3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature® The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies
Vol 32(3), September 2026 http://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2026-3203-24

Ecofeminist Spirituality in Carole Lindstrom and Michaela Goade's *We Are Water Protectors*

DIYAH RAHMAWATI
English Department,
Universitas Jember, Indonesia

DINA DYAH KUSUMAYANTI*
English Department, Universitas Jember, Indonesia
dinadyah.sastra@unej.ac.id

ERNA CAHYAWATI
English Department,
Universitas Jember, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Inspired by the Standing Rock Indigenous community's resistance to the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016, the children's picture book We Are Water Protectors (2020) by Carole Lindstrom and Michaela Goade portrays the ecological crisis through the relationships among nature, women, and spirituality. This study examines how the picturebook's narrative and visual elements construct ecofeminist spirituality, especially the sacredness of nature and the spiritual interconnection between women and the natural world. It also studies how the picture book constructs collective female empowerment as a form of ecological resistance within an ecofeminist spiritual framework. Using a qualitative approach, this study applies Starhawk's ecofeminist spirituality and utilises Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to interpret the verbal and visual signs of the picturebook. The results show that this book presents nature as sacred, portraying water as a living entity with divine significance. A spiritual interconnection between women and nature shapes communal identity and affirms that all beings are related, expressed through the merging of women's bodies with water and ecological grief. The collective empowerment is grounded in Starhawk's term 'power from within', with women leading nonviolent resistance against the "black snake" as a symbol of ecological threat. This term accentuates spiritual integrity, cooperation, and spiritual strength. We Are Water Protectors voices an ecological ideology rooted in indigenous identity and ecofeminist spirituality, emphasising the intrinsic value of ecosystems and the interconnectedness of humans and nature. The book serves as a cultural and political medium for ecological education and resistance while encouraging environmental solidarity.

Keywords: Barthes' semiotics; Carole Lindstrom and Michaela Goade; Starhawk's ecofeminist spirituality; We Are Water Protectors

INTRODUCTION

For some communities, especially indigenous peoples, water is more than a source of sustenance and hygiene. It is revered as a sacred, living entity, and honoured through various rituals, traditions, and cultural practices that affirm the relationship between humans and nature. However, the current state of water worldwide is facing serious problems, in both availability and quality. *The UN World Water Development Report* (2024) notes that about half of the global population experiences severe water scarcity every year due to natural and human-induced factors. An anthropocentric development model that prioritises economic growth over ecological balance has led to widespread degradation of water systems. Gaard (2009) asserts that environmental damage cannot be separated from issues of social justice, class, and gender. Women and indigenous

peoples, in particular, whose lives are strongly connected to nature, are the groups most affected by ecological imbalance. Indigenous women occupy a crucial position because they play a role as guardians of traditional knowledge and spiritual ecology, while also being the group most vulnerable to environmental and social disruption.

In this context, literature, including children's literature, serves as a strategic cultural medium to instill ecological awareness and ethical responsibility. Picturebooks, in particular, have a unique strength in combining text and visual images to communicate complex messages to children through aesthetic, emotional, and symbolic aspects (Nodelman, 1988; Sipe, 2012). One notable work is the children's picture book *We Are Water Protectors* 2020), written by Carole Lindstrom and illustrated by Michaela Goade, both of whom are indigenous women. Lindstrom is of Ojibwe descent, while Goade is of Tlingit and Haida descent. Goodreads (n.d.) reports that the book has received several prestigious awards, including the Caldecott Medal (2021), the Jane Addams Children's Book Award for Younger Children (2020), a nomination for the Goodreads Choice Award in the Picture Books category (2020), the NCTE Charlotte Huck Honour Book Award (2021), and a nomination for the Kirkus Prize for Young Readers' Literature (2020). In addition, this book also ranked at the top of The New York Times Best Seller list for the Children's Picture Books category in 2021.

Inspired by the Standing Rock protest held in 2016, the story recounts the struggles of the Ojibwe people, a Native American tribe in the United States living across the border between the United States and Canada, to protect their land from the threat of the "black snake," a term the Ojibwe use to refer to the giant oil pipeline. The picture book tells a young indigenous girl who mobilises her people to protect their sacred water, reflecting both environmental resistance and indigenous women's empowerment. Through poetic narration and vibrant illustrations, this book depicts water as a living, spiritual force, emphasising the interdependence between humans and the natural world.

This study is grounded in the ecocriticism framework, which examines literary representations of nature, environmental crises, and human-environment relationships (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). More specifically, this study refers to ecofeminism, which argues that the domination of nature and the oppression of women stem from the same patriarchal and anthropocentric logic. The study further employs Starhawk's ecofeminist spirituality (1999) as its primary theoretical lens, viewing nature as sacred and relational, in line with the indigenous worldview in *We Are Water Protectors*. It is combined with Roland Barthes' semiotic theory (1968) to analyse how meanings are constructed through the verbal and visual signs in the book. This integration, is essential as ecofeminism defines the ideological focus on the sacred relationship between women and nature and its suppression, whilst semiotics provides a method to examine how these ideological values are constructed, encoded, and naturalised through the narrative and illustrative elements of the book.

This study conducts a qualitative interpretive analysis of the verbal and visual elements of the picture book to address the following research questions:

1. How are the principles of ecofeminist spirituality— in particular, the sacredness of nature and the spiritual interconnection between women and the natural world—constructed through the verbal and visual signs in *We Are Water Protectors?*
2. How does the picture book construct collective female empowerment as a form of ecological resistance within an ecofeminist spiritual framework?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies of women, nature, and spirituality in children's literature have been approached in various ways. Malau et al. (2024) demonstrate that *Mary Wears What She Wants* represents women's empowerment through a semiotic reading, while Ryman (2021) applies an ecofeminist approach by foregrounding interconnectedness in *Heartbeat* as a response to environmental oppression. A similar perspective is evident in Hernawati's (2021) study of the film *Moana*, which highlights the spiritual bond between women and nature in Polynesian culture, as well as Kheong and Satkunananthan's (2025) ecofeminist reading of the folk tale *Sang Kancil,* which frames nature as an active and relational space. In the realm of adult literature, Chandran et al. (2021) reinterpret Sita's character in Divakaruni's version of the *Ramayana* through an ecofeminist spirituality, presenting her as a figure with ecological awareness to challenge patriarchal mythology.

Within indigenous ecocriticism, scholars emphasise that indigenous relationships with nature are grounded in relational ontologies that fundamentally differ from Western dualisms. Kimmerer (2013) explains that indigenous ecological knowledge situates humans as part of a broader community of life rather than as its rulers, grounded in principles of relationality and reciprocity, in which nature is understood as a living entity with agency. Allen (1986) highlights the sacred interconnectedness of humans, nature, and spirituality, while emphasising the centrality of women in indigenous cosmologies that are matrifocal and egalitarian, and critiques colonial patriarchy as a form of both ecological and spiritual violence. Meanwhile, Cajete (2000) develops the concept of *native science* as a holistic and integrative system of knowledge in which spiritual, ecological, and communal dimensions are inseparable, and underscores the importance of relational, balance-oriented, and interdependent education as the foundation of sustainability. These thinkers demonstrate that indigenous ecological worldviews resist the nature–culture dichotomy that underpins patriarchal domination and colonial dispossession.

Despite developments in this field, research that brings together ecocriticism, ecofeminist spirituality, and semiotics within children's picturebooks rooted in indigenous culture remains relatively limited. Research specifically discussing *We Are Water Protectors* has also not been developed comprehensively. Hagen (2024) identifies the “black snake” symbol as a powerful representation of environmental activism and colonial exploitation. However, the spiritual and symbolic construction of the sacred relationship between women and nature has not been the main focus. The intersection of ecofeminist spirituality, semiotics, and indigenous epistemology within children's picturebooks thus remains underexplored, a gap this study wants to address.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

ECOCRITICISM: ECOFEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

Ecocriticism, or ecological literary criticism, emerged in the late twentieth century in response to environmental degradation and the social impact of capitalist expansion. The term comes from the Greek words *oikos* (house) and *kritis* (judge), meaning "judge of the house" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. 69), implying the role of the critic as the party responsible for maintaining the order and well-being of the "house" of nature. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996, p. xviii) define ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, emphasising an earth-centred approach. In addition, Garrard (2004) describes ecocriticism as an exploration of the

relationship between humans and non-humans throughout cultural history, including criticism of the concept of "human" itself.

As a critical method, ecocriticism departs from the assumption that cultural texts shape the way humans view nature, thereby influencing ecological attitudes and behaviour. It encompasses various forms of cultural expression, including children's literature. In this context, ecocriticism examines how texts represent nature and environmental issues, and how these representations can foster ecological awareness in child readers. Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) describe three primary levels of analysis: (1) identifying how nature is represented in the text; (2) examining how concern for the environment shapes narrative structure and characterisation; and (3) revealing ecological ideology contained in the literary work.

In the realm of ecocriticism, the intersection between ecology and gender is examined through ecofeminism, which emerged in the 1970s alongside the environmental movement and second-wave feminism (Mellor, 1997). Ecofeminism then developed into ecofeminist spirituality by incorporating a spiritual dimension into its framework. Ecofeminist spirituality draws on various traditions, including indigenous spiritual practices, goddess worship, paganism, and other earth-centred belief systems (Diamond & Orenstein, 1990). This approach directly challenges the patriarchal system that exploits women and nature, while promoting relationships based on care, ethics, and connection to the Earth. One of the most influential figures in this field is Starhawk, who introduced three main concepts in ecofeminist spirituality: immanence, interconnection, and community (Starhawk, 1999). The first concept, immanence, states that the earth is alive and has an inner spirit, symbolised by the Goddess. The Goddess is not seen as a transcendent entity, but as an immanent presence in nature, humans, animals, and plants. This perspective emphasises that every living being has inherent value and power that are not rooted in domination or control, but in harmony and mutual dependence. The second concept, interconnection, recognises the universe as a living system in which all entities are closely connected (Starhawk, 1988, p. xvi). By recognising this network, ecofeminist spirituality rejects the anthropocentric view that separates humans from nature and fosters empathy and compassion as transformative spiritual forces. The third concept, community, refers to groups that recognise their place within a living earth and derive strength and purpose from their collective identity (Starhawk, 1988). Community serves as the basis for mutual support, collective learning, and collaborative action that empower individuals to protect and restore the environment.

Ecofeminist spirituality emphasises ‘power-from-within’, a form of spiritual strength and cooperation that rejects ‘power-over’, the hierarchical domination that fuels oppression and violence. It calls for active involvement in preserving the earth by recognising it as a living entity that demands respect, equality, ecological justice, and collective responsibility. Within this framework, activism is seen as a sacred duty. Starhawk encourages women to reclaim their inner spiritual wisdom and lead environmental movements, while inviting men to stand as allies in efforts to restore ecological balance.

ROLAND BARTHES' SEMIOTICS

Language encompasses not only spoken and written forms, but also visual images that function within a system of signs. Saussure argued that meaning is produced through the relationship between signs, which forms the basis of semiotics as the study of sign systems in culture (Hall, 1997, p. 20). Barthes (1968) further defines a sign as a unity of the signifier, a material form such as a word, sound, or image, and the signified, the mental concept it represents; the interaction

between the signifier and the signified constitutes the process of meaning (signification). Building on Saussure's linguistic model, Barthes introduces the concept of sign-functions, which emphasises that signs operate not only in the linguistic realm but also in cultural and utilitarian contexts. In this case, signs are both representational and functional.

Barthes distinguishes two levels of meaning: denotation refers to the literal, general, and socially agreed-upon meaning, while connotation produces additional meanings shaped by specific cultural and ideological contexts (Hall, 1997, pp. 38–39). These two layers show how signs connect the surface meaning and deeper cultural values. In *Mythologies* (Barthes, 1968), Barthes conceptualises myth as a second-order semiotic system that presents the dominant ideology as natural and commonsense (Barthes, 1968). Myths encompass bourgeois ideology and themes such as masculinity and femininity, freedom, individualism, national identity (e.g., Englishness), success, and others.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach to examine how Lindstrom and Goade use verbal and visual elements to construct the meanings of the sacredness of nature, the spiritual interconnection between women and nature, and collective female empowerment as a form of ecological resistance. The analysis is designed to address the two research questions by combining ecocriticism, particularly Starhawk's theory of ecofeminist spirituality, with Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. The data consist of verbal narrations and illustrations selected from *We Are Water Protectors* (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020). Out of 40 illustrations, including the cover page, 12 were purposively selected because they provide significant representations of ecofeminist spirituality and ecological resistance. These selected illustrations were categorised according to Starhawk's three key concepts of ecofeminist spirituality.

The analysis begins with a close reading of the verbal narration, followed by a detailed examination of the illustrations. Textual and visual elements are analysed to explore how the picture book represents women, nature, and their spiritual relationship. Barthes' semiotic framework is applied to analyse both denotative and connotative meanings of the verbal and the visual in the picturebook under scrutiny, and is further extended to the level of myth. Myth, as a second-order semiotic system, helps in understanding the lurking ideology at play in the book. When Barthes' theory of myth is understood as the camouflage of capitalism, the rhetoric through which exploitation becomes invisible, the verbal and visual texts of the book will be examined to find how the texts are created as a critical tool for resistance. Starhawk highlights how a text is used to resist the ideology of capitalism, that is invisibly naturalised. The findings will be integrated to provide a cohesive interpretation.

The semiotic analysis is supported by library research and relevant scholarly literature on Ojibwe spirituality, Indigenous ecological knowledge, ecofeminism, and the historical context of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) protests. These contextual sources provide the cultural and historical grounding necessary to interpret the meanings embedded in the picture book and to understand its contribution to contemporary discussions of environmental justice, indigenous resistance, and ecological consciousness.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

NATURE AND WOMEN FROM AN ECOFEMINIST SPIRITUALITY PERSPECTIVE

This section analyses the portrayal of women, nature, and spirituality in *We Are Water Protectors*. This section is devoted to discussing Starhawk's first two concepts of ecofeminist spirituality, nature as a sacred place and woman-nature spiritual interconnection, to find the answers to the first research question.

NATURE AS A SACRED PLACE

The first key concept in ecofeminist spirituality, as proposed by Starhawk, is immanence. Immanence refers to the idea that the divine, whether viewed as Goddess or God, is not a distant or separate entity, but is present and embodied in all living beings and elements of the earth. (Starhawk, 1999). This concept affirms that each individual is a unique manifestation of the earth's life force, and that the diverse expressions of nature, culture, and life itself should be considered sacred. *We Are Water Protectors* presents this sacred view of nature verbally and visually throughout the book.



FIGURE 1. Women Standing in Flowing Water (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, pp. 1-2)

Figure 1 (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, pp. 1-2) shows an older woman pouring water into a young girl's hands as both stand in flowing water, surrounded by kneeling women engaged in calm activities. The background features a soft red forest with white floral motifs, and the text states, *"Water is the first medicine, Nokomis told me"* (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 2). This scene, depicting the engagement of an older woman and a young girl, signifies an intergenerational teaching within a natural environment of water, plants, and trees. It illustrates a practice that is deeply rooted in broader cultural and communal traditions.

At the connotative level, the act of the older woman, referred to as Nokomis in the Anishinaabe/Ojibwe language, pouring water into the young girl's hands signifies the transmission of sacred knowledge and intergenerational teaching rooted in indigenous spirituality. The presence of other women shows that this relationship with water is a collective cultural practice of the Ojibwe community. Zhao and Abdullah (2024) explain that colours possess significant symbolic and rhetorical power when associated with specific objects or symbols within a shared social context. The dominance of blue suggests an enhanced symbolic power and calmness, emphasising water's vitality. The watercolour technique mirrors its natural flow, while the presence of plants and trees signifies nature as a living, sacred space for learning and healing. The

text *"Water is the first medicine"* strengthens water's significance as both biologically essential for life and culturally revered in Ojibwe belief as a healing, life-giving spirit (Todd et al., 2023).

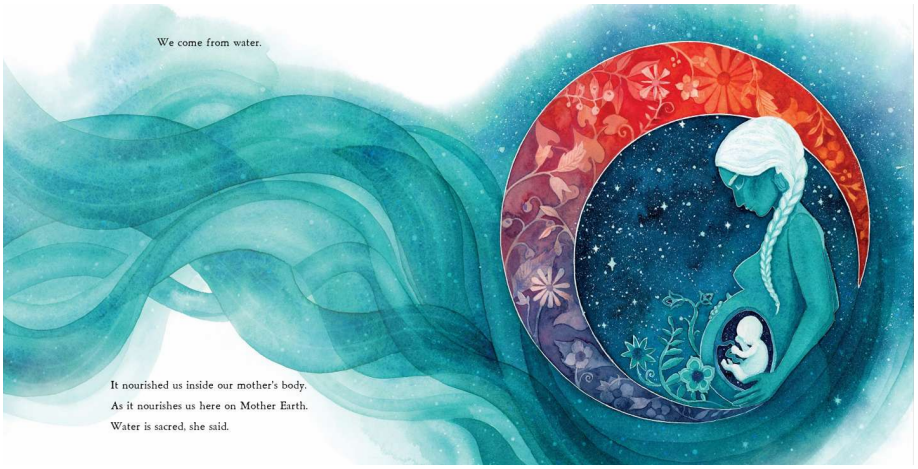


FIGURE 2. A Pregnant Woman Surrounded by Flowing Water (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, pp. 3-4)

The next data in Figure 2 also visualises nature as sacred through the depiction of a female figure. Denotatively, the image shows a pregnant woman with braided white hair, gently holding the fetus in her womb. She stands within a circular frame decorated with red and purple floral motifs and a starry background, with a turquoise stream flowing across the image, linking the left and right sides. These visual elements, including the pregnant woman, her womb, the floral circle, the starry sky, and the flowing water, signify a woman peacefully coexisting with natural and cosmic elements. The verbal text states, *"We come from water. It nourished us inside our mother's body. As it nourishes us here on Mother Earth. Water is sacred, she said."* (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 3).

This illustration connotes a holistic spiritual vision that connects the universe, the earth, and life through sacred feminine power, as seen in the integration of water, stars, flowers, and the female womb. The pregnant woman signifies Mother Earth and the generative power of women, both biological and spiritual, while the flow of water around her body signifies life and continuity. The circular frame with floral motifs affirms the cycle of life and wholeness. It resonates with Ojibwe sacred symbols such as the medicine wheel and the lunar cycle, which reflect balance, femininity, and healing (Quinlan, 2007). Johnston (1976) notes that in Ojibwe culture, Kitche Manitou is believed to be the source of all life. The origin story of the Ojibwe tells how Nokomis descended from the sky into the water, became pregnant, and gave birth to various forms of life that filled the earth. This narrative places women as life-givers and guardians of spiritual sustainability. Nokomis is understood as a maternal figure, one with nature, who nurtures the universe. This sacred feminine power depicts nature as a living entity that supports existence in harmony. The quote, *"We come from water. It nourished us inside our mother's body. As it nourishes us here on Mother Earth. Water is sacred, she said."* (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 3), claims that water is not only biologically important to the Ojibwe people but also has deep spiritual meaning.

Based on the visual and textual analysis above, the denotative meaning reveals the interaction between humans and nature, particularly water, which is depicted as a living, sacred being. Connotative meaning deepens this view, reflecting the Ojibwe belief that nature, especially water, is alive and spiritually intertwined with human life. This meaning does not operate as myth,

as Barthes (1968, p. 142) argues that myth operates by emptying reality and naturalising dominant ideologies. Instead, the Ojibwe worldview functions as a form of resistance by preserving a collective ecological consciousness and challenging modern ideologies that portray nature as passive and exploitable.

In the following data, the denotative level depicts a pregnant woman in harmony with nature and the cosmos, signifying Mother Earth. Such an image could turn into a myth when it is read as femininity and linked to nurturing traits that justify domination. However, its connotative meaning resists this reduction. The figure of Mother Earth, with her generative and life-sustaining power, operates as a counter-narrative that restores the sacred agency of the earth. This visualisation affirms interconnection, vitality, and reverence for the natural world as spiritual principles that oppose materialistic and patriarchal hierarchies. In this context, Mother Earth becomes not only a symbol but a critical tool that exposes and challenges anthropocentric and gendered ideologies, restoring an ethic of harmony, equality, and care between humans and the living earth.

THE SPIRITUAL INTERCONNECTION BETWEEN WOMAN AND NATURE

The second concept in ecofeminist spirituality is interconnection, which asserts that all living things are interconnected and are part of a single living organism within the universe (Starhawk, 1999). This interconnection is grounded in a spirituality of compassion that fosters empathy for all beings and emphasises that caring for others and nature is the path to healing and transforming the world (Starhawk, 1988, p. xvi).

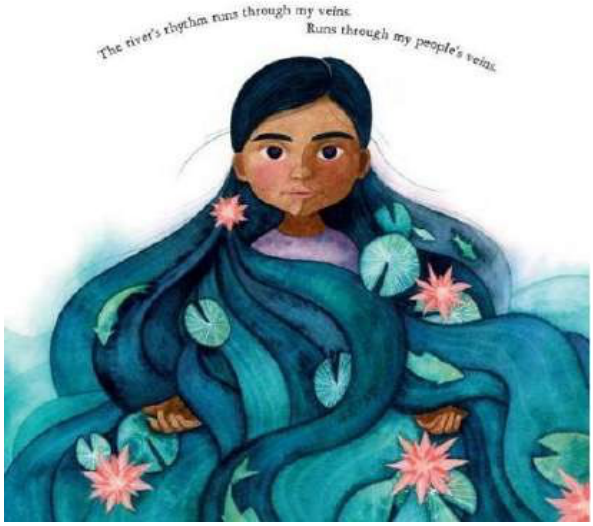


FIGURE 3. A Young Girl with Long Hair Merges into Flowing Water (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 6)

The verbal and visual data show the spiritual interconnection between women and nature. The scene depicts a young girl whose hair merges with a river teeming with fish, lotus flowers, and lily pads. Above her head is the text, *"The river's rhythm runs through my veins. Runs through my people's veins."* (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 6). This portrayal presents a literal scene of a girl closely connected to water, where the river becomes part of her identity. The text reinforces that water sustains both her life and her community.

At the connotative level, these elements reflect the Ojibwe spiritual worldview, which believes that women and water share an inseparable bond because women act as water keepers. The merging of the girl and the river signifies interconnectedness between humans and nature as living, interdependent entities. Fish represent Ojibwe clan symbols and spiritual responsibility toward water (Benton-Banai, 1988), while lotus and lily pads signify purity and the spirit in living plants (Johnston, 1976). The text deepens the spiritual meaning of water, connecting generations and signifying its flow through human veins as a vital and sacred force. In Ojibwe belief, as stated by Todd et al. (2023), water, or *nibi,* is a living spirit bound to humans, with women recognised as its guardians.

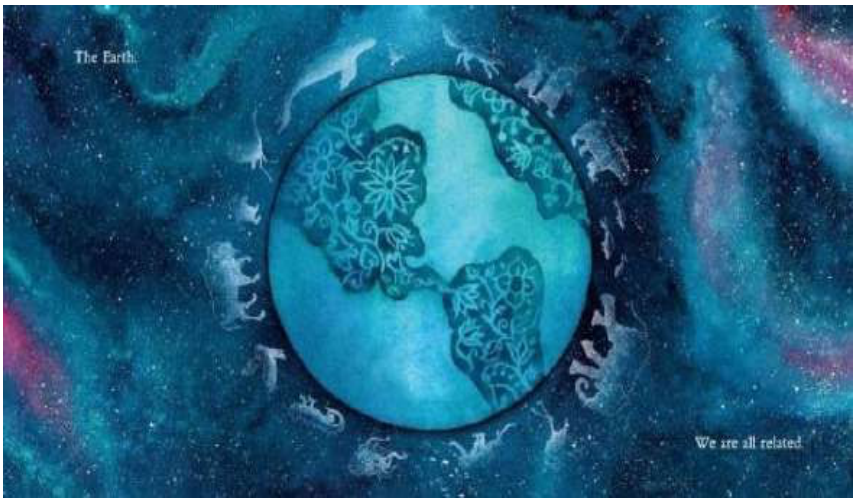


FIGURE 4. Floating Earth with Floral, Human, and Animal Constellations (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, pp. 25-26)

At the denotative level, the illustration presents the Earth floating in a blue cosmic background filled with stars, adorned with floral patterns, and surrounded by human and animal figures, such as birds, fish, bears, and elephants, which blend into the cosmic space. At the same time, the verbal texts say, *"The Earth"* (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 25) and *"We are all related."* (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 26). The image places the Earth as the centre of an interconnected system of life, where humans, flora, and fauna coexist as integral parts of a unified ecosystem.

At a deeper, connotative level, visual elements such as the floral designs on the earth's surface, the animals merging with the cosmic background, and the star-filled sky carry symbolic meaning. These features collectively reflect the Ojibwe worldview, which holds that the earth, humans, plants, and animals form an inseparable unity grounded in respect and responsibility. The floral patterns signify the living and spiritual nature of the land, while the animals represent ancestral spirits and clan symbols with social and spiritual functions (Benton-Banai, 1988). For example, the Crane and Loon Clans hold leadership roles; the Fish Clan is known as thinkers and mediators; the Bear Clan functions as guardians; the Marten Clan as warriors; the Deer Clan represents peaceful people; and the Bird Clan signifies spiritual leaders. The cosmic background extends the meaning that the Earth belongs to a sacred cosmic order. The text that says, *"The Earth. We are all related."* (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, pp. 25-26) reinforces the idea of interdependence, emphasising that humans are not rulers but part of the interconnected web of life.

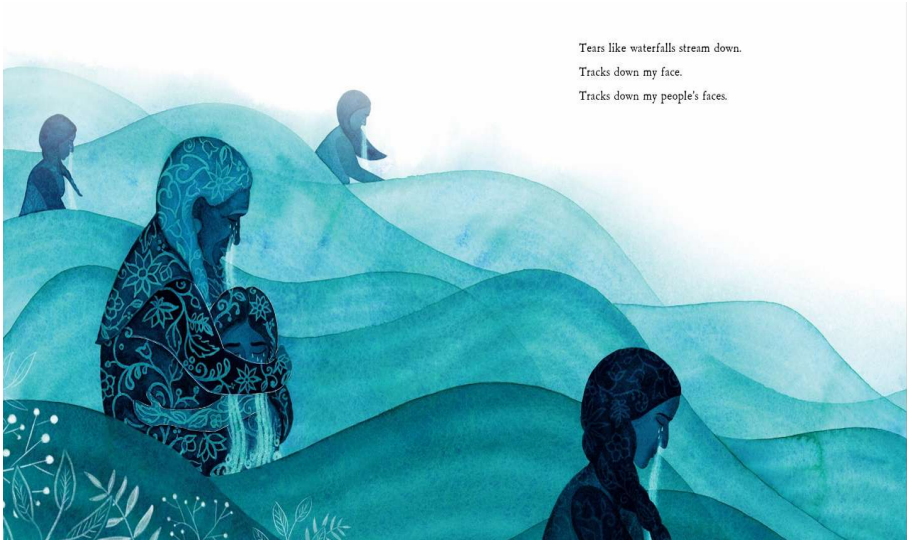


FIGURE 5. Crying Women in a Wave-like Blue Landscape (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, pp. 27-28)

In this illustration, several women in dark blue floral-patterned clothing stand in a wave-like landscape, and the text says, *"Tears like waterfalls stream down. Tracks down my face. Tracks down my people's faces."* (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 28). The scene signifies collective grief, with tears visually linking human emotion to the natural world, underscoring that the figures are part of their environment. The floral patterns further highlight their cultural identity and heritage.

This image connotes a profound meaning about the spiritual relationship between women and nature. This is evident in the tears that flow and merge with the landscape, signifying the inseparable connection between emotions and ecological conditions. Although water is usually associated with life, here it becomes a sign of suffering. The repetition of sentences in the image emphasises the intergenerational sadness shared by the community. This image not only conveys grief but also affirms the unity between women and nature through the wavy landscape, which visually connects their bodies to the natural world. This meaning aligns with Ojibwe spirituality that treats water as sacred and women as its guardians, so that crying is understood not only as an expression of sadness but also as a form of spiritual communication between women and nature. In this context, tears become a manifestation of collective suffering due to ecological damage and cultural oppression by dominant ideologies, particularly capitalism.

The denotative and connotative analysis, particularly of Figures 3 and 5, shows that indigenous women have a spiritual connection with nature, revealing symbolic structures that shape a myth. This depiction reflects cultural associations of femininity with emotional, nurturing, and life-giving traits, which risk reinforcing patriarchal ideology. However, as Barthes (1968, p. 142) notes, myth functions to naturalise ideology, whereas in this context the images contain historical and political meaning. In Ojibwe belief, women are water guardians due to their life-giving role (Chiblow, 2019). The merging of women and water signifies both spiritual connection and collective memory, as well as suffering under industrial capitalism, represented by the "black snake" which contaminates the life-giving water.

WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE EMPOWERMENT

The third concept of ecofeminist spirituality is community. Following Starhawk, Diamond, and

Orenstein (1990, p. 74) explain that the purpose of community is to create a space that empowers individuals to build harmonious relationships with nature and to take collective action to heal the earth. This goal can be achieved through a spirituality of 'power-from-within', which grows through cooperation and emphasises the awareness that the earth is alive (Starhawk, 1988). This awareness encourages individuals to contribute to collective power and engage in nonviolent resistance to preserve the earth, while consistently rejecting the dominant, hierarchical logic of 'power-over'. Within this framework, women play a crucial role in shaping and leading such communities.



FIGURE 6. An Elderly Woman Telling Stories to Children (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, pp. 11-12)

Denotatively, the image shows an older woman telling a story to children who listen attentively. The older woman says, *"When my people first spoke of the black snake, they foretold that it wouldn't come for many, many years"* (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 12). These signifiers denote oral tradition as a medium for passing down knowledge and history.

Connotatively, the elderly storyteller signifies spiritual and cultural authority, highlighting the roles of women and elders in preserving collective memory (Hart, 2007). The "black snake" refers to ecological and social threats, particularly oil pipelines that endanger water and sacred lands (Whyte, 2017). For the Ojibwe, it also represents the destructive path of technology that neglects the existence of Mother Earth (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 35). Therefore, it reinforces the role of oral storytelling as a spiritual and communal act that preserves wisdom and warns against environmental destruction.



FIGURE 7. The Girl with Flowing Hair Standing Bravely (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, pp. 15-16)

The next visual data portrays a young girl engaged in an act of resistance. She has long, flowing dark hair that seamlessly merges with water filled with fish, lily pads, and blooming flowers. She wears a purple top and red pants, holds a feather in one hand, and raises her other hand in a clenched fist, a gesture that signifies strength and determination. In this image, the denotative signifier is the girl herself. Her expression and stance show courage and strong intention. Her long hair, which flows into the river filled with aquatic life, visually reinforces the idea that her identity is intrinsically connected to nature. This reflects Ojibwe cultural beliefs that emphasise the sacred bond between women and water. Women are regarded as the protectors of water (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020). The feather she holds signifies her identity as a member of the Ojibwe indigenous community. Meanwhile, the clenched fist raised is a widely recognised sign of resistance and empowerment, historically associated with various social justice movements (Busch et al., 2025). In this context, the girl's posture and expression signify both resistance and empowerment, particularly in relation to Indigenous women's role in protecting water and life.

The verbal data accompanying the image states, *"Take courage! I must keep the black snake away from my village's water. I must rally my people together."* This text highlights a serious threat, represented by the metaphor of the "black snake," which signifies the Dakota Access Pipeline (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020). The phrase ***"TAKE COURAGE!"*** written in uppercase and bold, conveys a strong and assertive tone, serving as a powerful communal call to action. It reflects the girl's bravery in confronting ecological dangers and further positions her as a leader who mobilises her community to resist environmental injustice.

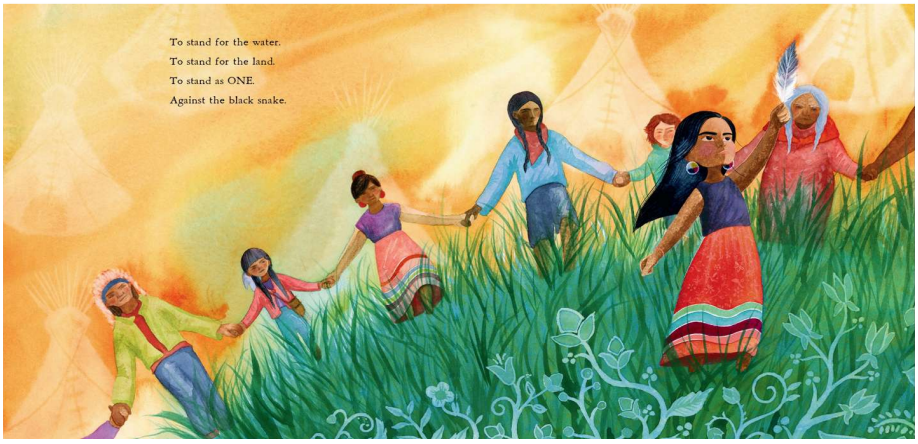


FIGURE 8. A Young Girl Leads Her People (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, pp. 17-18)

The next data illustrates how activism is carried out with women as leaders. The denotative stage of the image shows a group of indigenous people, including women, men, and children, standing together and holding hands, in a tall-grass field. A young girl leads at the front, holding up a feather with a determined expression. These visual elements reflect the collective spirit of the Ojibwe people in protecting their water and land from an external threat, the "black snake." This is supported by the narrative text, *"To stand for the water. To stand for the land. To stand as ONE. Against the black snake."* (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 17).

The illustration connotes a deeper symbolic meaning. The faint teepees evoke Ojibwe identity because the traditional dwelling signifies a grounded, community-centred way of life. The golden-orange sky, associated with warmth, sunlight, and hope, suggests renewal after hardship. The resistance led by women and children is both political and spiritual, rooted in a sacred relationship with nature. This meaning aligns with the Ojibwe worldview that positions women as guardians of water and men as guardians of fire (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 35). The feather raised by the girl carries additional cultural significance as a sacred ceremonial object lifted in times of battle or profound determination, as cited here, "when they fight and are very angry, then they will lift the feather" (Radin, as cited in Corbiere, 2019). The lifted feather, therefore, signifies courage and resilience in protecting their water and land.



FIGURE 9. A Young Girl Facing the Black Snake (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 20)

The next image illustrates how women continue to resist, fight, and persevere in the face of threats, even when the circumstances are challenging, as emphasised by the narrative line, *"It will not be easy."* (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 20). This circular illustration captures a moment of powerful confrontation and solidarity. At the centre, a young girl is depicted from behind, holding the hands of two community members, as they stand together, facing a large, threatening black snake. The composition, which places the viewer behind the girl, creates an emotional sense of involvement, as if the reader is standing alongside her.

The girl is shown with long, flowing hair, wearing red and purple clothing, and standing confidently. Her appearance signifies youthful spirit, cultural identity, and feminine strength. Her position at the centre of the composition marks her as the focal point of the resistance. In front of her stands a massive black snake with glowing red eyes and a forked tongue, visually portrayed as a monstrous figure. The snake almost completely blocks the sunlight, creating a dark, intimidating atmosphere. The snake's glare is fixed on the young girl standing before it, creating an atmosphere of intense confrontation. Despite the danger, the girl does not retreat. She stands firmly, holding the community members' hands. Together, they face the black snake with courage and determination. This image signifies the power of unity and solidarity against threats to their land and way of life. Women, especially from the younger generation, are portrayed as central figures in this resistance, highlighting their vital roles in protecting both the natural environment and their cultural heritage.



FIGURE 10. A Group of Women Standing Together, Playing Drums and Singing (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 5)

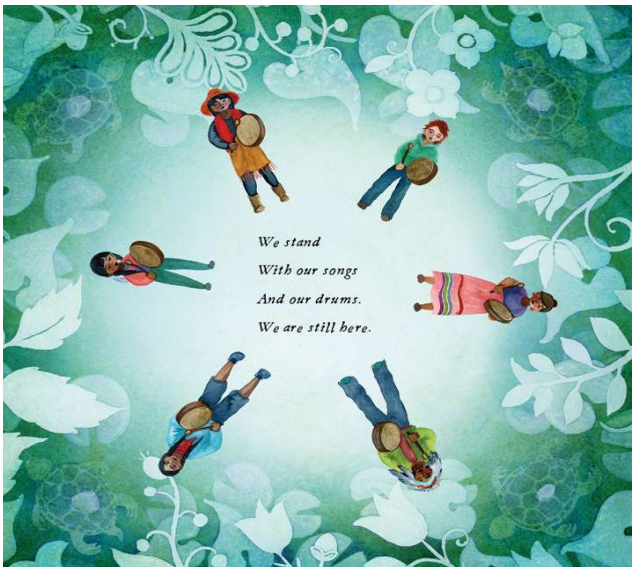


FIGURE 11. Women, Men, and Children United in Drum and Song (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 19)

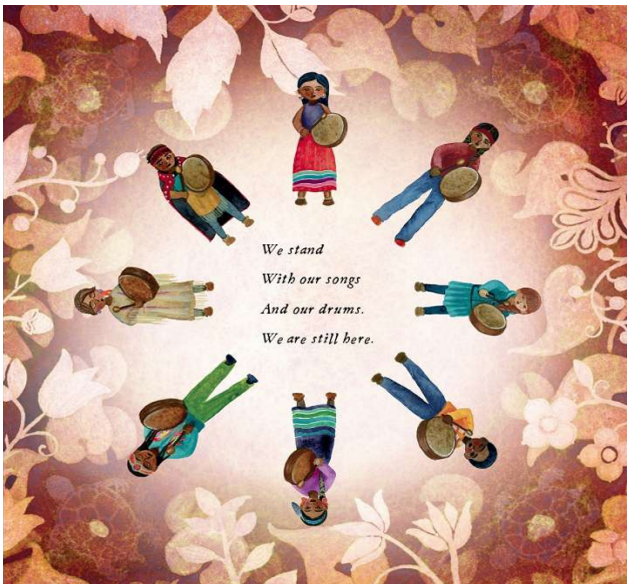


FIGURE 12. A Crowd of Women, Men, and Children Gathered with Drums and Songs (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 31)

The illustration appears in three colour variations, including blue, green, and brown, which depict women and men standing in a circle while holding drums. The text says*, "We stand with our songs and our drums. We are still here"* (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, pp. 5, 19, 31). This repeated image represents a communal gathering that affirms unity, cultural continuity, and collective resilience through ritual and song. The recurring floral motifs reinforce the community's relationship with nature, while the three colour schemes, blue for water, green for nature, and brown for land, highlight their deep connection to the natural world.

In a cultural context, the three illustrations connote the Ojibwe worldview. In Ojibwe belief, women are considered the guardians of water, while men are the guardians of fire (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 35). The role of women as water protectors is closely tied to their

special connection to water, which stems from their role as life-givers (Chiblow, 2019). In contrast, the role of fire keepers has traditionally been assumed predominantly (though not exclusively) by men, a fact further affirmed in Ojibwe oral tradition, which portrays men as fire keepers and reflects their roles as providers and protectors (Benton-Banai, 1988; Eriksen & Hankins, 2015). The illustrations also express the collective spirit of the Ojibwe people as they preserve cultural identity through song, music, and communal solidarity. Drum songs are central to Ojibwe ceremonies and are regarded as sacred (Dueck, 2018). The recurring statement *"We stand with our songs and drums. We are still here"* (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, pp. 5, 19, 31) functions as an affirmation of resilience and a declaration of ongoing resistance.

In Figure 10 (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 5), the blue background represents the sky and water. Symbolically, the colour blue evokes a sense of tranquillity, holistic life, and harmony with the unity of the universe (Braem, 2020). The limited number of figures depicting women emphasises the meaning of the beginning or the foundation of life. This aligns with the Ojibwe view that water is the element guarded by women, as the source of life. Furthermore, Figure 11 (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 19) presents a green background symbolising nature and all it contains. For the Anishinaabe people, including the Ojibwe, green signifies life, the giver of life, and the sustainer of life (Johnston, 1976). The increase in the number of figures from men to women on the green background reflects the growing interdependence between humans and nature, which strengthens community solidarity. Lastly, Figure 12 (Lindstrom & Goade, 2020, p. 31) uses a brown background symbolising the land as a solid and secure foothold (Braem, 2020). In this context, brown reinforces the community's attachment to the land as a source of identity, survival, and spirituality. The greater number of figures in the land background indicates that the connection to the land is collective rather than individual, uniting the community in both ecological and cultural struggles. Thus, the change in background colours and the increasing number of human figures not only enrich the visual dimension of the illustrations but also strengthen the ecological and spiritual message of the Ojibwe people's resistance to environmental destruction and cultural oppression.

The myth of the "black snake" appears in Figures 6 and 9. In Figure 6, the denotative sign is the narrative text mentioning the "black snake," while in Figure 9, it is visually represented as a large, threatening serpent. At the connotative level, both signify the real threat of the Dakota Access Pipeline that endangers the Ojibwe people's water and sacred lands. This image constructs a myth that naturalises capitalist expansion, presenting ecological destruction as inevitable. According to Barthes (1968), myth functions to mask historical and ideological meanings. The "black snake" thus symbolises capitalist and patriarchal domination that exploits both nature and women. Despite Ojibwe women's resistance, the continuing operation of the pipeline reflects how patriarchal capitalism legitimises environmental and gender-based oppression.

ECOLOGICAL IDEOLOGY IN *WE ARE WATER PROTECTORS*

The ecocritical study aims to reveal how ecological ideology is conveyed through the book's verbal and visual elements. According to Barthes' semiotic model, ideology is created through the myth-making process (Barthes, 1968). In the picture book, water functions as an honoured signifier whose connotations include life, ancestry, and sacred continuity. At the myth level, these meanings are naturalised as universal and unquestionable truths. The protection of water becomes self-evidently compulsory. Nature as sacred, women–nature interconnection, and women's

collective responsibility to protect nature are made to seem like common sense. Through naturalisation, the ecological ideology is produced as a 'universal truth'. It refers to human attitudes and positions towards nature in a broader social, cultural, and political context. The book foregrounds an ecofeminist-spiritual perspective that asserts the intrinsic value of all elements within the ecosystem and emphasises their spiritual and ecological interconnectedness with humans. This ideology challenges patriarchal structures that separate spirit from nature and justify the domination of women and the environment, while simultaneously supporting the empowerment of individuals and communities through collective, nonviolent, and spiritually grounded practices.

The portrayal of women as water protectors reflects Anishinaabe traditions that recognise women as custodians of water due to their life-giving and spiritual roles (Chiblow, 2019), while also critiquing the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). The narrative highlights the close connection between environmental destruction and the oppression of women, including the rise in gender-based violence against indigenous women linked to extractive projects (Whyte, 2017). Moreover, the book promotes an ecocentric worldview that rejects anthropocentrism and critiques capitalist exploitation, with the oil pipeline symbolising what Harvey (2005) calls accumulation by dispossession, in which profit-driven actors seize land and resources from marginalised communities. In this situation, indigenous peoples disproportionately bear the consequences of ecological degradation while corporations secure economic gain. This dynamic also reflects settler-colonial practices that violate historical treaties, such as the Fort Laramie Treaties of 1851 and 1868, through the construction of the DAPL across Lake Oahe (Hu, 2024).

The indigenous wisdom "Mni Wiconi. Water is life!" serves as a powerful, recurring motif throughout the book, encapsulating the core moral and spiritual message that underpins the narrative. This declaration is not only a slogan of resistance but also a statement of identity, hope, and continuity. By presenting the voice of a young indigenous girl, the picture book underscores the urgency of ecological preservation while highlighting the struggles of indigenous communities that have long stood at the forefront of environmental activism.

The picture book brings about collective subjectivity through the relentless use of the pronoun "We." This pronoun ideologically positions child readers within collective resistance to protect water from harm. Here, children's literature is an effective tool in shaping children's cognitive and ethical frameworks (Nodelman, 1988). The child readers are constituted as ecological subjects because ecological activism is claimed as moral and spiritual work. As Stephens (1992) asserts, children's literature is a main site where ideological subjectivity is produced. The child readers are not passive recipients but emergent subjects with a sense of responsibility and care for protecting nature. They are actively immersed within ecospiritual ideology, invited to identify, feel and imagine themselves as agents in ecological protection.

Therefore, the book serves as both an educational medium and a tool of resistance, fostering awareness and encouraging action, particularly among child readers. The pledge at the end of the book further reinforces this call by instilling values of respect for nature, collective responsibility, and moral courage from an early age. Thus, *We Are Water Protectors* transcends the boundaries of a conventional picture book, becoming a text rich in both cultural and political significance. This picture book depicts resistance to patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism, advocating for ecological justice and empowering younger generations to actively participate in protecting and preserving the planet.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that *We Are Water Protectors* functions as a semiotic construction that dismantles the anthropocentric and patriarchal ideologies of colonialism. The sacredness of nature and spiritual interconnection, as addressed in the first research question, are not only decorative themes, but are constructed through a systemic layering of signs. The denotative description of water is elevated through connotation to represent ancestral memory. Eventually, it reaches the level of myth, where the protection of water is naturalised as a 'universal truth' and moral imperative. Women's bodies, as presented in the visual texts, serve as powerful signifiers, in which the human "veins" and "the river's rhythm" are juxtaposed to depict a living system. *We Are Water Protectors* foregrounds the spiritual bond between women and nature through the protagonist's reverence for water as sacred and life-giving.

Meanwhile, the construction of collective female empowerment, in addressing the second research question, provides an alternative to the dominant "power-over" hierarchy. The "black snake" is identified as a myth designed to naturalise devastating ecological destruction as an inevitable impact of natural resource exploitation. The book shows a counter-mythology of this danger. By framing women as the "guardians of water" and children as the "emergent subject" of resistance, the text critiques the "accumulation by dispossession" inherent in projects like the Dakota Access Pipeline. The use of the pronoun "We" in the book positions the readers not as passive observers, but as participants in a decolonial ecological discourse that rejects the commodification of the earth. This means the narrative situates women at the centre of ecological preservation and community empowerment, challenging patriarchal and anthropocentric domination.

The recurring phrase "Mni wiconi. Water is life" on the author's note page encapsulates the book's spiritual and ecological essence. This phrase is shown to be more than a slogan; it is an ethical imperative that the book's visual and verbal elements convey harmony between human and non-human entities. This makes the book significant not only as a story but also as a cultural artefact representing the relationship between women and nature. Targeting children as its primary audience, the picturebook plays an important role in shaping children's understanding of ecological responsibility and their position in the wider ecological community.

This study is limited to scrutinising a single picturebook and does not analyse actual responses of readers. Further research could expand the scope of the study through comparative studies of environmental-themed picturebooks or by examining how children interpret the ecofeminist and ecological messages conveyed in children's literature aside from picturebooks. An interdisciplinary approach combining ecocriticism, child psychology, and other strands of feminist theory would further enrich the study of children's literature. Despite its limitations, the findings of this present study strengthen children's literature scholarship by showing that picture books can produce decolonial ecological discourse through ecofeminist spirituality and connect environmental crisis to patriarchy, settler colonialism, and extractive capitalism.

REFERENCES

Allen, P. G. (1986). *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Beacon Press.
Barthes, R. (1968). *Elements of Semiology*. New York: Hill and Wang.
Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies* (A. Lavers (Ed.)). The Noonday Press.
Benton-Banai, E. (1988). *The Mishomis Book - The Voice of the Ojibway*. Indian Country Communications.

Braem, H. (2024). *The Power of the Colours: Meaning & Symbolism*. Elvea Verlag.
Busch, L., Malkin, A., & Belisle, J. (2025). Art in Context: A Multi-level Analysis of Art. *Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science*, *36*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcbs.2025.100890
Cajete, G. (2000). *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence.* Clear Light Publishers.
Campbell, A. (2008). *New Directions in Ecofeminist Literary Criticism*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing 15.
Chandler, D. (2007). *Semiotics: The Basics* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
Chandran, G., Seng, F. S., & Xian, R. T. Y. (2021). Re-Imagining Sita in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's the Forest of Enchantments: A Spiritual Ecofeminist Reading. *New Literaria*, *2*(2), 61–71. https://doi.org/10.48189/nl.2022.v03i1.007
Chiblow, S. (2019). Anishinabek Women's Nibi Giikendaaswin (Water Knowledge). *Water*, *11*(2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.3390/w11020209
Corbiere, A. O. (2019). Anishinaabe Headgear: Symbolic, Cultural and Linguistic Meanings. *American Indian Art Magazine*, *37*(3), 38.
Diamond, I., & Orenstein, G. F. (1990). *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*. Sierra Club Books.
Dueck, B. (2018). 8 North American Indigenous Song, the Sacred and the Senses. *Body and Religion*, *2*(2), 206–223. https://doi.org/10.1558/bar.36490
Eriksen, C., & Hankins, D. L. (2015). Colonisation and Fire: Gendered Dimensions of Indigenous Fire Knowledge Retention and Revival. *The Routledge Handbook of Gender and Development*, 129–137. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203383117
Gaard, G. (2009). Children's Environmental Literature: From Ecocriticism to Ecopedagogy. *Neohelicon*, *36*(2), 321–334. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11059-009-0003-7
Garrard, G. (2004). *Ecocriticism*. Routledge.
Glotfelty, C., & Fromm, H. (1996). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press.
Goodreads. (n.d.). Retrieved October 20, 2023, from https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/44581496-we-are-water-protectors
Hagen, S. (2024). The Black Snake: Powerful Imagery in We Are Water Protectors. *Climate Literacy in Education*, *2*(1), 52–59.
Hall, S. (1997). Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices Spectacle of the Other. *Sage Publication*, 391.
Hart, M. (2007). Indigenous Knowledge and Research: The Míkiwáhp as a Symbol for Reclaiming Our Knowledge and Ways of Knowing. *First Peoples Child & Family Review* 3(1), 83–90. https://doi.org/10.7202/1069528ar
Hernawati, M. (2021). How Far the Ecowarrior Will Go: An Ecofeminist Reading of Disney's Moana. *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature*, *27*(4), 257–268. https://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2021-2704-18
Hu, S. (2024). *The Dakota Access Pipeline: What You Need to Know*. NRDC. https://www.nrdc.org/stories/dakota-access-pipeline-what-you-need-know
Johnston, B. (1976). *Ojibway Heritage*. McClelland and Stewart.
Kheong, C. Q. W., & Satkunananthan, A. H. (2025). Her Voice in the Forest: A Neo-Archetypal Eco feminist Analysis of Sang Kancil as the Female Mousedeer. *3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature*, *31*(1), 168–182. https://doi.org/10.17576/3L-2025-3101-12
Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants.* Milkweed Editions.
Lindstrom, C., & Goade, M. (2020). *We Are Water Protectors*. Roaring Brook Press.
Malau, T. C., Kusumayanti, D. D., & Supiastutik, S. (2024). The Representation of Liberal Feminism in the Picture Book Mary Wears What She Wants by Keith Negley. *Humanus: Jurnal Ilmiah Ilmu-Ilmu Humaniora*, *23*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.24036/humanus.v23i1.123800
Mellor, M. (1997). *Feminism and Ecology: An Introduction*. New York University Press.
Nodelman, P. (1988). *Words about Pictures*. University of Georgia Press.
Quinlan, E. (2007). Ritual Circles to Home in Louise Erdrich's Character Names. *Names*, *55*(3), 253–275. https://doi.org/10.1179/nam.2007.55.3.253
Ryman, C. K. (2021). Listening to Heartbeat: the Pulse of Ecofeminism in a Picturebook. *Environmental Education Research*, *27*(6), 879–893. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2021.1879733
Sipe, L. (2012). Revisiting the Relationships Between Text and Pictures. *Children's Literature in Education,*43, pp. 4-21. DOI 10.1007/s10583-011-9153-0
Starhawk. (1988). *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Starhawk. (1999). *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Goddess*. Harper One.
Stephens, J. (1992). *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*. Longman.
Todd, W. F. K. S., Northbird, A. V., & Towne, C. E. (2023). The Science in Indigenous Water Stories, Indigenous Women's Connection to Water. *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*. https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/science-in-indigenous-stories/
United Nations. (2024). *The United Nations World Water Development Report 2024: Water for Prosperity and Peace*. Bernan Distribution.
Whyte, K. (2017). The Dakota Access Pipeline, Environmental Injustice, and US Settler Colonialism. *Red Ink: An International Journal of Indigenous Literature, Arts, & Humanities*, *19*(1).
Zhao, Q., & Abdullah, A. Q. C. (2024). Metaphorical Meanings of Color Symbols in Literature. *Chinese Semiotic Studies*, *20*(4), 625–646. https://doi.org/10.1515/css-2024-2030