"Not Today, Colonizer": Reclaiming Voice through T-Shirts in *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet*

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Content warning: this paper includes reference to sexual assault, murder, and r*.**

"Not Today, Colonizer" [23]–the bold letters on Lou's T-shirt proclaim a gravity of defiance as she comes face-to-face with a colonizer. This is a defining moment of Lou's resistance in Jen Ferguson's *The Summer of Bitter and Sweet* (2022), where her fashion statement speaks volumes against the rural and conservative backdrop of Lloydminster, Alberta. Lou aligns her values with what she wears, opting for T-shirts to do the talking in a world that has historically suppressed Indigenous women's voices. Lou's T-shirts are a signifier of a way to confront heteropatriarchy and colonialism, and at the same time act as an avenue to reclaim her bodily autonomy. T-shirts are ways to communicate personal and communal messages, asserting ourselves and our beliefs in society. Lou's T-shirts help her move from silence to voice, and they propel her on a journey to confront colonial power.

Historically, T-shirts originated as male underwear for modesty purposes until the early twentieth century (Cole 153). The T-shirt eventually transformed from boxy men's tees to everyday attire worn by all, often adorned with graphic art or text as a form of self-expression (Critchell). Barthes explores the history of the coding of clothes as a "function of meaning" that goes beyond modesty and ornamentation (90). Lou wears her protest T-shirts as what Barthes would call "an act of signification and therefore a profoundly social act right at the very heart of the dialectic of society" (91). While her T-shirts, including "Black Lives Matter" and "Not Today, Colonizer," are memorable and "capture the pulse of [the]

[23] This phrase riffs on RuPaul contestant Bianca Del Rio's popular line, "Not Today, Satan," referring to expressing resistance to an action or person. The phrase now exists in many variations. In this case, Lou's T-shirt protests against colonialism and the evangelical churches' historical ties to colonial power.

time," the historical colonial ties to these issues continue to be prevalent to this day and Lou aims to confront them (Critchell).

There is a deafening power that lies within the ability to convey a message without speaking. Ferguson depicts Lou's T-shirts as "being loud in Alberta in a way she wouldn't be being loud in say, Toronto, or Vancouver. And she knows this" (Personal Interview). This comparison emphasizes that context matters; her silent protest is impactful in rural Alberta where right-wing politics dominate. Therefore, her "Not Today, Colonizer" T-shirt speaks volumes as Lou chooses to wear this specific tee to assert her body into spaces held predominately by white men and settlers. When Lou wears the tee, she is "flooded with adrenaline. The urge to run. To fight" (45). She feels this impulse in the beginning of the novel when she experiences pushback from a delivery driver while working at her family-owned ice cream shack. He notices her T-shirt and hostilely claims "it's called the right of conquest, girl. Done and done and done" (45); his statement illustrates settlers' unapologetic ways of continuing to illegitimately occupy stolen land or dishonour treaties that were meant to protect Indigenous land: Lloydminster is on Treaty 6 land, first stolen from the Cree, the Nakoda Sioux, the Dene, the Saulteaux, and the Métis Nation; it is presently Metis land (The Law Society of Alberta). His immediate observation of Lou's T-shirt and malicious comment contrasts to possible reactions in more progressive urban spaces such as Vancouver or Toronto; Lou's tees may not be as provocative there and there would be an increased likelihood of support shown towards Indigenous Peoples. Even when she is confronted by colonizers, her fear of "turning [her] back on [her] family–again," referring to her past denial of Indigeneity, prevents her from taking it off (46). Thus, Lou's T-shirt is not only speaking for her but also empowers her to embrace her Indigeneity and confront conflict through this non-verbal form of expression. The meaningful impact that silent protests create are more powerful in spaces where significant political and social tensions exist; consequently, here Lou can balance her sense of safety with her acts of protest.

Although Lou does not reveal concerns for her safety, subtle hints of fear emerge when she avoids provoking others. She attempts to distract the delivery driver from the meaning behind her shirt by exclaiming it is an "inside joke" (45). This fear is rooted in the awareness of historical racist attitudes towards Indigenous Peoples and being treated as inferior. According to Ferguson (Personal Interview), Lou's silent protest is "being loud in a way that feels safer?" Echoing this compromise is Lou's confusion about her sexuality and her decision to keep it private; she can feel safe without revealing her sexuality to others. Lou

allows both safety and the urge to protest or reveal her sexuality to simultaneously exist throughout her journey. Finding this balance motivates Lou not just to wear these protest messages one time, but to continuously wear them to illustrate that a cause is deserving of relentless disruption against unjust systems of power.

Halfway through the novel, Lou wears a "Love Is Love Is Love" T-shirt spelled in glitter and describes how she gets all her T-shirts from Goodwill, "where once-activists donate their uniforms when they give up the fight. Or, where they dump their gear when the fight isn't cool anymore" (131). This spotlights the current activism climate where self-proclaimed activists enthusiastically fight for a cause but no longer show support once its novelty fades. The decline in support parallels the way celebrities and brands advocate for certain causes in the short-term, limiting their efforts to symbolic activism which does not address the structural roots of the issue (see Brodmerkel). Lou chooses to wear and share other people's concerns to demonstrate that the fight is never over as long as these oppressive systemic issues continue to exist. Her deep respect for the land is embedded in giving thrift store T-shirts a second life, which is a direct response to the exploitation of natural resources and labour in clothing production. Lou's act of reducing harmful pollutants into the environment while supporting social causes close to her may inspire young readers to shop secondhand and discourage them to participate in fast fashion.

While Lou wears these T-shirts proudly and repeatedly, she has not yet discovered how to embrace her own identity in the same way. Lou's "Love is Love is Love" activist T-shirt communicates her belief in celebrating all forms of love, including those that extend beyond heterosexuality. However, she struggles with discovering her own sexual identity and her relationship with King makes it more complicated. She feels a growing attraction to him, yet she does not want to be sexually intimate with him. Lou wrestles with her inner turmoil as she reflects on feeling no sparks with her ex-boyfriend Wyatt and can count the exact number of times that they kissed, while losing track of the instances between King and herself. Therefore, this is about "King versus Wyatt" in the beginning (Personal Interview). Throughout the novel, there are occasions when Lou notices King in a T-shirt, especially when his tee "darkens under a circle of sweat" (186). Similarly, she cannot help but stare at him shirtless, while noticing for the first time that he is "not only aesthetically beautiful" (186). Lou staring at the sweat forming on King's T-shirt evokes an imagery of perceived masculinity, one that is conventionally sexual and exhibits physical strength. While she may not consciously connect King's wearing T-shirts to stimulating a sexual attraction for

him, she continuously wears or sleeps in King's T-shirts and finds a sense of comfort and safety in smelling them or curling her fingers in the cotton (251). Her interactions with his T-shirts reveal both sexual and romantic attraction, an interest distinct from what she experiences with Wyatt. She trusts King and "want[s] to want this," the sexual desire King feels for her, but she believes that "all that matters is I don't work" when she realizes that she does not want to go beyond kissing (293). She considers that this could be a trauma response to the sexual violence Peter England inflicted on her mother. It is only when King asks if she is asexual that Lou considers her sexual identity struggle as being "regular" (311). Therefore, her "Love is Love is Love" tee reflects Lou "willing to give others credit that she won't extend to herself. So she believes in a thing and wears a t-shirt but hasn't always internalized that she is also allowed to live that truth" (Ferguson, Personal Interview). The revelation of her sexuality as an inherent aspect of her identity instills greater confidence in Lou, to live her truth, and emboldens her to stand up for her beliefs.

Towards the end of the novel, she becomes braver and confronts Peter England, healing something inside of her that was afraid to embody her values beyond wearing protest T-shirts. This allows her to become more comfortable with King, leading her to share her identity struggle with him, realizing she is not alone. In the final scene, she recognizes "I'm not broken" and that her deep connection with King, while kissing him back, may not be forever but that "right now, this is exactly enough" (360). In this moment, Lou affirms her identity beyond conventional heterosexual ideas of romance and attraction and chooses to embrace her demisexual identity. Her connection with King not only contributes to her identity journey, but it could be the reason she feels a close tie to the Black Lives Matter movement. This is a cause that not only affects her close friend but mirrors the demand for racialized bodies, such as Indigenous Peoples, to exist in spaces without harm.

Readers are first introduced to Lou's T-shirts when she slips on her Black Lives Matter (BLM) tee a few days after her breakup with Wyatt. It is then revealed that her uncle, Dom, hired both King and Wyatt to work at the family's ice cream shack with her that summer. In this moment, she reflects on previously lying to King about her Indigeneity even when he revealed that folks in town commented on his darker Black skin compared to his father's. Their casual prejudice is based on the notion that "there's acceptable Black and too Black," with King being perceived as fitting into the latter (28). This is one of the readers' first glimpses of everyday racism and shows how it has affected someone close to Lou. During

their first day working at the ice cream shack, Wyatt fixates on King's Blackness by calling him a "Black man of mystery" and that he would "pay good money to have hair like yours" (33); this reduces King to singular racialized traits, objectifying him. Their interaction magnifies the way Wyatt diminishes King's identity by expecting him to perform like television Black stereotypes.

Despite Lou's complicated feelings towards King, her close connection to him activates her support as an ally to the BLM movement, understanding the violent parallels between his struggles and hers. Therefore, wearing a BLM T-shirt conveys meaning, whether during protest events or everyday life, that Black lives are inherently valuable. Richardson & Ragland analyze the language of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and argue that protest messages on shirts disturb the commonly unquestioned complicity of racism and "put the issue of state violence against Black bodies in the faces of all passersby" (35). Famous athletes such as Lebron James and Kyrie Irving used their platform in 2014 and wore "I CAN'T BREATHE" T-shirts in honour of Eric Garner, a Black man unjustly choked to death by the police (Richardson & Ragland 35). Their presence and message were asserted in a controlled space with a predominantly white audience who had no choice but to be confronted by the devastating effects of state violence. Although Lou's reach is not the same as that of NBA athletes, she wears her BLM tee for the same reason–to disrupt white spaces and the silence of the conservative and privileged lives of Lloydminster.

King experiences racism on a spectrum, from casual remarks about his hair to fearing for his safety from the RCMP. We see disproportionate police surveillance when King is targeted by getting pulled over after escaping Doyle, Wyatt's friend, who attacks Lou and her friend Cami. The police officer asks, "been drinking, boy?" with a "mean spit of the word" on boy (91). The malicious tone and language are a way to belittle King's autonomy and degrade him by not saying his name, reflective of historic racist practice. This reinforces white men's perceived power and is a tactic of dehumanization to justify violence. King's reflexive polite and measured performance when interacting with the police officer indicates he has learned this routine before, so as not to provoke suspicion or violence. His cautious actions are in response to systems of power that regard him as inferior. King's encounters highlight how institutions and societal practices are complicit in racism and point to the need of collective resistance against these oppressive systems. Lou's BLM T-shirt signifies her allyship and a counter-narrative to normalized violence against Black lives, which is similarly reflected in her tees that challenge the destructive narratives of Indigenous Peoples.

The purpose of Lou wearing protest T-shirts is not just to stand against colonialism, but to offer a counter-narrative that works towards changing harmful discourses. Lou wears a T-shirt from the Students Against Drinking and Driving fundraiser with a "Students Do It Sober!" message (70). This T-shirt alludes to challenging the "drunk Indian" stereotype, as it resists harmful racist generalizations. The message builds towards a critical conflict in the novel where Doyle taunts Cami and Lou for not drinking by remarking "but you're like, Indians," which links their race to the stigma of substance use (86). A brutal attack follows, in which Doyle and his friends repeatedly kick Cami and yank Lou's hair until it bleeds (effectively scalping her). Halfway through the novel, Lou confronts Wyatt about the attack, and he maliciously spits out the statement "Indians drink. There's a pack of them right now on the sidewalk outside that trash hotel downtown and you know it" (177). This is one of the rare times readers see Lou's fear vanish and she verbally fights back while embodying her T-shirt's opposing narrative. Wyatt's overt racism perpetuates the damaging assumptions about Indigenous Peoples, fueling her escalating anger.

Lou constantly negotiates between her protest goals and her well-being, and over time she becomes driven by something deeper–anger–that emboldens her to be fearless through her words and actions. This ties to Brown's argument that "without anger there is no impetus to act against any injustice done to [girls]. If we take away girls' anger, then, we take away the foundation for women's political resistance" (13). Lou inserts her presence and values, through her T-shirt messages, into white spaces and disrupts what society expects of a woman–specifically, an Indigenous woman who is silent and complies with the status quo. In a world that has historically marginalized Indigenous' voices, Lou's T-shirts, although silent in sound, come across as loud and clear in opposition to colonialism.

When Lou comes to understand that her father, Peter England, is attempting to gain complete control over the land where her family business resides, this anger reaches its peak. Peter England's sense of entitlement towards Lou is evident in his first letter by stating "we have the right to meet each other. I have the right to mold you into a woman —like any father does" (62). This statement is rooted in the patriarchy through England's objective to control Lou, which he disguises as a father's conventional protective role. His aim to control her, like property, is revealed when he attempts to manipulate her by suggesting she add his name to her birth certificate, so that he can secure complete ownership over the land Lou is set to inherit. His possessive and threatening actions towards Lou symbolize the

colonizer's belief in the right to land–to conquest–no matter who was there first. This perceived superiority is heightened in his third letter, which states "I can prove you belong to me," implying his sense of ownership over her and her Indigenous body (163). He attempts to distort the truth by telling her that Lou's mother tried to abort her or "legally murder you when you were beyond defenseless. I saved you" (163). His framing of Lou's mother as a murderer and himself as her savior reveals the irony of the white men who are killing Indigenous women and girls. His alleged truth is an attack on her mother and a deception to persuade Lou to meet him. Lou's silent protest of "Not Today, Colonizer" shifts from a message on a T-shirt to building towards the novel's pivotal moment where she confronts Peter England: "I don't belong to you" and "you have nothing I want or need. What you're doing, threatening me, my family, my friends, it stops now" (340). This moment is the first time she challenges him and denounces any sense of ownership over her, telling him to stop his pursuit. She realizes that "the land is as much mine as it is Peter England's" and that "this land knows me," affirming her own autonomy and her right and connection to the land (275). I argue that this is Lou's defining moment of resistance. Her values expand beyond her T-shirts as she asserts her independence against Peter, who symbolizes the pinnacle of colonialism. While Lou stands up for herself and her family against this colonial figure, the novel spotlights a broader conversation of the systems in place that make it difficult to address the ongoing violence against Indigenous women and girls.

In the beginning of the novel, Lou is faced with an ultimatum: she is coerced into either jumping out of Wyatt's moving vehicle or sexually pleasuring him in the movie theater. At this moment, her decision is clear, and she jumps from his moving car onto the highway pavement (18). This harrowing scene is evocative of the highway of tears, which highlights the ongoing failure of society and structural systems in providing justice for missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW). The novel centers around the traumas faced by Indigenous women and girls: her mother's rape, Doyle's violence towards Cami and Lou, and news of missing Indigenous women. The continuing violence against Indigenous Peoples is explicit when Lou educates Elise, Wyatt's new girlfriend, by stating that she does not celebrate Canada day: "I'm Métis. It's not a holiday most Indigenous people are really excited about. Colonialism and genocide, the mass graves of children at residential schools and all that" (132). The disparity of the murder of Indigenous women in Canada is evident, as they make up 4% of the Canadian population yet consist of 25% of national female homicide victims (Saramo 207). Saramo magnifies the government's inaction by highlighting previous Prime

Minister Stephen Harper's federal leadership (spanning February 2006 to November 2015) as a pivotal example of framing the problem as individual violent acts rather than an ongoing systemic problem. Harper's focus on the acts of violence did not do anything to redress the systems that allow violence towards Indigenous women to become normalized, resulting in reduced efforts to rectify the issue. This erases their voices to the point where Indigenous bodies are perceived as inherently disposable, such as Lou's body when she jumps out of Wyatt's vehicle. His assumption that it is Lou's responsibility to sexually please him is pronounced when he continuously calls her his "Native girlfriend… emphasis on Native," fixating on the stereotype of Indigenous women as promiscuous (33).

While it is important to challenge whether gender-based violence, including MMIW and ongoing harmful stereotypes, is that adequately addressed through Lou's T-shirts, or do these issues need to be redressed? Ferguson (2024, Interview) claims that "the silent T-shirt game is never enough. It's a step, and it's an important one." While Lou's "Not Today, Colonizer" T-shirt is in direct opposition to the disproportionate violence of Indigenous bodies, Ferguson stresses that

> wearing a T-shirt won't stop hate or colonialism or laws from getting passed that criminalize and are abusive towards trans kids. T-shirts might be a great fundraiser. They might be a great message that has lower stakes in terms of say... action or safety. But we always need more. We always need to open our hearts through storytelling and then to go out into the world and build one action on to another action. First a t-shirt, later a protest or volunteering at a community org doing good, etc., etc. (Personal Interview)

Through her novel, Ferguson tells us that moving from silence to voice and building upon our actions is necessary to drive impact towards both meaningful narrative and structural changes.

Redressing this protest issue requires a multi-faceted approach. It can include assembling community support and engaging in movements such as The REDress Project (Saramo). The project originates from Métis artist Jamie Black, and makes invisible missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls visible by hanging red dresses up to transform and disrupt physical spaces. The colour red evokes imagery of "blood, power, womanhood and Indigeneity" which draws attention to the violent crimes against MMIW and demands society to confront its complicity in perpetuating the systems that dismiss it (Saramo 214). This project is parallel to

the power of fashion activism, where Lou wears her T-shirts in predominantly white spaces to oppose settlers' belief of their right to land and Indigenous women's bodies. Parsloe & Campbell's analysis of #MMIW tweets spotlights a modern form of Indigenous protest. Increased awareness and online support are one way to continue Lou's mission of resistance in a digital space. Her individual act of protest joined with thousands of others can contribute to widespread systemic solutions, which is reminiscent of how a multitude of individual acts of violence affect an ongoing systemic problem. Redressing this issue needs to expand beyond community awareness. Taking an intersectional and anti-oppressive approach to policy reform, legal protections, education improvement, and public acknowledgement of injustices is necessary to redress systemic inequalities that have historically discriminated against Indigenous Peoples.

Lou uses T-shirts as a form of silent protest where they speak for her when she is not ready to speak. She is eventually faced with the choice of being silent or standing up for herself against Peter England, a figure symbolizing the white male colonizer. In her complex sexuality journey, she works through her trauma with King by her side and comes to the realization that her trauma does not define her; instead, the affirmation of her ace-spectrum identity enables her to be her authentic self and speak her truth. Lou's progressive resistance against colonial and heteropatriarchal forces throughout the novel reveals the loud transformative impact her voice can have beyond a T-shirt.

Lou's story models how expressing protest through a medium, such as T-shirts, can be a way to assert our beliefs and challenge historic systemic inequalities. Lou's journey from silently protesting systemic pressures designed to suppress Indigenous women's voices to confronting Peter England demonstrates how everyday activist choices and actions can build momentum in reclaiming personal autonomy. Her protest progression illustrates a way for young readers to find their own version of her T-shirts that feels authentic to themselves, and to reflect on how they use that to express their values and contribute to social change. Lou's story compels readers to move from silence to voice, and advocate fiercely for a cause that matters deeply to them.

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