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## Indigenizing the YA Canon: The Heroine's Journey in Angeline Boulley's *Firekeeper's Daughter*

Indigenizando el canon de la literatura juvenil: el viaje de la heroína en *Firekeeper's Daughter*, de Angeline Boulley

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**ABSTRACT:** Angeline Boulley's stated intention when writing her debut novel *Firekeeper's Daughter* (2021) was to indigenize the YA canon and offer positive role models for Native American young women, not properly represented in literature. The novel—about an eighteen-year-old Anishinaabe girl who sets out on a mission to help her community—creatively integrates traditional Indigenous stories like the Seventh Fire Prophecy with western detective fiction and coming-of-age narratives. Underscoring its activist motivation, the text denounces structural problems that affect Native Americans, including sexist and racist violence, and it recovers traditional rituals and values—most explicitly, relationality—to suit contemporary experience and needs. The article aims at making a contribution to the conceptualization of Indigenous Young Adult literature, thus filling a gap in scholarly work, and to bring attention to the literary and political value of contemporary Native women's writing. Additionally, it delves into the definition of Indigenous resilience as context-specific, political and simultaneously individual and communal, thus adding to the field of resilience studies and Indigenous and decolonial studies.

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*Key words:* Indigenous YA fiction, Anishinaabe literature, Indigenous resilience, American Indian historical trauma, MMIWG literature, detective fiction, bi-racial Bildungsroman, relationality.

RESUMEN: La intención tras *Firekeeper's Daughter* (2021), la primera novela de Angeline Boulley, era indigenizar el canon de la literatura juvenil y ofrecer modelos positivos para las jóvenes nativas, que no están representadas adecuadamente en literatura. La novela trata de la misión para ayudar a su comunidad de una joven anishinaabe de dieciocho años, y combina creativamente relatos tradicionales indígenas como la Profecía del Séptimo Fuego con narrativas de detectives y relatos de iniciación occidentales. Acentuando su motivación política, el texto denuncia los problemas estructurales que afectan a las personas nativas —entre otros, la violencia sexista y racista—, y recupera rituales y valores tradicionales —en especial la relacionalidad— destacando su valor en el contexto contemporáneo. El presente artículo pretende contribuir a la conceptualización de la literatura juvenil indígena, respondiendo a una carencia en la literatura académica, y destacar el valor literario y político de las obras de autoras nativas contemporáneas. Por añadidura, profundiza en la definición de la resiliencia indígena (contextualizada, activista, individual y comunal), ahondando así en el campo de los estudios de la resiliencia y los estudios indígenas y decoloniales.

*Palabras clave:* Ficción juvenil indígena, literatura anishinaabe, resiliencia indígena, trauma histórico nativo-americano, literatura MMIWG, ficción de detectives, bildungsroman biracial, relacionalidad.

“So much has been forgotten, but it is not lost as long as the land endures and we cultivate people who have the humility and ability to listen and learn.”  
(Kimmerer, 2013: 369)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Positive role models play a crucial role in countering the extended stereotypes of Native American women. While such stereotypes have evolved since colonial times, they continue to manifest in insidious ways, through invisibility, misappropriation, and distortion of Native American identity (Mihlto 2009, xi). This is particularly pressing for Indigenous girls and teenagers, who often struggle to find relatable representations in literature. To address this gap, contemporary Indigenous writers are producing a diverse range of young adult (YA) fiction, a powerful form of counter-storytelling which challenges misconceptions and gives voice to marginalized youth (Hughes-Hassell 2013). Such is the stated motivation behind YA mystery *Firekeeper's Daughter* (2021), an awarded instant *New York Times* best-seller whose rights were purchased by the Obamas's production company Higher Ground to adapt it into a Netflix series. The novel marks the literary debut of Angeline Boulley, an enrolled member of the Sault Ste. Marie

Tribe of Chippewa Indians from Sugar Island, who has since released *Warrior Girl Unearthed* (2023) and *Sisters in the Wind* (2025).<sup>2</sup>

Boulley's stated intention when writing *Firekeeper's Daughter* was to Indigenize the YA canon and prove that tradition, present and youth are not incompatible (Boulley, 2021). She emphasizes that Indigenous peoples have rich, evolving lives that extend beyond what is typically portrayed in Western accounts. Additionally, she seeks to raise awareness about the widespread violence Native women face, highlighting the painful reality of their experiences within the complex legal issues surrounding tribal lands and the targeting of Indigenous women (430). This is why she showcases what justice and healing look like in tribal communities, including cultural celebrations, language revival efforts, traditional teachings, ceremonies, and collective actions like whisper networks and blanket parties, all of which reflect the resilience of these communities in the face of adversity (430). Through her protagonist, Boulley wants to provide Native teens with "a hero who looks like them, whose greatest strength is her Ojibwe culture and community" (431).

*Firekeeper's Daughter* is set within a fictional tribe inspired by Sault Ste. Marie in the year 2004, the time when meth trafficking and consumption exploded in the country (Clayson and Beiner, 2021), and when Indian gaming in Michigan was especially lucrative. The protagonist and first-person narrator, Daunis Lorenza Fontaine, is an eighteen-year-old woman of mixed heritage. Her Anishinaabe paternal family, the Firekeepers, hold a significant ceremonial role, while her mother, of white French descent, hails from the affluent Fontaine family. The text explores Daunis's complex navigation of two communities and the process of finding her place in the world. While addressing common concerns of young individuals—such as friends, dating, or choosing a degree in college—the text delves into specific traumas experienced by Daunis's tribal community, like racism, rape, drugs, and murder. Following the deaths of her uncle and her best friend, Daunis becomes a confidential informant of the FBI to investigate the advance of methamphetamine in the region. In her exploration, Daunis grapples with two seemingly opposed worldviews, summarized as her traditional knowledge and her scientific outlook. In this respect, the novel is tellingly instructive, offering insights into traditional medicine, cultural values, and ceremonies. My analysis explores Daunis's self-definition in relation to Indigenous resilience in the twenty-first century, with a focus on young adulthood to address a gap in scholarly work.

In 2011, in the context of a handbook of research on children's and YA literature, Joseph Bruchac denounced the underrepresentation of Native writers in children's books despite the presence of talented authors willing to contribute to the field (344). In turn, Mandy Suhr-Sytsma lamented the lack of critical attention to Indigenous YA texts and

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<sup>2</sup> As well as receiving a good number of enthusiastic reviews, *Firekeeper's Daughter* is the main focus of Paulina Hernández Trejo's (2023) analysis of the novel as a decolonial text; Hatice Bay's (2023) interesting reflection on Indigenerdy in the novel, which makes it a counter-narrative of the view of scientists as white males; Margaret Mackey's (2024) study of the novel in terms of cognitive engagement through cultural context and reflection; and Kerstin Knopf's (2026) perceptive study of its engagement with Indigenous concepts of land, citizenship, belonging, and stewardship, and how these intersect in Boulley's portrayal of cultural resilience and the empowerment of Indigenous youth. Although they do not include a specific analysis of the novel, in their introduction to their special issue on YA fiction, Anderson, Calcaterra and Pexa (2022) highlight *Firekeeper's Daughter* as representative of the new wave of Indigenous YA texts, concerned with colonization and cultural resurgence, and set it in a long history of Indigenous storytelling for young audiences since Charles Eastman or Zitkala-Ša.

called for closer analysis of both the contributions of Indigenous authors to the YA genre and the ways in which YAL can enrich Indigenous literature (2016: 25). Fortunately, things are improving in the current context of the third wave of Indigenous writing, which Louise Erdrich qualifies as a powerful time where we are bearing witness to new Native writers of different backgrounds, sensibilities and languages (in Orange, 2020). Within this creative upsurge, third-wave Indigenous women writers of YA fiction that are becoming more and more popular include Cynthia Leitich Smith, Darcie Little Badger, and Marcie Rendon, as well as Angeline Boulley herself. As for literary criticism, Suhr-Sytsma authored *Self-determined Stories: The Indigenous Reinvention of Young Adult Literature* (2018), the only book-length study dedicated to this issue so far, which she connects to Native sovereignty. The 2022 Special Issue of *Studies in the Novel* devoted to Indigenous YA novels, co-edited by Eric Gary Anderson, Angela Calcaterra, and Christopher Pexa, sets out to prove that this has become a significant genre which addresses not only the personal struggles of Indigenous youth but also broader themes of sovereignty, decolonization, and resistance. Other recent valuable works include “Central Power, New Frontier,” by Traci P. Baxley and Henry Genyne (2014), “Irredeemable Stories,” by Emily Nagin (2016), or the chapters by Svetlana Seibel and J. Simpson in the volume *Heroic Girls as Figure of Resistance and Futurity in Popular Culture* (2024).

In spite of such progress, more critical attention is still needed to account for the specific aspects of Indigenous YA literature and its impact. To start with, we need to acknowledge that, if identity formation is a critical task for all adolescents, and YAL in general is very much about marginalization and alienation—after all, they must experience powerlessness “as a necessary condition of growing into power” (Trites 2000, 79)—, the experience of Indigenous teens is frequently more complicated. For one thing, they often have to identify—as is the case with Daunis Firekeeper—with two different cultures. Moreover, as Hughes-Hassel explains, teens of color, including Indigenous and biracial youth, constantly find themselves in situations where assumptions about their identities and potential are made based on their skin color (2013: 218). Hence, whereas YA texts typically focus on the power dynamics between a young protagonist and the social institutions that impact their life, Indigenous YAL often takes a different view of the process of estrangement from and reintegration with the protagonist’s community (Suhr-Sytsma, 2016: 30). In this context, reintegration does not really mark the end of a process but acts by “invigorating an entire community’s rebellion against colonialism” (30). Exemplifying this, Indigenous YAL authors like Boulley denounce the violence of settler colonialism and vindicate their tribes’ traditional values, incorporating non-Indigenous generic forms and refusing to stay within the limits of expectations about Native American literature.

In addition to its Indigenous focus, Boulley’s novel speaks to the broader experience of being a young person in the 21st century by combining the traditional and the contemporary, the activist impulse, and the radical defence of relationality as a way to reject stereotypes. This kind of writing goes beyond the acting-out and working-through stages in classic trauma studies, an approach which cannot realistically account for what is happening in this context. It also promotes the idea that oppression should not be the thing that defines a people, the main feature of what Eva Tuck conceptualizes as the damage-centered approach, predominantly focused on documenting pain, loss, and the effects of domination, exploitation and colonization on communities (2009: 413). Works like *Firekeeper’s Daughter* and other YA texts aim to reframe Indigenous

experiences, refusing to define their communities as broken and highlighting their survivance instead.

In this respect, and in spite of recent developments in the critical conceptualization of Indigenous resilience from a decolonial perspective (Fraile-Marcos 2020, 2023; Martínez-Falquina 2023b), more attention to Native American perspectives is still due, and *Firekeeper's Daughter* provides a good opportunity to do so. Daunis is without any doubt a resilient Native woman. She is intelligent, strong and determined. Yet, she is also a complex character who hesitates, makes mistakes, and can be as ambivalent as anybody else. It is important to underscore this three-dimensionality to avoid falling into a celebratory, pigeonholed idea of resilience. Also, this is an example of how, as highlighted by Suhr-Sytsma, the growing body of Indigenous YAL offers significant contributions both within and beyond Native literary studies due to the complexity in the representation of Indigenous experiences in these works, which equals and sometimes surpasses that of their adult counterparts (2016: 47). Additionally, as we see in the analysis of *Firekeeper's Daughter*, Indigenous resilience is “embedded in Indigenous body and land sovereignty” (De Finney, 2017: 11), it is both human and environmental, focused on an Indigenous understanding of history and place. Moreover, resilience is directly connected to the storytelling tradition, and its current emphasis is explicitly political and activist (Simpson, 2017). Both the novel and my article point to the fact that, in the face of trauma, dispossession, or racism, both the community and the individual need to be part of the solution. As articulated in this text, Indigenous resilience is intrinsically relational, thus becoming a decolonial tool of empowerment and sovereignty.

## 2. A HEROINE FOR THE SEVENTH FIRE

*Firekeeper's Daughter* opens with a brief proleptic scene by way of a preface:

I am a frozen statue of a girl in the woods. Only my eyes move, darting from the gun to their startled expression. Gun. Shock. Gun. Disbelief. Gun. Fear. THA-THUM-THA-THUM-THAT-THUM. [...] I am thinking of my mother when the blast changes everything. (2)<sup>3</sup>

This first-person narrator offers a symbolic preview of a crucial event which will be further developed later in the text. For now, we are succinctly presented with a dangerous moment announcing death, a shaking hand who is threatening the protagonist's life, the girl's concern with her mother should the worst happen to her, and a friendly hand who demands the attacker to give the gun. Yet, a shot is fired and that changes everything. The details of this scene will be unveiled throughout the novel, but the episode is already irremediably suspended in time and place, becoming the material of nightmares and flashbacks. Significantly, the girl first characterizes herself as frozen in the woods, as only capable of moving her eyes from the gun to a “startled expression” of an unspecified owner. Does “their” refer to the person holding the gun? Is it their shock, disbelief and fear the narrator's eyes are seeing, or is it her own, reflected on them? It is also possible that the plural possessive refers to the woods, which in an Indigenous worldview, would

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<sup>3</sup> All quotes from the novel refer to the Kindle edition.

be considered capable of bearing witness and reacting to what is happening in front of them. This would make sense in a text that offers a relevant perspective on Indigenous relationality in connection to traditional storytelling, which involves an expanded understanding of agency and the intimate connection of place and time (LaDuke, 2015; Coulthard, 2014; Martínez-Falquina, 2023a).

After this momentous scene, the novel develops in four parts, each pointing to one of the sacred four directions in Native American thought accompanied by a specific reference to the phases of the journey Daunis embarks on. This is a deliberate move on the part of Boulley, who statedly wanted to refer to Ojibwe medicine wheels. As she says,

in my culture, there's a four-act structure, and each act has a different purpose. I really tried to use the Hero's Journey, which sometimes you see visually depicted as a circle. I looked at our medicine wheel, which has four quadrants, and I thought, what if Daunis's story is the Hero's Journey in the context of our medicine wheel—what if it mirrored our medicine wheel teachings and also fit into the Hero's Journey? It was really Indigenizing the Hero's Journey, and that meant a four-act structure. (Lavoie, 2021)

The novel is thus a hybrid where Indigenous and Western forms converge. Described by Boulley as “an Ojibwe Nancy Drew” (2021: 430), Daunis is the protagonist of both a coming-of-age narrative and a thriller whose conventions are somewhat questioned. She is asked to take on the role of an FBI informant because of her unique ability to blend scientific knowledge with cultural wisdom. Her main motivation to accept the job is the possibility to “give closure to [her] community. Healing to people who are grieving. Knowledge to people who need to know the truth. [...] Justice to the ones responsible for it all” (101). This is a difficult task and a great responsibility for an eighteen-year-old person, but she rises to the occasion. And it is made very clear that, while the FBI's primary goal is to punish criminals, Daunis is more focused on healing her community, a more intricate process than simply bringing certain people to justice. Therefore, as well as discovering the individuals responsible of the meth traffic crisis, the murders and the rapes, she will have to learn to apprehend the deeper levels of relations and the complex conditions of the context that explain it all. Throughout this process, her difficulties and reflections are presented to us via Daunis's first-person narration and internal monologue.

The Indigenous four-part structure aligned with Ojibwe medicine wheels is also revised. Its most significant upgrade is having a young woman as the protagonist of this Indigenous heroic quest. In Benton-Banai's account of the story of Firekeeper's Daughter, Daunis's namesake, this character of the Ojibway creation story is the companion of Original Man, who was placed on Earth by the Creator, Gitchie Manito, to name all the beings and places and be the first of the Anishinaabe. She is first mentioned as the “young and very beautiful daughter” (1988: 17) of the Firekeeper, a singer who brings Original Man to her in order to start a home together. From their union come four sons, who eventually travel to each of the Four Directions, starting families of their own (22). This traditional account encourages the quest—as Nokomis says, “there are things in life that one must go after and search for; they will not just come to a person. It is this way with knowledge” (18)—but mostly it is associated to men, not women. In contrast, Daunis is clearly not just a companion, but a central figure, a proactive searcher for answers and solutions.

She is also, as I contend, a twenty-first-century heroine for the Seventh Fire, a central story for the Anishinaabe. This prophecy is structured in seven “fires” which cover historical migrations and the effects of colonization. At the time of the Seventh Fire, “a new people would emerge with a sacred purpose” (Kimmerer, 2013: 367), which is nothing else but to “walk back along the red road of our ancestor’s path and to gather up all the fragments that lay scattered along the trail” (367-68). In Kimmerer’s solemn words, “We are the ones the ancestors spoke of, the ones who will bend to the task of putting things back together to rekindle the flames of the sacred fire, to begin the rebirth of a nation” (368). Daunis fulfills this mission, performing the role of a symbolic firekeeper who carries the teachings of the ancestors forward, and learning to live according to those traditional principles in today’s world.

Acting as a guide for Jamie—the newly arrived hockey player and FBI officer of Indigenous descent who is disconnected from his cultural roots—, Daunis presents herself to the reader as the hostess who explains the customs and traditions of her tribe. The focus on hospitality is relevant insofar as, in the words of Ana Manzanás and Jesús Benito,

[it] opens spaces up as forms of exchange; it dialogues with space and border theory, reexamines the roles of hosts and guests, mobilizes the notion of home and converses with hospitable and inhospitable languages as it rearranges the concepts of belonging, membership and citizenship. (2017: 8)

By means of this hostess, the novel engages with complex ideas of home and place, individual and communal identity, all of which are in the process of being redefined as part of an extended system of relations. It does so by progressing through the four directions—East, South, West, North—which I take to stand for a four-step process of assertion, dislocation, shattering and reconnection.

### 3. THE HEROINE’S JOURNEY THROUGH THE FOUR DIRECTIONS

#### 3.1. ASSERTION: “WAABANONG (EAST). IN OJIBWE TEACHINGS, ALL JOURNEYS BEGIN IN THE EASTERN DIRECTION”

Stressing circularity and starting in the Eastern direction, the first part of the novel sets the basic elements of the Ojibwe teachings it is aimed at transmitting. Boulley presents us with the storied place of a fictional tribe inspired by Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, located between Michigan’s Upper Peninsula and Canada, and of which she is an enrolled member. While the tribe itself is a product of imagination, the geographical setting is firmly rooted in reality, capturing the essence of the story and shaping the protagonist’s self-identity. Prompted by Daunis and Jamie’s morning running routine, we learn how Daunis lives in the American city of Sault Ste. Marie, which connects to its twin Canadian city through an International Bridge. The novel is set on a place where borders are important, but constantly challenged, largely through the flow of water and human communication. As Daunis says,

ships pass by on their way to or from the other Great Lakes to reach Lake Superior, which is twenty-something feet higher than everything downriver.

There used to be rapids here. It was a major gathering spot for Anishinaabeg, with fishing villages on both sides of the river and on Sugar Island. The government took over the area and cut through the rapids to build the Soo Locks, which work like a water elevator to raise or lower the ships. (40).

According to Stirrup and Orr, the Canada-U.S. border offers “fertile ground” for theorising the tension that arises from differing perspectives on questions of hybridity, authenticity and nationalist identity, given its unique socio-cultural and cultural landscape, which includes Indigenous sovereignty claims and the intersection of multiple colonial histories and governance structures (2024). As will become evident in the analysis of this novel, its border setting is most pertinent to stress the text’s focus on borders as sites of limit and connection.

Underscoring the relevance of place for characterization, Daunis’s mother’s family boasts deep roots in this city, where even some buildings are named after her prosperous white ancestors. However, the girl is most emotionally connected to Sugar Island, “[her] favorite place in the universe” (4). Situated in the St. Mary’s River, the island holds historical significance for the Anishinaabe—who once inhabited vast regions of North America, including present-day Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota in the U.S., and Ontario, Manitoba and western Quebec on the Canadian side—before its settlement by French Jesuit missionaries in 1668. Apart from its history, Sugar Island carries deep emotional ties to Daunis’s Ojibwe ancestry because her Aunt Teddie lives there: not only is she a model of strength and resilience for Daunis but also her fundamental source of knowledge about her Indigenous heritage. Furthermore, the island’s ecological diversity provides an ideal backdrop for her scientific explorations. When Sugar Island becomes the site of violence and murder, the place is violated in more ways than one.

Apart from its emphasis on place, the novel becomes explicitly enlightening in its deliberate vindication of Anishinaabe cultural values. Through her interaction with Jamie and her internal musings, Daunis educates on various aspects, including the significance of the owl in Ojibwe culture (21), proper treatment of Elders (10), the meaning of Anishinaabe identity (41), the uses of sweetgrass (46), tobacco offerings, or the diverse forms of dancing in a powwow and its relevance in the restoration of the community (60, 420). She also explores the Seven Generations principle (210), or the meaning of the four directions (360, 404). Many of the lessons have to do with Anishinaabe identity in general, like the enrolment requirements (216), and womanhood in particular, including the coming-of-age fast (86) or the meaning and protocol during a woman’s Moon (141). Others are related to the historical context, like the reference to ICWA and the rituals for adopted children when they return to the tribe (220), or the complicated issue of per capita (47). The narrative devotes ample space to ritual practices, such as the sweat lodge (289-290), or the role of a firekeeper, a tradition in Daunis’s family (89). The Seven Grandfathers are also introduced, representing the principles of Anishinaabe *minobimaadiziwin*—the good way of life—encompassing love, humility, respect, honesty, bravery, wisdom, and truth (27). The narrative incorporates Anishinaabemowin words without translation, urging readers to work on their meanings through context and encouraging cultural preservation. Daunis is looking for a language herself—“Maybe there’s a word in Anishinaabemowin for when you find solid footing in the rubble inanimate” (213)—and she explains that “Words in Anishinaabemowin are either animate—living—or inanimate” (213). Amidst all these teachings, some lessons are particularly painful, like the blanket party ritual to heal a woman who has suffered



sexual abuse (28), the meaning of each of the four days of funerals (91), or the protocols of mourning (123).

The starting point of Daunis's learning process is thus an exercise of assertion of values in connection to place. The book is presented as a manual on how to live a good life as a young person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century while respecting the ways of one's ancestors. As Daunis guides us through the map of her home, we become acquainted with the place, her family, relations and different ways of seeing the world. Nevertheless, the map is not definitely drawn or complete, but in the making, and the relation of identity to place is by no means stable but always in the process of being apprehended. In other words, Daunis cannot stay a frozen girl in the woods, but is called upon to act and change by the circumstances and by her motivations. This is why, as she picks up the pieces of knowledge and tradition that make her Anishinaabe, she needs to embark on a journey consisting of wondering about the meaning of the various borders defining her identity; of wandering around them, between them, and finally, through them. In this search, she will reach a deeper understanding of the various components of her self and renew her connections to the world around her.

### 3.2. DISLOCATION: "ZAAWANONG (SOUTH). THE JOURNEY CONTINUES INTO THE SOUTHERN DIRECTION—A TIME FOR WANDERING AND WONDERING"

Daunis initially defines her identity in terms of difference and separation. Early on in the novel, she describes herself thus: "Tall, sturdy chick, ginormous ass, ghostly white skin, wide mouth, big nose, and—what cruel irony—small tits. I fight an urge to shout back that I'm powerful on defense, I'm smart, and I don't ever give up" (38). In line with the common concerns of youth, the novel places an even greater emphasis on how others perceive and define Daunis. Among her peers, she is known as a great hockey player—she is called "Daunis Defence"—but also occasionally addressed by derogatory names such as "Ghost" (9), "White Sheep" (25), or "that washed-out sister of Levi's" (9), her popular hockey star half-brother. The novel brings to the forefront the issue of identity being defined or controlled externally, highlighting the complexity of Daunis's experience. Being Native is "your identity," she says, "but it gets defined or controlled by other people" (48). She is very aware that being Native means different things to different individuals and, that, unfortunately, "to some people, you'll never be Native enough" (48).

Daunis grapples with the dual nature of her heritage, a complex amalgamation of her mother's family, the Fontaines, and her paternal family, the Firekeepers. She often feels caught between these two worlds, compelled to be a different person depending on who she is with. As she puts it,

My Zhaaganaash and Anishinaabe grandmothers could not have been more different. One viewed the world as its surface, while the other saw connections and teachings that run deeper than our known world. Their push and pull on me has been a tug-of-war my entire life. (8)

As a result, and in spite of her deep ancestral roots and ties to both communities, Daunis experiences a profound sense of not belonging. In her words, "It's hard to explain what it's like being so connected to everyone and everything here... yet feeling that no one ever sees

the whole me” (27). Thus, Daunis’s journey is driven by a yearning for wholeness, for a sense of self that transcends the limitations imposed by how others see her.

Daunis possesses a keen awareness of the various borders that demarcate distinctions in her life, extending beyond mere questions of identity. The dichotomy of being or not being enrolled in the Sugar Island Ojibwe Tribe is one border Daunis navigates. Despite their ancestral ties, Daunis and her best friend Lily are descendants rather than members, due to intricacies like Daunis’s father’s absence on her birth certificate, and Lily’s not meeting the blood-quantum requirement. In spite of their profound connection to the tribe, this situation leaves them “looking in from the outside” (15). Referring to science—according to which, “a mixture has two or more components that don’t join chemically. Like oil and vinegar” (11)—, Daunis further underscores the importance of delineation by keeping her worlds distinct, which makes her feel safe. She adheres to different sets of rules on and off the ice, when interacting with her Fontaine and Firekeeper worlds (21), or with tribal ways and federal agencies like the FBI and the BIA (92). The divide between Catholicism and Ojibwe religion is also underscored: while some tribal members embrace Catholicism, others maintain a distance due to the historical connection between churches and Indian boarding schools.

Hence, it seems clear that, in times of inner conflict and “complicated feelings” (54), Daunis’s scientific mindset offers her solace by providing a structured and logical world, helping her maintain a sense of order and stability (138). As she ponders,

It’s as if Jamie and his investigation are lodged in my brain’s left hemisphere with facts, logic, and analysis. Lily is in my right brain, part of my imagination, intuition, and feelings. Between the two hemispheres is a divide as deep and wide as the Grand Canyon. (93)

Science World—which “has laws, standards, order, and methods” (138)—is a language Daunis speaks fluently and it helps her keep things in their place. However, those divisions she insists on reinforcing are artificial and eventually fail her in her attempt to properly apprehend the world around her. Prior to her death, Lily used to challenge her to embrace the idea that “the good stuff happens when worlds collide” (21) and to recognize that her rules were too overly black and white. This notion compels Daunis to embark on a journey where these boundaries may blur, leading her to a more profound understanding of herself and her place in the community.

### 3.3. SHATTERING: “NINGAABII’AN (WEST). IN THE WESTERN DIRECTION THE JOURNEY FOCUSES ON THE RIPENED BERRIES AND THE HARVEST, A TIME OF CONSTANT CHANGE”

Daunis bears the weight of inherited trauma that repeatedly shatters her world. Her life is marked by a series of distressing events, including abandonment and death, which have burdened her from her earliest existence. Because her late father deserted her mother, pregnant at sixteen, the woman struggles with emotional distress and heartache to the point of debilitation (50). One of the important lessons that Daunis learns is that vulnerability does not necessarily involve lack of strength. Yet, for most of the narrative, she struggles with the uncertainty derived from her mother’s emotional openness and sets her mind on protecting her. As she says,

My heart breaks for her, for her life altered by secrets and scandals. By wounds so deep the scar tissue keeps building up. Layers of bulging, dark red keloids encasing her until she cannot move. Leaving her stuck somewhere in the past. Scars made by the broken promises of Levi Joseph Firekeeper Sr. The king of Guy Lies. Maybe my first wound was so deep that it never healed. My mother wasn't the only person he made promises to. My dad was the first guy who ever lied to me. I was seven years old. It still hurts. (254)

Daunis's familiarity with trauma continues with the death of her uncle David, wrongly attributed to drug abuse, and her Fontaine grandmother's stroke, ushering in what she calls "the New Normal" (5). Inherited trauma also weighs heavily on Daunis, especially regarding the painful legacy of boarding schools, where Indigenous children had their culture and language forcibly taken from them. Daunis is very aware that many tribal members did not survive the boarding school experience and that those who did have been marked in one way or another. For example, even though the last church-operated boarding school in Michigan closed two years before the girl was born, the simple and common event of hearing a dog bark still unavoidably triggers Gramma Pearl, making her grab a rifle and hide her granddaughter in a "hidey-hole beneath a trap door under the bed" so that the Zhaaganaash do not take her away (115).

All of these episodes are set in the past, outside the story time, but the event that serves as the catalyst for the unfolding of the crime narrative is the death of Lily at the hands of her addict ex boyfriend. Daunis discovers that this murder—which will be followed by others just as tragic—is connected to the issues surrounding drugs, specifically methamphetamine, on the rise in town and on the reservation. This is a crisis that affects young people in particular, destroying them, as Daunis observes: "When guys do nothing but smoke weed and play video games, we call them Lost Boys. As in Peter Pan's gang in Neverland. Never growing up. Never leaving home. Never holding on to a job. I suppose there can be Lost Girls, too" (152).

Additional traumatic experiences derived from her involvement with the FBI are the agents' occasional prejudice, and the discovery of her brother's implication in the making and dealing in meth. Knowledge can be painful and there is no turning back from it: "Why can't Indian time let you go back in time? Change the things that weren't supposed to happen? We never should've gone to the island. I shouldn't have looked for him. Never should've opened that bedroom door" (253). Daunis is now in what she calls "this Newer New Normal" (108) as a confidential informant, and she is thus a first-hand witness of the excess of violence and pain in her community.

If that were not enough trauma, Daunis is raped. The perpetrator is a powerful white man, involved with the hockey team. He also knows that, due to jurisdictional complications, it is very difficult for such a crime to be punished if it is committed on the reservation. The experience is profoundly shocking and temporarily puts Daunis in a dissociative state: "It's not supposed to happen to me. The bedding smells clean. Like a fresh sachet. Lavender. An instant later, I watch from high above. What he does to her" (330). Daunis used to think that her light skin and wealthy white family would protect her, but she learns the hard way that in this sexist and racist environment, no one is safe. In the end she is treated as one more ungrievable Indigenous woman, and the most painful lesson of all is that "Not everyone gets justice. Least of all Nish kwewag" (415).

### 3.4. RECONNECTION: “KEWAADIN (NORTH). THE JOURNEY INTO THE NORTHERN DIRECTION IS A TIME FOR RESTING AND REFLECTING IN THE PLACE OF DREAMS, STORIES, AND TRUTH”

A happy ending for this novel would be unrealistic, considering the context of violence that plagues Indigenous women today. Nevertheless, Daunis makes progress in her heroic journey towards awareness and the acceptance of ambivalence. A key feature is Daunis’s strengthening of her connection with elders, who support her when she applies for enrolment and coordinate a rescue to help her confront the meth dealers. The reconnection to elders is an important element of the Anishinaabe prophecy, according to which the new people who will emerge will retrace the steps to find what was left behind; “Their steps will take them to the elders who they will ask to guide them on their journey. [...] The New People will have to be careful in how they approach the elders. The task of the New People will not be easy” (Benton-Banai, 1988: 91, 93). At her time of dire need, Daunis says, in her usual explanatory tone,

I’m reminded that our Elders are our greatest resource, embodying our culture and community. Their stories connect us to our language, medicines, land, clans, songs, and traditions. They are a bridge between the Before and the Now, guiding those of us who will carry on in the Future. We honor our heritage and our people, those who are alive and those who’ve passed on. That’s important because it keeps the ones we lose with us. (402)

In this process, Daunis distances herself from the FBI and their methods. Her motivation shifts towards community healing and restorative justice, and she emphasizes the importance of attending to the whole story in order to achieve resilience: “If the community were an ill or injured person, the FBI would cut out the infection or reset the bones. Amputate if necessary. Problem solved. I’m the only person looking at the whole person, not just the wound” (192).

Hence, Daunis’s personal journey is deeply marked by internal conflict, as she grapples with the interplay of logic and intuition, science and spirituality. In her quest, she incorporates Anishinaabe teachings with Western scientific knowledge, recognizing the richness that emerges when these worlds are integrated. Her new career goal at the end of the novel—she eventually decides that she wants to become “a traditional medicine practitioner and scientist” (424)—reflects this integration, which will let her find “the synergy of all the teachings” (61). This means overcoming her reliance on linear thinking, solving the “battle raging between [her] brain, gut, and heart” (250), and accepting all the different parts of herself.

Accordingly, as Daunis evolves, her identity transforms, culminating in the decision to relinquish the name associated to her father. Her view on tradition is by no means uncritical, as we see when she refers to her mythical namesake:

I don’t like her story, because she doesn’t even get her own name in it. Her identity is in relation to her dad, Firekeeper, and then her husband, First Man, called Anishinaabe, and then her sons, named after each of the four directions. She gets stuck with the responsibility of lifting the sun every morning. [...] It just seems like a raw deal—all that responsibility and you don’t even get your own name. (154)

Her decision to leave out the name “Firekeeper’s Daughter” and her adoption of a new spiritual name is a significant step in her self-discovery journey:

I should ask Auntie the word in Anishinaabemowin for the beams of light you can see when the sun hides behind clouds. In science, they’re called crepuscular rays. I think the word is zaagaaso. If I’m right, that’s what I’ll call Firekeeper’s Daughter from now on. Her own identity: Zaagaasikwe. (154-55)

Daunis’s choice is proof of her capacity to adapt to the circumstances as she learns about the world and herself, as well as of her independence. Both qualities make her a good heroine for her time and place.

The traumatic experiences that Daunis has to face make her gain some distance from the men in her life, as seen in her new name differentiating her from her father, her determined reaction to her brother’s crime, or her final decision not to let herself fall for a relation of dependence with Jamie based on his need. As she says to him, “It’s your journey. You gotta do your work and I gotta do mine. [...] Your need scares me. [...] I love you... and I love myself” (419). Simultaneously, she strengthens her connection to the women around her. First, her aunt Teddie serves as a key role model who imparts wisdom and strength. This character represents the complexities of being “a strong and wise Nish kwe” (349), imperfect yet brave, and fiercely loving, “full of love, anger, humor, sorrow, and joy” (291). Daunis has always admired her, but it is not until she has some experience with pain that she fully understands and values her aunt: “My whole life I’ve wanted to be like my aunt. The way a person dreams about being a ballerina, but not of broken toes and years of practice. I wanted to be a strong and wise Nish kwe, never considering how that abundance of sight would be earned” (349). As Daunis learns, albeit unwittingly, grief imparts knowledge and can only be alleviated by connection.

Ultimately, Daunis’s deepest sense of belonging lies with the community of Indigenous women who have suffered violence. The rampant violence against Native women denounced in the novel is all-too-real. Considering her two little nieces, Daunis ponders:

I am overcome with a mixture of emotions. Sad that their innocent eyes are open to the trauma that still impacts our community today. Angry they must learn these truths in order to be strong Anishinaabeg in a world where Indians are thought of only in the past tense. Proud that they—smart, sturdy, and loved—are the greatest wish our ancestors had, for our nation to survive and flourish. (425)

At the end of the novel, Daunis participates in a ritual she had always wondered about and she is now a part of, due to her having been raped. This connects her to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls movement (MMIWG), which denounces the outrageous levels of violence this collective has to face. The novel’s activist impulse is made very explicit by Boulley when Daunis participates in the powwow Jingle Dance, which represents healing, wearing a red dress, which symbolizes women: “Indigenous women and girls who are murdered or missing. Their spirits taken too soon, lives cut short. For each one... mikwendaagozi. She is remembered” (427). Impeding a conventional pattern of a happy ending, the final stage of Daunis’s

development sheds light on the urgent need to acknowledge and combat violence against Indigenous women, who have all too often been “pushed into the abyss of expendability and invisibility” (428).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Angeline Boulley’s *Firekeeper’s Daughter* is an important contribution to the indigenization of the YAL canon. Not only does the novel reclaim space within the commercial YAL genre, but it promotes the redefinition of Indigenous YAL as a form of counter-narrative. The text challenges dominant Western frameworks—which have historically been associated with the marginalization and colonization of Native peoples—by intertwining them with Indigenous perspectives and epistemologies. Its hybrid structure and genre—drawing on both the Hero’s Journey and the four-part Ojibwe medicine wheel, and blending thriller elements with cultural and spiritual teachings—demonstrate how Indigenous storytellers can transform mainstream literary forms like YAL and reimagine them as a tool for decolonization and cultural reclamation.

With a heroine like Daunis, a complex, multidimensional character who is both strong and vulnerable, the author defies Native American stereotypes. Her journey derives in her acknowledgement of the hybridity of her experience as a young Native American woman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She learns—often the hard way—that keeping the different parts of the self apart by reinforcing differentiating borders does not work, that her community is by no means idyllic or homogeneous, and that she needs to accept uncertainty, ambivalence, and different ways of knowing. After all, as she eloquently expresses, “We Anishinaabeg are not stagnant. We have always adapted to survive” (428). As Boulley herself stated, Indigenous peoples are not a monolith, they are living dynamic lives in the present, and there can be “no one great Native American story” (in Clayson and Beiner, 2021). Revealing all these layers is needed in order to challenge dehumanizing stereotypes and for the sake of making changes.

Daunis also teaches us about resilience from an Indigenous perspective. In contrast to the individual process of overcoming adversity that often appears in many YA novels, *Firekeeper’s Daughter* places the focus on the community. Yet, resilience is not articulated as a solely collective endeavor either: in the face of trauma, dispossession, racism, and sexism, both the community and the individual need to be part of the solution. Such representation of Indigenous resilience as multilayered and relational is inherently political, drawing attention to challenges that Native American peoples face, like the outrageous violence against Indigenous women and other manifestations of racism and sexism. The novel thus functions as a form of activism, encouraging young readers—Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike—to engage critically with these issues. The commercial and critical success of *Firekeeper’s Daughter* underscores the need for stories that challenge mainstream paradigms and reflect the diversity of youth experiences.

In his recent study of heroic girls in contemporary culture, Simon Bacon asserts that “the future is no longer to be left in the hands of the forms of manhood that have brought the world to its current position but should rather be passed over to the girls” (2024: 1). I would go further and argue that the future should be in the hands of Indigenous girls like Daunis, who embodies the humility and ability to learn while sharing her learning process. By integrating traditional values with contemporary experience, this Indigenous heroine transmits both the beauty of the world and the need to change it.

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