

Joshua Whitehead. *Making Love with the Land*. Alfred A Knopf, 2022. 221 pp. ISBN: 9780735278868.

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In the middle of this stunning meditation on tenderness in the face of oppression, Joshua Whitehead offers a literary discussion that is simultaneously an admitted capitulation to the non-Indigenous reader of his writing and also a necessary treatise on its reception in the context of Indigenous literature as a body of texts. This intervention, “Writing as Rupture,” which temporarily shifts *Making Love with the Land* to that of a more essayist style, demands that the very reading of the book, including the musical, cultural, and physical intertexts seasoning the narrative, be situated in the tradition of Indigenous thinkers and writers Whitehead joins, such as Daniel Heath Justice and Lee Maracle. He shatters any attempt to interpret his stories through the hegemonic lens of the mystical, noble savage that permeates the dominant language of reconciliation. This section protects the deeply personal and vulnerable moments from the commodifications of a colonial reading. Taken together, with “Writing as Rupture” as a reminder, these chapter-length discussions give voice and substance to the violences of settler colonialism and offer writing as a healing, decolonial practice.

Reminiscent of Dionne Brand’s magnificent *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2011), *Making Love with the Land* is a memoir, a writer’s guide, a cultural map, a linguistics lesson, a trauma narrative, and a contemplation of joy. It is, by design, undefinable, and it explores Whitehead’s relations: to his body, to his lovers, to his aunties and his father, to the lands around him, to the threats that abound in the heterosexist settler colony, to the musicians who affect him, and to his own written texts. He narrates scenes and instances, phenomenological and spiritual, that search for an articulation of resurgence out of emotional, intergenerational, gendered, and racialized fragmentation. This narrator considers the horrors of the COVID-19 pandemic—one in a long line for Indigenous peoples in the Americas—and the unearthing of the mass graves of Indigenous children within the context of his own family, romantic, and academic life. To use a well-known framing, he connects the personal to the political as a praxis of decolonization.

Making Love with the Land proposes that storytelling is an art of both healing and resistance, and that Indigenous writing subverts traditional generic restrictions to achieve those goals. The opening salvo to “Writing as Rupture” proclaims:

We don’t have the ability to write simply of aesthetics. I can never write a poem about the shapeliness of a teacup for the sake of a teacup. For me such cuppings are always bound by political poetics because of two truths: one, that settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy have failed; and two, that my existence has and will always be a radical act of political livelihood. (73)

Here, an intervention in the age-old debate about the politics of literature sets up the essay, which draws upon the pain of the book’s first half and frames the complicated joy of the book’s closing chapters, as a welcome Indigenous polemic on literary culture. Discussion of what constitutes Indigenous literature, how it is written and received, and the languages it deploys are matched with frank revelations of Whitehead’s own craft, also sprinkled across the book. His intimate imagining of his characters (22), his struggles with language use (126-27), his refusal to colonize the narrative

for a “realist” market (27) urge readers to understand the politics inherent in the art and the formation of his aesthetics, or, as I define the term: the affective impact of his formal choices.

Whitehead connects his own body to the experience of heterosexist colonization in a way that reveals the interweaving of the colonial matrix of power: “I think of my body like that reservoir, riddled with stains from words like ‘savage’ and ‘faggot.’ All that waste coagulates into a mound of defecation that clumps together like a mutated body, one that poisons its host, one that cries to be expunged” (19). Here, Whitehead demonstrates the intersection of racism and homophobia, whilst evoking the environmental consequences of settler colonialism and using waste as a metaphor for both imperialism and the rejection of it. The contradictory beauty of *Making Love with the Land* is represented by this visceral representation, with its painful and grotesque imagery. Moments of intense danger and precarity are manifest in Whitehead’s descriptions of bodies, including his own, decaying, re-forming, and traumatized.

However, this practice is juxtaposed with “Me, the Joshua Tree,” which describes a tangibly painful but ultimately salubrious breakup of one of Whitehead’s long-term relationships. The kindness with which he treats the “the death” of that relationship (153) is replete with a reimagined form of relations between former partners:

I think about the word “ex”—another word I want to remove from my lexicon because it is a signifier I cannot attribute to you, nitôtem. What a disgusting word, with its colonial sentiment of ownership, its finality; and what a heterosexual word. The word “ex” performs what it says: it cuts, disfigures, it snaps meaning off history. Instead, we define ourselves for ourselves. (172)

Whitehead asks us to reconsider hegemonic relations and establishes the fracture of kinship structures, indigiqueer ones in particular, as patriarchal coloniality. He refuses the violence of the “ex,” which is substantiated by the later acknowledgement that his manuscript offers forgiveness to those who have harmed him and seeks forgiveness of those whom he has harmed (216). His writing thus challenges the presumed lack of love in a hookup-laced queer culture yet seeks to explore the nature of relatedness within a context of colonial misery.

Whitehead’s use of language is also crucial to further understanding his work in relation to Indigenous resurgence. He interweaves *nêhiyâwewin*, or Plains Cree, into the text using both the English alphabet and *nêhiyâwewin* syllabics, particularly in the potent chapter that describes his sexual assault and the journey afterward. The use of largely untranslated *nêhiyâwewin* asserts a linguistic resurgence that confronts cultural erasure. “Me, the Joshua Tree” is the exception, which assumes a “you”—there are multiple addressees in the book (189)—who is not fluent in the language, footnotes many terms, and replicates a language lesson by translating them only once. According to Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, interlinguistic narrative signifies cultural distinctiveness and alterity (63); in this case, it also blurs the presumed reader (and addressee[s]) by speaking to both an Algonquin and non-Algonquin audience. In “A Geography of Queer Woundings,” the *nêhiyâwewin* syllabic performs a healing function for both narrator and reader, connecting cultural resurgence to physical and emotional recovery. Indeed, the reader is called upon quite directly to integrate the syllabic with the English to comprehend the nuances of pronouns and tense shifts in real time. That translations are offered, but not repeated, demonstrates an effective didactic quality reflected in the larger project of the book itself: to teach outside the bounds of the colony, academy, or literary genre.

A term that kept coming to mind as I read this collection is *bodyography*. The book maps for us the ways that bodies are implicated in stories of coloniality, sexuality, and gender identity. Using the senses of his own body, and those he encounters, Whitehead shows us a corporeal understanding of the pain associated with these structural phenomena, a vision that undergirds any pathway to liberation. *Making Love with the Land* stands proudly alongside other textual offerings that remind us how Indigenous resurgence takes place at cultural, linguistic, and spiritual levels and his work confounds any totalizing or reductive theories of what it means to be Indigenous and to contest colonial heteropatriarchy.

Works Cited

- Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2002.
- Brand, Dionne. *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*. Vintage, 2011.