

---

**Eroticism as a Series of Offerings**  
**Keynote Address for the 42<sup>nd</sup> American Indian Workshop**

SHAAWANO CHAD URAN

This was written as a keynote for the American Indian Workshop and Transmotion Journal Conference of 2021. The theme was The Sovereign Erotic. I was a last-minute substitution, stepping in for a person I had recommended, but who had to cancel. I was introduced as a scholar, musician, traditional knowledge holder, and noted for my frequent appearances at the Native American Literature Symposia with my deceased wife, Carol Warrior. Being a last-minute addition meant, I figured, that I could do whatever I wanted, and the conference organizer suggested that they would likely be interested in whatever I had to say. I told them that I would let them know after about 12 hours, as I got the message around 5 am and hadn't slept that night yet. Instead of going to sleep, I spent the next few hours writing some vignettes based upon my take on the conference theme given what I have been learning through the processes of grief over the past three years. I still have a hard time saying her name, so there's a lot of pronouns used here.

---

One day we watched "Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Métis Child" in the library at the University of Washington. We had to check out a reserve VHS and sign up for a carrel that had a top loading VCR and a rack of those shitty headphones like what we had in elementary school to take hearing tests with. Cardinal, aged 17, hung himself from a board he nailed into the crotch of a tree after suffering through many of the 14 years he spent in Alberta's child welfare system. As

an adoptee whose placement with an Anishinaabe family likely saved my life, the documentary reminded me of many parts of my own life, both good and bad, and of many of the adoptees I have met over these decades. I've read the Lost Bird ads in the newspapers in Manitoba. I've met adoptees who have no idea what clan, or sometimes not even what tribe or nation they are.

Walking across the parking lot near the children's hospital helipad in silence and tears, crying for a childhood I never had. We lived in married student housing, down the hill from campus, across from the stadium parking lot, a long flat walk across asphalt and over the sites of where Arthur Denny burned Duwamish longhouses. Walking slowly, silently. She whispered, "I'm sorry," and we had soft, intense, life-affirming sex, celebrating our bodies shaped by stories and pain and trauma and beauty and grief and joy. She told me years later that it was during that walk that she made a promise. She promised that she would never leave me alone.

She died, beautifully and perfectly, on the fourth of July in Montana, and is buried with her ancestors at Fort Belknap.

Everything with her was a ceremony. Ceremony is transformative, intimate and immediate. Ceremony affirms, reaffirms, and challenges who we are in the universe of relationships that shape or even define us as people. As a person. As a people.

Ceremony usually begins with an offering, but then that's true of every relationship. For our offerings to be in good faith, we have to know what it is, exactly, that we have to offer. We need to know the power and the limitations of our offerings, so that we offer enough to make the

relationship worthwhile, or at least functional, but we have to be careful to not offer more than we can deliver.

And that means we have to know ourselves well enough to know what we have to offer. Knowing what we have to offer, and recognizing what we want to offer, is a good window into our personal values. Because what we have to give, and want to give, is the deepest insight into what we think is important about ourselves and what we think is important for the world.

It also means we have to be confident in what we have to offer. But then, a lot of confidence—real confidence—comes from that knowledge anyways. Unfortunately, confidence exhibited by people who are supposed to be oppressed is usually taken, by the oppressors, as arrogance. Or at least an overdeveloped sense of entitlement. Which is actually pretty funny when you think about it.

Because of colonization, oppressors think they have the power to define reality for us. Our realities. Our knowledges. Our practices. Even our identities, be they racial, gendered, cultural, authentic, sexual, moral, traditional, whatever.

After my presentation at the first NAISA conference, someone asked me if I was a fluent speaker. I said I didn't even know what that means. I said I don't believe in fluency. I said fluency is a measure that matters only to people who are removed from their language. I was thinking out loud at that point, but I stuck the landing. I said, "I won't call myself fluent until I can do pillow talk in my own language."

Later, worried, she said, “You’ll never be fluent so long as you’re with me, because I can’t speak your language.”

It was early in our relationship, and we both had a lot to learn. We learned together. It was fun.

How do you say “I want you?” How do you say “Let’s fuck?” How do you say “cock?” How do you say “come?” Most of the time, I didn’t know. I learned most of my language in a college classroom, or in ceremony, or while at an immersion school for kids up to grade three.

How do you say, “Eat me?”

Hmm.

You see the problem is I don’t know if the word I know for eating works at the level of allegory. This is the problem with translation, these idiomatic expressions and stuff come up, and there isn’t a 1:1 way to swap words for words and still preserve the extra levels of meaning. Plus, there’s the whole winter cannibal monster thing that you wouldn’t want to evoke at a time like this, or any other time, really. Same with “come,” because I know how to say “come here” or “come on” in that calling someone in sort of way, but the word for ejaculate is the same as the word for shooting someone, and there’s this whole other ceremonial connotation to the phrase “shooting someone” that I wouldn’t want to evoke. And I don’t even know words for female orgasm, but I know there must be lots of them.

Wait a minute. The theme is sovereign erotics? Shit, I thought you said sovereign neurotics.

Somehow despite all that, I still got laid.

It's been over three years since I've tasted her, or anyone. Three years of remembering, three years of thinking about what it might all have meant, three years of re-storying myself and my body into new roles, new places, abstracted from sex but still erotic, still loving, still life affirming.

The matter of intimacies in our language has been my central concern for years now. We really do need to be able to talk about everything in our language, including things the colonizers called "dirty" and "sinful," the stuff edited out of the anthropological documentation and translations of our stories, and the everyday stuff that mostly gets left out of Ojibwe classroom materials at the university level. If we're planning to raise our kids speaking Ojibwemowin, we need to be able to talk about body parts and body fluids because, let's face it, kids are a sloppy mess of multimedia effluents.

This is important for the talking about bodies and fluids and stuff, too. I accidentally-on-purpose created a sex-positive environment for my kids, or at least one that was more sex-positive than how I grew up. But that unfolded from some core values I wanted them to have: autonomy, flexibility, and self-knowledge.

I remember walking across a park with them, and somehow dating came up. They were, idk, all around 9-12. I told them dating was a way to learn about yourself as you learn about other people. You try out foods and activities and places and whatever that you might not otherwise get to do, and that way you learn what you like and don't like. Delightfully vague, right?

I told them I hope to see them getting into a variety of relationships with a variety of people. Friends and friends groups, dating or nonromantic, and have a whole lot of fun and experiences and, therefore, opportunities to learn more about themselves and the world. I of course made mention of risks, and said that dating around doesn't have to mean sleeping around, and told them how when I was their age, AIDS really became a thing, and that I know my ideas about sex and dating have been shaped by the experience of learning about sex as something that could potentially kill me long before I experienced sex.

I also said that I'd hate to see them get tied to any one person while they were young, because being in a relationship should not become a barrier to other opportunities in life, like moving away to college or taking a job or a gig or travel or anything like that. Years later, one of them reminded me that I said I wouldn't want any of them to get stuck pretending to be married and limited by that. In fact, as I am living with them now as adults, I can see how the message of being careful about all choices with an eye towards their potential consequences for flexibility really stuck with them.

Turns out there are unforeseen consequences maintaining a sex-positive household. For example, no one ever prepared me, as a parent, for dealing with my kids' sex toys. R-rated teen comedies in the 80s taught me to expect the occasional stiff sock or whatever, but I wasn't quite ready when a vibrator rolled out of the sheets I was prepping to wash, or the packer that managed to go through the washer and dryer. All I could think of was those trickster-with-a-detachable-penis stories, which at some point in the 90s took on a King Missile soundtrack.

My youngest is a bass player, and at some point I mentioned that I used to use a small vibrator on my guitars as a sort of electromechanical bow. So he decided he wanted to try that out, and ordered one online. Unfortunately, he ordered it from wish.com, so what arrived in the mail was a small, black dildo that tries to look anatomically correct in every detail except for the color. Talk about disappointment, it doesn't even vibrate!

It was hunting season, so I thought it would be funny to use it to make a decocking arrow for my crossbow. Since you can't dry fire a crossbow, you have to replace the deadly bolt with a padded one, and just fire it into the ground or a fallen, squishy log or something. But this thing is far too bouncy, and the temptation of wanting to see what a dildo decocking arrow would look like bouncing off the ground or a rock or something after being shot out at 340 feet per second eventually went away.

The other day, after breaking up with his girlfriend, my older kid asked me where the corn starch was. My second youngest kid's boyfriend asked, "Are you gonna put it on your balls?" and the answer was "As a matter of fact..."

Turns out he was putting his sex toys into dry dock, and corn starch preserves the silicone or something. With two gluten-free kids in the house, we were out of corn starch, but I found acorn starch that had been kicking around the pantry for far too long.

A few hours later, I'm in bed writing this keynote, and was horror stricken. I went to his room and said, "Hey, so, be sure to wash them real good in case your partner has a fatal nut allergy, cuz that'd be some hilariously dark Chuck Palahniuk body horror way to die."

Afterwards, I asked if he acorned up his sex toys, and he showed me the upper shelf in his closet had them all lined up. “It’s my dick display,” he said.

He’s always been pretty forthcoming with details about his body and stuff. I remember when he was younger and was openly worried for days that his period would interfere with something on the schedule. It arrived a few days before we were to leave for a trip, and his way of announcing it was to emerge from the bathroom singing AC/DC’s “If You Want Blood (You’ve Got It)” at the top of his lungs.

She expressed amazement at how open he was about his period. She told me how at that age she would have been mortified to have it mentioned at all. She said they were taught to hide such things, to never talk about them. I’m happy to report that she, like many of us, worked hard to unlearn that shame about our bodies.

We ate ice cream almost every day after she died, for like two years. #griefeats. Rootbeer floats reminded us of her, straight-up bowls of ice cream were attempts at distraction. We pretended the lactose intolerance explained the pain in our guts, even though the pain preceded the ice cream. Constant pain. Constant pressure. She used to berate us if we licked out the bowls, so even after her death we didn’t do that, in her honor. For a while, anyways.

About a year into grief, I texted Smokii, who had recently moved out of our house.



So we met Smokii when he was 21 years old, so she and Smokii were friends before Smokii became our kid a few years ago. Which is my way of letting you know that Smokii knows things about our sex life that the rest of the kids may not.

I had to develop this weird cadence to texting Smokii, because if I seemed to pause at all, Smokii would send a barrage of texts and interrupt whatever story I was trying to tell. And, to add insult to injury, this results in my texts to Smokii looking like goddamn poetry.

I fucking hate poetry. Mostly, because I hate poets.

Anyways, check this out:

Wanna hear something awful?

I ate a bowl of chocolate ice cream the other night while watching some trash film and

[send]

When I finished I considered just licking out the bowl but felt hypocritical about it cuz (my youngest son) was in the room

[send]

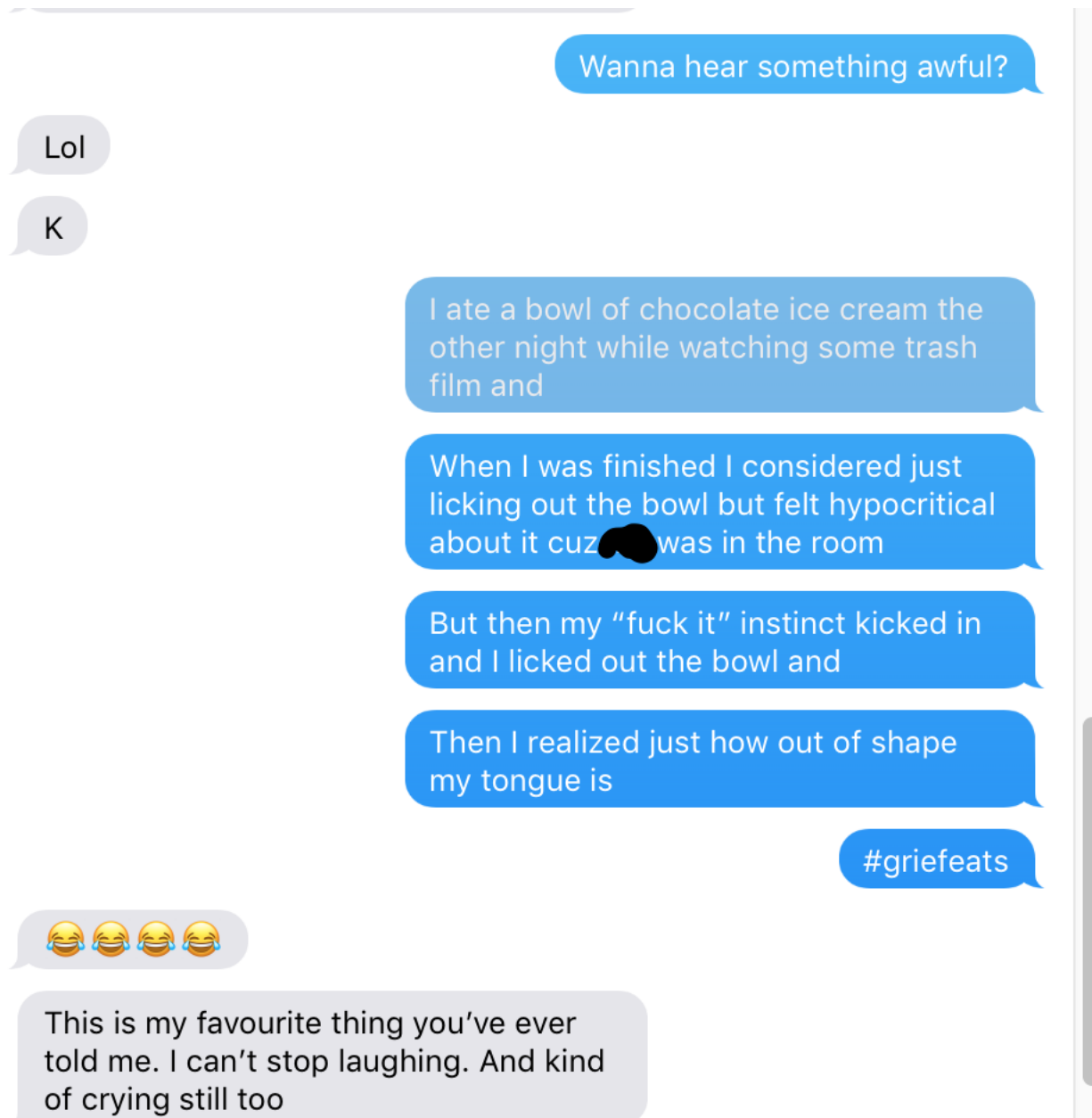
But then my “fuck it” instinct kicked in and I licked out the bowl and

[send]

Then I realized just how out of shape my tongue is.

[send]

#griefeats.



She and I organized and hosted Ojibwe language tables in Seattle. There were enough Anishinaabeg there that we could rotate the hosting across three or four different homes. We'd cook up a meal, tell anyone they could bring more food to share, and eat and talk and speak and talk and practice and talk. It was, like most things, mostly about the visiting. Seeing each

other, laughing together, eating together. That's love. It's all eroticism. Like most things, it's eroticism all the way down.

I had two Anishinaabe students in Seattle, sisters, and I met the first one in my Zombies and Indians class. I couldn't quite get a bead on her, something was off. I'm one of those professors who only closes his office door under extreme circumstances, and thankfully I've had big enough offices stuck in low traffic hallways that I could get by like that even when discussing grades. But even then, I was cagey about FERPA. I met the other one at language table, Carol had invited them, I think. And during the course of that invitation, she learned that these two students were having a hard time processing my presence as a teacher because I look like their estranged father. They liked my classes, and respected my knowledge, and enjoyed my presence, but that was all complicated by the physical resemblance in some sort of uncanny valley way.

We got to joke about it a little bit during the language table dinner.

One of the sisters came to the memorial art quilt showing that our oldest daughter held at the Chief Seattle Club, and it was still awkward, but I also know that part of my job here is to make relatives, or at least help native people find their own connections. I think that's what brought Carol and I together most of all. She was a great facilitator, listener, and advocate. She helped me sort out how to, for example, give Smokii his name, and how to treat these two sisters. In too many ways, I see now, she acted as my agent, too, because she knew what I had to offer people, and did a lot of the emotional and logistical labor necessary to start and then even manage that process.

Right, Smokii?

At that quilt show, the one sister told me that they're now talking to their dad, and that it's good. I hope it still is.

I'm still learning how to be a good relative.

I was twenty years old when I went to sweat for the first time. I went with some guys that I had been singing powwow songs with in Minneapolis. Frankin Firesteel, the Dakota language teacher ran it, and it was held on land owned by Horst Rechelbacher, founder of the Aveda cosmetics corporation. He let natives use his land in that way.

I won't go into it, but I have to tell you that after it was done, before we got out, Franklin told us “watch yourselves for four days, something is gonna happen.” I wonder how big my eyes got.

On the fourth day, I got a wake-up call from Hennepin County Family Services telling me that I had a biological sister who wanted to meet me. Now, I was adopted, but my dad who raised me is also from White Earth, so there's actually a lot of people around who don't know I'm an adoptee. Navigating what it meant to have a sister was messy. We basically had to reinvent what that meant as we went along, and we made some mistakes along the way, but I am happy to report that she and I remain close, and one of the things I am looking most forward to about this new job at Bemidji State is living close to her and her kids and grandkids. I brought her son, my nephew, into his first sweat at Ninigoonsiminikaaning.

Since then, she and her sons have gotten their names, and attended ceremonies, and lived their lives as best they could. I hope they can be at the first sweat at my new place this fall.

Ceremony has always been about making relatives for me. About reconnecting. About love. That's the work of life. Love keeps this whole universe moving, and everything we do is supposed to reflect that in the best possible ways. Even when we think it doesn't show, it does.

Maybe sometimes even more so.

That's the power of reclamation of the erotic. I guess here I'm still in my fucked-up Frankfurt school mode of thinking about eros and politics, but the revitalization of the erotic, of love, into more of what we do as Indigenous people is a necessary step in our existence as Indigenous people. It's easy for us as academics to say that Indigenous relationality is the central theory and practice of Indigenous resurgence or sovereignty or whatever the term for our continued, defiant, transformative existences may be these days. I'm glad you think that, but tell me how you *feel* that. How do you love through that?

I always emphasize that everything colonization did to us was intended to break a relationship. Relationships to land, law, authority, spirit, language, culture, economies, resources, medicines, other tribes, our children, and each other, were all disrupted by policy and practice—including treaties. Lands were commodified and privatized. Allotments (and other "benefits") went to "heads of household," which favored a patriarchal nuclear family structure. Law and authority were usurped or co-opted. Electoral politics transformed the ideas and practices of leadership.

Missionization and “civilizing” projects denigrated spiritual, economic, medicinal, and other knowledges. They rewarded acceptance of their authority over these domains, and they continue to work to maintain domination over how we talk about these domains. One method here is pretensions to objectivity, which casts emotional understandings as irrational and therefore irrelevant and erasable.

Imposed borders and European-style nationalisms separated us from our distant relatives and trading partners. Many came to reject our relatives’ knowledge of even shared lands, stories, and ceremonies as “not our way.” Our children were sent to boarding schools, day schools, foster care, prison, slavery, and adopted out. Today, their education is left mostly to our traditional enemies: the church and the state, and now our new enemies, corporations.

Wage labor disrupted how we saw land and the beings living on it. Places and beings became exploitable. And not even for profit, but for the promise of inclusion, and the thin veneer of civility—for political recognition.

All along, each step broke a connection to our histories, our concept of relationality, our notions of time and space, and our own self-concepts as relatives who are responsible to each other and to all of creation.

Therefore, to remake these relationships, to refuse to be isolated, is the most obvious way to resist, to help each other through all these disruptions, and to even remake ourselves in healthier and happier ways.

That takes love. Disruptive love, powerful love, even violent love—the love of community defense.

Bodies, families, communities, these are all embodiments of love in all its complications. They are comprised of the relationships formed and maintained through themselves. And that's what makes everything, in one way or another, in a creative way or a destructive way, an offering of love.

The refusal of colonial impositions onto our bodies, our families, our communities, our lands, that refusal is done out of love for all of creation, because we are part of it, and we understand that it is our job to keep it moving. That's what bimaadiziwin means, the root of the word and concept is *motion*. Transmotion isn't just a cool name for a journal.

The sovereign erotic is no mere identity project. I'm amused to see people use it like that, like some aspect of their personality or image management or personal aesthetic practice. I don't mean that dismissively, because we are all enmeshed into violently distorting systems of domination and repression no matter where we are on the planet, so we all do need to work on ourselves. But sovereignty is bigger than individuals. It's bigger than humans. Indigenous sovereignty can only be understood and acted through relationships, and therefore it cannot be reduced to any single nation, much less any single person. Sovereign eroticism is love of self and land and people. Love of the past, present, and future. It is what we offer of ourselves to each other, and to the land, to the universe itself so that everything keeps moving.

It rejects borders and definitions and objectivity and all that, because those are all about limitation and control. They are about domination. Everyone knows this at their core, but the problem is too many of us throw in with the dominators because they see certain rewards and

benefits to participating in domination. They think it works for them, and then get all defensive when anyone points out how no, in fact, it doesn't work for anybody, because it is the worst kind of hubris—an attempt to fix and define once and for all the entire universe for everybody. It's an attempt to have the final say of the final word, to place the punctuation mark on the ultimate sentence.

It will not be the last sentence ever spoken, so long as there are Anishinaabe people putting out their tobacco someplace. So long as there are people who do what they are supposed to be doing, which is keeping the universe moving.

You're welcome, btw.

Well, not all of you.

It seems that taking any of this seriously is, first and foremost, a mistake. None of this is real, so to take it seriously is a chronic waste of time and effort. Secondly, to take this seriously means everything will have to be remade, over and over again. The good part of this second point is that that's how the universe actually works, so we have inertia on our side.

During her first sundance, we were staying in an old, mouse-infested Airliner travel trailer behind a barn that had been converted into a family-style restaurant with a few rooms for rent on the second floor. It was miserably hot and stressful, and we would drive over the mountain to take showers and do laundry. Towards the end, though, we did use the laundromat in Browning,



Montana on Blackfeet territory. Now, I have this thing that happens to me regularly where random middle-aged and older men tell me their life advice and dreams.

For example, while I was waiting for a tire change here in Ithaca a couple years ago, a 50-60 year old man in sunglasses with an active herpetic sore on his lip and what sounded like a TB cough, and who self-identified as “a rocker,” asked me what kind of native I was and if I was “a womanizer.” To his great disappointment, I am not. Another example was outside a gas station, also in Browning, Montana, a man asked me, “Do you like to get low and have a good time?” which after some further conversation I learned had nothing to do with alcohol and everything to do with marijuana. Outside the first NAISA conference in Minneapolis, a man from North Africa talked to me as she and I were outside smoking on Seven Corners, and at some point he turned to her sternly and challenged, “Do you know what *your* people did to *his* people?” because he misread her as nonnative.

Outside the laundromat in Browning, a man told us about how the rez works, and how you can tell someone’s intent for coming to the rez just by listening to how their car sounds as they drive by. He also told me at great length about his father’s accomplishments, which was a unique strategy for the common feature to all of these encounters, which are mostly these men confessing to me their own inadequacies while simultaneously telling me their hopes and dreams.

I always listen. My kids have gotten used to this quirk of being in my company in public.

The laundromat guy left, but then he came back, passed me a cigarette, complimented me and my family, welcomed us to his territory, and then advised us to “follow the beat. Keep on following the beat. Just follow the beat, man.”

If he only knew how often we still use that phrase.

I’m just following the beat, man.

Those men are always dangerous and untrustworthy. Always on the edge of something bad. And I love them.

I love some of you, too. I love enough of you enough to spend this time with you, to share these stories and words. To give these warnings. To laugh with you, and sometimes at you.

That’s what it takes to do Indigenous studies, especially. Love.

No one cares how smart you are. No one cares that you can namedrop Vizenor or Berlant or Marcuse or Simpson or Bataille or Million or relate Indigenous erotics to the French enlightenment or psychoanalysis or biopower or Greek philosophy, or the struggle towards a non-repressive society while still living lives shaped by colonialism and imperialism and capitalism that co-opt our desires only to sell them back to us and call it freedom.

Real people don’t need that. Real people need love. Communities need love. We need to take care of each other, to defend each other, to protect each other, and to keep everything moving.

Just showing up is not enough. Ask yourself, what am I offering?

Just including people is not enough. Ask yourself, what am I offering?

Acknowledgement is not enough, recognition is not enough. Critique and practice and representation and even honoring is not enough.

In the wake of the attempts to rewrite the White Earth Constitution—which I opposed out of love for White Earth, sovereignty, and Vizenor—I had a conversation with the then secretary treasurer, a woman who loves her community. She was trying to get people involved in the constitutional reform process, and it wasn't going terribly well. I talked to her about how I see every relationship as a series of offerings, and how for those offerings to be in good faith, you have to know what you are offering to the other party, and also have a good sense of what the limitations or extent of those offerings are.

Clearly there are a lot of demands placed upon tribal governments, and that relationship is usually quite complicated. But the conversation was stilted, with the government side asking the people to participate, to give input, and the people side asking the government to get their fucking shit together and provide services to people in need.

So I asked what is the White Earth tribal government offering to the people? And what are the people of White Earth offering to the tribal government?

We all have desires. Needs. Wants. Expectations. I think we know those pretty well. I think we know less about what we have to offer to others. Knowing what you have to offer, I've learned and am learning, goes a long way towards knowing who you are, and what you value, and what your potential roles can be as a person.

Foregrounding what you have to offer the universe puts you in a potentially less extractive, and hopefully even less transactional relationship with people. With partners, with family, with communities, with the land, and with the universe.

We can then adjust our expectation of each other accordingly. And, even better, organize and mobilize our communities in healthier ways.

What do you have to offer?

Your answers to that question will change over time and according to context. We learn, we grow, we acquire skills and stories and songs and ceremonies. We have different community supports. Our bundles are under constant revision.

Then things get interesting. What do we wish we could offer? What will it take to make my desired offerings possible? Where are the lines between what I have to offer, what I want to be able to offer, and what is possible to offer under the circumstances?

That last one is a dangerous question, because as academics, our circumstances are rooted in institutions that we can unwittingly ventriloquize, thereby making it sound like the limitations of

institutions are also our limitations. That's a huge abrogation of responsibility, and therefore an act of bad faith. It certainly isn't love.

My menstruating son was skirt-shamed at a sundance once. He was hanging back at the camp, but went to the cook shack for some food, and a woman yelled at him for not wearing a skirt.

When someone presents with a problem, always start from empathy. Then, maybe, move to possible solutions.

I asked him if he wanted advice. He did. I told him that whenever someone hits you with a cultural rule, a prohibition or whatever, we have a choice of response. We can, of course, submit, or at least pretend to, in order to pass. Or we can resist and refuse to comply. Or we can thank the person for the correction, pass them tobacco, and ask them to tell you the story behind the cultural rule.

I told him that at least 9 times out of 10, the person telling you what to do or how to be as some sort of tradition or rule is much more invested in rule enforcement than understanding the culture. At least 9 times out of 10, the person will be unable to tell you a story that justifies or explains the rule. I told him, if they are unable to tell you the story of the rule, then you don't have to listen to them. Too many people are busy policing ceremony with a goal towards enclosure, exclusion, and domination instead of upholding ceremony as a place for taking care of each other. I understand the need to protect ceremony and ceremonial spaces from harm and even from outsiders. But if ceremony is a necessary component of life and healing, any rule that keeps

people away—and especially the people who need it the most—is worth questioning. So I told him how he could question them.

But once in a while, I told him, when you ask someone to tell you the story of the rule, they will know the story, and will be more than happy to hand your ass to you. You need to take that gracefully and with gratitude, even if you know it's bullshit.

Skirts? From north pole to south pole? No. On horseback? Also, no. While chopping wood? Maybe. Because otherwise Creator won't recognize you as a woman? Please.

Spirits who consider what you are wearing before they decide to help you might not be the spirits you want helping you. And people are spirits, too.

Wearing a skirt as an offering of respect (which is not the same as deference) to a community that expects a skirt? That's fine.

Some rules have become overgeneralizations. They've taken on the appearance of universalization, which is the worst kind of irony. Every ceremony, every lodge, every pipe, they each have their own story, their own offerings to us and life, so universal rules do not necessarily apply.

Relationships are made through love and offerings, not rules. Not lists

Love requires bravery. Enforcing rules, and lists, are acts of fear.

I was invited to sit with that powwow drum while I was a college dropout. They practiced at the University of Minnesota in the American Indian Learning Resource Center. When I parked in back of the building, I could hear them through the open windows. I was late.

I went upstairs and found the room, following the sound of the drum. I stood near the door and watched a bit. The lead singer waved me over, finally gesturing towards an open seat at the drum. I sat down and listened for what seemed like a long time.

They kept singing, and the dude handed me a stick. I froze.

He motioned me to join in on the beat. I was still frozen.

Can I do this? Should I do this? Do I deserve to do this? Am I Ojibwe enough to do this? Am I good enough to do this?

Eventually it was either start drumming or start crying. I ended up doing both, but hoping neither one was noticeable.

Maybe 25 years and an unknown number of ceremonies later, I found myself at a sing in Montana, supporting her in her preparations for her first sundance. I was sitting on the floor in a corner after eating, and I thought they were taking a break. The room was mostly cleared, with just a few of us sitting around the perimeter of the room on the floor when, to my great surprise, a buffalo robe was tossed out into the middle of the room, partially landing in my lap.

I wonder how big my eyes got.

They quickly spread the robe open and handed out drumsticks and started singing at that robe.

The dude next to me handed me a stick, I took that stick, and I started singing.

That’s what I had to offer.

No hesitation. No self-doubt. I knew I was there for love. Love for her. Love for ceremony. Love for family and love for community. It wasn’t until later that I remembered how different that felt in comparison to my first time sitting at a drum.

I took this difference as a lesson in the other kind of shame colonialism taught us. We were made to not only feel ashamed to be Anishinaabe, we were made to feel ashamed for not being Anishinaabe enough at the same time.

Shame keeps us from realizing what we have to offer. Ego does, too. Thankfully, love can help solve both those problems.

She worked hard to build those relationships, making the connections that allowed her to participate in ceremonies. Reactivating kinship that had been disrupted and warped by boarding school and relocation and other colonial disruptions. I am honored to have been a part of that work, which became our work. The work our family still does.



She went home, and is buried with her ancestors.

We've helped many people find their ways home, in whatever ways we could. We opened our home and our ceremonies to our communities and our students in love and hope that we can all find or make our own connections and keep the whole thing moving.

I hope we all figure out what it is we have to offer, and where and how we can best make those offerings.

I became a scholar by accident. All I wanted to do was to learn some things so that when my kids had questions, I might have some answers. I wanted to be the type of person I wished I had around me more often when I was growing up with my own questions. That became a desire to understand how things got to be this way. Somehow, that became a series of academic degrees, as well as other accomplishments.

Along the way I learned that none of this work is possible without a loving vision of the future, with all its possibilities. I have to find the love to teach, the love to write, the love to attend conferences, the love to research. If I can't find the love in something, someone else should do it. If you don't see the love in something, you're wasting everyone's time, including your own.

I know, now, some of what I have to offer my family, my students, and my communities in a deeper way that I knew before. I understand the responsibilities of those offerings, and I am more confident in my own agency to make—or not make—those offerings.

---

I also know, now, that I have to spend this last year of mourning reinventing myself as a father, as a grandfather, as a relative, as a scholar, as a teacher, because I don't have her here at my side anymore.

But she kept her promise. She didn't leave me alone.

---

About a week after the above workshop session, I had a dream about her. Well, a dream about us, here at the new place where I live now.

I have moved to Bemidji to teach back home. The perfect job came up, and I've been feeling pulled here for a while, especially in the last couple of years. And I got it.

During one of our visits to Minnesota, she said that my entire demeanor changed when we were here. She could tell I was at my most comfortable and confident in my home territory.

Our plan was to always go home, to go to Montana, or Alaska, or Minnesota, to teach and live. That plan always included some of our kids. I always thought it would be a big homecoming, but here I am alone. I didn't even bring my dog, because he loves the place in New York, and he'll be living with the kids and have way more visitors and attention and all that.

So it's just me.

Driving the Uhaul trailer up from my parents in the cities, I thought the landscape looked, due to drought, so much like Montana. It hadn't rained here in over a month, so the ground cover was toasted gold, lakes were low, and it was kind of heartbreaking. But that it looked like Montana was poignant, because it reminded me of her homelands.

But, of course, the Aaniiih were here, too.

I'd pass some horses, a stable here and there, some advertising trail rides or lessons. She would love that. I knew that she and I would be gathering rice and hunting and fishing and gardening and all that. We go to powwows and ceremony and watch the sun rise and set over water and trees. We'd sit under the stars and walk in the woods as often as we could.

We'd fight pipelines.

But it's just me, feeling a bit lost.

But I'm home. I do feel the comfort and confidence she noticed. I belong here, and I have never worked someplace where I felt so seen, appreciated, and understood. I have to relearn this community, just like I have to relearn myself. I need to find friends, teachers, elders, mentors, and mentees. I need to find my place and roles in this community. I need to do that without the kids, without her, even without my dog, without the roles of husband and father being the primary building block of these new roles and new relationships. I'm reconnecting with old friends, meeting new relatives, and missing everyone I used to rely on here who have since moved on or passed away.

So the dream was just that she was here with me. We were in the new place, sharing meals, talking about whatever we were teaching and reading or doing. Talking about the kids. And we were getting ready for a trip in a few days. We had a few mornings together, a few nights together, busy but relaxed. Cooking. Eating. Taking care of each other and the kids. Like how normal used to be for us. Love.

We had tickets for some kind of anniversary trip that we were getting ready for.

We never had an anniversary for anything. We had special dates, but no definitive date, so this was a weird detail. But in the dream, it felt normal.

After a few days together, we started loading up the car to go to the airport, and she turned to me and said I couldn't go. I stared at her. Right then I knew I was in a dream, and that I was seeing her for the last time.

She said she was going to go, and that it was all going to be ok.

I believe her.