

Holding Home Together

Katherena Vermette's *The Break*

For the characters in Katherena Vermette's novel *The Break*, the notion of *home* is a complex one, as multiple understandings are interwoven through their experiences. At one point in the story, Flora—the Kookom (grandmother) at the centre of the family—inquires after Gabe, her daughter Lou's partner. Gabe has been away for a while with his extended family, and Flora asks Lou, "So, Gabe's not coming home?" (282). Lou tells her mother, "He's not coming home, Ma. He is home" (283). In reading this richly layered novel, understanding home means travelling with these characters as they hold each other together; conversely, understanding how they hold each other together means recognizing how they think about home.

In my own experience as a Métis woman, *home* is affective and relational, not merely a static sense of place. When I was growing up, we moved a fair bit, even when it was just within Calgary. Until my mid-thirties, the longest I had ever lived in one house was three years. The exception was my maternal grandparents' house, which was the extended family home from the 1960s until the early 2000s. I lived there directly, at times, or very nearby. Even when my house changed frequently and we moved—when my mom was renting places and raising us girls as a single parent, or later when I moved around as a student—that family home was there, a quiet constant in the background. I always prided myself on my ability to handle change, to move without feeling disrupted, and did not think consciously that I was attached to anywhere. Home was wherever my mom and sister were, or wherever we were when we were with my dad.

I think I did not realize how stable a sense of place I had until it came time for my grandparents to sell their house—they had moved back to Medicine

Hat and were living in a smaller condo—and I started to mourn that house. I spent time in that house in my dreams, sifting through layers of time: family gatherings, meals, games, visits with my grandparents and my innumerable aunts and uncles and cousins. I had not realized consciously that despite all our moves we were always in orbit around that house, and that my mom was not parenting alone, but in a web of relations spanning outward from my grandparents. I had not realized consciously that while I lived in many places I was deeply at home in that house, and, even deeper than that, I was at home in my connections with my kin.

In the past few years, my grandfather and then my grandmother have passed away. Ever so slowly, the creep of age and Alzheimer's muffled my grandmother's spark, drained the ever-present vibrant flow of her stories, and weakened the strong body that had raised and held together four generations of proud people—a rambling, prairie Catholic-Métis-German family. Before she died, my grandmother celebrated her ninetieth birthday with all nine of her children. After she passed on, I remembered the way she was years before: her eyes bright, her voice laughing, her hands baking, her mind always weaving together the past with the present, the there with the here, constantly narrating for us how things were and might be. When she died, I learned that *that* was home.

This personal learning was still swirling in my mind when I picked up *The Break*. At first, I was reading the novel for portrayals of resilience, of enduring sexual violence, of the strength that resides in women's bodies. I was looking for the ferocity of the love between the Métis women. However, my attention was increasingly drawn to the prevalence of *home* in the story. The word *home* appears on 113 of the book's 350 pages.¹ The notion of home seems tremendously significant. While I started out looking at the strength of the women in the story as they grapple with the impacts of violence, and at the ways in which their strength is relational, I began to see how that relational resilience takes place through multiple and shifting conceptions of home.

Reading Katherena Vermette's *The Break*

Vermette is a Métis woman living and writing in Winnipeg. She writes about the city's North End, where she also set her Governor General's Award-winning book of poetry, *North End Love Songs* (2012). Her first novel, *The Break*, was published in 2016 to widespread public, critical, and academic attention. In examining this text, I position myself as a scholar of Indigenous literatures, but also personally as a Métis woman. In keeping

with critical approaches established within Indigenous literary studies, I write from my personal positioning, situating my understandings in relation to my own experiences as well as the text and its contexts, both critical and socio-cultural. As Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episkenew contends, it is vital for readers of Indigenous literatures to approach texts in ways that are socially responsible, that connect to the real-world experiences of Indigenous people, and that acknowledge the interconnections between literary representations and Indigenous community well-being. Episkenew in particular offers cautionary advice to non-Indigenous academics who are not well informed about the contemporary realities of Indigenous peoples, arguing that “scholars need to be cognizant of the authority that society accords their voices” (“Socially Responsible” 57). Her call for responsibility can be extended to all literary critics, including Indigenous ones, given that scholarly “articles have an effect on the social situation of the Aboriginal people who are their subjects” (57). Building upon this ethic from Episkenew, I am interested in “the applications of Indigenous literature as it moves outside the boundaries of the text to affect the material world” (*Taking Back* 193), and I read *The Break* through both the text and its context. Sharing how my understandings of the text are shaped by my positioning and experience is one way of enacting this kind of responsibility.

In this article, I focus on notions of resilience and home for urban Indigenous women through a reading of *The Break*. As a Métis reader taking up a text by a Métis author, I read largely for the Métis specificity in the book, which is abundant. However, the book has both Métis and First Nations characters, and can also be taken up under the broader rubric of Indigenous literatures. As an important note on distinctions between Métis and First Nations, I appreciate how this book resists explicit labels, taxonomies, or divisions, relying on implicit cues about characters’ positionings or experiences rather than explaining them clearly for readers. For example, when I read the book, I took Rita—Cheryl’s best friend—to be Anishinaabe rather than Métis. As her daughter Zegwan (Ziggy) verbalizes, Rita’s children’s names are “Anishinaabe” (60), and Lou mentions how, in the past, Rita “lived on reserve” and was more “traditional” (40). Pointers are scattered throughout the text for careful and familiar readers to find, but the novel refuses to lay things out too clearly. The fact that the central family, the Charles and Traverse family, is Métis, is likewise not explained heavy-handedly; rather, it is treated as known through humble, implicit clues. For instance, Cheryl calls her daughter “my girl” (55); the

family calls their grandmother “Kookom” (87); and, in the hospital room, Cheryl looks at Officer Tommy Scott and thinks, “Yes, he’s definitely Métis. Looks like one of Joe’s brothers” (113). In reading this text, I am particularly examining its Métisness, but I am also reading it as Indigenous—that is, I use “Indigenous” as a more general term, within which “Métis” experience is a specific subset. Along with Métis scholars like Chantal Fiola, I believe it is vital for Métis and First Nations Peoples to be recognized as kin; to see that the divisions between us are the result of colonial processes; and to look for ways “to recognize and reject these colonial divisions, while embracing and celebrating our differences, in order to heal our relationships” (11). In this spirit, my arguments here focus on urban Métis women, but also urban Indigenous women and people more broadly, as appropriate to the range of characters portrayed in Vermette’s novel.

My reading of *The Break* addresses significant aspects of the text, but also takes on particular significance given the contexts surrounding the novel. At the time that I was first reading this book in 2017, Canada’s 150th birthday was generating attention, and Indigenous people were voicing counter-narratives in response to national celebrations. I was also well aware, as I read, of the prevalence of violence against Indigenous women and Two-Spirit people in Canada and of the public dialogues around that issue. I wondered what *The Break* might offer to such dialogues, in terms of challenging Canadian narratives that fail to recognize Indigenous women’s presence in cities. For instance, how does *The Break* make space for Indigenous resilience and unsettle narratives that prioritize the Canadian nation? How, in particular, might understanding what *home* means to Vermette’s characters help to foreground Indigenous women’s experiences? I asked these questions in order to respect the processes of personal and cultural expression that the literary arts embody, while also attending to the calls that Indigenous literatures make for social change.

In framing my reading theoretically, I am working under a rubric of reading for resurgence, which offers a way to engage with literary texts in order to support, align with, foster, sustain, and nurture the self-determination of Indigenous communities and peoples. I build upon the work of Indigenous scholars who are thinking through resurgence, in the sense of Indigenous survivance—as formulated by Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor—as well as celebration, politics, culture, reclamation, and revitalization. Broadly speaking, I align resurgence work with the (re)strengthening of Indigenous ways, rather than with the dismantling of colonial systems, structures, and

ideologies that comprises the work of decolonization. In prioritizing resurgence, I follow scholars and artists like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) and Craig Womack (Muskogee Creek/Cherokee) to view decolonization as a vital but distinct process that takes place alongside, but which should not supersede or subsume, resurgence work.

I believe that artistic practices are integral to community resurgence, and I understand the literary arts as a potential site for Indigenous people to imagine and enact community resurgence. In so doing, I look to Simpson, who invokes a celebratory, vitalizing process, describing resurgence as “a flourishing of the Indigenous inside” (16). Building upon such understandings, I define resurgence as the regrowth of Indigenous communities from strong roots toward strong futures, building upon tradition and heritage through processes of revitalization and reclamation in order to create healthy, vibrant, self-determining nations. Reading for resurgence connects my understandings of literary texts to that vital work. In relation to *The Break* more particularly, reading for resurgence brings me to examine the notion of resilience. While the term “resilience” has been defined and deployed in a wide range of ways across disciplines, I define it here through the language of the novel: resilience means “fighting” (278), “holding each other up” (291), being “okay” and “strong” and able to “heal” (329); it means not being “broken” (318) despite experiences of unspeakable violence. My arguments below illustrate how these characteristics of resilience run through the novel, emphasizing the vital contribution that *The Break* makes to portrayals of urban Indigenous women.

This article moves in two parts. In the first, I expand on the concept of reading for resurgence by setting out the key terms underlying my examination of *The Break*. I also stress why it is urgent to recognize urban Indigenous women’s resilience, looking at the context surrounding Vermette’s book. In the second part, I proceed with my reading of the novel. This reading foregrounds the resilience of the women in the text by demonstrating how kinship and mobility, as well as multiple conceptions of home, are at work in their stories. I conclude with a consideration of why it matters to hear stories expressing the resilience of Indigenous women in urban spaces.

Resilience—Home, Mobility, and Kinship

The primary concepts through which I am reading for resilience in Vermette’s *The Break* are home, mobility, and kinship. The interrelatedness of these terms helps to map out the conceptual framework supporting my

arguments. The first term (home) arises out of my reading of the text itself. In seeking to draw out ways of understanding the novel from within the novel, I am remembering Anishinaabe scholar Kimberly Blaeser's powerful call to look "for critical methods and voices that seem to arise out of the literature itself" (53). This call was part of a necessary push to "approach Native literature from an [I]ndigenous cultural context" or to "frame and enact a tribal-centered criticism" (53). Articulated twenty-five years ago now in Okanagan writer and scholar Jeannette Armstrong's foundational collection *Looking at the Words of Our People* (1993), Blaeser's call has been a persuasive touchstone for Indigenous-centred studies of Indigenous literatures, and a growing body of scholarship has responded to and developed critical framing and enactment along those lines.² The second two terms (mobility and kinship) emerge from my reading of the text but also from my considerations of critical contexts in relation to resilience and home. I will explore each term briefly before moving on to how they shape the women's lives in the novel.

With so many Indigenous people living in cities, understandings of *home*, and of what it means to belong in urban spaces, are vital to community well-being and self-determination. Responding to Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore's performance piece *Vigil*—which commemorates missing and murdered Indigenous women in Vancouver—critic Elizabeth Kalbfleisch suggests that the increasing prevalence of urban Indigenous populations "calls for the recognition of an ideological home, one that is central to cultural memory and political agency and to maintaining the relevance and currency of the adopted inhabited home" (285). I am interested in what such recognition would look like for Métis people, whose conceptions of home or homeland have been shaped through particular histories and experiences.

In looking to scholarly literature for considerations of home, I find a number of helpful examinations that relate to Métisness and/or urban Indigeneity—separately if not together. For instance, scholars have looked at fluid conceptions of home and Métis experience (MacFarlane); notions of homeland for the Métis (Andersen; St-Onge, Podruchny, and Macdougall); and the growing numbers of self-identified Métis in Canadian cities (Laliberte). In my reading thus far I have found one scholarly text that specifically articulates Métis experiences in relation to *home*, and that is from Métis author Maria Campbell. In her foreword to the book *Contours of a People: Metis Family, Mobility, and History*, Campbell writes that "coming together to share these stories is a beginning or a start to finding our way home. Home

meaning the place where the spirit dwells” (xxv). Campbell’s consideration of home as both located in communal practice and as spiritual residence connects well to what I see in the experiences of Vermette’s characters.

Equally vital to understanding Métis people’s experiences of home in relation to urban space is the understanding that urban Indigenous people are mobile. In using the word *mobility* in my reading, I am referencing the thinking of authors in *Contours of a People*, the collection on Métis identity edited by Nicole St-Onge, Carolyn Podruchny, and Brenda Macdougall, in which mobility is one fundamental concept for understanding the Métis as a people. Additionally, mobility among urban Indigenous people means that they “transgress the classic rural / urban binaries” that have shaped so much research on Indigenous populations (Peters and Andersen 387). Such binaries are colonial restrictions imposed on the identities of Indigenous people, locking them into fixed categories rather than recognizing and affirming their ways of being. Consequently, it becomes important to attend to the work of artists like Vermette who insistently portray urban Indigenous resilience in characters who are mobile and who exercise agency in their articulations of home.

Related to the mobility of the Métis is the notion of *kinship*: while on the move, Métis people have been tied together through bonds of relationship. St-Onge and Podruchny argue that “extensive webs of kinship” were key to Métis survival and adaptation in difficult environments historically (82), and set kinship alongside mobility in terms of Métis ethnogenesis. Kinship is also a broadly used category of analysis across Indigenous literary studies. Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice, for instance, takes up kinship and community as “interpretive concepts” for “ethical Native literary criticism” (149), exploring “the relationship of our literatures to our communities— and the role of that relationship in ensuring the continuity of [I]ndigenous nations into the future” (150). Communities are continually shaped through stories, through imaginative work done within relationships. Within Indigenous literary texts, explorations of kinship can illuminate significant sites of survival and self-determination.

Urban Indigenous Women’s Resilience

In contextualizing my reading of *The Break*, I want to consider why stories of Indigenous women’s resilience matter for Indigenous women, and what effects such stories might have on Canadian consciousness if they are taken up by broader readerships. I am reading, first and foremost, for resurgence,

but am also aware of the unsettling impacts such texts can have when they are published and read in Canada or even held under the umbrella of Canadian literature. As a scholar of Indigenous literatures and Indigenous education, I feel that multiple, often-conflicting impulses are at work in my scholarship and teaching. At times, focusing on the resurgence projects of Indigenous peoples while also teaching non-Indigenous learners about these projects offers opportunities to build better relationships between groups. However, these two undertakings are often “irreconcilable,” to borrow a term from Métis scholar David Garneau, who argues the necessity for spaces where “Indigeneity is performed apart from a Settler audience,” where Indigenous “people simply are, where they express and celebrate their continuity” without translating for others (33). In relation to *The Break* and my readings here, I believe there is space for considering both. I am reading primarily for resurgence, but also asking attendant questions about what impacts the stories told by this book about urban Indigenous women’s resilience might have on the surrounding work of unsettling Canada.

For one thing, as allied scholar Paulette Regan points out, Indigenous stories unsettle the peacemaker myth and collective understandings of Canada as a peaceful, benevolent nation (105). Indigenous stories challenge many Canadians’ prior understandings of history and their own positioning in relation to Indigenous peoples—which, as Lenape and Potawatomi scholar Susan Dion argues, sometimes makes those stories difficult for settler audiences to hear and understand, resulting in “dynamics of denial” (59). In addition, the story of urban Indigeneity remains largely unheard. More than half of Indigenous people in Canada live in cities.³ While Indigenous peoples in Canada are often portrayed within dominant discourses as being elsewhere—in the distant past or on rural reserves, and further distanced through the idea of the “romantic, mythical Other” (Dion 56)—Indigenous peoples are in fact ever-present, both in time and place. Until recently, most studies of urban Indigeneity were framed through a “deficit model” (Newhouse and FitzMaurice xvii), which posited Indigenous people as out of place in urban spaces, or “Indigenous peoples and their cultures as incongruous with modern urban life” (Peters and Andersen 1). However, scholarship is increasingly recognizing that cities can be “spaces of Indigenous resilience and cultural innovation” (Peters and Andersen 2): cities are Indigenous places.

Furthermore, the resilience of Indigenous peoples in enduring and resisting colonial violence is not a story that is heard often enough in Canadian contexts. Across Indigenous communities, people are working to

expose and dismantle colonial structures while reclaiming and revitalizing Indigenous ways of knowing and being. This decolonizing and resurgence work takes place at multiple levels—from individual mental health and family relationships, to language and education, to justice and governance—all of which are interdependent and essential to the well-being and self-determination of communities. The resilience of Indigenous peoples in Canada is remarkable as they work to regenerate their ontological and epistemological frameworks, to engage in traditional and innovative artistic expression, and to celebrate the validity and strength of their nations. I agree with Onondoga scholar David Newhouse and Kevin FitzMaurice that the narratives of loss, displacement, and dysfunction, or the “theme of lack” in deficit-oriented studies of urban Indigeneity (xii), marginalize understandings of cities as Indigenous spaces, failing to recognize resilience and resurgence within urban Indigenous communities. Unangax scholar Eve Tuck has, further, called for a “moratorium on damage-centered research” (423) that views urban Indigenous people “as broken” (409); in a related spirit, I emphasize resilience and resurgence in my readings here.

The resilience of Indigenous women in particular is not a story that is told, or heard, often enough. News and statistics tell a dire story, one that also must be heard. More than a thousand Indigenous women are missing or have been murdered in Canada: in 2017 Patty Hajdu, Canada’s Minister for the Status of Women, “pointed to research from the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) that puts [the figure] at 4,000” (Tasker). In my teaching, I find that students often ask, simply, why this crisis is taking place—a naive and vital question. The prevalence of such violence, paired with everyday racism, can foster a culture of acceptance, normalizing violence against Indigenous women. Mechanisms of power and oppression coalesce around Indigenous women’s bodies within the socio-cultural context of the colonial nation-state—whether because of the equation of “the Native female body with the conquest of land in the ‘New World’” (Finley 34) or because interlocking axes of racism, colonialism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of oppression constrain the Indigenous female body as a “rightful target” of violence (Razack 144). Such destructive narratives must be countered and undone through Indigenous women’s own stories.

Recognizing these counter-narratives, I contend that listening to stories of Indigenous women’s resilience, like the stories in *The Break*, can precipitate important shifts in perspective. Considering the impacts literature can have, I have a particular interest in texts by Indigenous writers who interweave the

realities of intersectional colonial violence with the resilience of Indigenous people in ways that open up space for well-being in our communities or for resurgence work to take place. I recognize the danger in looking for literary works that convey a clear narrative of empowerment: there is a risk of that arc overcoming the difficult and honest work of artists to portray, to represent, to dream, and to imagine. Acknowledging that risk, I work as a reader to examine those texts that confront colonial violence while recognizing Indigenous agency, focusing my readings on perspectives from Indigenous women.

Reading for Resilience: *The Break*

It is from within these contexts that I turn to Katherena Vermette's novel *The Break*. Narrated by ten distinct characters in interwoven segments, the novel seems to circle around the central incident of physical and sexual violence perpetrated against thirteen-year-old Emily. I prefer to see how the violence ostensibly at the centre of the story reveals what is truly central, however, which is the resilience embodied in the web of women in this family. The members of the Charles/Traverse family gather together to support Emily, who endures a brutal attack that takes place in "the Break" (3), a strip of open space in Winnipeg where Hydro towers run in a long line north. Her aunt Stella's house borders on the Break and it is Stella who witnesses the attack on the snow-swept field on a bitterly cold winter night. Accompanying Stella through this experience is the spirit of her mother, Rain, whose violent death has caused significant pain in the family, but whose narrative presence perhaps highlights the cohesiveness of the family relationships despite very real trauma.

By contrast to the resilient kinship in Emily's family, the devastating violence in the text overlaps with disrupted kinship webs. Phoenix, the young woman who leads the attack on Emily, has a past that is heavy with violence, trauma, and loss. Her staggeringly vengeful attack takes place after she sees Clayton—who seems to be her former boyfriend and the father of her unborn child—taking an interest in naive young Emily: Phoenix has already realized that "Clayton didn't love her" (150) when Emily shows up at Phoenix's uncle's house, invited by Clayton to a party there that night. The sharp ruptures in Phoenix's kinship webs help to explain—but not, of course, to justify—what has driven her to commit such an unthinkable act. Unlike Stella and Emily's family, Phoenix did not have a strong web of extended kinship to draw upon when her mother—dealing with her own

experiences of sexual violence and loss—was unable to parent her in healthy ways. Instead of a kin web of unquestioningly supportive women, Phoenix experiences state care and institutionalization. Her mother and her uncle, while still alive, are of little help. The portions of the narrative focused on her perspective feature nostalgic memories of familial loss. In my view, the novel does not demand forgiveness for Phoenix, but rather invites readers to see with open eyes the circumstances that have led her to where she is. She is not a faceless villain, but another young woman whose intergenerational struggles with sexual violence, poverty, and disconnection from family have led her to become solitary and hard. The novel leaves readers wondering what might be next for her and her unborn child.

By contrast, the strong family of Flora (Kookom), her children Cheryl and Rain (Lorraine), and their children Lou (Louisa), Paul (Paulina), and Stella, now raising their own children in turn, shows how urban Indigenous women's resilience can exist as embodied and enacted kinship. For these women, enduring is simply a way of being. When faced with a crisis, the women—daughters, sisters, mothers, aunties, grandmothers, and cousins, both living and in the spirit world—weather it together in their web of relationships. The interwoven narratives from the different women's perspectives emphasize this web. Together, the women endure the violence by being together and supporting each other in a powerful and primal enactment of relationship. This togetherness is highlighted by the experiences of Stella, who is separated from her relatives until the attack happens, after which she is drawn back. She has become distanced because she has moved out of the family neighbourhood, married a white man, Jeff, and has stopped visiting her relatives. Jeff is not comfortable with her travelling across town on the bus to take their children to what he considers a bad neighbourhood. Stella devotes her time and care only to her nuclear family, trying to be a really good mother, which is perhaps understandable given the loss of her own mother that she suffered as a child. As soon as she witnesses the attack, however, it becomes clear that her nuclear family model will not help her to cope with this crisis. She quickly realizes that her husband cannot understand or support her in the way that she needs. For instance, after hearing her conversation with the police, who do not believe Stella's assertion that the late-night attack she witnessed was a sexual assault, Jeff says to her, "They know what they're talking about. . . . It's okay. But with your past, hon, you know you could've just been dreaming. You could've just been confused" (15). Instead, Stella craves the support of the women in her

family. She wants to call her Kookom or her auntie: “Aunty Cher would’ve listened. She probably would’ve come over, made the coffee, yelled at the cops when they started acting like they didn’t believe her” (15). Stella begins to recognize that she needs these women in her life.

While Stella moves in and out of the family web, the other women in the family draw together to handle the situation—gathering around Emily at the hospital and supporting Emily and her mother, Paulina, when the police come to ask questions. It is not just the things they do that make them strong; it is how they are together. Resilience is not magical or glamorous; it is the everyday business of enduring together—getting coffees, taking walks, making phone calls, buying sandwiches, sitting together over late nights, cleaning houses, getting blood out of fabric, putting blankets over the blood that will not come out. Resilience is just how things are, how they have to be. They can be falling apart, but they are, as Lou so clearly puts it, “not completely fucked. . . . everything’s going to be okay” (288). Vermette’s novel portrays urban space as a site of potential struggle and violence for Indigenous women, but it more powerfully portrays their resilience as they live out their relationships in the place they call home. In my reading, exploring what *home* means for the women in this novel illuminates the relational nature of their resilience—of the strength with which they are holding each other together.

Understanding Home in *The Break*

In illuminating the intertwined yet distinct notions of home that traverse Vermette’s text, I am making two points. First, I want to show that, by holding differing but simultaneous understandings of home, and maintaining mobility between them, characters in this novel are able to draw upon multiple sources of resilience. That is, they have more than one figurative home to go to when they need to be safe or strong. Second, I want to show that home is not only a sense of place, but also a responsibility for action and mutual caretaking. *Home*, in this sense, is about navigating webs of kinship, and coming home is about stepping up to enact those kinship relations. *Home* calls people into ethical ways of being-in-relation. My purpose in drawing out these two interpretations is to argue that Vermette’s novel portrays home in ways that open up possibilities for Métis women (and Indigenous women more broadly) to be resiliently at home in urban spaces despite ongoing gendered colonial violence. In what follows, I will move through the four conceptions of home that I see in this novel.

The first is the home of matriarchal kinship, of the everyday being together of kookoms, mothers, aunties, sisters, and children. This humble, embodied home is evoked through kitchens, babies, musty smells, tea, Noxzema, stories, mundane conversations, time, and photographs. It feels like home, in this sense, when the women are just being together. Woven into this conception of home is the web of relatives connecting the women in the story, those marked in bold text in the family tree at the front of the novel—Flora, Cheryl, Rain, Lou, Paul, Stella, Emily. One strong example of this conception of home is the dynamic between Stella and Kookom. Stella has been away tending to her nuclear family apart from her extended family, but she comes home to her grandmother's house after witnessing the attack. Kookom tells her, "it never feels like home until you are here" (199). After Stella returns she is able to feel this sense of home again as well: "Stella leans in to the soft couch, the smell of it soothing, perfect, imperfect, home, and falls asleep to the coos of her child and the gentle snoring of her Kookom, and in the shadow of her mother's face. And for the first time she feels she is exactly where she is supposed to be" (273). This sense of home is the home of women's relational resilience: they are enduring violence, supporting each other, surviving in the city, embodying care, sharing stories, tears, laughter. The young police officer investigating the attack, Tommy, sees "all these women holding each other up" (291), and they remind him of his mom and aunts. Marie, Tommy's mom, tells him that the women seem familiar because he is recognizing his own belonging in Métisness. She says to him, "they're your people, that's why" (301). Tommy shares a parallel sense of home to that of the Charles and Traverse family: he remarks, on entering Marie's apartment, that it "feels like home even though he's never even spent a night here. . . . Everything smells like her and that's what she is, home" (297). Tommy recognizes home as embodied through his maternal relations.

The second *home* is the simpler but distant home of the bush, the land, far outside of the city. This is the home where the men are, away from the women at the core of the story. Louisa sets out the distinct Indigeneity of this home space as she listens to Paulina describe Pete's family home. Paul tells Lou, "His parents still live in the house they all grew up in out in the bush just outside his reserve. The bush! . . . He hunts and everything"; and Lou considers this image: "a real house in a real community with a real family. Real Indians! Not city half-breeds like us" (42). With this line Lou voices—and, with humour or irony, pokes fun at—persistent misconceptions, including the notion that urban Indigenous people are less authentic, that

Métis people are not authentically Indigenous, and that urban and reserve populations are discrete. While challenging these misconceptions, the text is able to set out a rural/reserve (and largely First Nations) sense of home as fitting within an urban (and largely Métis) story. This sense of home is evoked through connections to the land, through breath and air, through good work like chopping wood, through cleanness and open spaces, through ceremony, and through past memories. This home, too, takes shape through kinship, but noticeably through separations between men and their women and children. This is the home that is meant as the characters repeatedly note that Gabe has gone “back home” (52), meaning that he is no longer home with Lou and the children. Similarly, Zegwan and Rita miss the home where Ziggy’s dad and Moshoom are, and Cheryl misses the home where Joe is. Notably, this sense of home also invokes both the closeness of, and the differences between, the Métis and First Nations spaces and characters in the novel. While this second notion of home evokes a sense of health and Indigenous community, and while the women move freely in and out of this space, it is not where they have chosen to live: it is not home to their fierce survival together.

The third conception of *home* I see in the text is actually its inverse, a sharp contrast with the other two I have outlined. Revolving around Phoenix, this aspect of the novel sets out a striking absence of home, which is significant given the violence that Phoenix inflicts on Emily. In the early pages of the novel, Phoenix stumbles thankfully, half-frozen, into her uncle’s house, having run away on foot from the detention centre where she has been in custody (121). There is no suggestion that this house is home to her: she notes that “the place is a total dump” (25) and although “they’re family” (26), right away her uncle tells her, “you can’t stay here” (30). Phoenix’s uncle’s house is a space of disarray, of cigarettes, booze, gang associations, parties, and people moving through. Phoenix’s narratives are woven through with longing, memory, and loss. Her story is more elusive but carries the suggestion of kinship webs ruptured rather than sustained. Phoenix remembers being asked by a counsellor, “when did you feel most safe?” (31), but she seems continually unable to answer this question. Phoenix remembers houses she has lived in—such as “the brown house, Grandmère’s house” (233)—and thinks of the house where her one surviving sister lives in foster care (144), but she does not talk about *home*. One exception occurs within a sad little memory: Phoenix remembers sitting up through the night watching her little sisters sleep, “waiting for her mom to come home, waiting for the sun to come up so it wouldn’t be dark anymore” (143). Looking back, Phoenix thinks

“she was stupid and scared like that, but she was only a little kid” (143). This memory evokes the tender relationships that are now lost from Phoenix’s life and that live on only in her longing rather than in her belonging.

The fourth conception of *home* is tangled up in the other three. In looking after each other, the characters build a sense of home that exists in their mutual caretaking over time. This fourth sense is that of *coming* home, something Phoenix’s mother Elsie was not doing when Phoenix was little. This sense of home is voiced by various characters over the course of the novel. After the attack on Emily, Kookom pleads to her granddaughter, “Come home, my Stella. Please” (171). Struggling alongside her family, Lou narrates, “I think of Gabe for the first time in hours, wanting him to come home, to take care of the boys and to help me convince them everything is going to be okay” (178). This sense of home is also what Lou tries to describe to Paul when the latter struggles to believe that she deserves Pete: Lou reassures her, “It’s not just blind luck, hey. You worked for this . . . you made a healthy home, and a man took notice” (54). Pete is a “good” man (54), as the women repeatedly point out, and the home Paul and he have made together is one where they will stay and take care of each other; Paul can “rely on him” (287). This final sense of home is one that evokes a wholeness of the family being together, in Pete and Paulina’s case, but even more so evokes a sense of responsibility and continuity in that relationship. This home is about a mutual and ongoing needing, relying on, and taking care of each other. Unlike Pete, Gabe does not come home and stay home, in this sense: Lou admits that Gabe “wants to be needed” but, she says, “I just don’t need him” (283). This way of sharing home together does not seem to be in Lou and Gabe’s future.

The four senses of home that I have described are helpful in understanding the novel’s conclusion. All four notions are closely interwoven during the collective trip that the families take at the end of the book. As many of the characters head out of the city to share a sweat at Ziggy’s father and Moshoom’s place, and as Emily works to heal from the violence that she has endured, the story brings together kinship, the land, resilience, men and women (and kids) taking care of each other, and a chance to come home. Rita says to Cheryl, “it’s a good place, hey? . . . I never realize how much I miss it ‘til I go back,” and Cheryl, “with a look,” tells her, “it’s your home” (348). This ending is redemptive for Cheryl and Rita, Paulina and Louisa, and even for Kookom, as the multiple conceptions of home coalesce and as the women remain mobile between them. Meanwhile, Stella’s ending is a

little more ambiguous: she has gone back home to her husband and things are not fully resolved with her wider family. The kinds of home she will inhabit remain to be seen. Again, there is still no home for Phoenix, now in custody: she faces a difficult future.

One portion of the conclusion is particularly striking. It is that of Emily's final narrative section, during which her remembered experience of the attack is shared alongside her current feelings as she prepares to leave the hospital. This segment is strongly affective; it is also densely woven with understandings of home, and it is where I conclude this part of my reading. The narrator tells us that, immediately after being attacked, Emily "just thought of home, her stupid smelly home where she could be warm and where everything would go away" (310). This is the home of her mom and her relatives, the humble and sensory notion of home that is associated with being taken care of. Now, however, from her place in the hospital, she feels that "everything's Before and After" (310). The attack has changed everything for Emily. The last portion of the text written from her perspective ends like this: "Paul says she'll go home soon, and Emily knows she has to, one day, but that part feels really distant. Going home is like another After, one that's even further away than Before" (311). Emily is unsure about going home, unsure about how different things will be. She does not know what *home* means anymore.

Her uncertainty is deeply poignant, particularly when read through her relatives' understandings of home at the end of the story. Reflecting back on her life, Flora hangs on to the memories of her kin: the daughters, granddaughters, and great-grandchildren she has loved. Kookom sees how "Emily has so many: Louisa, Paulina, Peter, Jake and the wee ones. Emily is alive and strong" (335). Invoking this connection between kinship and strength, Kookom knows that "as long as they hold on to each other, they will always be okay" (335). While Emily may not feel it at that moment, she is embedded in a living web of kinship, a space in which people take care of each other, and where they belong together. Her home is just there, waiting for her.

Finding Home in the City

As I conclude, I want to reiterate my contention that representations of Indigenous women's resilience, in relation to their communities, can erode dominant and dehumanizing understandings of what it means to be an urban Indigenous woman. It is significant that the Métis women in *The Break* are finding home—an ongoing, relational process—in their

webs of kinship: holding home together is what enables them to endure, to be resilient. A focus on urban Indigenous women's resilience works to undermine the colonial notions that frame Indigenous women's bodies as being out of place in cities and as natural targets of violence. Indigenous women are living Indigenous lives in urban spaces. Indigenous women can be at home in urban spaces, and in their mobility between urban and rural or reserve spaces. It is urgent that these stories reach attentive ears. Vermette's novel portrays endurance, creativity, and a strong spirit of more-than-survival that stories Indigenous women's belonging in cities. Such genuine and complex representations are resonant for me as a reader, but beyond their links to my own experiences in urban, Indigenous contexts, I recognize the impact that a literary work like *The Break* can have on diverse communities across this land. This significant counter-narrative challenges dominant understandings of the Canadian nation and calls for better relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Further, such storying fosters resurgence, opening up space for Indigenous women's well-being—for being at home.

NOTES

- 1 Many thanks to Katherena Vermette for searching electronically through her manuscript for this number.
- 2 I am thinking, to cite only a few, of Craig Womack's *Red on Red*, of Chadwick Allen's *Trans-Indigenous*, and of the widespread work of Indigenous literary nationalists, as discussed by Kristina Fagan et al. For a Métis-specific consideration of literary nationalism, see the work of Jennifer Adese.
- 3 For recent information, see Statistics Canada's "Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: Key Results from the 2016 Census."

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