and experiences by way of the stories we remember and the places we remind each other of, we will know where we come from and who we are as Secwepemc” (254). Sellars does so, although in English.

Sellars’s text offers several examples of recuperating language. Despite being shamed as a child when learning to write English at the hospital (25–26) as well as the broader context of learning English instead of Carrier and Secwepemtsin, Sellars describes a positive experience reading in English with Miss Norris, her grade three teacher (36). Her grade five teacher would read books aloud such as *Rin Tin Tin*, *The Hardy Boys*, and *Nancy Drew*. For Sellars, “those afternoon stories were the highlight of my grade-five year. I hated Fridays because we had to wait until Monday after lunch before [the teacher] would read us another chapter” (36). When Sellars grows older, she transcribes letters in English for her Uncle Ernie to help ease his loneliness (151) as well as political speeches for her partner Bill Wilson, Kwakwaka’wakw chief, lawyer, and politician (174–75). In these instances, Sellars reveals how she takes the English language—taught to her and her family as one of many assimilative tactics—and uses it for her own purposes: to write a memoir, to survive at school, to support family, and to collaborate for anticolonial, political gains.

Furthermore, Sellars writes about the genre of the self-help book later in life. She credits finding Norman Vincent Peale’s *Discovering the Power of Positive Thinking* in a used bookstore at age twenty-eight with leading her to other books, which all help her to work through the impacts of residential schooling (158). That Sellars discovers the book while waiting at a laundromat is significant: she recalls a white man once visiting Gram’s house and commenting with surprise that her house was clean (12–13). These standards of white female domesticity, patriarchy, and heteronormativity are commented on with surprise because they disrupt the

dominant narrative of being primitive and dirty. Indigenous girls were not newly introduced to the importance of a clean home in residential school—we/they had been taking care of homes and families long before settlers imposed definitions and domestic rules. Michelle Murphy contextualizes the genre of self-help “as a biopolitical project [that] was deeply informed by *whiteness*” (37). For Murphy, like *whiteness*, “feminist self help’s version of self-care and individual bodily control also presupposed a self-determining, self-knowing, self-possessing subject-figure as attainable and universalizable,” thereby reassembling the “liberal sovereign subject” (38).

In contrast, Sellars uses the self-help book in coming to re-know herself, her family, and her community. Rather than developing a neoliberalized subjectivity, Sellars uses the genre to confront violence and to re/cognize her relationships and responsibilities to family and community. The self-help book reminds Sellars (and readers) of the importance of lessons learned within family and community. Specifically for Sellars, the self-help book creates the space for her to remember who she is in relationship with her Gram, Xp’e7e, her uncles, and siblings. Sellars recuperates her relationships and responsibilities and goes on to be a leader in her community, a successful postsecondary student, and a grandmother. That these teachings come through a self-help book is striking in addition to the ties to white female domesticity that Murphy discusses, particularly given the longer settler colonial history of “help.” Help is what colonial tactics such as residential schooling were cloaked as by church and state; such a history of help is further twinned with the rhetoric that Indigenous peoples cannot help themselves. The genre of book Sellars finds comes from these histories, but in her hands it becomes a book capable of decolonial ends.

Sellars also reveals a taking back later in life in relation to her grandfather and land. Sellars recalls her grandfather Xp’e7e being furious “because of all the non-Aboriginals who were taking up land and fencing it off” (16). Sellars believes Xp’e7e never destroyed the new fences because “he probably knew ‘the law’ was against him. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police would have come and thrown him in jail for destruction of property or trespassing” (16). In this example, colonial institutions buttress settler claims and attempt to diminish Indigenous rights to relationships with land. Yet as an adult, in telling these stories from her perspective Sellars reveals what Mishuana Goeman calls the “national myths narrating the space of the nation. Conceived and perceived notions of place and bodies in those spaces are revealed, and in doing so the discourses and interpretations that converge to produce settled truisms are rethought on a conscious and sub-conscious level” (“Disrupting” 256).

Sellars
experiences
what Marie
Battiste calls
“cognitive
imperialism.”

Sellars also provides examples of pedagogical recuperation. Sometimes this came in the form of physically barring children from attending residential school: Sellars notes that in previous generations of residential school, “sick kids were sent home to die” (62), which was common practice (72) and meant “one less death to be investigated at the school” (Kelm 75). The practice meant student deaths happened off school rolls and at least superficially off the hands of administrators. Sellars’s Uncle Ernie was one such example, sent home after contracting TB. Part of a generation who was sent home sick from school rather than a hospital, Uncle Ernie was nurtured by his aunt, a traditional healer, and he recovered, never returning to school (63). But pedagogical recuperation also occurred while at the school. Sellars recounts her experience at school of learning to tell time. Every evening a child was sent downstairs to check the clock and report the position of the hands on the clock. But Sellars jumps ahead of the nun’s lesson: “Instead of telling the nun the position of the clock hands, I told her what time it was. She looked at me with total disgust and sent me back downstairs again. ‘I told you to see where the hands were!’ she barked” (37). This scene exemplifies how at residential school the goal was not to learn but to follow instruction. Sellars has other negative experiences with colonial education after residential school. At her provincial school, the Indigenous students were put into a pre-vocational rather than pre-academic program for high school because “the Mission, the priests, the school district, or maybe a combination of both thought we weren’t smart enough to handle the academic program” (129), later dashing Sellars’s dream of becoming a nurse (136). When she wishes to attend college as an adult, the Department of Indian Affairs streams her into business instead of her preference for travel or recreation (155). When she later becomes a teacher’s assistant in the Williams Lake school district, Sellars faces an institution of well-meaning people but also a teacher’s lounge she avoided and teachers who mostly gave her menial tasks such as photocopying (149–51). Despite these earlier experiences, as well as her initial belief that university history courses would be like earlier classes—inaccurate and colonial—Sellars persists and uses her university degrees in law and history in service to her community (183–84). Sellars experiences what Marie Battiste calls “cognitive imperialism”—when Indigenous knowledge is omitted or ignored in the schools and a Eurocentric foundation is advanced to the exclusion of other knowledges and languages (26).

Yet in far more scenes, Sellars and her family recuperate land and relationship amidst threats. Sellars recalls how when she traveled in the summers by horse and wagon with her grandparents that “tourists would

slow their vehicles to snap our picture. Gram hated being photographed, and I'm sure when the pictures were developed her scowl was evident. I wish I could find some of those pictures now" (106). In this example, Gram refuses—using Audra Simpson's concept—the photographic expectations of settler tourists: perhaps a face to pity, a face that was read by tourists as exotic, stoic, or compliant. Would Sellars be able to find these photographs of scowls? Or would the tourists, once they developed their roll of film, have discarded the images because they did not conform to settler expectations? Sellars portrays how her grandmother refused to be the subject in someone else's story of Indigenous people and land at the very moment it was happening.³

Gram's recuperative role also occurred when the place of residential school intruded on the place of home. At one point during her time at home on a break from school, Sellars recalls clearing the table with her siblings in an orderly way: "Gram got visibly upset. I was surprised because her voice cracked when she said, 'You kids don't have to do that! Just leave your plates where you are sitting.' It was rare that I saw Gram get emotional, but that day I think it distressed her to see us so conditioned by a place she hated" (122). In this passage, Sellars reveals how the surveillance and conditioning at the school invaded the home Gram so carefully created as anathema to residential school. Gram is distressed by her own earlier experiences as a student and then as a mother and now grandmother to children who are at home but acting according to the rules of residential school. The scene also shows how Gram continued to offer her home as a place free from the policies of the school.

Other examples of simultaneous recuperation in Sellars's memoir occur at school. Despite the attempt to control most aspects of the children's school lives, Sellars describes how knowledge learned at home could not be erased. Within the pain-filled place of residential schools, Sellars reveals how she and her peers created spaces for play, laughter, tenderness, and care. Students found places away from administrators behind school buildings and on the skating rink—one of the "rare times when the girls and boys were allowed to mix without any real restrictions" and where Sellars "was free to be with [her] brothers, even if it was just for an hour or so" (76–77). Children create toys from old tires (98) and find ways of showing their attraction to each other despite strict gender segregation (94). They share even their already-chewed gum with each other. Reflecting on the experience Sellars writes, "White kids thought chewing old gum

3 See Audra Simpson for more on ethnographic refusal.

was disgusting, but to us it was just making do with what we had. Store-bought chewing gum was something that could be shared, and so we did” (74). Sellars had to rely on newspapers discarded in the dining room of the priests, where she cleaned, for news about friends and family (52). The discarded newspapers were the only way Sellars learned her cousin had died. The emphasis here is on sharing as an expression of relationship. The school insisted on quashing relationship, but the children persisted.

Examples of cognitive imperialism abound at the school, but the children’s small refusals and evasions of authority and assertions of their right to be Indigenous despite the threat of institutional repercussions—recuperation—are contemporaneous with the attempts at disruption. At school, the children on occasion would take walks in what the school regarded merely as “the woods.” Although the children knew what to eat, they had to hide their knowledge. As Sellars writes, “we knew the land could sustain us and supply everything we needed to survive. But the nuns didn’t respect our knowledge and thought we would poison ourselves. So we ate only when the nuns were not looking” (128). Similarly, Sellars writes that students used the Secwepemc word “St7leck” to warn of authority coming at school (80).

The text reveals examples of visual recuperation as well. Sellars was forced to watch a government-produced film at school titled *Beautiful British Columbia* (Duffy 4). Sellars recalls how “all of the people on camera were White, and they were inviting other people to British Columbia to witness the beauty of it” (82). She remembers thinking, “‘Where do we fit in this society?’ I couldn’t understand why there was no mention of Indian people, and I put as much thought into it as an eight-year-old could. The words ‘invisible’ and ‘undesirable’ in this context hadn’t yet made it into my vocabulary.”⁴ Such films, depicting a complete erasure of Indigenous peoples on their own land, attempt to naturalize settler claims to land; the fact that such a film was shown in residential school to Indigenous children is not accidental, and Sellars’s recollection of the impact of the film—Where are Indigenous peoples in this narrative?—reveals the effects. Although Sellars describes these thoughts as an adult, she reacted to an absence of Secwepemc people in a film about their land when she first watched the film as an eight-year-old. In this moment, Sellars is insisting both as a child and retrospectively as an adult on Indigenous presence rather than the erasure the film both reflects and helped make possible. If

4 Similar to Sellars and her questioning of *Beautiful British Columbia*, Secwepemc artist Tania Willard problematizes films by archaeologist Harlan Smith, made in the late 1920s for the Geological Survey of Canada (Hogue).

a government employee, teacher, or church affiliate were to have taken a picture of Sellars watching this film (and such a photograph would not be inconceivable, as photographs of children in residential school participating in extracurricular activities were important tools in communicating that children were happy), the camera would not capture Sellars's insistence on Indigenous presence. So there are two erasures: the film's and also the school's. What the memoir instead offers is a textual corrective to residential school photography of children sitting at their desks obligingly learning; as Sellars reveals, these same faces in residential school photographs that were commonly disseminated without context (and often without consent from those featured in the photographs) were well aware of these attacks on land and relationship—and not just retrospectively.

Recuperation of land and relationship continues after residential school, when Sellars began attending the provincial school by bus. As Sellars states, riding the bus was a source of shame because it was derelict and also because the bus provided rides to older, on-reserve community members. Sellars admits that “as much as we loved our relatives it was quite embarrassing. No one else had older people on their buses, and no one else had people drinking on their buses. But, as embarrassing as it was, I still preferred to ride that old bus home with all the shame that came with it than ride a newer bus from the Mission” (126). Children being made to feel ashamed of their families is an ongoing issue in schools where expectations reflect norms established in non-Indigenous communities. Yet Sellars's focus is on how her preference for the old bus prevailed over the attempts at inducing shame brought on by a non-Indigenous school because of relationship and land: unlike her earlier years at the Mission, riding the bus meant Sellars now remained at home, with her family.

Conclusion

This is our homeland and we are not going anywhere. (Sellars 190)

In January 2017, Sellars made headlines after staking a legal mining claim on the so-called private property of B.C.'s Minister of Energy and Mines. With \$130 and her driver's licence, Sellars filed an online application in under an hour (Hunter). Sellars is the chair of the First Nations Women Advocating Responsible Mining in British Columbia, and her claim came after the devastating 2014 breach of the Mount Polley tailing pond dam, which directly affected Xat'sull (Soda Creek) territory. The claim was not a publicity stunt: as Sellars stated to media, she indeed wanted to highlight the breezy regulation of placer mining on Indigenous land. At the same

Within her memoir Sellars offers what it means to live conscious of one's obligations to the land and people.

time, Sellars also explained that she was going to “look at all my options” now that she had staked a legal claim. Although the *Globe and Mail* did not mention it, the Indigenous news outlet *Windspeaker* recorded Sellars's observation that at no point in her application did she have to ask permission from Ktunaxa people even though the Minister's property is on Ktunaxa land (Narine). Outside of her memoir, Sellars is literally taking back land and insisting on relationship.

Within her memoir Sellars offers what it means to live conscious of one's obligations to the land and people. In the preface she conveys a complex understanding of her roles and responsibilities as storyteller. When community members became aware of her intention to write a book, Sellars is challenged: “What pain have you suffered that qualifies you to speak?” (12) and “You better not be writing about me” (11) are statements community members pose to her. Yet it is because of her relationships and her responsibility to contribute to the wellbeing of family, community, and Indigenous peoples more generally that Sellars states she feels compelled to write (16). Moving beyond a story that locks Indigenous people into perpetual victim/survivor, Sellars documents the harms of settler colonialism and just as powerfully details moments and places of assertion, recovery, and recuperation. Whether sharing previously chewed gum, running for leadership, or resisting the mining of Xat'sull land, Bev Sellars acts on her understanding of what it means to be Secwepemc. Her memoir documents the ongoing impacts of residential school experiences and just as importantly offers readers opportunities to learn from Indigenous conceptions of land, relationship, and responsibility that are recuperated.

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