



Land, Identity, and Ecological Memory: Exploring Environmental Ethics in Contemporary Canadian Literature.

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Abstract- Land occupies a central position in the construction of cultural identity and ecological consciousness in contemporary Canadian literature. While earlier Canadian literary traditions frequently represented nature through wilderness, exploration, and national identity, contemporary writers increasingly portray land as a living, historical, cultural, and ethical presence. This paper examines the relationship between land, identity, ecological memory, and environmental ethics in selected contemporary Canadian literary works. Particular attention is given to Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle* (2014), Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song* (2014), Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), Waubgeshig Rice's *Moon of the Crusted Snow* (2018), and Ed O'Loughlin's *Minds of Winter* (2017). Through an ecocritical and environmental-humanities approach, the study explores how land functions not merely as geographical setting but as a repository of memory, identity, cultural knowledge, ecological relationships, and ethical responsibility. Recent scholarship on Canadian literature demonstrates that Indigenous-authored and environmentally engaged texts increasingly challenge colonial and anthropocentric understandings of land. Eppley, Wood, and Stagg-Peterson (2024), for example, demonstrate that land and place are represented as constitutive of Indigenous identity rather than as passive backgrounds. Similarly, Šlapkauskaitė (2023) develops the concept of “eco-memory” to examine how memory can function as an ethical mode of ecological relationality in contemporary Canadian fiction. The study argues that contemporary Canadian literature reimagines environmental ethics through relationships among people, land, water, animals, memory, and community. Land consequently becomes not only a physical territory but also a cultural archive and an ethical relationship through which human identity is formed and ecological responsibility is negotiated.

Keywords- Canadian Literature, Land, Identity, Ecological Memory, Environmental Ethics, Ecocriticism, Indigenous Literature, Place.

I. Introduction

Land has always been deeply connected to Canadian literary imagination. Forests, rivers, lakes, mountains, Arctic territories, prairies, and coastal environments have provided Canadian writers with geographical settings as well as powerful cultural symbols. However, contemporary Canadian literature increasingly moves beyond the representation of land as wilderness or scenery. Land is now frequently represented as a space of memory, identity, cultural continuity, ecological conflict, and ethical responsibility.



This transformation is particularly important in Indigenous Canadian literature, where relationships with land cannot be separated from language, community, history, spirituality, and cultural identity. Recent scholarship on Indigenous-authored Canadian fiction demonstrates that land is represented as historically, spiritually, culturally, and relationally significant rather than simply as a backdrop for human activity.

The concept of ecological memory provides another useful way of understanding this relationship. Memory does not belong exclusively to individual human characters; literary narratives can also preserve memories of landscapes, environmental destruction, displacement, extraction, and changing relationships between communities and places. Šlapkauskaitė (2023), in her study of Ed O'Loughlin's *Minds of Winter*, uses the concept of “eco-memory” to examine the relationship between nature, culture, power, and memory in contemporary Canadian fiction.

Environmental ethics consequently becomes central to the study. The question is not merely how literature describes nature but what ethical relationships humans should establish with land and other-than-human life. Fraile-Marcos's analysis of Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle*, for instance, connects water, Indigenous ethics, environmental ethics, and an ethics of care, challenging anthropocentric and extractive approaches to the environment.

This paper therefore examines how contemporary Canadian literature transforms land from a geographical setting into a repository of identity, memory, relationship, and ethical responsibility.

II. Land as Identity and Cultural Belonging

In contemporary Canadian literature, land frequently functions as an important source of identity. Rather than understanding identity as something formed independently of geographical location, Indigenous literary texts often portray identity as emerging through relationships with particular territories, communities, ancestors, animals, and ecological systems.

Eppley, Wood, and Stagg-Peterson (2024) demonstrate this particularly clearly in their analysis of Indigenous-authored Canadian rural fiction. Their study finds that land and place are represented as constitutive of Indigenous characters' identities, while relationships with land are simultaneously physical, spiritual, cultural, and relational. This understanding challenges a colonial conception of land as property. If land is primarily regarded as an economic resource, human beings become owners, users, or extractors. In a relational understanding, however, humans are participants within a larger network of relationships.

Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song* provides a significant example. The novel's representation of community, memory, animals, and place demonstrates that identity cannot be separated from the wider ecological and cultural environment.

Similarly, in Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, displacement from land becomes inseparable from the disruption of cultural identity. The characters' movement through



landscapes is simultaneously a physical journey and a journey through cultural memory.

Table 1. Land and Identity in Contemporary Canadian Fiction

Dimension	Conventional understanding	Relational understanding
Land	Property	Relationship
Place	Geographical location	Cultural identity
Nature	Resource	Living environment
Identity	Individual	Relational
Memory	Human recollection	Human + ecological memory
Responsibility	Ownership	Care and reciprocity
Community	Social unit	Human–land network

The literary significance of land therefore extends beyond physical geography. Land becomes a means through which characters understand who they are, where they belong, and what responsibilities they inherit.

III. Ecological Memory and the Literary Landscape

The idea of ecological memory expands conventional understandings of memory. In literary studies, memory is often associated with individual experience, family history, trauma, or collective cultural remembrance. Ecocritical approaches extend this concept by considering how landscapes themselves can carry traces of historical and ecological change.

Šlapkauskaitė (2023) describes “eco-memory” as an ethical mode of ecological relationality in her analysis of Ed O’Loughlin’s *Minds of Winter*. Her study considers how contemporary Canadian fiction can rethink the relationship between human and non-human historical agencies.

This concept is particularly valuable because landscapes can preserve evidence of human activity. A river can carry memories of industrial development; a forest can represent displacement and extraction; a flooded territory can embody the history of technological development and Indigenous dispossession.

Virginia Pésémapé Bordeleau’s *Blue Bear Woman* provides another relevant example. Landry and Lak (2024) examine how water in *Eeyou Istchee* is connected with Indigenous peoplehood, culture, spirituality, and the historical consequences of hydroelectric development.

The literary landscape therefore becomes an archive.

Through ecological memory, literature prevents environmental history from disappearing. The landscape becomes capable of reminding contemporary communities of previous relationships, losses, transformations, and responsibilities.



Table 2. Ecological Memory in Literary Representation

Environmental element	Memory represented	Ethical implication
River	Industrial/extractive history	Responsibility toward water
Forest	Cultural displacement	Protection of habitat and heritage
Arctic landscape	Indigenous presence	Respect for place-based knowledge
Flooded land	Development and dispossession	Environmental justice
Animals	Ecological continuity	More-than-human responsibility
Seasonal cycles	Traditional knowledge	Ecological awareness

IV. Water, Land, and the Ethics of Care

Water provides one of the most powerful literary representations of environmental ethics in contemporary Canadian literature. Rivers, lakes, oceans, and waterways are simultaneously ecological systems, cultural spaces, sources of life, and sites of political conflict.

Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle* is especially important in this context. Fraile-Marcos's analysis argues that King's treatment of water brings Indigenous ethics, feminist ethics of care, and environmental ethics into conversation. The novel critiques anthropocentric and extractive approaches while emphasizing interconnected relationships between human and non-human life.

The significance of water extends beyond its physical function. When a river is polluted, the consequences involve not only the destruction of water quality but also the disruption of communities, animals, cultural practices, and relationships with place. The same relationship appears in Virginia Pésémapéo Bordeleau's *Blue Bear Woman*. Landry and Lak (2024) examine the political and aesthetic significance of water in Eeyou Istchee and the consequences of hydroelectric flooding for territory and Indigenous peoplehood.

This literary representation challenges the idea of water as an unlimited commodity.

Instead:

Water → Life → Culture → Memory → Responsibility

Environmental ethics therefore requires an understanding of water not simply as something humans consume but as a component of interconnected ecological and cultural systems.

V. Land, Colonialism, and Environmental Justice

The relationship between land and colonialism is essential to understanding contemporary Canadian literature. Colonial systems transformed Indigenous



relationships with land through dispossession, territorial control, resource extraction, settlement, and the imposition of European concepts of property.

Contemporary Indigenous literature frequently returns to these histories, not simply to represent past injustice but to demonstrate their continuing influence on contemporary identity and environmental relationships.

Kamboureli and Lai's *Land/Relations: Possibilities of Justice in Canadian Literatures* (2023) brings together scholarship concerned with relationships among people, humanity and other living forms, and land. The collection emphasizes “counter-memory” as a way of confronting erasure, loss, and trauma within Canadian literary and cultural histories.

This approach is important because environmental ethics cannot be separated from questions of justice. If particular communities have historically experienced displacement or environmental destruction, then environmental responsibility must also involve recognition of those histories.

Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* illustrates this relationship through a future shaped by ecological crisis and Indigenous displacement. The environmental future is therefore inseparable from Canada's colonial past.

Table 3. Land and Environmental Justice

Issue	Environmental dimension	Cultural dimension
Land dispossession	Loss of territory	Loss of belonging
Resource extraction	Ecological degradation	Community disruption
Water development	Habitat transformation	Cultural displacement
Climate change	Environmental vulnerability	Unequal impacts
Colonial mapping	Territorial control	Reconfiguration of identity
Ecological restoration	Environmental recovery	Cultural renewal

The literature consequently demonstrates that environmental ethics must include historical accountability and justice, not merely conservation.

VI. Human–Nonhuman Relationships

Contemporary Canadian literature increasingly challenges the traditional distinction between humans and non-human nature. Animals, plants, rivers, forests, and landscapes are not simply passive objects observed by human characters. Instead, they participate in ecological relationships and influence human existence.

This relational approach is particularly visible in Indigenous literature. Eppley et al. (2024) demonstrate that Indigenous-authored fiction represents land as an active presence and emphasizes relationships among human, non-human, and ancestral worlds.



The representation of animals is similarly important. Rather than treating animals merely as symbols or resources, contemporary ecological narratives can position them as co-inhabitants within shared environments. This challenges anthropocentrism in two ways. First, it questions the assumption that humans are the only subjects worthy of ethical consideration. Second, it emphasizes human dependence upon ecological systems.

The relationship can be conceptualized as:

Human ↔ Animal ↔ Plant ↔ Water ↔ Land ↔ Climate

Each component affects the others.

This interconnected model is particularly important when analysing ecological crisis because environmental damage rarely remains confined to one species or one geographical space. The destruction of a habitat can affect animals, plants, water systems, human communities, and cultural practices simultaneously.

Contemporary Canadian literature therefore encourages a broader understanding of identity in which being human also means being ecologically situated.

VII. Memory, Place, and Indigenous Knowledge

Memory in contemporary Canadian literature is frequently connected with Indigenous knowledge. Stories, oral traditions, community practices, place names, seasonal knowledge, and relationships with animals and land can preserve information across generations.

Fraille-Marcos (2019) describes a “turn to Indigenization” in Canadian writing and identifies the importance of Indigenous kinship and ecologies of knowledge in contemporary Canadian literature.

This perspective challenges the idea that environmental knowledge exists only within formal scientific systems. Scientific knowledge remains valuable, but literary representations demonstrate that ecological understanding can also emerge through lived experience, storytelling, observation, cultural practice, and intergenerational relationships.

The importance of memory becomes especially visible when environmental systems change. If a river is redirected or a forest is destroyed, stories and cultural memories may preserve relationships with the landscape that no longer physically exists in the same form.

Thus:

Ecological memory preserves what environmental transformation threatens to erase. Contemporary Canadian literature consequently becomes an important space for preserving and communicating ecological knowledge.



VIII. Comparative Analysis of Selected Canadian Texts

The selected texts demonstrate different approaches to land, identity, memory, and environmental ethics.

Table 4. Comparative Ecocritical Reading

Literary text	Central ecological concern	Role of land/environment	Ethical focus
<i>The Back of the Turtle</i>	Water pollution/extraction	Damaged ecological system	Care
<i>Celia's Song</i>	Human–nonhuman relationality	Cultural and spiritual space	Reciprocity
<i>The Marrow Thieves</i>	Climate crisis/displacement	Homeland and survival space	Justice
<i>Moon of the Crusted Snow</i>	Energy dependence	Community life-support system	Collective responsibility
<i>Minds of Winter</i>	Memory/Anthropocene	Historical ecological archive	Ecological memory
<i>Blue Bear Woman</i>	Water/flooding	Indigenous territory	Cultural and environmental justice

The comparison reveals that land is never simply a geographical background. Its meaning changes according to the relationships humans establish with it.

In some texts, environmental destruction reveals the consequences of extraction. In others, land preserves cultural memory. In Indigenous narratives, land is closely connected to identity and community. In climate fiction, environmental transformation challenges assumptions about human security.

The texts therefore converge around one major principle:
Human identity is inseparable from relationships with place.

IX. Environmental Ethics and the Changing Human–Nature Relationship

Environmental ethics in contemporary Canadian literature involves a shift from ownership to responsibility, from extraction to care, and from separation to relationality.

The older model of human–nature relations can be represented as:

Human → Nature → Resource → Use

The contemporary relational model becomes:

Human ↔ Land ↔ Water ↔ Animals ↔ Community ↔ Responsibility



This transformation has important ethical consequences. If land is understood only as property, environmental destruction can be justified through economic benefit. If land is understood as a relationship, destruction becomes an ethical disruption affecting multiple forms of life.

Canadian literature makes these ethical questions accessible through narrative. Readers encounter polluted rivers, displaced communities, damaged landscapes, threatened species, changing climates, and memories of environmental transformation through individual and collective stories.

Recent Canadian literary scholarship similarly emphasizes the growing importance of human/non-human interaction, bioregional studies, Indigenous perspectives, and postcolonial ecocriticism in responses to the climate emergency.

X. Discussion

The analysis demonstrates that contemporary Canadian literature provides a complex understanding of land and environmental responsibility. Land functions simultaneously as physical territory, cultural memory, ecological system, historical archive, and source of identity.

The concept of ecological memory is particularly useful because it connects environmental history with cultural identity. Environmental damage does not simply alter physical landscapes; it can also disrupt stories, relationships, traditions, and senses of belonging.

The selected Indigenous texts demonstrate that environmental ethics must also be relational. Human beings are not isolated individuals standing outside nature. They exist within networks involving land, water, animals, ancestors, community, and future generations.

Another important finding is the relationship between environmental ethics and justice. Environmental degradation frequently has unequal cultural and social consequences. Contemporary Indigenous literature therefore challenges approaches that treat ecological crisis as a universal experience detached from history.

The literature also suggests that environmental consciousness is not achieved merely through recognizing environmental problems. It requires a change in the way humans conceptualize their relationship with land.

Table 5. Major Findings

Major finding	Literary implication
Land shapes identity	Identity is place-based
Landscapes preserve memory	Nature functions as an archive
Water has cultural meaning	Environmental ethics extends beyond utility
Ecological damage affects communities	Environmental crisis is also social



Indigenous knowledge challenges anthropocentrism	Multiple ecological knowledge systems are needed
Environmental justice is historical	Ecology cannot be separated from colonialism
Human survival depends on ecological systems	Interdependence replaces human independence

The overall argument is therefore that contemporary Canadian literature reimagines environmental ethics through memory, relationship, and responsibility.

XI. Conclusion

Contemporary Canadian literature demonstrates that land is far more than geographical space. It is a source of identity, a repository of memory, a cultural archive, a living ecological system, and a site of ethical responsibility. Through the works examined in this study, land emerges as an active participant in human history rather than a passive setting for human activity.

The analysis shows that contemporary Canadian writers increasingly challenge anthropocentric and extractive understandings of nature. Indigenous literary perspectives are particularly important because they foreground relationships among land, humans, non-human beings, community, memory, and cultural continuity. Recent scholarship confirms the significance of land-connected Indigenous identities and relational approaches to Canadian literature.

Ecological memory further strengthens this understanding by demonstrating that landscapes can carry traces of environmental and cultural histories. Water, forests, animals, and territories become repositories through which communities remember ecological transformation and loss.

Environmental ethics consequently emerges from a recognition of interdependence. The question is no longer simply how humans can use or protect nature, but how humans can participate responsibly within ecological relationships. The study therefore concludes that contemporary Canadian literature transforms the meaning of land from territory to relationship, from resource to responsibility, and from background to memory. Through this reimagining, literature contributes to a broader environmental consciousness in which ecological wellbeing, cultural identity, historical justice, and human responsibility are understood as interconnected.

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