

# *Transmotion*

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Double Special Issue –

Storywork in Indigenous Digital Environments

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The Sovereign Erotic

ed. James Mackay

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*Transmotion* publishes new scholarship focused on theoretical, experimental, postmodernist, and avant-garde writing produced by Native American and First Nations authors, as well as book reviews on relevant work in Vizenor Studies and Indigenous Studies.

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The journal also accepts creative or hybrid work, provided that such work aligns aesthetically with the aforementioned editorial emphasis. The editors particularly welcome submissions of innovative and creative works that exploit digital media.

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## Introduction: Storywork in Indigenous Digital Environments

ASHLEY CARANTO MORFORD, TANJA GRUBNIC, and JEFFREY ANSLOOS

### **Storywork, cyberspace, and Indigenous digital literary studies**

In 2008, through working with the teachings of Stó:lō Elders and cultural knowledge holders, Joann Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiim developed the concept and practice of Indigenous storywork. Storywork is a dynamic, multi-faceted, and ever-developing literary tradition, pedagogy, and research methodology. Rooted in the principles of “respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy” (Xiim et al. 1), storywork recognizes and approaches Indigenous literatures—which we understand to be the total gamut of creative narrative expression developed and used by Indigenous peoples, from oral histories to poems to beadwork to novels to personal lived narratives and beyond—as powerful teachers teeming with lessons on how to navigate the world in ethical, respectful, and holistic ways. A storywork reading practice invites the application of Indigenous stories to education in and beyond the classroom (Archibald 3). Storywork calls on audiences of Indigenous literatures to recognize and respect Indigenous stories, and to approach these stories with love and care, for these stories matter and they are powerful (3).

But storywork is not only a way of understanding and making meaning of Indigenous literatures. It is an ongoing and embodied responsibility, a process of accountability and reciprocity, one which calls on educators, researchers, readers, and learners to listen to, study, and work with Indigenous stories in holistic, community-centred, respectful, and active ways. A storywork process refutes extractive and dissecting approaches to reading Indigenous literatures.

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As one makes meaning of Indigenous literatures, “[a]n interrelationship between the story, storytelling, and listener is a [...] critical principle” in this process (32). That is, the reader “cannot be a passive observer or armchair reader” (31) but, rather, must be actively and reciprocally participating in the meaning-making process; “synergistic interaction”—or intentional, multidirectional, and respectful interrelation—is necessary in storywork (33). This type of interaction or interrelation requires the receiver of the story to listen not only with the mind, but with the heart, spirit, and body (8). Indigenous “[s]tories have the power to make our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits work together” (12), and the holistic listening to story that is core to a storywork praxis is ongoing, for, each time we listen to a story, we are invited to make meaning anew (24-5). Storywork helps us to witness and honour the important teachings of Indigenous stories, and it teaches us how to carry these lessons forward and embody them in a good way in our day to day lives.

The digital realm has become a pervasive part of our everyday lives and our society, and the allures but also the risks of the digital realm are becoming ever clearer: these concerns include but are by no means limited to algorithmic bias, surveillance, doxing, and issues of consent and theft by humans and artificial intelligence. Building on Jo-ann Archibald Q’um Q’um Xiïem, Jenny Bol Jun Lee-Morgan, and Jason De Santolo’s (2019) assertion that storywork “offer[s] hope at a time when environmental and social crises threaten all life and ways of being” (11) by providing holistic lessons around navigating these concerns, we posit that so too do Indigenous stories and storywork processes offer lessons of hope for living well, and for centring the heart, mind, body, and soul with and within fraught digital environments.

Amidst digital technologies and structures that have been coded through western protocols, what can Indigenous stories teach us about using these digital tools with responsibility and care for Indigenous peoples, knowledges, and cultures? How might these stories guide the creation of different digital tools that are not programmed through western protocols? How can

these stories guide us in being good relations within digital ecologies? How might taking up and considering cyberspace through a storywork process help us to understand Jason Edward Lewis, Noelani Arista, Archer Pechawis, and Suzanne Kite's (2018) question of what it means to "make kin with the machines"? In this context, scholars have critiqued discourses of the digital that separate it from land (Caranto Morford and Ansloos, 2021; Duarte, 2017; Gaertner, 2016; Grubnic, 2023), and Archibald, Lee-Morgan, and De Santolo (2019) further argue that storywork is deeply place-based (12.) Thus, a storywork approach to digital environments reminds us that the digital is never separate from land, asking us what it means to care for and attend to land and land-based relations when we navigate digital realms.

When we approach Indigenous literatures through the process of storywork, understanding the important educational powers of these narratives, we realize that, regardless of whether an Indigenous story is digital or not, it can teach us about living and being in relationship in a good way in this digital age and into our digital futures. At the same time, there are a plethora of Indigenous digital literatures that are being created, published, and circulated. From virtual reality (VR) stories to video games, twitteratures to Instapoems (Ansloos and Caranto Morford, 2022; Grubnic, 2023), Indigenous literary production across and through digital technologies is dynamic and vibrant.

As Indigenous storywork expands into digital realms, it is crucial that the field of Indigenous literary studies accounts for the profound impact of digital narrative expression in redefining storytelling methods, asserting cultural sovereignty, and reclaiming narratives of oppression. Indigenous digital literary studies, as an emerging sub-field, seeks to honour the resilient forms of storytelling manifesting in digital places that counteract the historical marginalization and erasure of Indigenous voices. Engagements with Instagram posts, X (formerly known as Twitter) threads, and other digital platforms have opened up new ways of telling stories that exceed and even challenge physical boundaries. Many of these stories, as the essays in this

collection point out, have provided opportunities for Indigenous people to re-frame narratives of Indigenous life in ways that foster healing and acceptance. Whether that be through challenging stereotypes, re-framing histories of loss and oppression, facilitating community engagement, or contributing to cultural preservation, digital spaces are overflowing with Indigenous stories that are enriching the tradition of storywork.

And yet, these stories are not always tangible, at least not immediately so, in the sense that they emanate from material forms like the book or the gallery wall. Similar to oral stories that transform in their retelling (Archibald 1997), digital storytelling undergoes various changes; it adapts and alters its form or appearance throughout its evolution. Considering storywork in digital space is not as simple as conducting a close reading contained within a more static and stable form like the print novel. As Steven Loft (2014) explains, cyberspace is a “networked territory.” Storywork takes place through the connections people make online—connections that lead to conversations, new and old relationships, and storied networks. Digital storywork leads to a proliferation of new stories in a myriad of forms. Whether through the more ephemeral stories exchanged through social media threads, or the more physical installations of exhibition spaces and VR games, digital narrative expression thrives in fluid environments. These spaces for telling stories matter for the simple reason that Indigenous literatures matter (Justice 2018).

These nuances prompt questions concerning not only how to bring digital stories into Indigenous literary studies, but about how to care for and protect them. Similar to how oral histories so often get discredited, the ephemerality of the digital realm is often used to minimize storytelling that happens in the margins, like Facebook posts and Instagram stories, despite their transformative potential and impact on Indigenous worldviews. How do we protect and honour Twitter pages and social media archives, for instance, when the user ultimately does not have control or complete ownership over them, or when their visibility is dictated by algorithmic processes? How do we ensure these issues do not overshadow the stories themselves? What sorts

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of structural and financial supports are needed to uphold the vitality of Indigenous storywork in digital space? To safeguard requires an ethical, desire-centred approach that not only respects the cultural significance of these narratives, but that also navigates the intricate, often transient nature of digital networks with a balance of critique and respect.

### **Reading and witnessing storywork in this special issue**

Our primary objective for this special issue is to foreground and further develop storywork as a vital theoretical lens within the context of Indigenous digital literary studies. We believe it holds profound implications for understanding and amplifying Indigenous peoples' contributions in these digital spaces. By situating Indigenous literary traditions with storywork at the intersection of engagement with digital environments, social media, and all things virtual, we aim to demonstrate the complex importance and dynamics of storying self-determination in cultural production and sociopolitical movement in online spaces. This matters to us because it contests the subtle devaluing of these material contexts of Indigenous life; helps to bolster a growing field of Indigenous digital literary studies scholarship; and brings to light the nuanced ways Indigenous communities engage with, adapt, repurpose, read, share, tweet, and transform digital media for telling the stories that matter. Furthermore, we hope it matters to you, our readers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, as it provides a means of increasing our collective ethical engagement and appreciative reflection on the contributions of Indigenous storytelling traditions, their evolving interactions with digital technology, and the importance of their recognition in literary studies. This special issue celebrates these contributions critically, creatively, and compellingly.

As editors, we propose three central provocations to inspire your engagement with this special issue, each designed to deepen, extend, contest, complexify, and creatively contextualize storywork as a conceptual framework for Indigenous digital literary studies. First, we ask, "What

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is storywork as imagined by these articles?” This question invites each of our readers to explore the diverse interpretations and applications of storywork across these contributions, highlighting the expansive, generous, and porous ways that storywork might be conceptualized. It encourages reflection on how storywork intersects with, and diverges from, western and other literary conceptions of storytelling. Second, we wonder, “Where does storywork happen?” This provocation challenges the conventional boundaries of storytelling spaces, urging readers to consider the geographies and conceptual multitudes of digital platform contexts where storywork takes place. From social media to VR to code to tweets, this question opens up consideration of the spatial dimensions of digital storywork, emphasizing its fluidity and adaptability across different digital contexts. Finally, we ask, “What does storywork do?” This inquiry delves into the impact and implications of storywork in digital contexts. It encourages our readers to think critically and practically about the role of digital storywork in shaping Indigenous life both personally and collectively, spanning sociopolitical and cultural projects in an increasingly digitally interlaced world.

Through this lens, we aim to inspire critical scholarship in literary studies that gets at the transformative potential of storywork, especially in the digital. Put another way, we consider how Indigenous digital literary traditions foster and nourish change at various scales. The articles that make up this special issue engage with a wide array of literary traditions, including but not limited to poetry, fiction, autoethnography, beading, VR, and photography. They invite us to think carefully and caringly about the possibilities, responsibilities, ethics, power, and futurity of storywork that is occurring within and supported by digital environments. They remind us that cyberspace is a vibrantly Indigenous literary space.

In Andreas P. Bassett's essay “Death Canto: The Urban NDN Nature Poem in Tommy Pico's Nature Poem,” we encounter a multifaceted exploration of the intertextual, interspatial, and intertemporal nature of contemporary Indigenous poetry, demonstrating how digital media and

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various forms of storytelling contribute to a rich, layered understanding of settler colonial and capitalist contexts. Here, storywork points to the interconnectedness of each part of Pico's work. Rather than viewing each quote or reference as an isolated element, Bassett encourages readers to see them as integral parts of a collective story. This approach extends feminist citational practices as a form of relationship building with multiple people and places, and across time, showcasing how digital communications technologies enable a kind of storytelling that is deeply connected and expansive. The essay also highlights the porous borders between various media types, studying genre and form to reveal the interplay between poetry, digital media, and cultural storytelling. We see this evidenced in Bassett's analysis of "Nature Poem" in its intertextuality, interspatiality, and intertemporality. It manifests in the sourcing of Black music, the incorporation of internet slang and hashtags, and the strategic placement of multisensory excerpts, all while referencing literary work from the late 1800s to Beyonce in the present. These elements are not always immediately legible but become apparent upon closer and perhaps more intimate and proximal examination.

This relationality in reading Pico's poem extends beyond attention to the interconnected segments; it's evident in the citational practice and in how Bassett engages with Pico to create an adapted piece, reflecting a thoughtful process of negotiating consent and acknowledgment. The essay suggests that each component of the poem contains meanings, not so much hidden in plain sight as patiently awaiting acknowledgement, urging a reading strategy that appreciates the depth of intertextuality, interspatiality, intertemporality, and the importance of clustered close readings. This porous and permeable citation practice highlights the necessity of reading across different canons and fields, like Indigenous, Latinx, and Black studies. It emphasizes a deliberate disordering of traditional narrative structures, viewing this type of bricolage as central to future-oriented literary projects. Bassett's analysis engages key tensions in Indigenous literary studies, including the complex interplay between past and present literatures, tradition and innovation in

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literary form, and community identity, collectivity, and individual expression in contemporary Indigenous and other literatures. As such, it offers a gift: it encourages us to revisit with Indigenous literatures, including those familiar to us, reminding us that these works not only nourish relationships but also possess the remarkable ability to transcend space, time, discipline, genre, and form, both enriching and unsettling our sense of the present. Bassett's essay thus serves as a bridge, linking canonical notions of Indigenous storywork with the gravity of the present, and inviting readers to perceive Indigenous literature through a lens that appreciates its depth, complexity, and evolving nature.

Pablo Montes, Luis Urrieta, and Judith Landeros's "Refiguring Digital Landscapes: Online Pedagogical Hubs of Indigenous Latinx Youth" demonstrates that social media platforms like Instagram have been refigured as Indigenous Latinx storied spaces by Indigenous Latinx youth—living libraries (which they conceptualize and discuss as "hubs") featuring transformative and collaboratively written Indigenous Latinx literature that is multimodal, transnational, and rooted in land relations, community responsibilities, and survivance (Vizenor 1999). These literary works tell stories that challenge and undo the ongoing colonial invisibilization of Indigenous Latinx youth. And, against mainstream conceptualizations of the digital and land as separate, this literature reveals that they are, in fact, intimately interwoven—for the stories within this digital library are deeply connected to place and land-based geographies and relationalities. In so doing and being, these stories bring forth the presence and, hence, the presents and futures of Indigenous Latinx lives and ecologies. Montes, Urrieta, and Landeros's research suggests that, in the active plurality and transnational, co-creative nature of Indigenous Latinx literary production on social media—where Indigenous Latinx youth within homeland and diaspora are constantly revising, editing, undoing, rewriting, and adding to the stories within the library through dialoguing with each other—necessarily contentious, contested, messy, fraught, difficult, and, ultimately, urgent and generative storywork is occurring. As this article posits, the storywork of Indigenous Latinx



dynamically represented through digital and computational media, thereby reconfiguring our understanding of Indigenous narratives.

Through the development of a Cree coding language, Corbett infuses his programming with Indigenous ontologies, teachings, and connections to ancestors, land, and the body. This approach aligns with Archibald's views on storywork as a form of Indigenous knowledge and emphasizes the role of the creator's emotional and spiritual disposition in storytelling. Corbett's contemplative and meditative engagement with beadwork, as a form of prayer and introspection, transforms the act of creation into a narrative process, highlighting the importance of affective elements in storytelling. Moreover, the article reflects on the role of "Four Generations" in language revitalization, cultural preservation, and the protection of Indigenous knowledge through digital encryption. It contributes to broader discussions in anthropology, critical code studies, and esoteric programming, underlining the significance of embedding Indigenous stories and perspectives within these fields. In a sense, Corbett's contribution in this collection invites us to think how creative practices can be collectivized, and how Indigenous storywork not only changes us, but connects us to worlds of meaning and the intricacies of connections between Indigenous peoples. As Corbett makes clear, beadwork is not a metaphor (Tuck and Yang 2012). Storywork stitches us together and, through that creative act, we become something more.

Hugh Burnam's "'We don't need settler permission': Recalling the Haudenosaunee Thought Project (#htp) through Indigenous autoethnography" invites us to consider Indigenous autoethnography as a literary genre that embodies and invites storywork. Through sharing stories of the social media-based project #htp (The Haudenosaunee Thought Project), Burnam not only reveals how social media has emerged as a storied space for and of Indigenous autoethnography; he uses Indigenous autoethnography as a story-based methodology for learning about and practicing ethical relationality in digital spaces. His autoethnographic accounts

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offer important lessons about honouring consent, sharing truths unapologetically, and protecting sacred knowledges from settler consumption online. Burnam’s care-filled approach to story-telling demonstrates the importance of process to Indigenous autoethnography, engaging in relational and ethical practices that are not always readily visible. That is, as Burnam shows, Indigenous autoethnography is not simply about connecting the personal with wider sociocultural and sociopolitical issues; while it certainly does this, it does so much more. In the stories it tells—and the processes embraced to tell these stories—Indigenous autoethnography is always collective; always rooted in supporting and affirming Indigenous sovereignty; always “heart work” that provides profound healing from colonialism for both the teller and for Indigenous listeners; and that refuses non-Indigenous narrations of Indigenous life. Thus, as Burnam posits, embracing Indigenous autoethnography as a digital research method helps to break the cycle of harmful research practices that have been far too common within western academia and across mainstream internet spaces. Indigenous autoethnography as digital research practice and digital process helps to bring into being digital research and digital environments that are guided by Indigenous ways of being and that are geared towards Indigenous life, love, community, and futurity.

In “#HonouringIndigenousWriters: Visiting with and through Indigenous Literatures in the ‘Digital Turn,’” David Gaertner initiates a thought-provoking discussion that asks readers to think about the hashtag as more than a type of metadata or technological function. Rather, his writing enables us to see the hashtag as an element of storywork: it is an archive, convener, and connector. Hashtag networks cultivate online communities where stories can be shared in safe and communal environments. Hashtags are, of course, open networks. They make space for guests—both wanted and unwanted; both familiar and strange. Along these lines, the article asks: what does it mean to be a “visitor” in spaces of Indigenous storytelling, specifically for those who are non-Indigenous, who now have increased access to digital spaces of storytelling due to hashtag

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networks and the open nature of the internet? Gaertner, himself a settler scholar of German descent, does not critique the open nature of the internet for allowing non-Indigenous groups to gain entry to intimate spaces of storytelling. Rather, he suggests these communal spaces make room for reparative storywork that moves non-Indigenous groups and settlers to be better guests by acknowledging that hospitality is, at best, earned. Gaertner sheds light on the subtle settler colonial expectations underpinning words like “guest” that take for granted Indigenous hospitality. “Guest” connotes a certain sense of comfort, coziness, obligatory hospitality, or perhaps even permission to overstay one’s welcome. A better word, Gaertner proposes, is “visitor,” a word that places a greater sense of responsibility upon non-Indigenous people to approach Indigenous spaces of storytelling with accountability, relationality, and a commitment to reciprocity. Visiting can invite and move non-Indigenous people to be better guests and listeners, for it “is grounded not in an unconditional welcome, but in the acknowledged presence and responsibility of the guest” (Gaertner 2024, 154). Gaertner’s perspective redefines the act of visiting for non-Indigenous people as an active, at times uncomfortable, commitment to centre care, listening, and a willingness to learn through storywork.

Chiara Minestrelli, Patrick Mau, Despoina Zachariadou, and Alim Kamara’s “‘Virtual Reconnections’: Using VR Storytelling to Reconnect to Indigenous Cultural Artefacts” ponders the potentialities for VR to be a form of storywork. The authors invite us to reflect on a prototype VR experience, which they describe as a digital repatriation. This project would allow internet users, specifically younger generations of Torres Strait Islanders and Sierra Leonian communities, to reconnect with their heritage through an interactive, immersive virtual interface. Through this platform, they would visit African Indigenous and tribal artefacts stolen from Torres Strait communities and now on display in British cultural institutions. Yet this interface is more than just infrastructural. It is animate in its ability to transport visitors to worlds of the past and engage with the ongoing life of these worlds in the present. When artefacts are stolen from communities and

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preserved in colonial institutions such as museums, they are storied in harmful and culturally inaccurate ways that lead to their decontextualization and dehistoricization. Engaging in VR storywork presents opportunities for reclaiming these cultural objects, counter-storying and re-storying these cultural artifacts through digitally repatriating them for virtual environments, with Indigenous communities as the narrators. Such initiatives point to the potential for virtual reconnections to form in online environments, and speak to the notion of a virtual landedness.

Yet at the same time, the article invites us to consider ethical implications concerning this digital repatriation and VR experience, elucidating that storywork is a process that carries immense responsibilities and ethical frictions. To do this work in a responsible and accountable way requires attending to absence and loss in an ethical manner and working closely with Indigenous communities. The article and the storywork it shares prompt us to reflect on the question: what is digital repatriation? If a cultural item is not physically returned to the community, and is merely virtually returned, is this truly an act of digital repatriation? We must ask these fraught but necessary questions when engaging in storywork through VR to avoid compounding the history of institutional decontextualization and dehistoricization. While certainly re-storying and re-connecting with cultural items that have been stolen out of communities through digital technology like VR provides an important and healing bridge, any sort of digital repatriation fundamentally requires its physical manifestation. That these artifacts would continue to be steeped in deep histories of loss and theft despite the potential for virtual interaction underlines the limitations of VR for storywork when it does not accompany or lead to action on-the-ground. This article raises difficult and urgent questions around the ethics of VR, and also points to the hopeful futures that VR and digital storywork can provide. And the article demonstrates that there are no simple answers to any of these important questions.

We end our exploration of storywork—what it is, where it happens, and what it does — with an interview from Paul Seesequasis. In conversation with Tanja Grubnic, Seesequasis

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introduces readers to the *Indigenous Archival Photo Project*, a social media project that he began almost a decade ago. Through studying the archives of museums, institutions, auction houses, and digital sources like *Getty*, Seesequasis finds photographs of Indigenous community members that have been stored away in archives and brings these photographs out of storage into the open to reclaim stories and images of Indigeneity through the lens of joy and strength. Against colonial stereotypes, images, and tropes surrounding Indigeneity, Seesequasis's project shares historical photographs via social media that document the vibrancy of everyday Indigenous life. His project is a reminder that photographs, as storytelling devices, are deeply literary. In short, the photographs that make up the *Indigenous Archival Photo Project* are literatures that offer deep possibilities for storywork. The project reveals the link between reclamation and storywork. As Seesequasis circulates these photographs on social media, community members who witness the images remember and share the kin, events, and narratives attached to them. The reclamation of these photographs and their narratives by community offers healing through liberating Indigenous images and stories from storage spaces and colonial framings that have stifled and hidden these stories and that have prohibited communities from connecting with them. This project emphasizes that the returning of these stories to their lands and peoples is an integral aspect of storywork, and that social media can help to ignite this storywork.

The *Indigenous Archival Photo Project* further reveals storywork as simultaneously memory work and world-making. As Seesequasis discusses, photographs embody past worlds and help family, community, and kin to remember those past worlds and the past's rooted connections to the present and future. Through digital spaces, the storywork of these photographs—the memory-making and world-making—has been collaborative and continuous, unfolding as various community members engage with and tell stories about the photos, and unfolding ongoingly amidst the rapid and wide spread of information that often occurs through social media. This storywork is also collaborative in its multimodality: while the project was ignited by social media,

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since its conception, it has taken on a variety of forms, ranging from social media and the digital realm, to print magazines and books, to various in-person exhibitions and talks. This multimodality signals that the digital realm is always connected to the physical and the land-based. As Seesequasis's insights illuminate, social media serves as the initial gathering space from which this project's storywork can develop and spread into various digital and physical realms and manifestations, but storywork never just occurs online—it is deeply place and land-based, traversing land and digital alike. As Seesequasis's extensive project archives and ignites vibrant storywork online, we hope that this special issue can provide a small archive of the dynamic storywork that is happening online, and can perhaps ignite and inspire further storywork across digital environments and beyond.

## **Conclusion**

This special issue celebrates and recognizes the urgency and the potency of Indigenous literary life online. Indigenous digital literary studies is not just an emerging subfield nor is it separate from other literary spaces and contributions. It is rich, dynamic, vibrant, expansive, and multimodal, extending beyond cyberspace and always connected to Indigenous lands, waters, and place-based relations. Aligned with this dynamic expansiveness, the Indigenous stories emerging from digital media are not secondary to conventional storytelling media, genres, and forms; they are essential to Indigenous storytelling traditions and narratives not just of the present, but of the past and future—and they connect relations and foster kinship not only in the here and now, but across the generations past and future too. Digital media have enabled Indigenous peoples to reclaim and share their histories, to assert their presence and presents, and to envision and world-make their futures. And, as such, the digital is an integral space of storywork. Indeed, a digital storywork praxis takes seriously the ability for digital spaces to support Indigenous life, storytelling, and education, while simultaneously teaching about the need to use digital

technologies with care and in ways that centre Indigenous narratives. Through storying digital spaces, Indigenous peoples are continuing a long practice of crafting, developing, and using the latest technologies towards supporting and nourishing Indigenous life, literary tradition, and storywork. We are excited to share these Indigenous digital literatures and digital storywork teachings with you.

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## Death Canto: The Urban NDN Nature Poem in Tommy Pico's *Nature Poem*

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The reluctance to engage with and inability to compose nature poems is a recurring theme throughout Tommy Pico's *Nature Poem* (2018). Rather than attempt a contrived modern pastiche of an Indigenous nature poem that feeds into outmoded stereotypes, such as the ecological Indian trope, Pico purposefully resists traditional and Western poetic conventions altogether. Accordingly, individual sections in *Nature Poem* are untitled, internet shorthand (or text-speak) comprises much of the book's language, and, predictably, no conventional nature poem ever emerges. Although Pico does not showcase traditional nature writing, he does present us with an alternative nature poem on pages 32-33. This curious section immerses readers in the fast-paced, sensory-overloaded, and discombobulating features of the digital urban environment. For the most part, this section limns a digital landscape imbued with consumer capitalism and entertainment culture. Every line is an excerpt from a diverse range of external sources from the near and far past—American television commercials and product advertisements, films, songs, poems. Read linearly, these snippets mimic the aural effects of digital media browsing found in activities such as skipping songs on media players or streaming services and scrolling through short-form videos on a smartphone or tablet application. However, amidst this patchwork of intertextual quotes, a hashtag—#death—caps the end of each line, invoking an ominous mood. The repeating hashtag is what gives this section its digital pulse, but affixed to the intertextual excerpts #death is a siren-like warning that something about these lines, individually and collectively, is amiss. The amalgamation of fragmented transtemporal multimedia tagged with a

parasitic “#death” hashtag captures the essence of an overwhelming digital urban realm, but there is also an insinuation that elements of this mediascape, artistic and creative as it may be, possess an unsettling familiarity to some. For urban, modern Indians, such as Teebs, the queer protagonist in *Nature Poem* and the broader Teebs tetralogy (*IRL*, *Nature Poem*, *Junk*, *Feed*), encounters with audiovisual bites that embody or reflect consumer capitalist culture within larger settler colonial contexts will always retain an inherently deathly nature.

This article examines the intertextual content, configurations, and latent meanings in the untitled section on pages 32-33 of *Nature Poem*. I contend that the serried intertexts in what I refer to as “Death Canto” are audiovisual characteristics of digital urban environments, and, initially, when taken as a whole, this bricolage portrays a superficial reality where both short-burst consumption of digital media and elements of the digital media itself are innately death-inducing to the urban-dwelling Teebs. But when viewed in bundles or lines, “Death Canto” also reveals that beneath a cynical exterior, there is a hidden world burgeoning with potential for liberation from such darkness.

Throughout, I refer to the section on pages 32-33 as “Death Canto” primarily for the sake of convenience to you, the reader, but I want to acknowledge and respect Pico’s intention to not title this section or any page in *Nature Poem*. As Teebs writes in *IRL*, “I grow / my poems long” (97), and *Nature Poem* is structured as one long-form poem, not individually cordoned-off, self-contained poems. I do not wish to contravene Pico’s authority by isolating one section for analysis and, in doing so, assign it an unsanctioned name. As I restate in Appendix 3, it is important to recognize that subsequent references to “Death Canto” should be understood merely as a temporary designation for ease of reading strictly within the confines of this article.

Before proceeding, in the spirit of self-reflexivity and transparency, I would like to acknowledge that my positionality as a relative newcomer to Kumeyaay literature colors the

interpretations of Pico's work presented in this article. I am not and have never been an active interlocutor in Kumeyaay spaces and affairs. In the course of my academic training in the study of English literature, however, I have cultivated a genuine interest in American Indian fiction and poetry. Through engaging Pico's work and insights produced by scholars that study Pico and broader American Indian literature, I have come to embrace amplifying the voices and stories of American Indian experiences at large. While my perspective as an outsider undoubtedly shapes the meaning-making put forth in the following pages, I hope this article contributes meaningfully to the ongoing discourse surrounding Kumeyaay and American Indian works of art.

On the one hand, "Death Canto"—and, in a broader sense, *Nature Poem*—represents an instance of narrative resistance. From an aesthetic standpoint, the form, substance, and flow of "Death Canto" defy easy decipherment; each line's source and cultural reference taken at face value may or may not be known, there is no detectable rhyme scheme and meter, the organization of excerpts comes across as haphazard, and a conspicuous digital hashtag (a word or phrase preceded by the pound symbol used to designate relation to a special topic) calls our attention to something insidious but not immediately apparent.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, Pico indirectly subverts stereotypical nature writing by sewing together multimedia pieces extracted from the digital urban environment, and in so doing, he opens a space to consider and critique the NDN experience within it.<sup>2</sup>

A persistent motif that runs through the Teebs tetralogy is a turbulent love-hate relationship with urbanity that bleeds into digitality. In *IRL*, Teebs expresses fondness for city living, stating, "I'm in the city. Am the city, / The rush is what I covet—the / noise of constant motion" (60). Teebs in *Nature Poem* admits, "I can't write a nature poem / bc I only fuck with the city" (4), even going as far as saying, "I miss the city when I'm in the city" (64). But in other moments, the city bustle enervates Teebs, imposing such an overwhelming force that it renders him catatonic: "Clack, clack of expensive shoes slapping down the train / platform A car backfiring

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Sputter of gunfire on a Snapchat story / I don't know where the feeling is or what to do with it n  
spent / most of the day in bed with my eyes squeezed shut” (*Junk* 17). This sentiment continues in  
*Feed*, but with a focus on the presence of violence and death in digital media: “Once again I don't  
know where the feeling is or what to do with it / and spent most of the day in bed with my eyes  
squeezed shut— / everything all over the news... The list of the newest mass shooting on record  
the / names the list of shooting victims of fragile masculinity and misogyny and a rigged system in  
favor of assault rifles over human life” (48). Teebs' emphasis on the overpowering feeling of  
demoralization stemming from his interaction with digital media evokes Dian Million's felt theory.  
Million's concept explores a sensory-based knowledge imbued with “the affective life force that  
runs through us... the affective content of our experience[s]” (“There Is a River in Me” 32, 35) and  
encompasses “culturally mediated knowledges, never solely individual... projections about what is  
happening in our lives” (“Felt Theory: An Indigenous Feminist Approach” 61). By articulating his  
on-the-ground, affective responses to digital urban encounters, Teebs illumines the ambivalent  
lived experience of what it means to be NDN in metro America. While the accentuation of  
negative “feelings” foregrounds a felt sense of Teebs' conflicted physical and mental wellbeing  
within a growing techno-urban environment, Laura Furlan finds that “In the cities, Indian characters  
become what Vizenor calls ‘postindian warriors’ who ‘create their stories with a new sense of  
survivance’” (31). For urban NDNs, cities are both “a generative space and one where Indians are  
marginalized” (35) due to settler colonial legacies, but digital urban environments also possess  
“the potential to germinate meaningful activism” (12), as they empower Teebs to combine affect,  
environment, and critique as a means of fostering social change. Thus, through “Death Canto,”  
Teebs offers an NDN-specific critical commentary on the struggles faced in urban digital realms  
while at the same time charting creative pathways for reparative social transformation. As Teebs

outlines himself in *Junk*, “it’s hard to let go Resisting death for / generations, *I want to make the opposite of death*” (66; emphasis added).

On the other hand, “Death Canto” paints an exceedingly bleak picture of tuning into the digital. In particular, the urban environment’s more materialist digital content produces pernicious effects on its users because its substance is laden with intermittent consumerist and self-destructive messaging. This is most evident in lines 8-11 of “Death Canto”—“I’m lovin it #death / because you’re worth it #death / the best a man can get #death / maybe she’s born with it #death” [32]—where the grim #death hashtag assigns each capitalist slogan’s (McDonald’s, L’Oréal, Gillette, and Maybelline, respectively) object an innately deadly quality. Robyn Maynard, in her epistolary dialogue with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson during the COVID-19 era, recognizes that the state of the despairing world makes it difficult to “stop doom-scrolling the multiple crises of our time” (Maynard, et al. 13). Morbid fascination springs forth from mass media, particularly television, which exposes users to graphic electronic media violence to the point of desensitization. We see this kind of powerlessness to the doom scroll in one of the organizational frameworks of *Feed*: a series of devastating news article titles formatted in full capitals (e.g., “GUNMAN FIRES INTO OKLAHOMA CITY RESTAURANT” [41], “MASS GRAVES OF IMMIGRANTS FOUND IN TEXAS” [57]). At one point in *Junk*, too, Teebs references the 2016 Orlando nightclub mass shooting, noting that after the murder and wounding of over one hundred LGBTQ+ individuals, “In the silence that followed, / the only noise was cellphones Desperate family and friends / wailing praying against their bottomless suspicion It’s all I cd / think about that day” (62). In this brief meditation, it is the inert cellphone as a communication technology that stands out to Teebs for attempting (and failing) to connect deceased and incapacitated users with loved ones.

Teebs repeatedly links contemporary, often quotidian violence to settler colonialism in “Death Canto” and its surrounding pages. As Colleen G. Eils observes, Teebs “is bound in the repercussions of ongoing colonial projects and—he would remind his readers—we, too, are also

either subject to or beneficiaries of colonialism" (96), which renders "Death Canto" a decolonial endeavor that recognizes that really "There is no post-colonial / America" (*IRL* 43). On the preceding pages of "Death Canto," an unfazed Teebs states, "my dad texts me two cousins dead this week, one 26 the other / 30," to which he responds nonchalantly, "what I'm really trying to understand is what trainers @ the gym mean when / they say 'engage' in the phrase 'engage your core'" (30). Death's proximity and commonness in Teebs' life lead him to a kind of survivance coping mechanism where indifferent treatment of death attempts to mitigate the trauma it typically causes. Teebs also staves off grief a few pages later when he resorts to "invent[ing] myself some laughs in an / attempt to maneuver from a sticky kind of ancestral sadness, being a / NDN person in occupied America" (37). *Nature Poem* early on intimates that settler colonialism operates as an overarching backdrop, working as a normative feature of contemporary NDN existence and contributing to much ongoing tension:

it seems foolish to discuss nature w/o talking about endemic poverty  
 which seems foolish to discuss w/o talking about corporations given  
 human agency which seems foolish to discuss w/o talking about colonialism. (12)

For these reasons, "#death" should be viewed not only in connection with an urban technological malaise that Teebs suffers from, but also within the broader framework of settler colonialism that continues to hold sway in American society. As Teebs comes to terms with the realization that "America / never intended for me to live" (*IRL* 70) as a "weirdo NDN faggot" (*Nature Poem* 2), we should equally regard "Death Canto" as an interpretive rumination on survivance in present-day settler colonial realities, encompassing both physical and digital dimensions.

Yet, beneath the surface of doom-scrolling digital media, the subtext of consumer capitalism, and systems of settler colonialism in "Death Canto," a ray of hope lies waiting to be discovered. "Death Canto" may exhibit a sense of fatalism, but it is through this struggle to find

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meaning in the digital urban setting that a positive outlook comes into view. Twelve of the seventeen song extracts in “Death Canto” stem from African American musicians. When considered in relation to the rest of the intertexts, Black artists comprise exactly thirty per cent of the section’s textual makeup. These songs also cluster more than other genres (notably in lines 25-26 and 29-35). It is, therefore, imperative that we situate “Death Canto” within a context that not only takes into account Black agency but also integrates it with the NDN experience. Tiffany Lethabo King in *The Black Shoals* (2019) finds interconnections between Black and Indigenous discourse throughout American history. She argues that while Black and American Indian experiences under the auspices of settler colonialism are distinct, when put into conversation with each other, they harness a “shared critique” (King 15) of slavery, colonization, and their aftermaths. King uses the geographical term “shoal,” the shallow area where coastal land meets water, as a metaphorical location for Afro-Native “contact and encounter, as well as emergent formations” (3) to take shape. Such a liminal space, King argues, is an “alternate site of engagement to discuss Indigenous genocide, anti-Black racism, and the politics of Black and Native studies” (35). With such a large contingent of Black artists present in “Death Canto,” I interpret “Death Canto” as a kind of shoal—for its lines spring from and exist in the ether that is the digital urban—where Black voices come to inform Teebs’ urban NDN experiences in largely digital realms. In *IRL*, Teebs recognizes that the “Internet is comprised / of possibility. Like. Book. / Reading revealing what / I’m ‘really’ thinking” (52). Delving into the audio-visual snippets Teebs invokes in “Death Canto” allows us to develop a greater understanding of Teebs’s rationale for sensing death in the multimedia he consumes. As King advocates, “I encourage the reader to engage the nontraditional geographies (visible, uncharted, and invisible) that connect Indigenous and Black diasporic thought reparatively” (12), and by shoaling “Death Canto,” we can glimpse how Black music can be used cooperatively with NDN meditations on urban existence as a guiding force to confront and transcend deep historical traumas.

Carol Miller’s observation that “city spaces are, for Indian people, places of risk, separation, disillusion, and dissolution” (31) highlights the historical challenges faced by Indigenous communities in urban settings. Nevertheless, the notion of NDN existence being inherently at odds with urbanity has recently undergone reconsideration. While, according to Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, the Western city may be a “wicked symbol of greed, godlessness, and rootless cosmopolitanism” (21) in the eyes of Indigenous peoples, Furlan and others have pointed out that technically “all US cities are Indigenous cities” despite possessing “a long and complex Indigenous and settler colonial history” (Furlan 12). For one thing, the rural/urban, reservation/city binary oversimplifies complex realities and is grounded in non-Indigenous knowledge systems. As June Scudeler notes, “Pico attempts to disentangle himself from nature but realizes that binaries between nature/urban are false because they’re based in colonizing logics” (170). Teebs acknowledges in *IRL* that “Good/Bad, / Right/Wrong, Binary is / another weapon of the / oppressor” (87). Kyle T. Mays critiques the notion that “The ‘urban’ is supposedly where premodern Native people go, lose their ‘traditions,’ and bring back the negative aspects of cities to the rez” (2) because more than two thirds of modern North American Indigenous people live in cities. As Tommy Orange reminds us, “Plenty of us are urban now. If not because we live in cities, then because we live on the internet. Inside the high-rise of multiple browser windows” (9-10). Although “this urban-rez dichotomy continues in scholarship” (Mays 2), Furlan asserts that it is specifically in metro settings that “Native characters reestablish and sometimes reclaim space in creative, occasionally subversive ways” (32), underscoring how urban spaces become catalysts for empowering NDN individuals. The shoal “represents a process, formation, and space that exists beyond binary thinking” (King 28), and “Death Canto” serves as a compelling example, illustrating how Teebs’s engagement with dynamic urban digital landscapes can subvert binary frameworks imposed by colonial structures to (re)imagine alternative, more life-affirming realities.

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In the end, such visions can, in the words of Warren Cariou, “destabilize those edges that keep Aboriginal peoples marginalized in contemporary North American culture, and it can do this by holding different realities side by side: by juxtaposing the received mainstream perception of colonial reality with a perception that is rooted in Aboriginal experience” (33).

Teebs’s deliberate sourcing of Black music functions as the driving force to (re)imagine this better world and practice future-making to (re)create it. Maynard and Simpson, echoing King, acknowledge that “it is the apocalypses of slavery and settler colonialism that bind [Black and NDN] collective pasts and presents together in the calamity at hand” (Maynard, et al. 14). Will Clark also remarks that “dispossession of Black autonomy and labor and dispossession of Indigenous land and sovereignty are often treated as incommensurate events despite the complex relations that historically and theoretically connect them” (540-541), suggesting the imbricated histories of Black and Indigenous peoples today might compound together more than run parallel to each other. One of the ways in which “Black-Indigenous histories have been crossing paths with each other ever since whites began inhumanely bringing captured Africans to Turtle Island” (Mays 8) is through the art of music. Mays informs us that “From its conception, drums (and beats) have been a significant part of hip hop music. Both African and Indigenous descendants continue to use the drum as a part of their musical production. Blackness and indigeneity, through sound, have intersected” (11). Through music, Black-NDN collaboration can “move beyond the persistent narratives of their demise, or their invisibility, or the notion that they are people of the past incapable of engaging with modernity” (Mays 3) to forge powerful counternarratives of fortitude. In this article, I maintain that it is through the invocation of predominantly influential Black music that a reimaginative world-building emerges in “Death Canto.” Though some lines appear dire at times, polyphonically, they possess a combinatory power that demonstrates resilience across space and time. In the face of hundreds of years of historical tribulations, the prominent and powerful Black voices invoked by Teebs in “Death Canto,” such as Rihanna, Mary J. Blige, Janet

Jackson, and Lionel Richie, coalesce Black resilience with NDN experience in digital urban realms. Simpson notes that “The absence of hope is a beautiful catalyst” (135), for progress is often constrained without the crucible of hardship, and seen in this light, “Death Canto” with its shadow #death hashtag is transformed into an exercise of interruption and searching for ways to create new forward momentum and possibilities of meaning in critical digital landscapes.

My reading of “Death Canto” in the following paragraphs will (1) attempt to demonstrate the section’s centrality to the thematic undercurrent of American Indian urban digitality in *Nature Poem* while also (2) investigating how the specter of death—as signaled by the omnipresent #death hashtag—maintains a tense position within digital urban contexts. Imagining Teebs as the primary user and listener in “Death Canto,” I analyze the intertexts with his perspective in mind and use the resultant interpretations as inroads to grasp Teebs’s—and, by extension, the NDN’s—multifaceted relationship with the digital urban world. My analysis takes a tripartite form: it ranges from micro (single line readings) and meso (clusters of two or more lines) to macro levels (lines having connections with other parts of *Nature Poem*), all of which work in concert with each other to interrogate the inner workings of “Death Canto.” Ultimately, I contend that Pico does engage nature writing to a certain extent as “Death Canto” portrays the cultural phenomena of the digital urban environment, albeit through a critical lens. Teebs’s ambivalence toward modernity and digital urbanism, which resonates throughout *Nature Poem*, finds further extension in “Death Canto,” but in the end, the #death hashtag overshadows his fraught relationship with urbanity by perpetuating Teebs’s existential cynicism of the urban NDN experience. However, by explicitly concatenating lyrical fragments of Black artists at the section’s end, Teebs also inadvertently models the resilient and reimaginative potential a Black-NDN coalition might implicitly hold in digital realms.

Something worth noting before moving forward is that “Death Canto” is positioned alongside the only other digitally born section on page 34 of *Nature Poem*. Most of *Nature Poem* is written in the voice and point of view of the semi-autobiographical Teebs, but four sections on pages 8, 32-33, 34, and 51 eschew this logic. The section on page 8 is a straightforward (but unsettling) list of entities associated with various acts or historical moments embroiled in violence (“Janjaweed, the Lord’s Resistance Army, Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Oscar / Pistorius, the Tea Party, Andrew Jackson, the Niña the Pinta and the Santa / Maria”). From this list, “the Niña the Pinta and the Santa Maria” stand out as the names of the three ships employed by Christopher Columbus during his voyage to the New World in 1492. The ships, translated roughly into English as “the Girl,” “the Painted One,” and “Saint Mary” combined symbolize the European first contact that precipitated disease-stricken mass death, enslavement, and genocide in Indigenous and Black communities. In *IRL*, Teebs points to the resilience affected populations demonstrated to weather such atrocities, in the process questioning his own capacity to endure similar tribulations: “Ppl survive all the time, / thru true horrors like the Holocaust, / Middle Passage, 1492 like how? / I am one of the weak ones. I cry at Beyoncé songs” (86). The section on page 51 similarly presents irregularly spaced out words and phrases in line groupings (e.g., “pure deviant,” “American mixed,” “down-to-earth,” “support our troops,” etc.) in a list-like manner and ends in presumably Teebs’s voice, interjecting with the rhetorical query, “you know what I mean?” Conversely, the section on 34 is an online chat log between usernames “heyteebs” and “AngelNafis,” in which they discuss with enthusiasm their reactions to the legendary Aretha Franklin and her songs. The section on 34 and “Death Canto” on 32-33, therefore, stand out as outliers from the rest of *Nature Poem* for consisting of primarily born-digital materials.<sup>3</sup>

At first glance, as the more cryptic outlier, “Death Canto” does not appear to feed into Teebs’s conversational and insouciant style that pervades *Nature Poem*, but the section does offer a peek into Teebs’s urban digital footprint. Although Teebs’s direct discourse is absent from the

intertextual miscellany, the excerpts stand out as deliberately singled out catchlines, beckoning an attentive, critical user—like Teebs—to deconstruct the power dynamics they conceal. The lines—alone, in clusters, and collectively—afford varying degrees of insight into the multimedia Teebs consumes and urban digital culture at large; they capture the sounds, visuals, and messaging that get trapped in his head and burned into memory. This labyrinth of fragments, in turn, becomes the site of both critique and subversion for Teebs.

“Death Canto” opens with “the fabric of our lives #death,” which (1) conjures images of weaving textiles, which is a meta-reference to the section’s intertextual makeup, (2) invokes *Nature Poem*’s repeated usage of the sky and star metaphor, and (3) subscribes an ominous tenor (#death) that contrasts the opening line in its emphasis on life. The first six lines are an interchange between mainstream national television commercials and song and poem lyrics:

the fabric of our lives #death [television commercial, Cotton, 1992]

some ppl wait a lifetime for a moment like this #death [song, Kelly Clarkson, 2002]<sup>4</sup>

reach out and touch someone #death [television commercial, AT&T, 1987]

he kindly stopped for me #death [poem, Emily Dickinson, 1890]<sup>5</sup>

kid-tested, mother-approved #death [television commercial, Kix, 1982]

oops, I did it again #death [song, Britney Spears, 2000]

The alternation between commercial and lyric from multiple periods (the late 1800s, pre-internet 1980s, and the dot-com era to the early-2000s) weaves together a dynamic “fabric” that puts these sources into conversation with each other. Cotton products, cereal, pop songs, telecommunication, and death poetry from the Gilded Age: these extracts speak to some aspect of life’s interconnectedness and hint at an underlying sinister issue. “The fabric of our lives” serves as an extended metaphor that underpins the interpretation of “Death Canto,” but beneath the line’s commercial messaging exists a shadow story that runs throughout the beginning and

culmination of the section. Cotton Incorporated promoted the use and image of cotton as a raw material beginning in the 1990s through its “Fabric of Our Lives” advertising campaign. Behind the scenes, however, the company’s promotion board allegedly spent producers’ and importers’ money on lavish things, such as adult entertainment, golfing, and luxury cars. Financial irresponsibility in the face of a clean, do-good public message confers a sense of irony and hypocrisy to the “the fabric of our lives” line.<sup>6</sup> The opening line is thus a tapestry of tension: “the fabric of our lives #death” stands in as a metaphor for the entirety of “Death Canto,” offers a glimpse into the deceptive nature of the corporate slogan it references, and the capping “#death” hashtag invites us to consider cotton’s grim history.

The rise of cotton as a key resource in the southern colonial plantation economy, of course, bears direct connections to Black slave labor. Indeed, it stands as an inextricable part of cotton’s dark roots in U.S. history. In the contemporary context, “The fabric of our lives” evokes images of soft, white, comfortable clothing in its final form and perhaps even nostalgia for individuals who remember watching the first Cotton advertisements on television in the 1980s and 1990s. But to premodern Black Americans in the colonial South, cotton held starkly different connotations: pain, bloody fingers, violence, and subjugation. Cotton as a material was literally a “fabric of” the “lives” of Black American laborers because they were forced to spend grueling hours picking the commodity for plantation owners with meager compensation in return. In addition to Black Americans, Indians participated in the plantation economy, and both disenfranchised groups, at some point in time, engaged in both labor and conflict with or for each other. For example, Tiya Miles shows that, in Indian Territories, “Cherokees adopted black slavery in part to demonstrate their level of ‘civilization’ in the hopes of forestalling further encroachment by white America,” which eventually led to the legalization of “slavery and black exclusion to maintain economic growth and independence and to demonstrate a social distance from the subjugated African race” (4). Celia E. Naylor finds that “enslaved African Cherokees in the Cherokee Nation

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constructed several layers of connections and disconnections between themselves and Cherokees in nineteenth-century Indian Territory,” creating a “distinctive African Indian cultural milieu in antebellum Indian Territory” (4). Ultimately, though, settler colonial logics set precedents for “southeastern Indians’ conceptions of themselves—as Indians, as ‘civilized Indians,’ as slave owners, and as people who often defined themselves as superior to those of African descent” (Naylor 4). In the end, neither population could truly benefit under overarching systems and cultures that disempowered them. King reminds us that in premodern and modern times, “Black and Indigenous people must die or be transformed into lesser forms of humanity—and, in some cases, become nonhuman altogether” for the continuation of “White humanity and its self-actualization” (20-21). As troubling as it may be, it is the cotton plant alluded to via “The fabric of our lives” line in “Death Canto” that amalgamates Black and NDN histories and survivance. So, implicit in line one of “Death Canto” is simultaneously a quilt-like connectedness that stitches the section’s intertexts together and a national history burdened by chattel slavery that brings into contact Black and NDN peoples. Although the veiled allusion to America’s national shame may conjure images of systemic racism and violence in the opening of “Death Canto,” seemingly foreshadowing the course of the rest of the section, as I demonstrate later, the final sequence of lines arguably takes a wry, hopeful turn and distinguishes itself from the more uneasy “fabric of our lives #death.”

In a broader context, this “fabric,” which meshes media excerpts from far and wide in “Death Canto,” aligns with the sky and star metaphor that Teebs uses throughout *Nature Poem* to convey a desire to reconnect with his Indigenous roots. A melancholic tone arises in the first lines of *Nature Poem* when Teebs asserts, “The stars are dying / like always, and far away, like what you see looking up is a death knell / from light” (1). From the outset, death is associated with celestial bodies. Teebs, gazing upward, recognizes that what he sees in the moment is a sea of dying or

already dead stars, that the starlight reaching Earth is a look into a star's millions-of-years-old history, but that past is most likely fraught with inexorable collapse. The “death knell / from light” means that an appeal to the sky for guidance is a defeatist act, but Teebs nonetheless still finds—or at least tries to find—recourse in the stars: “Tracing shapes in the stars is the closest I get to calling a language mine” (37). In a middle section, Teebs admits that “Stars are characters / in the tome of the night sky, which I shd work more at deciphering” and states at the end of the page that “Everyone remembers the weather when discovering a body. / I think it’s perfectly natural to look skyward” (37), and even earlier that his “eyes peel toward the sky / like memory” (23), rationalizing his instinct to defer to the stars for answers, especially when death is involved. However, “deciphering” star “characters” or ancestors is unfeasible if the sky conveys an illusory or an incomplete map to draw meaning from, which may be why Teebs is increasingly disheartened and resigned to “invent... some laughs in an attempt to maneuver from a sticky kind of ancestral sadness” (37). Toward the end of *Nature Poem*, Teebs again resorts to sky and star imagery in an effort to glimpse the totality of his forebears and their collective memories. Teebs states, “The first stars were born of a gravity, my ancestors . . . I look up at the poem, all of them up there in the hot sky” (71), and asks, “How many of you are there, up in the flat sky” (64), but he does not necessarily have a way to read and interpret what he sees despite admitting that “I’ve started reading the stars / Nothing is possible until it happens” (71).

This turning to skyward constellations for some semblance of meaning is emulated in “Death Canto” through configurations of popular culture excerpts. The sky represents a natural domain for Teebs to explore, and “Death Canto” functions in a similar way by assembling a constellation of intertexts to create a partial representation of a different environment. Like stargazing for signs, but now coincidentally in an urban setting where stars are obscured by light pollution, “Death Canto” intertwines transtemporal sound and word bites that exist largely in the present-day digital sphere, presenting them for imaginative interpretation. Reading linearly in

tandem with decoding each intertextual extract engenders a discombobulating effect akin to incessantly switching between media channels or scrolling through never-ending streams of audiovisual material. But this is arguably part and parcel of the digital urban landscape; it is by design frenetic and cluttered with advertisements, begetting and catering to shortened attention spans. Moreover, much like the dying starlight above, the snippets that comprise “Death Canto” are tagged with “#death” to signify that the digital sea of media below is also an environment in constant demise.

There is a noticeable shift in the nature of the intertextual lines and their messaging at the end of “Death Canto”—an interlude before the forceful final two lines. Whereas the initial two-thirds of the section (lines 1-27) remix mostly American film, television, and lyrics to create a dizzying multimedia experience infused with flavors of consumer capitalism, the final third (lines 28-40) turns almost exclusively to songs by Black artists that are upbeat to the ear as well as uplifting in spirit:

hang in there, baby #death [motivational poster, Victor Baldwin, 1971]

mr. big stuff, who do you think you are #death [song, Jean Knight, 1971]

solid as a rock #death [song, Ashford & Simpson, 1984]

all day, every day #death [song, South Central Cartel, 1997]

rude boy #death [song, Rihanna, 2009]

yr givin me fever #death [song, Little Willie John, 1956]<sup>7</sup>

that’s the way love goes #death [song, Janet Jackson, 1993]

almost doesn’t count #death [song, Brandy Norwood, 1999]

Here, in this multimedia shoal, we can see how, from “rubbing disparate texts against one another, unexpected openings emerge where different voices are brought into relationship” (King 31). The “Hang in there, baby” motivational poster causes the break between the first two-thirds

and the final third of “Death Canto.” The popularized image of a cat hanging onto dear life to a stick is often used as an inspirational message by people facing adversity of some kind. For Teebs, the poster represents a much-needed boost of hope, a reminder of encouragement to persevere in the face of challenges. This sentiment finds resonance in the subsequent selection of Black music: Jean Knight’s “Mr. Big Stuff” espouses strong Black feminist resistance to the control of “Don Juan”-type men; the love song “Solid as a Rock” by the husband-and-wife duo Ashford & Simpson conveys how a built-up love will withstand obstacles of all kinds; and similarly Little Willie John’s “Fever” and Janet Jackson’s “That’s The Way Love Goes” underscore a striving for passionate love. What this sudden series of sanguinity might imply is that Teebs draws on the optimistic work of Black artists for solace, for a respite from the overpowering, relentless mediascape of the digital urban. Beyond merely a fondness for specific kinds of music, Teebs finds meaningful relationality in these lyrics, extracting what appear to be affirmations that reinforce his sense of belonging within urban life. Music and digital spaces themselves, too, have in the past offered historically marginalized groups an outlet to communicate messages of resilience. We might catch a glimpse of this potential in the aforementioned chat log between usernames “heyteebs” and “AngelNafis” in *Nature Poem*. For instance, Clark notes that when Teebs asks AngelNafis, a Black feminist poet, “if he can ‘reproduce this twitter convo in nature poem plz,” Teebs inadvertently constructs “a textual bridge across disparate experiences of minoritization” (543). Back to the point at hand, lines 29-35 are, in effect, a collective act of solidarity where Black voices carry through into the digital realm reaching thousands, if not millions, of users. Teebs states that “Songs r spells / like poems” (19), likening the music he listens to and the inadvertent nature poem he is composing to magical incantations that possess the power to fulfill whatever wish they harbor through repetitive chanting. Repeated listens and vocalizations of the lyrics from these Black artists seem to actualize the essence of their affirming messages, centering themes of positivity, strength, and transformation. Consequently, the final

segment of “Death Canto” resembles a meditation on the potential of future-making to resist or reverse the oppressive and dispiriting effects of digital urban life and its comorbidities intimated in earlier lines. Furthermore, these lyrics serve as a reminder that possibilities for worldbuilding can withstand the historically loaded looming “#death” hashtag.

The finale of “Death Canto” features a striking juxtaposition between two lyrics in two conspicuously different registers, and the double entendre in the final line makes for an ominous ending:

o say can u see #death [song, U.S. National Anthem, 1916]

shots shots shots shots shots shots #death [song, LMFAO and Lil Jon, 2009]

Line 39, “o say can u see #death,” reproduces the first half of the first line of the U.S. national anthem, “The Star-Spangled Banner.” In my video adaptation of “Death Canto” (see Appendix 3), I have elected to use a clip of renowned African American singer Beyoncé singing the national anthem before Super Bowl XXXVIII in 2004 to represent this line. This decision is informed by Teebs’s evident admiration of Beyoncé, which also emphasizes the ironic fact that the national anthem was originally penned by wealthy slave owner and lawyer Francis Scott Key.<sup>8</sup> (My creative move is also in consonance with the ending lines of the Teebs tetralogy in *Feed*: “As their eyes / were watching / Beyoncé” [78].) Beyoncé’s presence in “Death Canto,” like the artists in lines 29-35, gives the ending a jolt of energy charged with optimism. As Teebs mentions later in *Feed* when discussing Beyoncé’s song “XO,” he sees her as a source of illumination in the darkness: “You give me everything. The dark is, in fact, teeming with life” (57). The tempo in Beyoncé’s rendition of “o say can u see” slows in what feels like a calm before a storm. These five words in the modern day are, of course, associated with reverence and steeped in revolution, considering the song’s place in (and recounting of) U.S. history. And invoking the “The Star-Spangled Banner” injects a sense of unity or consolation into the conclusion of “Death Canto,” but it also works to

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reinforce *Nature Poem*'s recurring sky and star imagery.<sup>9</sup> Diametrically opposed to "o say can u see" is the ridiculous series of six "shots" that follow to close out "Death Canto." On the surface, the party culture-driven hook from hip-hop artists LMFAO (Redfoo and Sky Blu) and Lil Jon's "Shots" (2009) is upbeat, mindless, and at times almost humorous with its absurd lyrics. The hook's delivery, base, and synths are all aggressive. Its tone is deliberately self-indulgent and flippant. The music video shows a crowd of ordinary people converted by the LMFAO duo and Lil Jon into imbibing partygoers.<sup>10</sup> Line 40's connection to alcohol abuse within American Indian communities is blatant, as Teebs later notes in a tongue-in-cheek remark about the expectations of Indigenous poetry, "An NDN poem must reference alcoholism" (57). Resorting to alcohol consumption is often a coping mechanism for stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues, all of which have historically plagued American Indian communities. But an alternative reading might construe the six "shots" as the sound of a firearm at discharge.<sup>11</sup> This adds a graveness to the end of the section, especially if we pay heed to the "#death" hashtag that has the last word. These six "shots" are a somber reminder of the ongoing challenges faced by Black and Indigenous communities in the U.S., which disproportionately bear the impact of gun-related crimes, such as per capita rates of violent victimizations, non-fatal injury, and homicide.<sup>12</sup> While the firearm (musket), as a weapon of war, played a pivotal role in securing victory in the American Revolutionary War, as a commonplace object in the modern day, the firearm alluded to in "Death Canto" symbolizes the deadening of Black and Indigenous agency. Though the U.S. national anthem may evoke romantic notions of freedom, liberty, and justice, the specter of #death after the six shots underscores a more serious reality of gun violence in urban environments, amplified by digital media coverage in news and entertainment. The theme of mass death by gun violence in NDN communities is echoed in the ending of the contemporaneous *There There* (2018) by Tommy Orange, in which a bloody shootout at the Big Oakland Powwow concludes the intersection of the novel's main characters. *There There*'s "Interlude" discloses that these "shots will

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come from everywhere, inside, outside, past, future, now" (140) as if the fatal bullets have historical, recursive, and prophetic properties.

The last line carries connotations of gun violence, mass death, alcoholism, and a hint of comedy, ostensibly painting a rather pessimistic final picture of Teebs's engagement with the digital urban. But at the same time, as I have mentioned throughout this article, the ending of "Death Canto" does present a chance of hope that charts a promising path moving forward. Maynard offers guidance through the kind of doom-scrolling crisis Teebs exhibits, as she states, "For us to live in anything that I hope we can one day call freedom, it is necessary to put a swift end to the death-drive-disguised-as-worldview" (24). Teebs is prone to attributing "#death" to the urban digital way of life. Early in *Nature Poem*, Teebs is depressingly honest, asserting that "The world is infected" (12). His negative ruminations slowly compound out of control, digging himself deeper into a hole of despair. Teebs's "Death Canto" can be seen as a "death-drive-disguised-as-worldview" in the urban digital context, where his dredging of the dark past becomes compellingly addictive, but as Thomas King points out, "to believe in such a past is to be dead" (106). If Teebs truly aspires to "make the opposite of death" (*Nature Poem* 66), then his coalition of Black artists and their music in the face of #death proves successful as it demonstrates a form of resistance, a defiance of narratives that models how to unsettle settler colonial imaginings. Teebs's attempt at an "end to the death-drive" (Maynard 24) in an urban NDN nature poem perhaps also succeeds in "disrupt[ing] the current impulse and tendency within the academy that seems to focus on and find Black death wherever it looks" (King 31).

In this article, I have tried to demonstrate that certain lines in "Death Canto" can be approached linearly to form groups of clustered close readings and analyzed in further detail to reveal deeper interpretive meanings and connections. A meticulous unpacking of the easily glossed-over multisensory excerpts in "Death Canto" affords us ways to understand Teebs's

relation to and perception of the urban NDN experience. If poetry based on ancient earthworks from the American Indian past has the capacity to carry “mathematical patterning” and “forgotten sign systems” (Allen 808) for future readers to decipher, as Chadwick Allen has shown with Allison Hedge Coke’s *Blood Run* (2006), then I want to suggest that future-oriented NDN poems that feature the urban digital, such as Pico’s *Nature Poem*, can similarly contain codes and profound messages which readers possessing digital fluency may unravel.<sup>13</sup> By investigating, identifying, and then stringing together the intertexts in Pico’s “Death Canto” to form a video adaptation, I hope to have also shown that recreating Pico’s more digital-based sections opens his work up to a different kind of comprehension and appreciation. Kyle Bladow writes that Pico’s poetry as a landscape denotes a kind of “visual art” (69) with “lyrics and aural qualities” that are meant to “be heard as much as read” (72), but I contend that certain portions of Pico’s work, such as “Death Canto,” can also actually be viewed to glean further insights. In the end, viewing Pico’s “Death Canto” from a bird’s eye view (see Appendix 1: Table 1) and in its original digital forms, studying its lines in groups and isolation, and drawing links to other areas of *Nature Poem* and the Teebs tetralogy allows for even more latent meanings couched in Pico’s intricately woven writing to see the light of day.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Hashtag, n.,” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, June 2022, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/59371427](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/59371427). Accessed 3 August 2022.

<sup>2</sup> According to Chelsea Vowel, “NDN is a term of more recent origin, in heavy use via social media. This shorthand term has no official meaning and is very informal. If you say it aloud it just sounds like Indian, so its use really only makes sense in text-based situations. NDN is more of a self-identifier than anything” (9).

<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the sections on 8 and 34 interweave Black and Indigenous histories, creating further connections between the two peoples in *Nature Poem*.

<sup>4</sup> Teebs notes later in *Nature Poem*, “I literally love Kelly Clarkson. Things reflect / their intersections” (49).

<sup>5</sup> The most popular instantiation of this line in the past few decades may be *Sophie’s Choice* (1982).

<sup>6</sup> See Sharon Walsh, "Cotton Industry Promotions Questioned; Agriculture: Two Agencies Spend Millions to Boost Fabric's Image, but Expenses for Swank Parties and Topless Clubs Are Drawing Scrutiny: Home Edition," *The Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles, 1998; Sharon Walsh, "Spending Hidden By a Cotton Curtain; Farmers' 'Promotional' Fees Used For Golf, Topless Dancing, Alcohol: FINAL Edition," *The Washington Post*, Washington, D.C., 1998; Oral Capps Jr., and John P. Nichols, "Our Cotton Study," *The Washington Post*, Washington, D.C., 1999.

<sup>7</sup> "Fever" was popularized by Peggy Lee in 1958. The video adaptation, therefore, uses a Peggy Lee performance as the snippet for the "yr givin me fever #death" line.

<sup>8</sup> Teebs mentions Beyoncé in *Nature Poem* multiple times: "The perigee moon haloes the white comforter in a Beyoncé way" (27), "that drop in 'Mine' by Beyoncé where she says 'no rest in the kingdom' (note to self: write pop song called 'Once, Twice, Three Times Beyoncé')" (42). Beyoncé is one of the most referred to artists throughout the Teebs tetralogy.

<sup>9</sup> This synchronizes "Death Canto" with the bracketing beginning and end structure of *Nature Poem*. Although not explicitly mentioned in "Death Canto," the national anthem's title, "The Star-Spangled Banner," and the second half of the first line, "by the dawn's early light" (emphasis by me) indirectly find an analog on the last page of *Nature Poem*: "The sun is / over the hill... and all across Instagram—peeps are posting pics of the / sunset" (74). Teebs' final remark—watching city folk take Instagram pictures of our solar system's lone star—is perhaps glimpsed in the tacit reference to the dawn in line 39 of "Death Canto."

<sup>10</sup> "LMFAO ft. Lil Jon - Shots (Official Video)," *YouTube*, uploaded by LMFAOVEVO, 4 Dec. 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNtEibFvIQ>.

<sup>11</sup> Coincidentally, revolvers or "six shooters" typically hold six cartridges.

<sup>12</sup> See "American Indians and Crime," The U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999, and Erika Harrell, "Black Victims of Violent Crime," The U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> See Chadwick Allen, "Serpentine Figures, Sinuous Relations: Thematic Geometry in Allison Hedge Coke's *Blood Run*," *American Literature*, vol. 82, no. 4, 2010, pp. 807-34.

Appendix 1: Table 1: Intertextual Source Map of “Death Canto”

Line #	Line Content	Originating Interest(s)	Medium(s)	Author(s)	Year(s)	Notes
1	the fabric of our lives #death	"The Fabric of Our Lives"	TV commercial	Cotton	1992	
2	some ppl wait a lifetime for a moment like this #death	"A Moment Like This"	Song	Kelly Clarkson	2002	
3	reach out and touch someone #death	"Reach Out and Touch Someone"	TV commercial	AT&T	1987	
4	he kindly stopped for me #death	"Because I could not stop for Death"	Poem	Emily Dickinson	1890	Originally also used by Bell in the late 1970s
5	kid-tested, mother-approved #death	"Kid Tested, Mother Approved"	TV commercial	Kix (cereal company)	1978 (slogan), 1982 (commercial)	Poem used and possibly popularized in the film adaptation <i>Sophie's Choice</i> (1982)
6	oops, I did it again #death	"Oops!... I Did It Again"	Song	Britney Spears	2000	
7	it keeps going, and going, and going #death	"Just Keeps Going"	TV commercial	Engelizer (battery company)	c. late 1980s to early 1990s	
8	I'm lovin' it #death	"I'm Lovin' It"	TV commercial	McDonald's	2003	
9	'cause you're worth it #death	"'Cause You're Worth It"	TV commercial	L'Oréal	1971 (slogan), 1973 (commercial)	
10	the best a man can get #death	"The Best a Man Can Get"	TV commercial	Gillette	1989	
11	maybe she's born with it #death	"Maybe She's Born With It"	TV commercial	Maybelline	1991	
12	a whole new world #death	<i>Aladdin</i>	Film	Disney	1992	
13	high flying adored #death	<i>Evita</i>	Film/Musical	Andrew Lloyd Webber	1978	Performed by Madonna and Antonio Banderas
14	be all that you can be #death	"Be All That You Can Be"	TV commercial	U.S. Army	1981	
15	it's... Alive!!! #death	<i>Frankenstien</i>	Film	James Whale (director)	1931	
16	the freshmaker #death	"The Freshmaker" (multiple)	TV commercial	Meatus	c. 1980s	
17	stick a fork in me #death	"The Butter Shave" in <i>Scinfeld</i>	TV episode	Larry David, Jerry Seinfeld,	1997	
18	when you've got it, flaunt it #death	<i>The Producers</i>	Film	Mel Brooks (director)	1967	
19	why you gotta be so rude #death	"Rude"	Song	MAGGI!	2014	
20	the best part of wakin' up #death	various commercials	TV commercial	Folger's Coffee	c. late 1990s	
21	it's morphin time #death	<i>Mighty Morphin Power Rangers</i>	TV show	Shuki Levy, Hann Shanon (creators)	1993-1996	
22	hello, is it me you're looking for? #death	"Hello"	Song	Lionel Richie	1984	
23	just do it #death	"Just Do It"	TV commercial	Nike	1988	
24	Got #death	"got milk?"	TV commercial	California Milk Processor Board, Michael Bay (director)	1993	
25	he can get it #death	"You Can Get It"	Song	Anjel	2003	
26	what's the 411, son #death	"What's the 411?"	Song	Mary J. Blige	1992	
27	takes a lickin and keeps on tickin #death	"Times - Takes a Licking and Keeps on Tickin'"	TV commercial	Times	c. 1960s	
28	hang in there, baby #death	"Hang in There, Baby"	Motivational Poster	Victor Balaban	1971	
29	me, big stuff, who do you think you are #death	"Mr. Big Stuff"	Song	Jean Knight	1971	
30	solid as a rock #death	"Solid"	Song	Ashford & Simpson	1984	
31	all day, every day #death	"All Day, Everyday"	Song	South Central Cartel	1997	
32	rude boy #death	"Rude Boy"	Song	Rihanna	2009	
33	yr givin me fever #death	"Fever"	Song	Little Willie John	1956	Popularized by Peggy Lee in 1958
34	that's the way love goes #death	"That's the Way Love Goes"	Song	Janet Jackson	1993	
35	almost doesn't count #death	"Almost Doesn't Count"	Song	Brandy Norwood	1999	
36	lived by Neil Patrick Harris #death	various award shows	n/a	n/a	c. 2010s	
37	yr not the boss of me #death	"Boss of Me"	Song	They Might Be Giants	2001	
38	clever girl #death	"Clever Girl"	Song	Tower of Power	1973	
39	o say can a see #death	"The Star-Spangled Banner"	Song	U.S. National Anthem	1916	From Francis Scott Key poem "Defense of Fort M'Henry" (1814)
40	shots shots shots shots shots #death	"Shots"	Song	LMP-AO, Lil Jon	2009	

## Appendix 2: Description and Breakdown of Table 1

The forty-lined originally untitled "Death Canto" appears close to the halfway point of *Nature Poem* (32-33/73). Every line is an excerpt derived from an outside source, making "Death Canto" a collage of sounds and visuals from the past unified under one repeating "#death" hashtag. Table 1 traces each line's source and its genre, author, year of publication and/or circulation, and, when applicable, supplementary notes. Identified genres in "Death Canto" include film (three lines), musical (one line), poetry (one line), song (seventeen lines), television commercial (fourteen lines), television show (two lines), and motivational poster (one line). Some genres tend to cluster more than others. For example, songs appear on lines 2, 6, 19, 22, 25, 26, 29-35, and 37-40, and TV commercials appear on lines 1, 3, 5, 7-11, 14, 16, 20, 23, 24, 27. Only one line (line 36) is anomalous: "hosted by Neil Patrick Harris" is a general introductory phrase used for television and film award shows and ceremonies. Every line is unique in the sense that each intertext and its author only appear once in "Death Canto." The periods from which the intertexts date also cover a broad range of years across multiple decades in the last two centuries. Line 4, "he kindly stopped for me," is the second line from Emily Dickinson's poem "Because I could not stop for Death," which was first published posthumously in 1890. (This Dickinson poem is featured in the 1982 Oscar nominated and winning film adaptation *Sophie's Choice*.) The second-to-last line, line 39, "o say can you see," is the first line of the U.S. national anthem (ratified by congress in 1931), but the lyrics come from a Francis Scott Key poem "Defence of Fort M'Henry" published in *The Analectic Magazine* in 1814, which makes line 39 the oldest intertext in "Death Canto." "It's... Alive!!!" on line 15 is a well-known quote from the 1931 James Whale film adaptation *Frankenstein* when Victor Frankenstein proclaims that his inanimate

composite creature has come to life. Aside from these three sources originating in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the rest of the intertexts hail from the late 1950s through to the mid-2010s: 1950s (line 33), 1960s (lines 18 and 27), 1970s (lines 9, 13, 28, 29, 38), 1980s (lines 3, 5, 7, 10, 14, 16, 22, 23, 30), 1990s (lines 1, 11, 12, 17, 20, 21, 24, 26, 34, 35, 37), early 2000s (lines 2, 6, 8, 32, 40), 2010s (lines 19, 31, 36). The tracing of intertexts facilitated and made more accessible by Table 1 thus illustrates the temporal and generic diversity immanent in “Death Canto.”

### Appendix 3: Note on the Video Production Process of “Death Canto”

(<https://youtu.be/UHVYoWCDijM>)

Before creating the video adaptation of the untitled section on pages 32-33 in *Nature Poem*, I contacted Tommy Pico through Instagram for permission to undertake this project. I am fortunate and grateful to have received written confirmation from him to create my “Death Canto” video adaptation, given how busy Pico is now that he is involved in screenwriting and television in addition to poetry writing. As discussed in the article, I do not intend to give the untitled section on 32-33 a definitive name. Doing so would assert control over a literary work I do not and cannot have authority over. My references to “Death Canto” should therefore be considered only a provisional name for purposes of convenience within the context of this article and this article only. In future discourse, with respect to Pico and *Nature Poem*, the “Death Canto” designation should be avoided and/or not used when referring to the composition on 32-33.

All video clips in the video adaptation are sourced from YouTube. When possible, I have used the originating intertext for each line. When unavailable, I have taken several creative liberties while trying to stay as true as possible to Pico, Teebs, and *Nature Poem*. For instance, line

4, "he kindly stopped for me #death," is from Emily Dickinson's posthumously published 1890 poem, "Because I could not stop for Death," but I have used a clip from the 1982 academy award-winning film *Sophie's Choice* where Dickinson's poem is read (24:28-24:31) by virtue of the film's cultural significance in the 1980s. Similarly, I use Beyoncé's singing of the U.S. national anthem before Super Bowl XXXVIII for line 39, "o say can u see #death," due to Teebs' fondness for her and Beyoncé's numerous appearances elsewhere in the Teebs tetralogy. For Line 36, "hosted by Neil Patrick Harris #death," I use the opening clip of the 2011 Tony Awards Opening Number. If one or more intertexts have been incorrectly identified or their year or origin are wrong, the error is mine and mine only.

The copyrighted video and sound snippets used in this video adaptation fall under fair use due to the academic, not-for-profit, and educational nature of this project as well as the short duration of each video and audio clip.

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## Refiguring Digital Landscapes: Online Pedagogical Hubs of Indigenous Latinx Youth

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Educational literature has long rendered invisible Indigenous Latinx youth in favor of a monolithic discourse of Latinidad (Chón et al. 135). For example, being grouped by nationalities (i.e. Mexican or Guatemalan) or as pan-ethnic identities (i.e. Hispanic or Latinx) does not fully express Indigenous peoples' cultural breadth, experiences, and languages throughout Latin America (Blackwell et al. 1). As such, many Indigenous Latinx migrants bring with them traditions, epistemologies, and family histories that they embrace and sustain through multiple avenues, or what Boj Lopez considers mobile archives of Indigeneity (Boj Lopez 202). In this paper, we focus on educational spaces created on social media, particularly through Instagram pages, where Indigenous Latinx youth actively engage in discourses of Indigeneity, borderlands, and colonialism. Additionally, we situate Instagram as a site of pedagogical depth that Indigenous Latinx youth deploy as co-curricular building projects.

Through our own praxis as educators, we came to the realization that the “traditional curriculum” actively misrepresents, distorts, and erases narratives and discourses of marginalized Communities of Color (Au et al. *Reclaiming the multicultural roots* 13). Particularly, Indigenous Latinx youth<sup>1</sup> continue to be overlooked within whitestream curricula (Grande 211). Oftentimes, the experiences of Indigenous Latinx youth, their cultural and spiritual practices, relationships to Land, languages, and histories are misrepresented and conflated with the projects of mestizaje and Latinidad (Chon et al. 137). In other words, *mestizaje*, which translates to “racial mixture”, and the pan-ethnic construction of Latinidad have served and continue to serve as a program of racial whitening through an attempt to eliminate both the Indigenous present and their proximity

to Blackness (Blackwell et al. 131; Urrieta and Calderón 146). We find it imperative that representations of Indigenous peoples and their knowledges are not only included in school curricula, but critically engaged with to challenge static notions of Indigeneity, the continued settler colonial project, and the relegation of Indigenous people to a colonial past. Too often, these discourses are deeply embedded within the settler colonial project of schooling and found even in multicultural, bilingual, or ethnic studies curricula that seek to be more inclusive of their multicultural students<sup>2</sup>. As Smith, Tuck, and Yang argue, this is not only about the creation of culturally responsive materials (Paris 94) but positioning “education as the vehicle for sustaining cultural knowledges that have otherwise been targeted for extinction” (*Indigenous and decolonizing* xvi). Thus, we examine Instagram posts and the related threads to analyze the ways Indigenous Latinx youth are creating learning landscapes outside of the traditional classroom through their own online pedagogical “hubs”.

We deploy Critical Latinx Indigeneities (Blackwell et al. 128) to make sense of an Instagram post shared by @newaumata who identifies as Quechua-Aymara and whose post is titled “Detribalized, Reconnecting, Indigenous: Further Debunking Attacks to ‘Latinx’ Reindigenization” and the various user responses to the post who actively participated in *refiguring* the conversation by nuancing, situating, and contemplating the overall premise of the post, which was mestizo/Latinx “reindigenization” through reclamation of an Indigenous identity. Given that these IG users are from geographically different places, they interpret, understand, and further navigate Indigeneity, Latinidad, and migration in distinct ways. CLI encourages us to look at the ongoing and “multiple contexts of power and multiple colonialities” (Blackwell et al. 128) as they relate to Indigenous Latinx migrants to the U.S. and how these migrations, most often due to political and economic violence, are in turn fostering critical discourse on the nuances of hemispheric Indigeneity. Thus, given the geographical difference between the various Instagram account users, we extend the conversation of CLI to include nuances on how systems of

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borderization can and do create contested “North and South” Indigenous narratives (Guidotti-Hernandez, *Unspeakable Violence* 19) via online interfaces. The account users draw on place-specific critiques of coloniality and Latinidad in relation to various borderlands and local scales, as they engage each other’s epistemic positions.

In this paper, we do not align with a single narrative about who is, or is not Indigenous, but more so create an opportunity to witness how Instagram has and is a generative site of pedagogical co-creation, a move we call *refiguring digital landscapes*. We define *refiguring digital landscapes* as digital spaces of dialogue, where Indigeneity is in motion and actively being (re)articulated and contested. Meighan details that a digital landscape is a “rapidly evolving landscape and influential proliferation of digital and online technologies in the past three decades since the creation of the World Wide Web in 1989” (398). Importantly, we also align with Meighan and how Indigenous people have been decolonizing the digital landscape beyond the coloniality of borders and against linguistic barriers (402). We view these re/articulations and contestations of multiple Indigeneities for different people, by Indigenous people, as part of refiguring the digital landscape.

In thinking through this concept, we pay close attention to what Caranto Morford and Ansloos describe as Land-based cyber-pedagogy, or the pedagogy that occurs in cyberspace where Indigenous people create digital-land-based connections through twitter (and other platforms) that reinforce their relationships to place and Land (297). Of key importance is also the specificity of *transnationality* within cyber Land-based pedagogies as Caranto Morford and Ansloos ask in the context of language revitalization “what happens to local land-based obligations when language revitalization movements are located within transnational digital ecologies like Twitter?” (301). Additionally, Duarte also acknowledges the transnational capacities of social media by detailing how the Zapatistas led a transborder and transnational grassroots anti-neoliberal movement (*Connected Activism* 3). Cyber Land-based pedagogies

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encourage us, then, to consider how digitality is implicated by transnational political, cultural, and pedagogical circuits.

By focusing on Instagram and paying particular attention to borderizations through a CLI framework, this paper suggests three key components: 1) how users from differing Indigenous territories can provide nuances on Latinidad and Indigeneity based on their own experiences 2) complicate the way in which settler colonialism (as an ongoing process) is interpreted within multiple geographic contexts 3) map the way that CLI is enacted via online interfaces. Indigenous Latinx youth are re-territorializing (Wilson et al. 3) social media to center their lived experiences, migrations, and diasporic knowledges since traditional education and schooling often fail to provide these pedagogical opportunities. Through *refiguring digital landscapes*, Indigenous youth are actively establishing robust digital worlds that—although they can be in contestation—foster a depth of epistemological and ontological importance.

### **Latinidad & Indigeneity**

Due to substantial scholarly work within Latinidades and Indigeneity, we will provide only a brief overview of the tensions that arise within the discourses of these terms, especially when Latinidad and Indigeneity are contextualized within emergent conversations. According to Urrieta and Calderón Indigeneity gets submerged, complicated, and engulfed by entanglements of Latinidad, as illuminated through their concept of Latinized entanglements (168). Put differently, Indigeneity becomes contentious because of the entanglements that Latinidad upholds as a pan-ethnic discursive construction that subsumes the possibilities of different worldings of Indigenous subjectivities. As a consequence, Latinidad upholds and contributes to settler colonial logics that are embedded within modalities of Latino/a, Hispano/a, and Chicano/a as pan-ethnic formations that can quickly be conflated with transnational formations and the tensions that often surround these.

Given the complex settler colonial and neoliberal histories that circulate hemispherically within Latin America and the U.S., an influx of migrations tends to follow suit due to state-sanctioned violence, illegal occupation of Indigenous territories, and racialized social hierarchies (Barajas 54; Urrieta, 2016, 162; Calderón 25). Education is neither benign nor innocent within these dynamics since many of the Latinx Indigenous youth and children that eventually migrate to the U.S. will attend school or receive some type of schooling services (Casanova 61; Calderón and Urrieta 232; Casanova et al. 200). As Alberto delineates, “seemingly beneficial projects such as education and health reform became sites of erasure of Indigenous knowledges and languages” (249) as schools reproduce settler futures (Tuck and Gatzimbide-Fernández 76) as they create multicultural narratives (i.e. melting pot) that construct the U.S. as a land of immigrants, free of Native sovereignty (Urrieta and Calderon 163). Although Indigeneity is constituted within various matrices of differentiability because of layered colonialities (Blackwell et al. 132), Latinx Indigenous migrants do not cease to be Indigenous upon their multiple migrations but do become situated within a transnational Indigenous diaspora in which they come to occupy other geographies of Indigeneity (Boj Lopez 215). In other words, “mobility is creating translocal Indigenous social worlds and transregional ways of being by exploring how socio-spatial relations are being reorganized in relation to Indigeneity, gender, and migration” (Boj Lopez 157).

As a response to these historical formations of Latinidad, Hispanidad, Chicanismo and Indigeneity, the terrain of Indigeneity itself has come to certain contestations on the politics of “authenticity” (Cotera and Saldaña-Portillo 553; Urrieta, 2017, 259). For example, Chicanismx and Chicanx studies has not necessarily taken into account the complexities and ongoing processes of settler colonialism because this would mean disrupting key dimensions of Chicanx political subjectivity such as the mythical land claim of Aztlan which occupies already existing Indigenous territories, in favor of a more palatable Indigenismo (Pulido 527; Wolfe 388). Furthermore,

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Chicanx indigenismo differs in purpose since it relies on a romanticized Aztec past through the conception of Aztlan’s mythical territory as the origin of Chicanx Indigeneity. Essentializations thus can emerge because of this latching onto in/authentic indigenous purity based on the preservation and reclamation of traditions and cosmologies. Even though these traditions are recreated and reimagined, they still rely on constructed dichotomies of what is in/authentic Indigeneity. These essentializations then construct an “authentic/inauthentic” dichotomy of Indigenous cultures and identities in which they are seen as cacophonous, or discordant and competing representations, that often rely on binaries within colonialist systems (Byrd, *The transit of empire* 44; Urrieta, 2017, 256). Latinized entanglements (Urrieta and Calderón 168) are therefore contingent upon the disappearance of the Indigenous through cultural purity and legal precarity. This section is not meant to be exhaustive, but it informs our entry into the complicated interactions between youth in terms of Indigeneity. Although we do not argue for a singular definition of Indigeneity, these scholars allow us to actively situate the discursive tensions that youth are complicating within their Instagram exchanges about Indigeneity, Latinidad, and Chicanismo.

### **Indigenous Digitality**

In the rapid age of emerging digital landscapes, youth are and continue to be immersed in these rapidly altering technological interfaces. Specifically, there has been generative scholarship that highlights Indigenous-technological relations and the way in which many Indigenous people maintain cultural connection, are sociopolitically active, and subvert the ongoing processes of colonization (Duarte, *Network Sovereignty* 15). For example, Ansloos and Morford draw from #NativeTwitter to describe language efforts of Indigenous people on Twitter as they engage in storywork within a social ecology and, importantly, how these Indigenous twitteratures are in fact technologies themselves (54). Social media and technology are powerful tools that have shaped, and continue to shape, political and social movements as evident during the Standing Rock

Movement, or #NoDAPL, where the Sioux people actively documented their transgression against a pipeline on their traditional territories by sharing their experiences transnationally to garner solidarity and support (Wilson et al.1). However, this is not to say that digital platforms, cyber space, and other technologies are benign or not implicated within structures of settler colonialism, anti-Black racism, and surveillance. In her critical work, Safiya Noble describes how search engines like Google are algorithmic in their anti-Black racism, a term that she puts forth as technological redlining (Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression* 1). Additionally, Noble argues that digital technologies are interwoven with power relations that expand transnationally, globally, and hemispherically (Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression* 171) with the outcome being that digital technologies and social media literature can often create a discourse that digitality is incomprehensible with Indigeneity (Menjívar and Chacón 8).

Although these realities persist, social media and Indigenous-based technologies do have the potential for Indigenous resurgence agendas of language, culture, and knowledge (Wemigwans, *A digital bundle* 2). Indigenous people strategically deploy social media practices to re-territorialize social media for Indigenous survivance and futurities (Wilson et al. 3) even though social media is in fact implicated within circulatory transits of coloniality and neoliberalism. The usage of social media is not new within Indigenous communities, and it was in fact Indigenous people from the state of Chiapas, Mexico who ushered in the utility of global technological activism. Organized under the name Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), or commonly known as the Zapatista movement, Indigenous people in Southern Mexico mobilized and used the internet as a tool for hemispheric solidarity to make known their fights against the nation-state of Mexico (Garrido and Halavais 165). Although the Zapatistas have been cited as the first social movement to deploy digital tactics for global mobilizing, it took years for academic literature to describe the depth of this social organizing (Duarte, *Connected Activism* 4). As Duarte in *Connected Activism* explains “while Chicana/o studies scholars recognised a familiar

approach to Mexican-state Indigeneity, it took a while for some strictly US and Canada-based Native studies scholars to allow for this new brand of Indigenous discourse to shape what would eventually become a stronger Native and Indigenous critique of neoliberal and neo-colonial approaches to globalisation and settlement” (4). Thus, what is imperative to delineate is the digital contributions that emerged from Indigenous people from the “Global South” that has influenced contemporary technological and cyberspace activism. Indigenous people are avid users of social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, however, few studies have focused on the impact of social media within Indigenous communities because of the perception that Indigenous people are technology-less, are not interested in participating in online environments, or should not participate because of technologies’ neoliberal underpinnings (Duarte 2).

### **Towards Refiguring *Digital Landscapes***

As this special issue calls for learning experiences of Indigenous people through/with technology and social media, we approach this topic as education scholars and how social media and digital landscapes shape, transform, and nuance learning and knowledge. In this essay, we “refigure digital landscapes” to quite literally mean the way in which Indigenous Latinx youth learn through and with a reterritorialization (Wilson et al. 3) of Land relations through the creation of online pedagogical “hubs”. We draw inspiration from the concept of a “hub” to mean a geographical, visual, and, we add, a *pedagogical* concept that suggests “how landless Native Americans maintain a sense of connection to their tribal homelands and urban spaces through participation in cultural circuits and maintenance of social networks, as well as shared activity with other Native Americans in the city and on the reservation” (Ramirez, *Native hubs* 3). These online pedagogical “hubs” have also invited us to consider how we ourselves participate and are implicated in these ongoing learning landscapes of Indigenous subjectivity.

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Furthermore, these digital landscapes are a culmination of pedagogical “hubs” that youth participate in to unsettle static notions of Indigeneity and fortify Land relations. Although fortifying Land relations may seem paradoxical to some, Indigenous people are indeed participating in Land-based education, pedagogy, and curriculum within digital environments (Caranto Morford and Ansloos 303). As Caranto Morford and Ansloos delineate, “online learning is not inevitably disconnected from analogue space and place. The ability to connect with one’s homeland through digital means has particularly transformative potential for Indigenous language learners who do not have physical access to their homelands and, thus, must learn from afar” (302). Thus, we align with Caranto Morford and Ansloos’s articulation of digital Land-based pedagogies.

We also deploy *refiguring* from Nxumalo’s concept of refiguring presences which states “a methodology of refiguring presences, as a way to creatively grapple with, interruptively respond to, as well as work through the doubts, complicated frictions, discomforts, knots and silences that... throw up in research and practice” (641). Although Nxumalo articulates refiguring presences in terms of early childhood and environmental education and their everyday anti-colonial encounters, refiguring is attuned to the “complicated frictions” and “discomforts” that an emerging digital landscape situate. Refiguring is therefore a process of co-creation in which millennial knowledge is shared, but also challenged and nuanced into new figurations or co-labored and relational co-understandings; thus, although the examples we provide in this piece are not always in alignment with each other, it is precisely these conflicting viewpoints from Indigenous Latinx people that further extend our understanding of colonialism, Land, Indigenous subjectivities, and digitality.

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## Theoretical Frameworks

The two theoretical frameworks that we employ are the concept of the “hub” (Ramirez, *Native hubs* 11) and Critical Latinx Indigeneities (Blackwell et al. 126). We envision critical community building through virtual cartographic and geopolitical “hubs” (Ramirez, *Native hubs* 11) that make visible the ways that Indigenous Latinx youth attend to issues of power, privilege, and oppression. Ramirez presents the “hub” as a “cultural, social, and political concept” (*Native hubs* 3) with transformative possibilities for Native and Indigenous identity as well as political power. Additionally, we draw from Critical Latinx Indigeneities (Blackwell et al. 126) as a conceptual framework to situate how Indigenous Latinx youth are using Instagram platforms to analyze multiple and contested registers of Indigeneity. To further complicate these socio-political territories, CLI provides a lens to engage with the often contested and conflicting terrain of Indigeneity and Latinidad that must be attuned to overlapping colonialities (Blackwell et al. 129).

Critical Latinx Indigeneities, or CLI, is dedicated to reflecting how Indigeneity constructions are constituted through and across multiple countries, spatial-temporal logics, overlapping colonialities, shared geographies, assertions of authenticity, and what is referred to as the cacophonous (Alberto 252; Blackwell et al. 129; Blackwell 157; Byrd, *The transit of empire* 44). Specifically, the cacophonous connotes the often discordant and contentious configurations of in/authentic representations of Indigeneity through the pervasive binarisms produced and reinforced through (settler)colonial systems (Byrd, *The transit of empire* as cited in Urrieta, 2017 256). This is especially so in the migratory processes of Indigenous peoples from Latin America, who have/are often plagued by this hegemonic imaginary; that once they migrate, they cease to exist as Indigenous. Critical Latinx Indigeneities makes a key intervention, as this theoretical maneuver suggests that although Indigenous migrants from Latin America are indeed settling (and are therefore settlers) on other Indigenous Land, there are co-constitutive relationships between

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Indigenous migrants and the capacities of power of the colonial empire that must be accounted for (Blackwell et al. 127).

Ramirez provides a useful theoretical tool to engage with the complexities of Land, Native and Indigenous identity, and pedagogy. The “hub”, as Ramirez argues, is a geographical and visual concept that suggests “how landless Native Americans maintain a sense of connection to their tribal homelands and urban spaces through participation in cultural circuits and maintenance of social networks, as well as shared activity with other Native Americans in the city and on the reservation” (*Native hubs* 3). In this sense, hub-making becomes a multidimensional process that involves re-membling, negotiating relations with diaspora and transnationalism, and situated within multiple configurations of citizenship. We argue that online spaces are constitutive spaces in which these hubs can and do manifest, especially conversations about Indigeneity within diaspora, cultural reclamation, and multiple meanings of citizenship. As stated previously, we are encouraged to think of these “hubs” as a pedagogical endeavor that relates to the reconfiguration of an Indigenous learning landscape.

### **Methods and Methodology**

Between late 2019 and early 2023 we engaged with numerous Instagram accounts and materials that were curated towards Indigenous people of Latin America. We position our methodological approach through digital ethnography which consisted of engaging with fifteen Instagram accounts that we identified as examples of content relating to issues of Indigenous people from Latin America. Although there are many instances of pedagogical hub-making on Instagram, we were particularly interested in pedagogical hubs where Instagram users created an online space, or better yet refigured the digital landscape, to invite or engage a multitude of perspectives. Many of the accounts were curated for a specific purpose and oftentimes they were separate from their own personal Instagram accounts, which is indicative of the purposeful

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creation of these pedagogical hubs. For example, some of the Instagram accounts would post and repost certain content while providing an in-depth opinion within the caption on whatever they were addressing. This could range from reposting content from a different page about Indigenous language revitalizations in Mexico, to specifically creating a post to address a contesting perspective on what it means to reclaim an Indigenous identity for those who are from Latin America.

As noted, we decided to highlight one post (from a series of two) from @newamauta a Quechua-Aymara Instagram user which underscores arguments about Indigenous authenticity, mestizaje, and migration in relation to Latin America. We purposefully disclose the username because the user detailed in their caption on the second post of the series (we engaged with the first post) that the posts were a gift. They state “This is the sequel to my guide on debunking [arguments] against detribalized/reconnecting Natives! Any and all arguments are yours to use, copy, cite, repeat, etc. It is a gift from a Quechua-Aymara to all the detribalized and reconnecting Indian siblings out there! 🌍 Wajmanta anchata agradekuykichej masisniy! 📖” (@newamauta). Framing the post as of *gift*, in many ways, speaks to Wemigwans’ provocation of digital bundles—sacred, community-based, and digital artifacts that must be cared for and respected (35). As recipients of this gift, we carefully enter the pedagogical hub and situate ourselves as both learners and witnesses of the knowledge that is unfolding within the interactions of the post.

The ethics of digital ethnography are critical to address, as Smith reminds us that research has/continues to have a tumultuous and imperial relationship with Indigenous communities (44). Digital ethnography must be attuned to the shapeshifting nature of digitality that prompts questions of ethics, power, and coloniality. For example, Carlson and Frazer demonstrate how Indigenous social media users affectively sense a “settler gaze” best described as a digital

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panopticon where their interactions are continuously implicated within broader power relations (8). Through a Native feminist perspective and drawing from Indigenous onto-epistemologies of Land as kin, reinterpreting cyberspace through relationality reframes “cyberspace as a place where Indigenous people can assert digital stewardship... Indigenous peoples earmark domains for sustaining and creating cultural (technological) protocol while guarding against others” (Cordes 287). Making sense of cyberspace as affectual and effected by the settler gaze and weaving in digital Indigenous feminist critiques necessitates certain protocols we must be conscientious of which includes our own positions as authors engaging in digital ethnographic methods. We as authors come from a variety of intersections of identity which includes Indigenous, queer, Indigenous Latinx, diasporic, and migrant amongst many more. For the scope of this article, we purposefully do not engage with the posts via responding but instead enact ethnographic witnessing as our means of engagement with the Instagram posts. In other words, we look through the already forming pedagogical hubs given two of the authors, Pablo Montes and Judith Landeros, are avid users of Instagram and engage in pedagogical formations elsewhere. However, for this particular pedagogical hub, we do not post because we feel as if this article highlights how people form these online learning spaces where a larger audience is invited to think with the content.

The comment section of the post was a particularly interesting space as this is where we encountered generative (yet contentious) discourses on Indigenous issues. However, we recognize that there are ethical considerations to contend with as we consider engaging in digital ethnography analyzing Instagram posts and the comments section. Therefore, we have completely anonymized all commenters on the post by obscuring their profile picture and their username. We do so because we have not garnered consent from these users, and we feel that anonymizing, although imperfect, is the most appropriate step. We also acknowledge that regardless of if we

anonymize the users, there is still a sense of traceability through the original post and we hope that through this recognition, we can move towards respectful and careful analysis.

In similar respects to Bonilla and Rosa’s argument of how hashtags on Twitter are a field site (sites of analysis), we also draw on this methodology to situate how Instagram accounts, the comment section, and re-posts can be interpreted in similar, yet distinct, ways. Specifically, Bonillas and Rosa argue that “recognizing hashtags can only ever offer a limited, partial, and filtered view of a social world does not require abandoning them as sites of analysis. Rather, we must approach them as what they are: entry points into larger and more complex worlds” (7). Aligning with this sentiment, we position the perspectives collected and presented in this article as not necessarily representative of Indigenous Latin America, but an entry point of interpretation of what Indigenous Latinx youth are contemplating both transnationally and locally. Attuning to these differing perspectives, and rejecting the urge for coherency and linear thinking, we can begin to create a relatively rigorous Indigenous perspective (Wemigwans, *A digital bundle* 46). In this respect, we situate ourselves as *guests* entering the pedagogical hub and hold the conversation in honorable and careful ways as “digital bundle” would encourage us we do (Wemigwans, *A digital bundle* 36).

We originally decided to focus on two Instagram pages for the purpose of this research. Since then, however, we became aware of sexual assault allegations of one of the Instagram users and in good conscience, we could not amplify this person’s platform knowing that violence and harm have been inflicted. In alignment with ethnographic refusal (Tuck and Yang 225) we agreed to not include the original posts and shift our analysis to another pedagogical hub. As Tuck and Yang describe “refusal, and stances of refusal in research, are attempts to place limits on conquest and the colonization of knowledge by marking what is off limits, what is not up for grabs or discussion, what is sacred, and what can’t be known” (225). Although our refusal of

“what is not up for grabs or discussion” required a reorientation of the paper, the theoretical architecture of this piece remained.

To continue with our analysis, we decided to both revisit the Instagram accounts and materials that we had originally gathered and search for more recent posts in late 2022 and early 2023. We specifically looked through Instagram accounts that posted relatable content on Indigeneity, Latinidad, Ch/Xicanism<sup>3</sup>, etc. Many of the pages were accounts that we ourselves engaged with, however, through the accounts that we follow we were able to sift through the “following” tab on their account in order to find other pages that posted similar content. We assembled posts such as images, memes, gifs, videos, quotes, reposts, and conversation threads. Subsequently, we archived, analyzed, and coded the posts and threads to further understand how Indigenous Latinx youth connect and participate with others. Our coding approach was based on how youth engaged discourses of Indigeneity, Land, settler colonialism, and borderizations. Our methods were guided by a digital ethnography approach (Kaur-Gill & Dutta 2) which consisted of analyzing, reflecting, and discussing the posts and emerging codes amongst the three authors. The posts and conversation threads that we examined were gathered during our search on Instagram and circling back to Bonilla and Rosa, we first and foremost position these conversations as both temporally situated yet generative as sites of analysis.

### **Discourses of Authenticity, Indigenous Identity, and Im/migration by Indigenous Latinx Youth on Instagram**

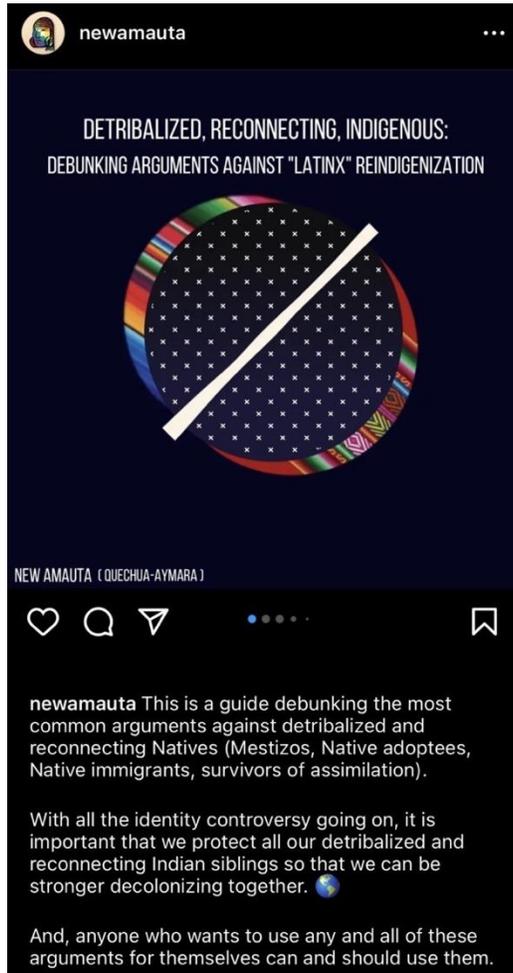
We encountered many compelling conversations on Instagram that addressed the question of “who is considered Indigenous?” and even more importantly “*how and when* is one considered Indigenous” within the context of Latin America and Indigenous people from Latin America who are born in or have immigrated to the United States (Chón et al.,136). The discourses that surfaced grappled with the multiple and competing iterations of Indigeneity, colonialism, and

Latinidad, prompted by an original post and the commentary that followed by other users. Ultimately, we highlight how these interactions between users, the original post, and further commentary invite us to *refigure* these digital interactions as more than exchanges made in social media, toward a *digital landscape* that is embedded within pedagogical and curricular importance by opening possibilities for other Instagram users to create a tapestry of knowledge and story sharing. Importantly, *refiguring digital landscapes* opens the possibilities for these interactions to serve as online pedagogical hubs where questions of Indigeneity, Land, migration, and Latinidad are forefronted.

Although online pedagogical hubs can be generative, this should not imply that all pedagogical hubs are benign and amiable. That is to say, pedagogical hubs are also filled with tension, vehement disagreement, and sometimes blatant disrespect. We also fully acknowledge that although we identify the following interactions as pedagogical hubs, users may not necessarily see them as such, especially if they are commenting in stark disagreement. The question of “*Who is it pedagogical for?*” is imperative to consider, especially as we are engaging in the discourse in an adjacent manner since we do not comment or reply to any of the users or on the original post. Consequently, the online pedagogical hub should not be considered an always cordial formation, but through the tension we can also find the pedagogical depth of the discourse.

The post that is shared below is from a Quechua-Aymara account titled “Detribalized, Reconnecting, Indigenous: Further Debunking Attacks to ‘Latinx’ Reindigenization” which already suggests the post will discuss the contentious issue of Latinx and Mestizx claims to Indigenous identity. Instagram has the option to post multiple pictures in a series through the multi-post option, which the following user deployed. We highlight four out of the ten arguments they posted below.

Figure 1: Post by IG user on Detribalized Latinx People and “Reindigenization”



**ARG 1: “DETRIBALIZED NATIVES/MESTIZOS ARE WHITE PRETENDIANS. THEY DON’T NATIVE ANCESTORS”**

**ANSWER:**

False. US Pretendians are often white settlers without a single drop of Native blood. Detribalized “Latinxs” (Mestizos) often have a majority of Native blood. Mestizo refers to someone with too much Native ancestry to be white.

Many detribalized Natives don’t just have ancestors, they have Indigenous grand/parents. Native immigrants to the US often hide their language and culture due to shame or fear, causing the children to become detribalized.

Many detribalized peoples will also have ancestors found in Church records. But due to language barriers, travel costs, and racism, many Natives can’t access these records, especially in Latin America. So they are left with only their brown skin & Native blood.



NEW AMAUTA

**ARG 5: “THEY DON’T HAVE THE LIVED EXPERIENCE.”**

**ANSWER:**

Again, this reduces Natives to a single (and stereotypical) lived experience to be Native, but under a lens of social justice. Detribalized lived experience is 1 of many Native experiences, and it’s one that’s inseparable from being racialized as Native because skin and blood.

Also, lived experience is too individualistic. Beyond it is collective experience. Detribalized Natives are also survivors of 1492 and its physical genocides. But cultural genocide was more effective on Detribalized Native families, leading to the self-hate & assimilation they carry today.

Telling a Detribalized Native that their lost ancestry was only their fault and colonization had nothing to do about it, is literally blaming the victim and a form of lateral violence. Reversing cultural genocide is a lived experience too!



NEW AMAUTA

**ARG 6: “PEOPLE WHO AREN’T BORN/DIDN’T GROW UP IN THEIR NATIONS CAN’T BE INDIGENOUS.”**

**ANSWER:**

Native adoptees and migrants were forced to not grow up in their communities due to settler policies and poverty. Saying this blames the Native victim for their separation from their own nation. It’s another form of lateral violence

The 60’s scoop in Canada forced Natives into white families to separate/assimilate them culturally. War and poverty led many Latin American Natives to be adopted out to US/Europe. No one says 60’s scoop survivors aren’t Native anymore. But Latin American Natives are told they’re only Latinx now.



NEW AMAUTA

**ARG 7: “NATIVE MIGRANTS ARE DIFFERENT, THEY CHOSE TO LEAVE.”**

**ANSWER:**

Forcing Natives to migrate is an old settler policy. In 1952, the US began the Urban Indian Relocation Program to voluntary push Natives from reservations to major cities, to eliminate depopulated reservations. Then why did Natives leave ? They suffered poverty on the rez and wanted economic opportunities & jobs/

Many Latin American Indians were forced to migrate to the US due to civil wars in El Salvador (1979-92), Guatemala (1964-96), Peru (1980-2000), etc. Many Native adoptees were also taken during this period. No one questions US Natives who relocated. Why question these “Latinx” Natives?



NEW AMAUTA

Figure 1 highlights many of the arguments that the user has encountered about "reconnecting Latinx Natives". Although the full post is not included, these different pictures within the original post provide a panoramic view of the contested issue within the discourse of in/authentic Indigeneity in Latin American communities, especially those who migrate to and are born in the United States. Of particular consideration is argument 1 "Detribalized Natives/Mestizos are White Pretendians: They Don't [Have] Native Ancestors" which suggests how the discourse of "pretendianism" within the U.S. is not translatable to those who are from the Latin American diaspora. Specifically, the user suggests that a considerable number of people from the Latin American diaspora have Indigenous ancestry, families, and communities but because of their migration and colonial state violence (both in the U.S. and within their respective countries), migrants and those in diaspora are forced to hide their languages, cultures, and identities. The user also mentions that detribalized Natives/Mestizos have "majority native blood" and are often referred to as "mestizo" because they have "too much native ancestry to be white".

While this post puts forward provocative discussion, we circle back to CLI to further complicate the discursive tension between *mestizaje*, Indigeneity, and Latinidad. The user is articulating a sentiment that migrants who are rendered as Latinx or mestizx, are actually Indigenous peoples because of Native ancestry, culture, and geography. In particular ways, @newamauta adjacently mentions how Latin American migrants are inculcated by U.S. racial ideologies upon their arrival, foreclosing Indigeneity as a possibility while actively disappearing the "Indian" through a colonial calculus (Saldaña-Portillo 143). While forced "Latinization" on Indigenous transnational migrants is indeed a reality, what is also true is the colonial projects of *mestizaje* and *indigenismo*. Although Latinidad draws from a collective presencing of pan-ethnic solidarity, the dual processes of *mestizaje* and *indigenismo*, which are often argued as imperially durable discourses, remain cemented within Latinidad and Hispanidad themselves and cater to a eugenicist program of *blanqueamiento* (whitening), anti-blackness (Daché et al. 134), and

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Indigenous erasure (Urrieta and Calderón 168; Urrieta et al.3; Boj Lopez 203). Indigenismo refers to the “science of being Indian—a science practiced by nonindigenous people—positing the Indian as the origin of the nation and its problem” (Saldana-Portillo, *Indian given* 39) which romanticized an Indigenous past and encapsulated it into an authentic form and mestizaje, as explained earlier, relies on this notion of racial hybridity through the erasure of Indigeneity and blackness. What @newamuata shares is one truth, that many Indigenous migrants from Latin America are inscribed as Latinx or Hispanic. An additional, and often competing, truth remains present as well which explicates how not every person from Latin America navigates transnationality as an Indigenous person.

Furthermore, Urrieta and Calderón state that “Latinx, as a regulatory category and signifier, positions and labels a collective into the landscape of the whitestream settler imaginary. In this imaginary Latinxs are homogenized into categorical difference despite our diversity, and it becomes a norming difference, a racial project to fit into the white supremacist vertical, racial, settler colonial structure on which this country is founded.” (165). While interpreting Indigenous migrant subjectivity through nation-state projects, such a mestizaje and Latinidad, imposes the narrative of the perpetual “foreigner” never truly or fully Indigenous in the U.S. (Saldaña-Portillo 140), CLI encourages us to also consider the multiple colonialities that speak to how anti-Indigenous and anti-Black violence is perpetuated by those who are mestizx or Latinx in Latin American territories. While @newamauta suggests the Latinx and mestizx subjects as detribalized Indigenous people, through a CLI analysis, we position and recognize the enduring anti-Indigenous and anti-Black violence as often reinscribed by those who are not culturally, politically, or communally Indigenous and/or Black. For example, in Mexico the creole elites strategically encapsulated notions of citizenship, modernity, and nationalistic imaginaries with the concept of mestizaje, and by association, to indigenismo (Alberto 249; Lopez and Irizarry 1542). This circumscribed Indigeneity into a peripheral but celebrated usable past (Alberto 249) that

allowed nationalistic and anti-Indigenous discourses to de-indigenize Indigenous migrants from Latin America because of their migrations through altering racializations and terrains of coloniality (Boj Lopez 204; Barillas Chón 7; Blackwell 163; Blackwell et al., 2017, 132). The homogenizing potency of Latinidad and Hispanidad provide a platform to the continued colonial project of whiteness and settler occupation by subsuming the Indigenous body into its discursivity, which renders them a deterritorialized, liminal, and “new” Latino immigrant (Author et al., 2019, 230; Calderón 28).

### **Refiguring “Reindigenization” and Contesting Latinidades**

Blackwell et al. (2017) make note of how a hemispheric Indigenous analytic is necessary when thinking with Indigenous people from Latin America (128). Specifically, they mention how intra-Latinx racism in the U.S. is catalyzed by eugenics, racial hostility, anti-Blackness, and anti-Indigeneity, and how the popular discourse of Latinidad further amplifies these violences upon those most susceptible to harm (Blackwell et al., 2017, 129). Therefore, it is imperative to consider how Latinidad and mestizaje cannot simply imply Indigenous identity because of the *real* anti-Indigenous and anti-Black violence interwoven with the historical, cultural, and assimilative mechanisms of mestizo formations. More specifically, scholars have pointed to the dual violence of mestizaje as a project of racial miscegenation whereby the nation-state promotes ideologies of a “new race” that can *only* emerge by discarding Indigeneity and Blackness and through *indigenismo* which only allows a folkloric and “retrievable” Indigenous past to exist in the newly formed mestizo state (Alberto 249). Thus, although the original post proposes an open invitation for a “reindigenization” by allowing detribalized/mestizo people’s rightful claim to Indigeneity, we take pause to further situate how “Mestiz@s’ very claims to a distant and lost Indigenous ancestor (only one) and their, often, performed Indigeneity in folkloric ways, contributes to the erasure and denial of Indigeneity for people who live Indigenous realities, good and/or difficult,

on an everyday basis” (Urrieta, 2016, 259). Knowing this, we also are aware that we cannot speak on the totality of a hemispheric Indigenous analytic. As scholars from the Mexican states of Michoacán and Guanajuato, with differing journeys through Indigenous identity, we enter these pedagogical hubs as both learners and people with lived experiences.

The comment section of the post in Figure 1 is where online pedagogical hubs emerged, as you will see in Figure 2. Namely, various users actively participated in *refiguring* the conversation by nuancing, situating, and contemplating the overall premise of the post, which was mestizo/Latinx “reindigenization” through reclamation of an Indigenous identity. Users crafted responses to specifically address components of the post creating a hub whereby others could engage in this type of public pedagogy.

The image shows a screenshot of a social media comment thread. It features three distinct comments from different users, each with a colored profile picture and a heart icon to the right. The first comment is from a user with a light blue profile picture, the second from a user with a yellow profile picture, and the third from a user with a light blue profile picture. The text of the comments discusses the complexities of Indigenous identity, racialization, and the term 'mestizo' in Latin America, with users sharing personal perspectives and experiences.

**USER 1** This is interesting. It's true northern folks often don't have a clear understanding of Latin American history and racial dynamics. A few additional thoughts/comments: the "mestizo" definition has changed and is not solely what you've defined and I'd say it can become a way for whites in Latin America to escape whiteness. An example would be the census in Bolivia, where some of the white elite and blancoids were demanding the mestizo category come back. By clinging to mestizo as a way to avoid accountability for their whiteness. The "mestizo" has changed throughout the decades and no longer means someone of mostly native origin (which is where I see the terms white mestizos, blancoids, coming from). Another being that while you mention CNI accepting mestizos, and Reinaga, that's not the case for all communities. Many mestizos (especially those who don't "look" indigenous) are just seen and accepted as white, from my experience in Bolivia. Example: when Aymara activists rejected Rivera Qusiqanqui for actually being "white" and not actually Aymara. That's ultimately something to be reckoned with, identifying as indigenous as diaspora in the United States etc vs how we are seen, accepted, socialized in our countries of origin in Latin America. And the unequal power dynamics that holds. That touches on the "lived experience", which like you said is not just a single experience as I see it, but tied to being racialized, socialized, and accepted as an indigenous person in the Americas, (which context looks different based on the region) but is distinct from someone who is not seen as such. That experience, the specific violence they experience, is something that should not be overlooked and generalized with the overall experience of "detrIALIZED narratives".  
16w 28 likes Reply

**USER 2** @USER 1 the only issue i have with the rivera example is, sure being indigenous can be seen how one is racialize but then that would also ultimately lead to Afro indigenous people to not be seen as amerindian because theyre just racialized as black. (also some aymara activist may see it that way but not all aymara people so whos to say) not to mention that other people in bolivia also say that evo morales is mestizo for the fact that he doesnt speak aymara. But he is racialized as indian. so groups of people can have these opinions too but who decides who is and isnt indian?  
now i personally dislike the term detritalize but ultimately we are in this place and time where some mestizos are racialized as indian but refuse to identify as such despite ancestry despite culture out of fear.  
16w 11 likes Reply

**Comment**  
16w 2 likes Reply

**USER 1** @USER 2 @USER 2 The Afro-indigenous part I agree. I personally feel more comfortable with Afro-indigenous folks and Afro/black reconnecting folks than white mestizos. Their experience is worth highlighting and acknowledging in particular in the convos of Reconnecting.  
With evo morales I 100% agree that he is a good example of someone racialized and socialized as indigenous, despite him not speaking Aymara. Very few people question that, mainly because of his phenotypes and background (ironically Rivera said he wasn't indigenous lol!). Who decides who's Indian? That's a hard one. (It's also worth mentioning the debate the debate of indigenous vs Indian/indio in Bolivia). And I don't think there's a one-size fits all answer and my understanding comes from my background. What I mentioned about being seen as white is not from the non-indigenous perspective in Bolivia. Y'all should've seen when my white looking (technically mestizo) partner came to my fams hometown. 🤔  
What I think helps is acknowledging that these convos seem to be about a specific population and understanding of mestizos.  
16w 8 likes Reply

Figure 2, Responses to Original Post and Formation of Online Pedagogical Hub

Although we will not be able to address every comment, or the totality of each comment, we were especially interested in the comments that signaled a transnational perspective of mestizaje and how reclaiming Indigeneity is afforded to white and even brown mestizos as opposed to Afro-Indigenous and Black people in Latin America. Specifically, USER 1 argues that mestizo/mestizaje is both an enduring racial project, and also one that has shifted throughout different Latin American contexts. USER 1 provides the example of Bolivia where white elites attempted to salvage the term “mestizo” by attempting to reintroduce it within the Bolivian census. This type of political project is a tactic for white elites in Latin America to escape and avoid accountability of whiteness by clinging on to this racially hybrid “other” which ultimately disavows mestizo claims to Indigeneity because mestizo can no longer be situated as “of mainly native origin” as USER 1 points out.

To further engage with this pedagogical hub, Cotera and Saldaña-Portillo provide us with insight into this conversation. Cotera and Saldaña-Portillo’s early work traces the genealogies of mestizaje and the consequences of Mexican-American, Chicanx, and Latinx claims to Indigeneity (553). Moreso, the original post’s annunciation of Mestizo and detribalized identity as Indigenous attempts to signal a “mestizo mourning”, or a gesture of mourning for an Indigenous ancestry foreclosed to mestizx people (Cotera and Saldaña-Portillo 562). To quote at length, Cotera and Saldaña-Portillo state: This rupture of the previously intimately connected categories of *mestizo* and Indigenous identity produced a condition that we are here calling *mestizo mourning*, mourning for the loss of a historically *filial* relationship with Indigenous people forged over centuries of interaction, intermarriage, collaboration, and alliance. Mexican American *mestizos* in the U.S. melancholically mourn a loss of Indigenous ancestry that has been foreclosed to them - not by biological relationship for what are *mestizos* if not the descendants of Indigenous

peoples?- but by the U.S. statecraft and racial nationalism, a statecraft and nationalism that directly contradicts and contravenes the statecraft of Mexican *mestizo* nationalism.

(562)

This mourning, albeit understandable, should not be romanticized where “detrribalized” is a standalone narrative for all Latin American detrribalized experiences because those who are “detrribalized” can also be racialized as Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous, as USER 1 points out and where USER 2 further interrogates. For USER 1, they further describe how discrimination and violence against those who are racialized as Indigenous should not be overlooked under the “detrribalized” narrative because those who are racialized as white are not susceptible to anti-Indigenous violence. So, while “claiming Indigeneity” might be a mournful effort, there are also political consequences that can undermine efforts for Indigenous mobilization against the settler state (both in the U.S. and Latin America). However, USER 2 further *refigures* the pedagogical landscape by troubling the notion of “being racialized as Indigenous” as critique of a generalizable detrribalized narrative, because Afro-Indigenous people in Latin America are most often racialized as Black and not Indigenous. Blackness and Afro-Indigenous descendants are then included within this pedagogical hub to further depict how racial formations and miscegenation of *mestizaje* are *also* an anti-Black colonial project as evident by the usage of terminology like *afromestizo* (Vaughn 229).

Vaughn is particularly critical on the usage of *afromestizo* as it calculates Blackness into a racial hybridity instead of linking Afro descendants to a larger Black diaspora (229).

Furthermore, encapsulating Afro descendants within *mestizaje*, especially through a *mestizx*-Indigenous binary, forecloses the real and material experiences of Afro descendants in Mexico, and in Latin America more broadly. This is evident by the continued fact that there is anti-Blackness embedded within the fabric of nation-states such as the Costa Chica region in Oaxaca (Banks 225). Specifically, Banks traces the legal underpinnings of anti-Blackness within Mexico

and further suggests that racial experiences are distinct for Afro-Mexicans as they are often called *negros* by “Indigenous and *mestizo* people” and are often characterized with violent stereotypes (226). In the case of Mexico, Moreno Figueroa articulates how a crucial component of colonial maintenance of *mestizaje* is anti-Blackness and how this anti-Black colonial project operates through two distinctive ways 1) the intentional distancing of anything that represents Blackness and 2) that there are no Black-Mexican people (both ontologically and representatively) (33).

Juliet Hooker details at great length how this type of exclusion of Blackness within Latin America is often positioned in contrast to Indigenous collective rights because the new multicultural citizenship regimes of Latin America are more “amenable to demands made on the basis of cultural difference or ethnic identity than racial difference or racial discrimination, and this mode of justifying group rights determines the greater success of indians than blacks” (306). Hooker is not necessarily arguing that Indigenous people in Latin America are in better sociopolitical positions than Afro-Latinx people, but through discourses of *mestizaje* we can see how Blackness becomes subsumed within this racial project, hindering sociopolitical mobility. The generative discussion that emerged crafted an online pedagogical hub whereby the users actively were interacting as a means to both nuance their own perspectives, but more importantly, situate the original post in a more robust discussion between Indigenous authenticity, migration, and Afro-Indigeneity.

Both USER 1 and USER 2 engaged in a refigured learning landscape because this pedagogical “hub” was constructed via their interactions with each other and other commenters. As Caranto Morford and Ansloos (294) describe, Indigenous people continuously repurpose digital space to support cultural movements and this pedagogical hub is one example of how Indigenous people from Latin America are doing so. Although there is no consensus among the users, we believe these generative pedagogical encounters nonetheless force us to engage with

multiple realities of Indigenous youth from Latin America and how they are negotiating, unsettling, and reinterpreting multiple colonialities (Blackwell et al. 126). Many of the questions that we as authors consistently negotiate is when/how/where people are Indigenous when traversing multiple nation-states, and how our own lived realities are implicated within such formations. Secondly, questions of racialization, lived experience, and migration complicates our understanding of our own Critical Latinx Indigenities' theoretical orientation, which prompts us to think of how, when, and *can* CLI be applied to various local contexts and at different scales? Can CLI's multiple overlapping colonial frameworks be useful not just in the context of Indigenous migrants in the US, but also in the ways Indigeneity is understood and constructed in Latin America? In the next section, we briefly discuss one additional comment from USER 3 who poses the question of territory and Land as imperative dimensions to consider.

### **Territory, Land, and the Question of Borderizations**

The following comment made by USER 3 articulates a contribution to the discussion by asking “what kind of territorial claims to Land does a pan-indigenous movement have rights to?”. Through this comment they make note that they are tribally affiliated, yet they are not comfortable claiming Indigenous identity since they did not culturally grow up with tribal and community experiences. Which brings them to the point of territory, Land, and rightful claims to place.

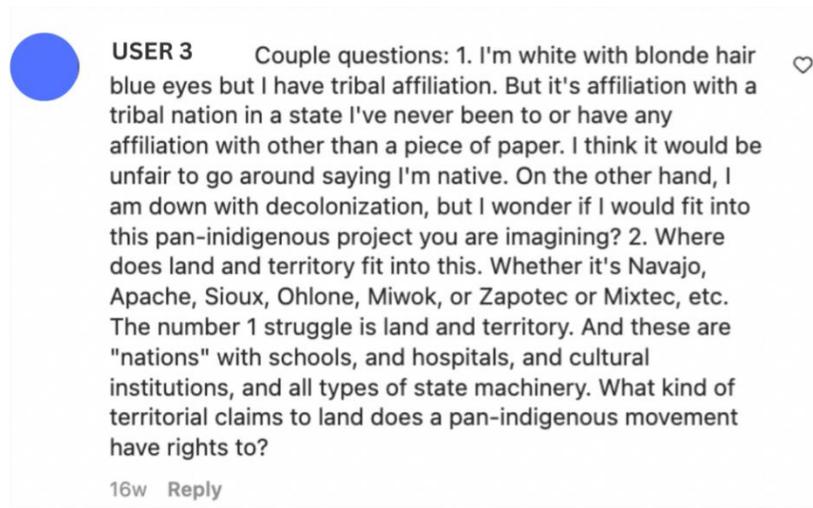


Figure 3, User 3 Responding to Original Post

Although we do not fully engage with the first point, the second point adds a discussion on Land claims and migration. Secondly, as authors who have not lived borderized experiences, especially within the context of the hypermilitarized U.S. border, we hope to introduce this topic with care and highlight this particular conversation because we feel it is often under analyzed especially in how the border is “taught” in education and elsewhere. As CLI articulates, migration often is a subtractive process for Indigenous migrants because their Indigeneity is interlocked with multiple ongoing colonialisms which regurgitates Indigenous identity into a Latinx or Hispanic subject. However, the fact remains that Indigenous migrants are indeed migrating to already Indigenous Lands articulating the reality that Indigenous people are enacting settlement but may not necessarily be considered a part of the larger settler colonial project since they do not have the political capacity to colonize other Indigenous nations (Blackwell et al. 127). One particular addition to this conversation is that of borderized Indigenous people across the U.S., further prompting a conversation on how CLI can expand to discuss the “border” as sociometrical violence that further contributes to the violence of mestizaje and further complicates discourses of

detrimentalized identity. USER 3 brings forth an often-overlooked discussion on pan-Indigenous movements and “rightful claims to Land” and we further refigure this discourse to also consider how places of borderization, military occupation, and forced displacement continue to be sites of Indigenous presence and contextually specific anti-Indigeneity.

The trans-borderized Indigenous people of the Tohono O'odham Nation of the U.S. state of Arizona and the Mexican State of Sonora, allow us to view CLI in expanding ways and approach the provocation that USER 3 provided. As Cadava explains, the Tohono O'odham were interlocked with competing national projects from both the United States and Mexico, which ultimately created distortions of tribal and nation-state citizenship, sovereignty, and federal protections for the Tohono O'odham people (382). *Mestizaje* and *Indigenismo* as tangential forces were “presented” as the renewed commitment to Indigenous autonomy and support in Mexico, yet they were codified through racial hierarchies that purposefully target the traditional Tohono O'odham landholdings (Cadava 373). Due to continued efforts by the Tohono O'odham people, those who are in Sonora can be granted tribal citizenship within the context of U.S. tribal federal recognition (Luna-Firebaugh 159). As a result, many Sonoran-based Tohono O'odham people would migrate to the U.S. to receive medical and tribal resources offered by the Tohono O'odham Nation and would “cross” the border regularly. However, due to the hyper-militarization of the border over the last two decades, harassment, discrimination, and restrictive border procedures has undermined Indigenous sovereignty and the migratory patterns of the Tohono O'odham people that have existed for millennia (Luna-Firebaugh 160). Although Tohono O'odham people have distinct political struggles, the case with the Tohono O'odham Nation provides insight as to how borderized Indigenous people must navigate the hybrid hegemonies (Blackwell, 175; Blackwell et al. 128) of two colonial forces. Figure 3, albeit brief, creates an addition to the discussion, both their own experience with Indigenous identity, but by bringing in an imperative question on Land and territory.

As part of the larger pedagogical hub, this specific comment from USER 3 provided an opportunity for us to enter with an analysis through CLI by both addressing an unattended question (i.e. borders) yet also mapping out more expansive theoretical grounds of CLI, which approaches the question USER 3 poses that pan-Indigenous movements are enacting settlement when they move (although not a part of settler colonialism) and a rightful claim to Land already Indigenous cannot be made. This type of *refiguring* provided avenues to witness the multiple discursive registers of mestizaje, Indigeneity, settler colonialism, Blackness, and migration as evident in the exchange between USER 1 and 2 and the comment by USER 3. The pedagogical hub that was formed speaks to the complexities of Indigenous homelands and through a cyber-Land based pedagogy (Caranto Morford and Ansloos 303) reterritorializes digital space to situate transnationality, im/migration, and Indigenous mobilities as part of these cyber-Land pedagogical understandings. Furthermore, although we as authors did not participate in the online discourse within the comment section, we argue that we were also implicated within this process of refiguring digital landscapes. As we engaged with the comment section and the posts on Instagram, we were actively co-configuring these digital landscapes due to our engagement with and our analysis of these pedagogical moments. Although we do not explicitly align with any of the arguments, we also acknowledge that refiguring digital landscapes is *not always* a benign process that leads to consensus, but we see and value that these conversations often involve highly debated exchanges that are nonetheless moments of learning.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this paper we focused on the educational spaces created on Instagram pages, where Indigenous Latinx youth actively engaged in discourses and cultural production of Indigeneity, borderlands, and colonialism that we called *refiguring digital landscapes*. We defined *refiguring digital landscapes* as spaces of dialogue, where Indigeneity is in motion and actively being

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articulated and re-articulated and contested. Instagram thus became a site of pedagogical depth that Indigenous Latinx youth deployed as co-curricular building projects. We drew attention to the contested “digital territories” of Indigenous subjectivity, Land, colonialism, and borderizations, because of the distinctive experiences of Indigenous people from Latin America. Depending on country of origin, racial state formations, forced migration, and Indigenous mobilities, Indigenous people from Latin America provide a specific entry point into discourses of Indigeneity that can be in generative tension with U.S. based and other Latin American Indigenous perspectives. That is to say, through online Land-based pedagogical hubs, Indigenous Latinx people are reinterpreting, challenging, and proposing multiple and contesting iterations of Indigeneity and Land while understanding that Land-based digital learning is not always an effortless process or without nuance. By attuning to the discrepancies of these Land-based pedagogical hubs, we traced how Indigenous youth from Latin America are pushing towards an Indigenous digital landscape that is critical of multiple colonialities, systems of borderization, and the intellectual contributions of communities from the Global South—or what we call *refiguring digital landscapes*.

New social media literacies continue to emerge within digital landscapes and have garnered exponential traction in what is called information and communication technology (ICT), especially as tools of pedagogy, knowledge production, and youth media cultural practices (Jocson 49; Jocson, *Youth media 2*; Rogers 269; Kral 5). While formal schooling is beginning to include social media literacies (Jocson 43; Jocson *Youth media 2*) many youth construct these literacies themselves to circumvent static schooling practices. Practices such as standardized testing, hyper-surveillance, and bans on Ethnic Studies or Critical Race Theory continue to contribute to ideological hegemony where “schools do not only control people; they also control meaning” (Apple 61). In many ways, the creation of social media literacies by youth has been *in response* to eurowestern schooling’s inability to capture their complexity, nuances, and lived realities. For example, Indigenous communities making gaming applications to remember

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language through songs (LaPensée et al. 120), co-creating blogs about Aboriginal LGBTQI issues (Farrell 3), and a grocery-mapping program to elucidate the way in which a low-income community in East Oakland responded to food insecurity (Akom et al. 1302). We position the work of this article within this growing scholarly literature as we see how Indigenous and Indigenous Latinx youth are deploying similar digital landscapes when interrogating Indigeneity, diaspora, settler colonialism, and Latinidad on various social media platforms and, in particular, Instagram.

We have highlighted four out of the ten arguments shared by @newaumata who identifies as Quechua-Aymara and whose post is titled “Detribalized, Reconnecting, Indigenous: Further Debunking Attacks to ‘Latinx’ Reindigenization” and the various responses to the post by users who actively participated in *refiguring* the conversation by nuancing, situating, and contemplating the overall premise of the post, which was mestizo/Latinx “reindigenization” through reclamation of an Indigenous identity. This type of *refiguring* carved spaces for pedagogical hubs through Instagram exchanges to (1) nuance understandings of Latinidad and Indigeneity, (2) complicate interpretations of settler-colonialism within multiple geographic contexts, and (3) enact CLI via online interfaces. In many ways, the tapestry we have provided of multiple, ongoing, and *refiguring* pedagogical hubs alludes to the impact and importance of stories and storywork in fortifying Indigenous knowledge, education, and survivance (Archibald 2). A future direction of this work could make more central how stories from multiple Indigenous Latinx youth are being woven together through digital spaces.

The Indigenous Latinx youth in this article used Instagram as pedagogical hubs that generated spaces of re-imagining and contesting the rigidity of hegemonic school structures that allows them to engage with their Indigenous identity in or beyond a pan-ethnic discourse of Latinidad. Although we only engage in this paper with one post and analyzed another set of 15 Instagram accounts, we believe that youth demonstrate the potential to use Instagram, and

possibly other social media platforms, and how social media platforms like Instagram are ways that youth can engage in pedagogical hubs. Traditional schooling often fails to provide opportunities for youth to engage in dialogues where they get to center their lived experiences, diasporic knowledges, and migrations. Therefore, we call this pedagogical co-creation *refiguring digital landscapes* which are spaces of dialogue where Indigeneity is in motion and actively being articulated and re-articulated and contested. Indigenous Latinx youth are actively engaging in educational endeavors that should be taken seriously as contributions towards transformative and decolonial education in classrooms, teacher education programs, and culturally sustaining practices (Paris 95). As Indigenous Latinx youth refigure digital landscapes, such as Instagram platforms, they demonstrate forms of agency and actively disrupt notions of legitimate knowledge construction that are often sanctioned to formal schooling.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we define Indigenous Latinx youth as those who are Indigenous from what is commonly known as Latin America whether it be through multiple migrations (Blackwell et al. 132) or those who were born in the United States whose families migrated prior. Importantly, we are conscientious of how Indigenous Latinx as a term is limiting, or even, reductive of an Indigenous subjectivity in Latin America. We more so position the term as a way to enter the conversation between Indigenous people from Latin America, but do not argue that people themselves consider themselves as Indigenous, Latinx, and/or Indigenous Latinx. We also deploy the x at the end of Latinx to disrupt gender binaries explicit in Spanish lexicon and acknowledge the work of LGBTQ2+ scholars and intellectuals (Medina and Gonzales 3).

<sup>2</sup> Ethnic studies, multicultural education, and bilingual education, albeit steps that have been imperative for students of minoritized backgrounds, do not fully encompass the multiplicity of student voices. This is due to the fact that many have transpired due to interests that ultimately benefit whiteness (Bell 523) and a neoliberal multiculturalism which enacts “a structure of public recognition, acknowledgement and acceptance of multicultural subjects, based on an ethos of self-reliance, individualism, and competition, while simultaneously (and conveniently) undermining discourses and social practices that call for collective social action and fundamental structural change” (Darder 417).

<sup>3</sup> We write Ch/Xinismx in this way to delineate the differences of usage such as Chicanismo/Xicanisma/Xicanismx and to further situate how the “x” has been contemporarily deployed within recent academic and public literature. As Susy Zepeda writes, Xicana is an ontological and political identity that intentionally re-remembers Indigenous epistemologies that have been lost and buried due to the ongoing violence of colonialism (121). Similarly, Nicole Guidotti-Hernandez provides an overview and historical account of the “x” both in its usage within

Xicana Feminisms but also the way that placing the X instead of the gendered o/a in Spanish is a move towards unsettling the rigid linguistic binary of the Spanish language (149).

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the word *kwe* (Simpson). Indigenous researchers employ these perspectives of story and identity in our research methods using our own cultural understandings of stories. These understandings may differ across Indigenous cultures, but their most significant difference can be seen in how they translate to western<sup>3</sup> notions of knowledge. In English, we often speak of the word story as anecdotal. For Indigenous people story is truth, and it is how we relate to and understand the world and our future, present, and past.

I will reflect on my digital artwork *Four Generations* (2015) and narrate how this work developed as a digital translation of my own Indigenous cultural praxis. From there, I explore how I transitioned my computational approach from logic to metaphor and share my responses to public discussions and academic critiques, contemplating this work in different knowledge domains. Finally, I express how these external investigations and insights from others have changed my approach to computing and (re)shaped my identity as an Indigenous artist and computer programmer.



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## The Origins of my Digital Beadwork

*Four Generations* evolved from a simple digital tool I wrote to help me create digital beading patterns from photographs into an animated generative work that metaphorically represents the transfer of intergenerational stories and knowledge.

The initial program I wrote used simple looping algorithms to create rows of beads based on a photograph. The program starts by reading a digitized photograph from the top left corner. It selects a random colour from a square matrix of pixels at each location, creates a neutrally-coloured 3D sphere, applies the chosen colour to the sphere, and then places that sphere onto a clean canvas in the computer's memory. Moving left to right, row by row, the program plots beads until it reaches the bottom right corner of the photograph and then saves the new beaded image as a digital file that can be viewed and printed. I would run this program ten to fifteen times because each image would be different due to the random selection of colour for each pixelated bead.

It was deliberately built to be a simple, time-saving utility application. From this output, I could decide which image I liked the best, print it, attach it to my material and bead the pattern without considering colour choices or placement. Beading is highly meditative. One of my mentors, Sherry Farrell Racette (Timiskaming/Métis), describes beading as a form of prayer that “produces introspection, wistfulness, and other thoughts, images, feelings, and sensations” (Garneau). While I beaded, I would think about the code, imagining myself as the program doing the colour decision-making and sewing each bead in place. Then, at the end of each row, I would move down a row and repeat my beading in the opposite direction, moving from right to left. After a dozen rows, this process of physical beading seemed to remove itself from the code because, in the program, the algorithm stopped at the end of each row, returning to the leftmost column to start beading the next row. This difference in actions between my physical beading and the computer program's loop design transformed how I considered the role of the program.



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*nehiyaw* language, cultural teachings, and practices to acculturate to western ways of doing so that I could express my *nehiyaw*-Métis identity in the digital world. Therefore, I added a digital “thread” to join the screen objects together. It is symbolic of “healing.” It binds together the digital objects in a meaningfully Indigenous way, deliberately disregarding efficiency and healing the fracture caused by the system’s design.

This shift in my conceptual computing model replaced my interest in replicating digital imagery with hide, sinew, and glass. Instead, it sparked an eagerness to “teach” the computer how to bead and how to use culture as an interface to code representation. I wanted to imbue the computer with the cultural metaphors and knowledge I draw from when working with physical media.

When I finally arrived at (re)coding *Four Generations*, I was intent on breaking and rewriting as many computational rules as possible. For example, I introduced “smudging” as a computational method. Smudging for *nehiyaw* people is a ceremonial practice involving burning a medicinal herb such as sage or sweetgrass and using the smoke it creates to “cleanse” or “purify” the individual. I digitized this practice. My first line of code is now `tisamân();` or `tisamânihkew();`<sup>4</sup>. I created this function to explicitly clear the screen and cached memory, preparing the program for running. It is a digital representation of the cultural ceremony performed by many Indigenous groups in North America. I stopped using the row/column (x, y) coordinate system and started using a spiral-based “grid.” I removed western math where I could, using string variables as numeric constants instead (for example, `hand = 5`, `person = 20`, and therefore `2*hands = 10`). I ignored code optimization, choosing to code based on personal physical, cultural, and spiritual practices. Ultimately, I also stopped thinking of binary as opposing ones and zeroes and instead saw the machine as a unary device with *animate* and *inanimate* states of being.



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begins anew. And because the program is generative, each subsequent portrait will never be the same as its previous iteration, thereby representing how time affects each new generation. You could almost say it is also intentionally timeless.

In its computational form, *Four Generations* has a deliberate start but no end; like the spiral I use a beading path. When the program starts, the first thing you see is an empty black screen. Then the first few beads appear, beginning the portrait of my grandmother. However, not all exhibition spaces have the equipment to run the full computer generative version, so I created a video version. The video was made with images of my father and myself in their normal state, but two complete cycles of my son and my grandmother so I could stitch together the end and beginning of the opening transition scene. This way, the screen does not start blank when run from a DVD or USB memory stick. The image opens with the full portrait of my son at the precise moment it has already started to un-bead itself, and the beading of my grandmother has started. This synchronous beading/un-beading starts in the middle of time, at a transition state in generations, when there is no true beginning or end. Though the digital information stream starts at the beginning of a file, the initial imagery pre-exists. You experience it from some point in its existence where time is irrelevant.

### **Anthropology**

*Four Generations* as a source for anthropological study can be found in the single still image pulled from the moving context of *Four Generations*. The single still image of my grandmother's completed portrait has been used as an example in several print publications. One of the more stimulating texts it has appeared in is Jessica Helfand's *Face: A Visual Odyssey* (Helfand). *Face* is a critical anthropological exploration of the face in a literal A to Z visual voyage of cultural identity and *nôhkomipan*, my grandmother, can be found in chapter "H: Hereditary" (Helfand 81).



The digital “thread” I mentioned earlier that connects the beads on the screen illustrates these relationships. The beads are placed deliberately in relation to one another. They are strings connecting each bead that persist across generations as visual expressions of the continuity of knowledge and its binding to our cultural origins. Without this thread, the digital beads would just be floating in space. Even though the image would likely hold its own as an image, it would just be an image. Nothing would hold it together, and it would have only the mildest connections to my culture just because of the people depicted in it.

Another highlight Garneau brings forth is my resistance to conforming to an  $(x, y)$  coordinate system for plotting pixels on the screen. I changed my output from linear lines to a circling spiral to make the screen *my* space and (re)configure it according to my cultural teachings. Garneau equates this struggle against the systemic structures of the technology to Métis resistance to colonial gridding of the landscape and geometric planning of new cities in North America (Garneau). Occupations of our modern digital worlds, social media spaces, and virtual realities occur with the same colonial mindsets as the geospatial politics of our physical spaces. Our technicism and false beliefs about the neutrality of technology perpetuate colonial and euro-dominant cultural structures in digital spaces. Garneau’s comments on the technological imperialism of our digital world and its impact on the surface of Indigenous digital art can also be viewed from inside the machine through critical code studies.

### **Critical Code Studies**

Mark Marino’s book, *Critical Code Studies* (Marino), provides a short history of the natural language elements found in computer programming, and he refers to my work, *Four Generations*, as an example of this push-back against “encoded chauvinism” (Marino 134). Critical code studies are concerned with examining code as literature and should be evaluated “within a sociohistorical context [and] analyzed using the [same] theoretical approaches applied to other semiotic



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revitalization, anthropology, and Native American cultural gatherings. All of these presentations were aimed at different audiences, and even though the content did not change much between them, each group had their own takeaways. Perhaps the most frequent groups that have invited me to discuss my work are non-profit organizations focusing on STEM and STEAM education and computing pedagogy for Indigenous students. STEM and its sibling STEAM are common monikers used in education to refer to the collective scientific domains of Science, Technology, Engineering, [Arts], and Mathematics. I argue that Indigenous STEAM education is a bit of a misnomer because Indigenous knowledge is wholistic (not holistic; see Absolon 2010). Excluding the “Arts” aspect from science education reduces the efficacy of STEAM’s design and hampers collaboration between these domains.

Building meaningful relationships between cultural learning perspectives in modern science and technology, especially in middle and secondary school, is probably the most significant challenge these organizations typically face. In these presentations, it was not my goal to seek or encourage change but to expose intersections where Indigenous concepts in STEAM’s subject material already exist. Before I presented at these workshops and conferences, I usually had a chance to listen to meeting attendees discuss their specific teaching initiatives and projects that use Indigenous knowledge or cultural practices. Of course, many of these Indigenous inclusions are needed in education and are extremely valuable to pedagogy. Yet, I was fascinated by how many of these advocates for indigenizing curriculum focused on finding Indigenous contexts to frame STEAM subject material without questioning the model(s) that STEAM programs are built on. I do not see myself as an educational professional, and this is not to imply that their models are flawed to start with. However, pondering my experience with the programming *Four Generations*, I realize I was just as guilty of this view of technology as culturally neutral and/or agnostic. In my case, I recognized the limits of what the system could offer me. Using a butter knife as a screwdriver can surely do the job, but is it the correct tool?



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not structurally necessary, nor are they visible in the finished key, the fact that they exist is what is most meaningful. Their presence literally supports the language. The top of the keycap sporting the appropriate syllabic glyph is upheld by the meaning embedded in these vertical supports.

Naturally, when I finish describing how *Four Generations* changed my philosophy on computer programming and how I engage with the computer, I would get many comments on how simple I made it sound and how it opened up possibilities, followed by questions and requests for further guidance. How I see the world of computing today has so much more to do with understanding my growing knowledge of *nehiyaw* and *Métis* cultures than with the forty years I have spent programming computers. After hearing me speak, one organization's director even told me that his board was going to re-evaluate the English used in their mission statement and update the focus of their organization's values. The colonial systemic structures inherent in organizational structures, even Indigenous-run organizations, are easy for me to understand. I was raised as a fair-skinned, blue-eyed, middle-class, urban Canadian, so I was blind or at least numb to those oppressive structures. So, to have an organization stand up and say they would re-evaluate and possibly change their organizational philosophy based on my experience of indigenizing the computer through beading a picture of my grandmother is a very surreal and life-altering experience. Furthermore, the people I have met and events I have attended on Indigenous arts, technology, and pedagogy have opened my eyes to other academic fields that involve language and culture. I have seen how *Four Generations* can be used as a model for developing desperately needed tools for energizing cultures and communities and their knowledges, to foster revitalization to keep these cultures alive and stave off the need for "preservation."



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programming language as only supporting language revitalization. In *Four Generations*, they saw a potential solution for digitally archiving, encoding, and encrypting cultural heritage. My method of programming using stories written in code using my heritage language would satisfy their needs for knowledge protection while providing a creative way to share their culture with the rest of the world.

The computer's source code is obvious as a repository for language and story. Encoding the language and story as source code, by default, also makes the application an archive. The visual output is not just an encoded representation of the source code instructions. It is a form of archiving knowledge, joining other Indigenous record-keeping methods like wampum belts, totem poles, and petroglyphs. Of course, for me, these natural attributes of the system to encode and archive are not just happy accidents. Digital encoding and archiving are just new forms of Indigenous cultural practices that have existed for eons.

However, encryption, as an extension of encoding, had not occurred to me. When compiled, the human-readable qualities of the source code are replaced with machine code, and the application converts to a state the computer can execute. An application in this compiled state can be considered encrypted, though it is a one-way encryption. I see one-way encryption as particularly favourable for protecting Indigenous knowledge in modern society's openly shared and very social platforms. Sharing an executable file with anyone to run gives the executor of the file the right to view the output. However, decompiling the executable file in an attempt to extract the original language that created it is not possible, thereby safeguarding the cultural knowledge of the community.

My conceptual model(s) of computing that resulted from my coding of *Four Generations* has exposed to me that its framework is far more flexible and valuable than just a way of using ancestral languages to generate digital imagery. Furthermore, it has exposed disparities in language and comprehension between technologies and culture. And, rather than trying to wrestle



with Jon Corbett”) and a segment in one of his articles for the online journal Hyperallergic (Temkin, “Programming Language Design as Art”). During one of our conversations, I was talking about my use of *nehiyaw* storytelling as a framework for my programming language, called “*âcimow*” /a:ʃImŭw/ or “Cree#” in English. He asked me if the double coding in Cree# was intentional. I admit this did not occur to me initially. Did I intentionally create the language to be a story in itself? My initial reaction was, “no, it was not intentional.” But then I remembered the dream I had when I was planning Cree#.

I was sitting in a lodge listening to an Elder tell a story as my program transcribed his oration. A projector animated the story on the tent canvas all around those who had gathered to listen. Those in attendance could not see the code running, only the animated result. And this animation was “programmed” by his voice. At a break in the story, he paused, looked at me, smiled, and said, ‘**this** is what you build.’

So maybe it was subconsciously intentional. This dream occurred long before I met Daniel, on the eve before I started writing *âcimow* as a programming language. I still do not know what the Elder in my dream meant by “**this**,” but I often think of this dream in the metaphoric contexts of *Four Generations* and the digitized cultural traditions I built into it. The visual output shows viewers the image of my grandmother. At the same time, the computer code is a digitized version of my grandmother’s life story hidden from view and only readable by myself or someone with access to the code. The code is a story that relates actions to the computer, just not necessarily about my grandmother, me, or our identities.

By way of example, coding in Cree# occurs in a storylike format that is syntactically formatted to be consumable by the computer. To rewrite the looping structure in *Four Generations*







<sup>7</sup> In some *nehiyaw* communities “winters” is how you identify age. For example, I am fifty winters old.

<sup>8</sup> In *nehiyawewin* the word for “bead” is *mîkis*, which is similar to the word for berry “*mînis*”. In *anishinaabemowin*, the word for bead is “*manidoominens*” which literally translates as “spirit berry.”

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## **“We don’t need settler permission”: Recalling the Haudenosaunee Thought Project (#htp) through Indigenous Autoethnography**

HUGH BURNAM

“Much like autoethnographic work, the sharing of stories on social media has deep cultural significance since these platforms often help users process questions of identity.”

(Dunn & Myers 47)

“To demonstrate my own exertion of self-determination with/in the academy, I have presented, throughout this paper, ‘another way’. A defiant stance to push back against dominant research methodologies and push forward with Indigenous autoethnography, insisting ‘don’t tell me what to do’.”

(Bishop 376)

In December of 2017 political tensions divided the country. Donald Trump was almost a full year in office and many people expressed their politics on social media. Around that time, I had started writing my dissertation and working as a Haudenosaunee Studies teacher in the Seneca Nation.

One Saturday night I went to visit some friends at a local bar near downtown Buffalo, New York. When I arrived, I scanned the busy room and my eyes wandered towards the window, where I remember watching as the snow fell from the dark sky. I paused to observe the scene and I remember feeling lost in that moment.

Outside, it snowed chaotically onto the icy streets. The snow piled up on the ground and

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glimmered under streetlights. Wind whipped snow down the dark alleyways. I traced the path of the wind by following the dizzying movements of the snow. This area is known for its winters. Strangers walked outside, shielding their faces from the biting wind. Most people living here, aka "Buffalonians" call this city Buffalo, but that is a settler name. For me, as Kanien'keha:ka (Mohawk) or Onkwehòn:we (Original people), we call this area Onöndowa'ga:' the lands of the Seneca Nation. I thought about the land.

Inside, the bar felt cozy and warm, yet awkward and noisy. Dim multicolored lighting shined against the wooden frames on the walls casting long shadows in the corners of the room. Signs read: *Noon-8pm, \$2.00 bottles Coors Light and \$3.00 bottles Labatt Blue*. Buffalo Bills and Buffalo Sabres emblems decorated the walls. The crowd that was gathered there spoke loudly and belligerently which made it hard to hear. People shuffled among and between one another, some turning sideways competing for space at the bar. In some ways it felt more chaotic inside than outside. The smell of stale beer and sweat filled the room.

I was talking with "Mary" (pseudonym), an old friend of mine from college. Mary is a settler, a white woman, and at the time she was in her late twenties. She often had a lighthearted and cheery demeanor. While she and I were making small talk that night, our conversation arrived at the topic of social media.

"Yeah, I mean, it's weird" she said, smiling ear to ear. The bartender handed her a lightly colored beer. She took a sip, looked back at me, and continued, speaking loudly over the crowd and the music. "It's just difficult, especially since we are all so politically divided now. I mean, I'm pretty moderate... or like, neutral, politically. You know? I can see things from both sides." Mary held her left and right hands out widely, to emphasize "both sides" with her hands.

"Mhm" I said. I took a drink of the same beer that I had been sipping all night. I leaned in closer to show her that I was listening.

“Take *you* for example, Hugh. There is *you*... and then there is the *other you* online. I like the in-person version of *you*... the old version.” She brushed her hair away from her face and continued, “You’re funny and you’re cool, that’s the *you* that I know. But when you post on Facebook, all your political and, like, cultural views on Facebook are just so different than the person I know. I really don’t know how I feel about that side of *you*.” She scratched the back of her neck, looked away, and paused awkwardly. She smiled again. “And so, I just stay out of stuff like that, online.” She stated this proudly. Her comments caught me off guard.

*The other me?* I thought to myself. I felt a pang of insecurity and adrenaline rush through my body. I leaned in closer, and I squinted my eyes as I tried to understand her perspective. My facial expressions must have given me away because her smile fell briefly. She quickly broke eye contact and changed the topic. The night went on and my mind stirred, I felt uncomfortable, and I wanted to leave.

After that night, I couldn’t help but think: *Do my “friends” really even know me at all?* Mary said this to me during a heightened time politically within the United States and a critical point of my own growth as an Indigenous person. Her comments came in late 2017, after about a year of Trump’s presidency and a period of my life where I had been examining my own Indigenous identity further, learning about Haudenosaunee identity, sovereignty, spirituality, and trying to build my own sense of community across our Haudenosaunee Nation territories. In fact, I had just begun conducting a small community-based project online called *The Haudenosaunee Thought Project* or #htp, a project designed to encourage online discussion on Facebook related to traditional Haudenosaunee teachings, deconstructing gender issues, examining internalized colonization, and sharing perspectives about Native identity from Haudenosaunee community members.

In this article, I revisit The Haudenosaunee Thought Project. I examine my own identity as a Mohawk, Haudenosaunee person and examine interactions with people, both insiders and

outsiders, who made passing comments about those posts and my overall presence on social media as an Indigenous person. Through a reflexive practice, I bring those posts from memory, back into being, to show how large-scale activism around political issues like anti-Trump, #blm, #metoo #waterislife may serve as an impetus to local community-based online discussions and self-examination of Indigenous sovereignty, Indigenous identity, and traditional Indigenous teachings.

### **Research Questions**

Through an Indigenous autoethnography, I revisit the essence of those six-year-old conversations, not necessarily to share Indigenous community members' online discourse, but rather to centralize three research questions:

1. How can Indigenous peoples build community using social media platforms?
2. How can Indigenous peoples use digital social media for resurgence and to disrupt settler spaces?
3. What are some ethical considerations about social media and Indigeneity?

Through these questions, I hope, not only to shed light on my own reflections about “Indigeneity” in a community-building space from years ago, but also to relate #htp with current online realities to map future directions.

While these questions may center on me, I often use community responses and interactions as a catalyst to examine areas related to that online space. In this paper I use and problematize “Insider” (Indigenous) and “outsider” (settler) interactions to understand ethics on Indigenous knowledges in online spaces, explore ways that Indigenous peoples build community online, and ways that Indigenous peoples resist settler colonialism within a digital space. I hope that this piece will contribute to a larger discourse by intersecting Indigeneity, Indigenous sovereignty, and

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community-building through online platforms (Carlson and Frazer; Caranto Morford and Ansloos; Hill).

### **Definitions of Terms**

- “Indigenous” or “Native” or “Onkwehòn:we” is a term I use interchangeably throughout this article to refer to “Native Americans”, “American Indians (AI)”, “Aboriginal”, “First Nations” or Native peoples who live within places which some might call “Turtle Island” also known as “North America”
- “Haudenosaunee” means “They [mixed group] build houses” a term I use to refer to the “Iroquois Confederacy,” “Six Nations” also known as the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora Nations.

## **Literature Review**

### **Background**

In the summer of 2015, I had the honor of being asked to organize an in-person conference that we called *Revisiting the Basic Call to Consciousness* which was held during the *2015 World Indoor Lacrosse Championships (WILC)* and hosted by the Onondaga Nation. This conference generated conversation about Haudenosaunee sovereignty, Indigenous treaty law, gender issues in lacrosse, nation-to-nation governance, and effects of the Doctrine of Discovery throughout the world. This conference was held at WILC, in front of a local and international audience, to celebrate Indigenous survival through the game of lacrosse and to assert Indigenous sovereignty on a global scale.

The conference was based in a book called, *Basic Call to Consciousness* (Akwesasne Notes 2005), a book that describes various treaty agreements and Indigenous activism on self-

governance and nation-to-nation relationships between Indigenous peoples and settler governments, locally and globally. Several teachings include the “Kaianere’kó:wa” or “the Great Law of Peace,” an established set of governing principles or a “law” among the Haudenosaunee which unified the original five Nations (Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca) centuries before European contact. Later in 1722, the Tuscarora joined the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, now known as the Six Nations. These governing principles still exist now among the Haudenosaunee. The book presents Haudenosaunee sovereignty, a model of Indigenous self-governance and revisits political activism in the early twentieth century and then a cultural revival in the 1960’s and 1970’s, advocating for global Indigenous self-determination broadly throughout the world. Community members, both Native and non-Native alike, had so many positive things to say about the event. I remember an Onondaga community member turning to me to say, “We should really do this more often. I learned so much” (personal communication).

Given the wealth of information and generative conversation at that conference, I grew interested in continuing the work in some way, perhaps by organizing another conference. At the time, my studies and mentors in graduate school sparked my interest in intergroup dialogue (Dessell, Rogge, and Garlington) and intragroup dialogue practices (Ben David, et al.). I liked the idea that people could talk together across difference, demographically-speaking (intergroup), and even within their own group (intragroup), to learn, and to address societal issues with which they would otherwise not have been familiar. I had seen people change after they participated in intergroup dialogue.

I wondered if I could combine intergroup/intragroup dialogue with Haudenosaunee identity to address a few areas of need. After about a year of reflection, in 2016, I proposed a project to the Humanities New York (HNY) that I called *The Haudenosaunee Thought Project* to create discussion. The project was eventually accepted, and my aim was to “generate critical intergroup and intragroup conversations about Indigenous identities within Haudenosaunee

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communities and neighboring communities” (Humanities of New York). I grappled with how I would do this for some time, but I engaged with ideas that were shared from my cohort of brilliant colleagues throughout the New York State, who were conducting podcasts, creating comic books, and even using social media like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to create discussions around social justice issues to raise awareness of inequities experienced by marginalized communities.

Eventually I decided to scale-down my dream of organizing another conference, to create something more practical: *an online project*. After some thoughtful consideration, I decided to post discussion prompts about Haudenosaunee identity on my personal Facebook page from January 2017 to December 2018. While the audience was small (my Facebook friends) the online discussions were quite dynamic and meaningful, and some posts were shared on Facebook. Topics ranged from gender roles, spirituality/religion, generational changes, Indigenous education, and the meanings of knowledge, all while centering on Haudenosaunee identity. Participants would often make mention of Haudenosaunee teachings like the Haudenosaunee Creation Story, the Great Law of Peace, and other teachings passed down through the generations. For the most part I did not participate in discussions, if only to “like” a post or to convey my gratitude to the person’s response. In later posts I engaged with posts more often and I commented back to people who made comments.

Haudenosaunee and Native peoples were the primary commentors in #htp discussions. It was rare, but at times non-Native people would comment, or “like” random comments, which admittedly felt strange. Additionally, some topics were discussed which were more culturally sensitive or referenced traditional teachings or even ceremonies, which I tried to be consciously aware of in discussion. For some time, I simply stopped posting discussion prompts because I felt weird about asking particular questions while non-Indigenous people were also able to view the posts. For example, if I had an idea for a prompt about gender and spirituality, I would often hold off on posting since people (Native people) might get upset that I posted a culturally

sensitive question, only typically reserved for “insiders” (Native people) and not for “outsiders” (non-Native people). Some of my online community identify as Native and non-Native (multiracial) and many of the non-Native people I know, live in rural Indigenous-white border communities.

### **Indigenous Spaces in Digital Media**

Up until this point, I had never considered how effective it might be to actually create an online space for Native people to share about who we are, discuss traditional teachings and practices, and unpack our perspectives on Indigenous identity. For Indigenous peoples, not only are digital and social media platforms typically spaces that do not include Indigenous perspectives, even worse, they may be spaces which perpetuate settler colonialism. Yet, Indigenous peoples can also actively disrupt these spaces to enact cultural preservation and Indigenous sovereignty (Bronwyn and Frazer; Caranto Morford and Jeffrey Ansloos). Digital technology offers a space for Indigenous peoples to express their Indigenous identity (Indigeneity), Indigenous sovereignty, language revitalization efforts, community building, anti-colonial resistance, Indigenous resurgence and land-based relations as they exist in online spaces.

Racism and settler prejudice runs rampant on social media. In their article *Indigenous people and the varieties of colonial violence on social media*, Kennedy and Frazier outline ways in which Indigenous social media users are “disproportionately targeted with racist abuse” on online platforms, which exists in many forms including “hate speech, trolling, cyber bullying, online harassment, digital sexual abuse, and police surveillance” (4). Indigenous peoples are subjected to settler violence via cultural appropriation and ethnic identity fraud, in which social media influencers or famed scholars present themselves as Indigenous in public spaces or online for professional or economic gain, but in fact are not Native at all (Schaelling). The settler gaze is so pervasive in online spaces; it often becomes difficult to consider how and whether online spaces can be helpful for Indigenous peoples.

Yet, Kennedy and Frazier remind us of Indigenous resistance in online spaces, that while digital technology “facilitates new and innovative ways to deploy colonial mechanisms of oppression... Indigenous peoples as digital citizens are leading the development of innovative approaches to resist and reject existing and emerging forms of online colonial violence” (9). This point is also supported by Caranto Morford and Ansloos who also complicate settler/Indigenous relationships online further by describing the stealing of Indigenous knowledge: “settlers enact racist discourse and hate speech, steal Indigenous knowledges shared on #NativeTwitter, and commit acts of cultural appropriation” (300).

According to Caranto Morford and Ansloos, Indigenous peoples can use digital technologies to connect or reconnect with their homelands. Indigenous peoples enact a sense of survivance and language revitalization using #NativeTwitter, in a space fraught with politics of settler colonialism and anti-colonial resistance (303). Additionally, online spaces have become important for those Indigenous peoples who live away from their Indigenous communities and aim to understand and learn about their own Indigenous identity, as “the ability to connect with one’s homeland through digital means has particularly transformative potential for Indigenous language learners who do not have physical access to their homelands and, thus, must learn from afar” (Caranto Morford and Ansloos, 302).

By creating clothing and traditional regalia, Indigenous peoples have always adorned and preserved their cultures, spiritualities, identities, dreams, and histories. Ansloos et al., explains that digital spaces can be therapeutic environments and on digital spaces such as Twitter, Indigenous communities have taken to beading to create a sense of Indigenous community, to heal, and for cultural resurgence. Ansloos et al., provide several ways in which beading can be a healing tradition, how digital spaces can support art therapy, and how ethical tensions arise at the intersection of beading and healing online (79). Overall, while online spaces may be riddled with the settler gaze which does not always center Indigenous peoples, Indigenous peoples can

use online platforms to center Indigenous identity, build community, practice Indigenous resurgence, heal from past wounds, and resist and disrupt settler colonialism.

### **Methodology**

In this section I describe Indigenous autoethnography as the methodology that I use to revisit #htp discussions, both in-person and online in digital spaces. I provide my positionality and briefly discuss ethical limitations conducting research on social media platforms as Indigenous peoples. I describe how I use Indigenous autoethnography within the context of #htp.

I do not simply “passively comply” (Blair 23) with existing Western research methods. In this research, I reference Indigenous scholar Michelle Bishop, whose defiant stance against settler colonialism in the academy gave me the inspiration to continue this work as an Indigenous autoethnography. Bishop writes,

To demonstrate my own exertion of self-determination with/in the academy, I have presented... ‘another way’. A defiant stance to push back against dominant research methodologies and push forward with Indigenous autoethnography, insisting ‘don’t tell me what to do’. (376)

I call attention to “doing” Indigenous research and Indigenous autoethnography specifically as political action against ongoing settler colonialism in many spaces, in the academy and outside of the academy, online and offline.

Originally called “indigenous ethnography” (Butz and Besio 1668), autoethnography as method was said to allow those of “Native” or an “insider” status of a group, or subgroup, to voice their experiences. Butz and Besio expand on indigenous ethnography more:

‘Native ethnographers’, as they are conventionally called, are members of subordinated groups who have metropolitan academic training and who study their own groups often from a position of opposition to existing metropolitan representations. We prefer the term

indigenous ethnography because it embraces a wider range of subaltern subject positions.  
(1669)

Later, Bochner and Ellis describe autoethnography as a method which combines “auto” (self) and “ethnography” (culture) to retroactively reflect on past experiences. In this piece, autoethnography allows me to examine and to bring voice to my own experiences and to create narrative to describe my experience in a digital format.

I often felt the need to write from the heart about salient issues experienced by myself and my community members, as it pertained to Haudenosaunee identity. Within autoethnography, Bochner stresses the importance of using “evocative narrative” (210), to use emotion as a form of power in storytelling,

Facts are important to an autoethnographic storyteller; they can and should be verified.

But it is not the transmission of facts that gives the autoethnographic story its significance and evocative power. Facts don’t tell you what they mean or how they feel. (161)

An evocative storyteller highlights the importance of emotion and meaning in narrative to address systems of power in their research. I observed myself being pulled into online discourse that had perked my sense of curiosity, challenged my own beliefs, made me laugh, and felt emotionally charged at moments.

Autoethnography also comes from a social justice imperative (Ellis, Cassidy, and Calafell 203), an approach that I always feel is necessary in spaces where systemic power is in-play, especially on digital and social media platforms. Scholars are continually exploring ways that LGBTQ2S+, Indigenous, Black and Brown people use autoethnography in digital media spaces to center their experiences (Bailey; Brown; and Are). In his digital humanities blog, *#transform(ing) DH Writing and Research: An autoethnography of Digital Humanities and Feminist Ethics*, Bailey used autoethnography to examine methodology, ethics, and theoretical issues through digital spaces to follow contemporary Black trans women on social media networks. Bailey explained

that centering Black trans women’s use of digital spaces to reclaim screens and networks, while not centering impact on white supremacy, heterosexist, and trans misogyny, was the goal:

The example of trans women of color’s digital activism demonstrate the power of digital media to redefine representations of marginalized groups... The practices of reclaiming the screens of our computers and phones with content is not simply one of creating new representations but is a practice of self-preservation and health promotion through the networks of digital media. (Bailey 6)

Bailey’s perspective is crucial to understanding how many marginalized groups including LGBTQ2S+, Indigenous, Black, Brown and Brown people use autoethnography within digital media spaces to practice self-preservation or health and wellbeing of their communities. In #http, I intentionally positioned Indigenous posts and perspectives to be central to the project. Viewers who may not be part of a marginalized group are placed secondary. In other words, as marginalized people we *center* our collective reclamation of digital media spaces through acts of self-preservation and wellbeing.

My positionality is that I live and work in and in-between Indigenous spaces. I am Kanien’keha:ka (Mohawk) Wolf Clan and a Haudenosaunee community member, enmeshed within various communities, both Native and non-Native. I am from the Onondaga Nation (near Syracuse, NY) and I moved when I was young, to a predominantly white town called Youngstown, NY, which is near the Tuscarora Nation. While I identify as an “insider” to my own Haudenosaunee communities, I am also an “outsider” to many of the same communities since I often float “between” spaces, on and off the Rez, inside and outside of the settler academy, or within my own familiar Haudenosaunee nations and communities.

I am also an insider/outsider to the settler academy, a complicated space where, as an Indigenous person, I’ve felt left out, alienated, dismissed through the years, but it’s also a space where I’ve grown and witnessed growth in my students. It’s a space where I’ve built allyship and

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created friendships. In the settler academy where I have grown, I have also struggled. In the past 20 years, I know that I am an insider/outsider in virtually every space that I stand where “neutral” doesn’t exist and nothing is apolitical. I acknowledge my own power, privilege, and marginality within settler academic spaces in which I work and earn a living. It’s in these “in-between” locations that I examine my own Indigenous identity, between non-Native and Native communities. Many of the questions that I generated were in relation to my curiosity leading up to the topic of my dissertation, a separate project that centered the experiences of Haudenosaunee men in higher education and explored aspects of Indigenous masculinities.

I also position myself generationally within the group of “old millennials”, a group of people born between 1981 and 1997, according to the PEW research center (Fry). I do remember a time before social media, but for the most part my world was then, and is still now, influenced by the internet and digital technology. Dunn and Myers write, “Millennials were either born using this technology or have learned to use it and inspired others to do the same” (48).

From an ethical standpoint as an Indigenous person, I connect deeply with Maori scholar, Paul Whitinui whose work *Indigenous Autoethnography: Exploring, Engaging, and Experiencing “Self” as a Native Method of Inquiry* posits that while Western research had been experienced by many Indigenous peoples as a “dirty word” (Linda Smith), Indigenous research does not have to be this way. Whitinui’s work influenced my decision to approach this work through Indigenous autoethnography as a method of inquiry, a decision that I do not take lightly. According to Whitinui, four attributes to Indigenous ethnography include: protect uniqueness, problem solve, provide access in supporting social and cultural, and spiritual wellbeing, and heal when learning about self (Whitinui 479).

As I reflect on these questions from a fellow Indigenous scholar, I remember the steps I’d taken to engage ethically within #htp and the conflict that I had experienced during the process. I often refused to post certain posts that were too closely related to Longhouse ceremonies. Even

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while writing this paper, I decided to remove some pictures of posts from this document, especially those pertaining to Longhouse traditions and spirituality, which I feel would not be appropriate to share in an open access journal for public consumption.

I find a sense of reward in deeply considering the wellbeing of my people through thoughtful and authentic conversation, even hard conversations that move people to consider perspectives that we may have not considered before. The questions that I asked during #htp were, I truly believed, questions to benefit our communities. When I reflect on being an Indigenous person "doing" autoethnography, I am thankful that I can ask such complicated questions at all, and for me this is how I protect my uniqueness, problem-solve, provide, and heal. While I rely on memory, the conversations depicted in this article, I took considerable time and effort to "fictionalize" scenes and hide and/ or change identities of those whose voices I recall.

### **Results (Part I): Revisiting the Haudenosaunee Thought Project #htp**

iPhone Note:

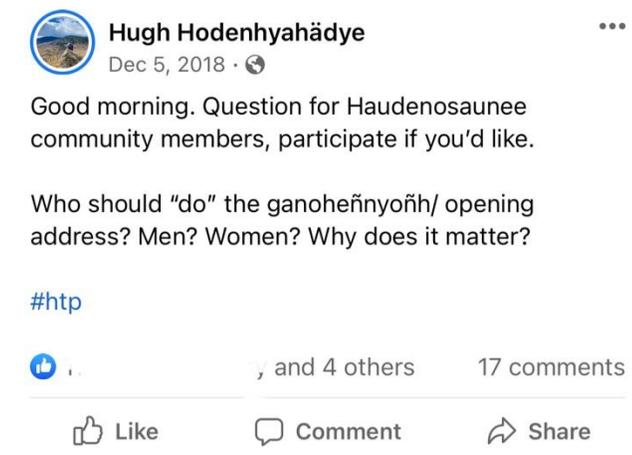
January 1, 2018

So I'm not even sure how to write this, but I'll make a quick note. Remember how you were stuck? How everything that a group of people thought of you, how they accepted you, or didn't- mattered so completely to you? Like, in high school- your peers opinions mattered so much to you. Or a group of friends. Then you grow up and you realize that the world is SO much bigger than that? Like, my world is so small- even

right now. There are so many people to meet. Native people, non natives, all sorts of people. My project right now is just one project. One small world to another. One small community inside another and another...

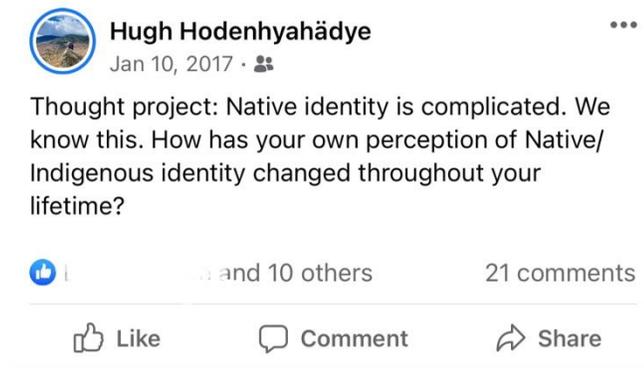
[This was a personal note about the Haudenosaunee Thought Project #htp and my feelings about sharing my “world” with people online]

In this brief section, I provide examples of #htp posts that I found to be relevant to this topic and theme them into groups. As I look back to my posts online from the Haudenosaunee Thought Project, #htp, some five or six years ago now, I pulled the old posts from my personal Facebook. Below I have listed some examples of those posts between January 2017-December 2018. I “screenshotted” each of the posts for viewer clarity, blurred Facebook reactions, “likes”, and comments for anonymity, and added alt text for viewer accessibility.



Text: Good morning. Question for Haudenosaunee community members, participate if you'd like. Who should “do” the ganoheñyoñh/opening address? Men? Women? Why does it matter? [#htp](#) (12/5/18)

In this post, I was specifically questioning my own Native community’s often rigid gender roles and why gender roles even matter. Traditionally, Haudenosaunee would have a male speaker deliver the “opening address” to a group of people gathered, to give thanks to the natural world. Posts swirled about Haudenosaunee gender roles, which prompted me to ask this question. The participants’ responses were rather mixed, many believing that men and women could give the opening address, which I felt was an important and much-needed conversation.



Text: Thought project: Native identity is complicated. We know this. How has your own perception of Native/Indigenous identity changed throughout your lifetime? (1/10/17)

I had asked this question because I wanted to understand if time made people shift in their understanding of their Native identity. Many people who were the same age or older than me answered this question, explaining that Native identity is complex and their perspectives may change throughout their lives.



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Text: Feel free to comment if you'd like. Is there a difference between education and knowledge?

Please explain. #htp

I asked questions around the meanings of “knowledge” versus “education” because there had been discourse around revitalizing Haudenosaunee languages, sharing traditional stories, and trying to understand those teachings within today’s context. This post prompted Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants to respond. Their answers seemed similar, many described that lived experience is a form of knowledge and education. Many people expressed their discontent with the American education system; that it prioritizes Eurocentric knowledge and not Indigenous knowledge. I particularly enjoyed the comments from working class contributors, both Native and non-Native peoples, mostly from rural backgrounds, many of whom agreed that they feel left out of the education system.

These are just three examples out of 12 posts of the #htp project posts to provide examples to the reader. When I posted these, I had around 2000 friends on Facebook. The posts were sent during a heightened time politically within the United States and Canada. In the next section I grouped each of the 12 posts into themed categories. The posts ranged from Indigenous knowledge, Haudenosaunee gender, spirituality, identity, and other topics of interest. Many of these areas came from my own personal interests that I felt Haudenosaunee people would like to discuss.

- **Indigenous knowledges and education.** In four (4) posts I referenced Indigenous education and Indigenous knowledge. I asked people to compare and contrast “education” versus “knowledge” or asked how we can use Indigenous knowledge within community and educational spaces.

- **Haudenosaunee gender/gender roles.** In three (3) posts I asked about Haudenosaunee gender roles. I asked about who should play lacrosse or recite the opening address in public functions. I also asked Indigenous peoples if they identified as feminists.
- **Haudenosaunee spirituality.** In two (2) posts I asked questions about peoples’ thoughts on Longhouse spirituality in comparison with other religions.
- **Indigenous identity.** In one (1) post I asked how peoples’ perceptions of Indigenous identity might change through their lifetime.
- **Other topics of interest.** In two (2) posts I asked my Facebook audience which topics we could discuss regarding Haudenosaunee identity or other topics of interest.

While these posts cover only few categories, I tried to home in on specific discussion, tensions, areas of intrigue and critical issues among the Haudenosaunee. I asked questions about Longhouse or Haudenosaunee spirituality to understand the history of our people, differences between various religions, the meanings of adaptations or changes to our belief structure, and perceptions of what it means to be Haudenosaunee today. Lastly, I provide other topics of interest to gauge community interest in creating more topics to discuss and potentially moving #htp to a public space.

In the next section, I unpack interactions with community members who participated. I do this to provide the reader with the level of meaning-making behind these posts, the level of emotional labor involved, and ways that these posts might impact different people as “insiders” (Haudenosaunee) or “outsiders” (non-Native). I problematize even that binary insider/outsider as an ethical consideration, along with the limits of sharing online.

### **Results (Part 2): Personal Interactions about #htp Posts**

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Many of the interactions that I've had, and community that I've built, were built offline (in-person) and often sustained online, especially since I don't get to see all my family or friends being in different communities (interactions also decreased significantly due to the pandemic). In five brief recollections, through an Indigenous autoethnography, this section provides interactions that I've had with people I had seen publicly in-person and who have made passing comments about the #hnp and social media posts online. I provide context, describe the person who I am interacting with (Native or non-Native) and my relationship to them, a brief dialogue, and some thoughts on the significance of the interaction.

**“This is not to be shared out there.”**

This quick interaction happened before I even started #hnp but I had often posted about Native issues and shared articles on my personal Facebook. A group of us are language learners and we sat in a small room devoted to discussing language, culture, and ceremonies. Many of the people in the room knew one another and the language instructor, “Carol”, was and still is a highly respected community member. She has a considerable amount of knowledge related to traditional protocol, ceremonies, and language.

As I was packing up my stuff, getting ready to leave class for the day, another language student asked a question about a ceremony of ours and the language used in the ceremony. Carol stood at the front of the class and described ways that the language can be used for this specific ceremony. After she was done talking, she paused, looked at me specifically, out of about 6 people in the room and said, “And this is not to be shared out there, Hugh. This stays here.” After a moment, I nodded my head in agreement. Some people looked at me and some people looked down.

I never really understood why she stated this to me directly in front of everyone, maybe it was because I was just starting my PhD classes and she knew this, conveying that it's not free for scholarship or for the prying eyes of the settler academy. Maybe she meant that it is not to be

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shared online for public consumption. Either way, she made herself clear, there are limits both academically and publicly, who gets to know this information. I will always respect Carol for telling me this so clearly and directly.

**"You know how *Hugh* is."**

I had a conversation with my longtime friend "Jessica", a white woman from my hometown, and close friend, who I would consider to be an ally. Jessica and I are both educators and passionate about social justice issues. Jessica did not often interact with people on the #htp posts but did talk with me in-person about Indigenous-related issues. One day we were walking and talking about differences between communities of color and the white community that we lived in growing up, when she described an interaction that she had with our old acquaintance and fellow high school classmate who I call "Jake", a white man, settler and former student athlete. She described seeing Jake:

"Well, I saw Jake the one day at this random event." Jessica said as we walked down the street, catching up. She continued, "Jake was telling me that he saw you recently." I thought for a moment and tried to remember.

"Oh yeah, I saw him and said "hi" to him some time ago. He was the only person I knew there. We caught up and it was nice to see him", I responded. Jessica smiled awkwardly at my comment. I knew that look. "Why, what's up?" I asked, slightly concerned.

"Well, he told me that he saw you too. This is how you came up in conversation."

"Oh?" I said. Jessica paused, half smiling. "And...?" I pressed her.

"Well, he definitely doesn't like what you post online", she said quickly. I felt confused.

"Really!" I responded, feeling somewhat surprised. "I thought we were cool?!" I said, as I could feel my voice inadvertently get louder. I turned to Jessica, my eyebrows furrowed. She half-smiled again and nodded her head. She could tell I was a bit shocked.

“Tellin’ ya man”, she said. She paused for a moment and stepped around a divot in the sidewalk. She continued, “He doesn’t like what you post, probably because he’s a white kid who grew up in [our hometown] and can’t see it from any other perspective. You know how racist that place is!” Jessica said. She also rolled her eyes when she mentioned our hometown. “He said, ‘Well, you know how *Hugh* is...’”, overemphasizing the syllables in the sentence. My jaw dropped. She shot a look at me with her eyebrows fully raised and her all too familiar sarcastic smile.

“I’m absolutely shook. I just saw this guy and I was all nice to him. He was nice back!” I laughed at the thought. She laughed in response.

“Yepp!” She responded, shaking her head, still holding her smile.

We continued walking and talking that day. I recall his words, “You know how *Hugh* is”, a comment which I feel carries a meaning about my perspective in an online platform, a perspective that people, especially white people from my small rural hometown often do not like. I also want to note that this white community also borders an Indigenous community and a Black and Brown urban community, something that both Jessica and I know and talk often about.

### **“It takes guts.”**

“I was talkin’ with ‘Mike’ and he was saying that he really enjoys reading your posts... he also said you’re pretty brave for posting what you do”, Christine laughed quickly. “But we love it, Hugh. It takes guts to ask those types of questions online”, she said. I paused, unsure about how to respond.

“Oh! Oh really? He liked it? You liked it? Wow, that feels really good, *niá:wen*. I’m not always sure what people thought about it!” I responded excitedly. My face probably looked dumbfounded to her. I had been visiting with Christine, we were talking about our friend Mike and how he enjoyed conversations. Both of them are Haudenosaunee. Christine is about 10 years younger than me. Mike is about 3 years younger than me.

I really found Christine’s brief reflection to be helpful and considerate. I also recognized in myself, and in my reaction, that few people actually said anything to me about it at that point. It helps when these people are your friends and acquaintances. But this isn’t always the case. Friends and acquaintances don’t always return positive feedback.

I map my own surprise in this interaction because in the moment that Christine said this to me, I realized that I had internalized a deep-seated worry—that since I felt that I had pushed the limits of Haudenosaunee identity and posted critical questions about our traditions and practices in such a public space, I feared my own community didn’t always support or appreciate it. I navigated a lot of silence about the posts, quite often. In this case, my interactions made me realize that I must have felt anxious for a long time and her comments, albeit brief, felt uplifting and encouraging. I also noted that they are from more of a “traditional” background. I use that term to mean that they are individuals who examine our teachings, learn our languages, and apply them to their lives on a daily basis. Their feedback felt good to me, since I really respect the people in our communities who uphold our traditional teachings but also grapple with complications in our teachings as well.

I also thought, *maybe I should get out more.*

**“I’m not negative online.”**

There have been in-person moments that were more difficult for me. Another person I’ll call “Frank” had some words to share with me about my online posts. We ran into one another in a waiting area of a restaurant. He smiled and greeted me, and I greeted him back. We made small talk standing in the middle of the waiting area and then we began talking about racism in online spaces. Eventually we broached the topic of white people who are unaware of their privilege.

“I don’t approach things like you do. I am not negative online”, he said to me, in a straightforward manner. I was taken aback by his comment. I quickly gulped and looked down

toward the ground. I caught myself and tried to retain eye contact with him, but inside I was rattled by his words.

“Oh, okay. What do you mean?” I asked coyly. I think I knew what he meant. I just wanted him to tell me more about his thoughts on my approaches in online dialogue.

“I just try to approach things differently”, he paused, clearly trying to soften his language. “I think we can be gentler with people about what they don’t know”, Frank said. I nodded and took a swig of my water. I truly didn’t know how to respond after he said that.

As I walked away from him, I remembered that maybe he was talking about how I posted things outside of #htp that was more about white privilege. I would often share memes, other people’s posts, and even post my own thoughts on white privilege. I decided to use this as a teaching moment. Since “Frank” is a generally respected person in our Haudenosaunee communities, and a traditional person as well, I wondered if my approach was too heavy-handed or may be too “negative” in his words. Frank is also about 25 years older than me. People in my community often describe something as “negative” when someone is being too critical—and I do think that I am critical of issues of power pertaining to Indigenous/settler issues. In retrospect, I feel it was good to listen to people, especially people who are older than me, to gauge how they feel about how we approach our public or even online presence.

I would be lying if I said that Frank’s words weren’t still echoing in my mind today, as reminders of how to be and to remember our older generation’s approaches to addressing issues with people who are not Native. Frank’s words were medicine for me, the reality of how my own Native community members might perceive my approach—and a harsh reminder from a well-respected man who I’ve always looked up to. Admittedly, I still post in critical ways, but I feel it’s only to bring awareness. How much should I care about how I make white settlers feel? Don’t they live in our lands? Maybe that’s too negative. Maybe it’s not.

**“It’s the truth.”**

I received another message from a former high school classmate—a white man (settler) around my age—who was upset about a post that I put on my Facebook. He and I went back and forth via messenger for over an hour. He was upset about someone who made a comment online about white people and I defended my community member. Afterwards, I became upset because this was a longtime friendly acquaintance of mine and I couldn't deal with his level of anger, so I stopped responding. I knew right then that he was going to block me. After the interaction, I just sat there, watching a candle burn through its wax. I had been visiting my parents, and my mom walked by. She asked if I wanted hot tea or coffee. Even though I was trying to hide it, that's when she spotted my face—she knew right away that I was upset. I told her that I had an interaction with someone that was difficult. She nodded and sipped her coffee, as she listened. Eventually after some time talking, she responded.

“Well son”, she said. I waited in full anticipation. She usually says this when she is going to impart some kind of magical-mom-wisdom on me. I honestly wanted her to solve the problem for me, but I knew she wouldn't, that's not her style. She looked up from her coffee and I won't forget her words, “Sometimes you write things on there that pisses people off... and ya know what... fuck 'em”, she said. She smiled and we both threw our heads back and laughed. She continued, “At times people might get upset. But it's the truth and they need to hear it.” I nodded, intently listening to her words. “And don't worry”, she continued, “Sometimes it's important to leave people who you used to know in your past. Sometimes it's a disappointment to know that they've changed, I think.” I nodded as her words immediately locked into my memory. “But please be careful, some people are crazy”, she reminded me. I nodded and smiled.

I thought about the Native community member I defended online, against racist and homophobic comments from this old classmate of mine. In that small online interaction, I knew that, while I may have lost an old acquaintance, I gained my own self-respect and I hoped that my own Haudenosaunee community member appreciated that interaction. I thought about my mom's

comments that night. Her words felt supportive. I know that she always speaks from the heart, whether I agree or not, she always tells me her truth. I wrote her words down: “sometimes it’s a disappointment to know that they’ve changed”... I thought: *Am I the one who’s changed?*

### **Discussion: Indigenous/ settler power relations and digital media spaces**

In this section, I discuss power relations between Indigenous peoples and settlers within digital media spaces. I discuss my own reflections of my experiences conducting #htp on Facebook by addressing the following research questions.

1. How can Indigenous peoples build community using social media platforms?
2. How can Indigenous peoples use digital social media for Indigenous resurgence and to disrupt settler spaces?
3. What are some ethical considerations about social media and Indigeneity?

In the following section I address the questions by providing examples of ways that Indigenous peoples might use social media as a tool to disrupt settler spaces by building Indigenous community and centering Indigenous experiences. I discuss limitations to the use of social media with culturally sensitive information.

### **Building Community**

Despite many feelings that may arise after hard conversations and dialogic moments online, Indigenous peoples may use online spaces to build and to maintain community. When she created a Facebook account years ago, my mom told me that she loves Facebook because she can stay in touch with her family and friends from back home in our Haudenosaunee community. In the conversations that I have had with people who made passing comments about #htp, many provided encouraging words of support and provided positive feedback, which could bring us closer together. When a white male classmate had hard words to share with me online and my

mother caught my reaction (which I stewed over for hours) she decided to offer words of support and encouragement. This was not the only time that #htp felt empowering.

Christine, a younger Haudenosaunee language learner, seemed excited to give a word of encouragement about online discussion among our own community members far and wide across many Haudenosaunee communities. Our mutual friend Mike noted that he also enjoyed the type of conversations online that might deep-dive into Indigenous identity, and grapple complications of today’s realities as they align (or don’t) with our teachings. Even topics which seem a bit controversial have potential to bring people together to create community, such as giving voice to community members who might be wondering about the complexities of our teachings such as community educators, language learners, knowledge holders, community historians, youth, or Elders. These online discussions are more accessible to Indigenous community members who, for various reasons, might not have access due to their distance from their home community or individuals who may feel like they don’t belong but want to. These community discussions are also more accessible to non-Native people who want to understand Indigenous peoples, to build connections, community, and allyship.

Indigenous-based discussions affirm identity and celebrate Indigenous survival. In *A Digital Bundle: Protecting and Promoting Indigenous Knowledge Online*, Wemigwans describes many ways that Indigenous knowledge in online platforms (FourDirectionsTeachings.com) creates important spaces to decolonize, to learn about cultural protocol, to make connections, and to build community. Instead of online presence and social media as a form of “avoidance machines”, an Indigenous presence can be a political act of Indigenous survival. Wemigwans writes that Indigenous-based content can bring people together in community and “rekindle culture, teachings, customs, and history” (Chapter 4).

Non-Native people may also build community with Indigenous peoples through online interaction, who otherwise might not have if the space was not provided. In *A Digital Bundle*,

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Wemigwans tells a story about a non-Native Italian student who wanted to study Indigenous issues, but her family held stereotypical beliefs about Indigenous peoples, and they dissuaded the student from attending the university to get her master's degree. Later, the student formed a relationship with a Native community and then went on to become a teacher where, in collaboration with the online Indigenous-based platform FourDirectionsTeachings.com, the non-Native student became a teacher who built community as an ally to Indigenous peoples within a teacher education program at OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto). The teacher then used the online platform to provide teacher training to non-Native students about Indigenous peoples.

My friend Jessica interacted with me on a regular basis and continued to strive to understand the posts in #htp. As a non-Native settler and Indigenous ally, Jessica continues to ask questions. While she was a “viewer” of the #htp posts, she rarely commented or participated. She often held her comments and questions until she saw me in-person, instead of posting in the online #htp space, which I felt was appropriate and an important consideration for Indigenous-settler allyship. Her questions were poignant, and her thoughts were often full of respect and empathy. She chose not to take up space in the online discussions, rather just observe and note her curiosities. This is the way she chose to build community, to center Indigenous perspectives (and not her own) and to interact with me in-person. Online communities can create a sense of identity development and provide important Indigenous knowledge to Native peoples who might otherwise be unaware.

### **Indigenous Resurgence and Disrupting Settler Spaces**

In so many of the posts for #htp I was admittedly attempting to understand my own Indigenous identity and align it with people from my own community. Even a small post, or the mere presence of Indigenous anything online felt right because it meant something to me and to people like me

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who are always examining the meaning of our individual and collective identities, what we know and what we don't know but want to learn more about as Indigenous peoples. This felt good and at times, even disruptive.

In *As We Have Always Done*, Leanne Simpson describes Indigenous resurgence, not just to seek inclusion within a multicultural framework, but rather for Indigenous peoples to resist contemporary settler colonialism radically and unapologetically, both in-person and online. Simpson describes Indigenous presence online as complicated by settler colonialism, corporate greed, and settler capitalism, and whether or not the internet or social media serve in building movements. While Simpson asserts that there are "no bodies or land on the internet" (222) and she questions how our ancestors would feel if we were "fully integrated into a system of settler colonial surveillance and control" (222), it is crucial to point out that during Idle No More, Indigenous movements were heavily surveilled by the settler state. There are so many negative things to know about social media, Simpson recounts, from our digital lives being the "antithesis of Indigenous life... that it amplifies fear, ego, and anxiety... [and] centers individuals within a corporate, capitalist and coded algorithm" (224). Yet, Simpson also writes that social media does play a role and it has a part in disrupting settler spaces and powering movements, "blogging, podcasts, and sprecasting became critical tools of representing ourselves, and our issues on our own terms, en masse" (225).

Jessica relayed Jake's feelings about my online presence. His comment to her about me, "You know how *Hugh* is", suggested that perhaps online posts about racism, traditional teachings, gender, and Indigenous identity disrupted Jake's everyday settler existence. Posting and naming settler colonialism no doubt disrupts everyday lives of settlers on a regular basis, yet it could also bring awareness to salient Indigenous-based issues. In this way, Indigenous peoples become visible in very public ways, maybe even becoming targets, but visible, nonetheless. Anything other than Jake's everyday viewing of typical white male hegemony on his newsfeed, likely disrupts his

settler sensibilities. Jake was born and raised in a predominantly white community which borders an Indigenous community. He is someone who has an opinion steeped in racism. Posting Indigenous content online might have forced Jake to briefly look through a different lens and to take a glimpse into the lives and perspectives of Indigenous peoples. It is worth pointing out that Jake did not say anything to me in person about my posts but felt it more appropriate to describe his feelings to a white woman who he felt “safe” to tell.

Frank, an older Indigenous man, had thoughts about the approach where he disagreed with what he called being “negative” towards non-Native people in an online space. Perhaps he felt calling out systemic racism online to be an attack on white people, insensitive, or not a traditional way of our people. His comments don’t escape me, even to this day. I value his feedback because it is within our culture and worldview to speak tactfully and to deliberate calmly—ensuring that we interact with everyone using what my community members might refer to as a “good mind.”

Yet, if I approach this work as unapologetically as Leanne Simpson does, through Indigenous resurgence, a challenge is placed upon us as community members in online spaces. How does one strive to understand Indigenous identity, yet not write about, and engage with politics around settler colonialism and systemic racism? If I understand Frank’s interaction with me, it’s to consider a different approach, a softer, more subtle approach. In my #htp posts, settlers might interpret posts to be off-putting, yet perhaps my own community members might feel the same way, too. Where is the line?

In all of her Mom-wisdom, I echo my Mom’s words to address this issue: “At times people might get upset. But it’s the truth and they need to hear it.” These interactions demonstrated something important. While we may often worry about how settlers “see” us, simply *being* Indigenous online was and continues to be an act of disruption and of Indigenous resurgence. Nyaweñha for the teachings, Momma. Our coffee conversations for the win.

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### **Ethical Considerations and Limits**

In Carlson and Frazer's article, *"They Got Filters": Indigenous Social Media, the Settler Gaze, and a Politics of Hope*, where participants, all Indigenous social media users across many parts of Australia, described the politics of digital spaces for Indigenous peoples. One participant explained that it is not culturally appropriate to share information about "the passing of a dead person" or censor Indigenous peoples "fighting on Facebook" (5) because of the way settlers might "see" Indigenous peoples. Authors and researchers often describe the "settler gaze" to mean ways that Native peoples are often viewed through a deficit framing, stereotyped, or being "looked at or seen as 'other'" (Rice et. al 11) or in ways that Carlson and Frazier describe as externally problematized:

for Indigenous people, drama is often externally problematized and pathologized in ways not experienced by other, non-Indigenous social groups... There is always the possibility that a nefarious observer is in the audience, ready to wield personal online interactions against Indigenous people as a social group. (5-6)

Since Native peoples are quite aware of the cultural protocol and the power of the settler gaze in online spaces, community members may self-police on Facebook, so that Native peoples aren't seen solely in a negative light by settlers.

In retrospect, Carol's words, "And this is not to be shared out there, Hugh", were meaningful interaction for me, especially from someone whom I hold in such high esteem as a language teacher and knowledge holder. Although we don't necessarily call people "knowledge holders" in Haudenosaunee communities, the meaning could be implied as a person of a particular responsibility, who holds our knowledge. She said this, not to police me, but rather to provide guidance in expectation and responsibility to cultural protocol, to provide a limit, and to extend a sense of trust. Being someone who recognized this early on, I always try to consider with deep

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respect, the limits of sharing our teachings. When settlers “see” our words online, they might often see much more than words on a Snap, Tweet, or Facebook post. When settlers grapple with what they do not know, we also grapple with what *they* do not know, as well. We navigate how sharing of information might leave us open or vulnerable to settler ignorance, brought by the settler gaze, always.

Given the complication or limits of posting sensitive information, I often would reach out and ask people if a post about which teachings would be appropriate and which teachings would not be. I ended up drawing limits for myself by not posting about ceremonies at all. I did choose to post particular teachings, but only as they were centered in history or “our worldview,” to couch such information that I felt would typically be discussed in college or university settings. As I continued to navigate posting or not posting, my perspective has even changed since #htp. I choose to have discussions about salient issues around gender, race, or ceremonial teachings to my own community in an in-person, closed space. Overall, I feel that since I am a learner, I should continue to limit my posts, perhaps even in more of a strict manner due to these implications of power.

Of course, to share or not, depends on the community, not us as individuals. Non-Native scholars, public news outlets, and people in authority positions have threatened Indigenous knowledge and continue to do so to this day. Wemigwans reminds us about the differences between personal/individual knowledge versus traditional knowledge:

Personal knowledge is acquired through individual educational pursuits, empirical processes, or the gifts that one is born with or has received through revealed knowledge, which includes spiritual knowledge gained through dreams, visions, intuitions, and meditations. Personal knowledge is not bounded by the cultural protocols of the community in the way that Traditional Knowledge is. (Chapter 1)

Often academics or scholars as individuals have acquired knowledge (in the settler academy or individual pursuits), but this is different from the cultural protocols that are upheld in an Indigenous community where Indigenous knowledge is gifted, highly praised, often just spoken, and protected.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

People can use digital social media platforms for so much more than I describe in this paper. #http only encompassed some ways that I have used social media to describe Indigenous identity, to confront issues of power, or to find a limit in the sharing of Indigenous knowledge online. While #http acted as a catalyst for me to see how far I could unpack Haudenosaunee identity on a public platform, it was far from perfect. Building online communities or having online discussions, if they lack personal interaction, may contribute to a lack of authentic interaction where facial expressions, body signals, and tones of voice play an important role in discussion, especially if people don't always agree. Online discussions are not always easy and have lasting effects, both positive and negative, which I hope I have demonstrated in this paper.

In future papers, I am personally curious about U.S. and Canadian Indigenous-Settler border relations using digital social media platforms, use of social media in P-12 settings or in teacher education, or Indigenous-to-Indigenous alliance-making on social media platforms. I have also found it difficult to locate research about ethnic fraud in online spaces pertaining to Indigenous peoples. I am also interested in differences across Indigenous nations and community protocol with regard to sharing traditional teachings, or to bridge divides for social innovation and dialogue about decolonized thinking concepts in online spaces (Turtle Island Institute). Lastly, as my children develop a deep understanding of digital technologies and online gaming, I'm curious about ways that they, as Indigenous youth and young adults, experience their online lives.

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One day I hope they will teach me more; as it seems I understand less and less about digital technologies, as an elder millennial.

### Conclusion

It was mid-August in 2022. I was grappling with the first draft of this article late one Monday night while sipping coffee that my mom gifted me. I took to Instagram for another writing break. As I scrolled through reels for some time, listening to guitar riffs and sharing funny memes to friends online, I eventually posted a picture of my laptop and my writing space with a small “sleepy face gif”.

A friend and fellow Kanien’keha:ka scholar-activist, Dr. Konwahawahi Rourke, saw the picture that I shared on my Instagram story and asked, “*How’s the writing going?*” We typed back and forth for a moment. She asked questions about the topic of the paper, and I responded. This was an exercise which I found helped to organize my thoughts. I finally found the words to explain to her, more succinctly, what this article is about.

H: “I grouped people in insider/outsider status. Basically, white people who were either curious or mad about my posts [and] our people who were interested or feeling weird about some topics. That’s the heart of it... The conclusion is like, “we don’t need settler permission to post about ourselves.”

*We don’t need settler permission*, I said to myself again. That’s the first time I wrote that, and I liked it. Her response came quickly through Instagram messenger.

K: “People who get mad about posts often don’t realize their implicit bias... it’s so deeply engrained. Social media is such a catalyst for settlers to realize that their narrative is incredibly incomplete.”

I felt so supported knowing that she got the paper idea, even when I couldn’t describe it so well in the moment. But more than that, she described the exact issue that often plagues our social media

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lives as Indigenous peoples online. Her words were crucial: *social media is a catalyst for settlers to realize that their narrative is incredibly incomplete.*

After this interaction, I asked her if I could use that for the paper. She agreed and said I could use her real name and not a pseudonym. I thanked her for her impactful words. Then I thought about the other aspects of the paper. For centuries since contact, Indigenous peoples have struggled to control our narrative, since our stories have all too often been told to everyone through a settler lens and interpretation. How can settlers tell our stories when their narrative about us has always been so flawed and incomplete?

When we use social media to understand ourselves, our teachings, our stories, and we share that space together in public, we stand in direct opposition to silent onlookers, settlers. Settlers gaze at our words, if only for a moment—and in that moment, they begin to understand how truly little they know about us. Simply by building community online, Native peoples disrupt settler narratives about us. And in all of our difficulties worrying about what to share, and what not to share, when all we truly need to know is simple—it's that we don't need settler permission to be Indigenous online. We never needed settler permission to be who we've always been; and we will never need settler permission to be who we will always be—the original people of these lands, Onkwehòn:we.

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## **#HonouringIndigenousWriters: Visiting with and through Indigenous Literatures in the “Digital Turn”**

DAVID GAERTNER

On March 15, 2022, as part of the fourth annual #HonouringIndigenousWriters Festival, Joshua Whitehead read from his forthcoming book, *Making Love to the Land* to an international audience collected on Zoom. The appearance marked one of the first public readings of *Making Love*, which was still months away from its official publication date. Whitehead’s reading was a historical moment for #HonouringIndigenousWriters. Hosting Whitehead, the festival served as a platform for one of Indigenous literature’s most innovative and popular authors reading from unpublished work. It also gathered an international audience online, with attendees logging in from Canada, the United States, New Zealand, Australia, the U.K. and India.<sup>1</sup> Despite taking place on Zoom, the reading was quite intimate, sending, as one attendee put it on Twitter, “soft, warm, friendly yet uncomfortable shivers” through cyberspace (@LenaRemyKovach). Via video conferencing, the audience was welcomed into the inner workings of Whitehead’s writing process, but also into his home, including glimpses of his writing space, art collection, and his dog. It was evident that the reading blurred the boundaries between online and offline, public and private when someone requested that Whitehead show his dog on camera, to which he politely and humorously responded, “I am wearing sweatpants, so I won't be getting up right now.”<sup>2</sup>

In the six years that it has been running, #HonouringIndigenousWriters has played a vital role in bridging the gap between online and offline spaces, working towards better representation of Indigenous literatures in the digital realm. I have co-organized #HonouringIndigenousWriters with Erin Fields, the Open Education and Scholarly Communications Librarian at the University of British Columbia, since we established it in 2018. Originally inspired

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by Daniel Heath Justice's hashtag of the same name, the event began as a Wikipedia edit-athon and a contribution to Open Education Week (O.E. Week).<sup>3</sup>

Since 2018, #HonouringIndigenousWriters has blossomed into a modest literary festival, uniting scholars and Indigenous authors in a unique celebration of culture and art. The festival features engaging readings and discussions, as well as unique editing challenges that not only foster community and collaboration but also enable participants to enhance public understanding of Indigenous literatures. Thanks to social media and platforms like Zoom, #HonouringIndigenousWriters extended its reach globally during the pandemic, allowing audiences to tune into readings like Whitehead's from the comfort of their homes all over the world. In some aspects, the festival mirrors the success of established edit-athons, such as Art + Feminism, by offering digital literacy training and improving the online representation of underrepresented communities.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, #HonouringIndigenousWriters has carved out a unique place within the edit-athon community, emerging as a lively forum for performance. It creates platforms, both digital and physical, where emerging and seasoned authors can share their works with receptive and knowledgeable audiences.

My contribution to this special issue of *Transmotion* serves as both a retrospective glance and a theoretical intervention. In what follows, I delineate the processes and strategies underpinning #HonouringIndigenousWriters, while also utilizing its events and procedures to probe deeper into the 'digital turn' within Indigenous literary studies. In examining #HonouringIndigenousWriters in conjunction with writings by the authors that have participated in it, including Whitehead, I hope to illustrate critical spaces that may allow us to 'visit with stories,' a concept advanced by Warren Cariou (Cariou 10). This approach illuminates the theoretical complexities and nuances of 'visiting,' offering readers a more relational and ethical means of

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engaging with Indigenous literatures through digital technologies, which builds on our strengths as literary scholars while opening opportunities for collaboration.

### **Hospitality and “Virtual Visits”<sup>5</sup>**

Of course, bringing online and offline spaces into closer proximity comes with complications, many of which were thrown into relief during the pandemic. Daniel Heath Justice frames the impacts and intimacies of Zoom culture in the terms of relationality. As he aptly put it during Whitehead’s #HonouringIndigenousWriters event (which he moderated), the all-too-quick-shift to online instruction during the pandemic made instructors and students “guests in one another’s homes” where we were privy to some of the more personal details of one another’s lives. Indeed, the transition to online instruction introduced an unprecedented level of intimacy within professional environments, including classrooms, something that university administrations largely failed to acknowledge. This disparity was especially pronounced for students living in cramped accommodations (an all-too-common occurrence in Vancouver). As education moved online, bedrooms underwent a rapid conversion into classrooms, while kitchens, living rooms, and even bathrooms seamlessly transitioned into offices.<sup>6</sup> Astutely identifying this shift, Justice argued that we must all, students and instructors alike, “think of ourselves as guests and honour that relationship”.

Justice's take on Zoom culture acknowledges the presence of risk in online education, but it also gestures toward the potential for connection. Through the framework of guesthood, he illustrates how the merging of public and private spaces in online classrooms opens up possibilities for intricate and multifaceted encounters with friends, family, colleagues, and students. Many teachers and students experienced these moments in digital classrooms. During my own online classes, I encountered children and pets, engaged in conversations around kitchen tables, and

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shared insights with mothers, fathers, and grandparents. These encounters, while complex and sometimes stressful, carried a sense of the sublime, as they relied on vulnerability, relationality, and hospitality beyond the typical student/teacher encounter. Encountering ourselves as guests in Zoom classrooms disassembled some of the authority that we, as teachers, carry into our educational practices and, in some instances, made space for pedagogies grounded in kinship and care.<sup>7</sup>

What I want to suggest about these encounters is that they throw into relief the potential (and the pitfalls) of *visiting* in digital Indigenous literary studies. In critical theory, visiting is framed within the discourse of hospitality, the tension between the right of the stranger, or *arrivant*, and the host's sovereignty. While hospitality entails a sense of obligation to the guest, offering them space and refuge, the relationship is defined by certain conditions. These conditions encompass the safety and well-being of both host and guest, adherence to the rules and norms of the host's space, and an expectation of mutual respect and civility. In this way, hospitality becomes a delicate balance of openness and constraint, where both parties acknowledge their responsibilities and shared values. If a host deems a visitor to be undeserving of hospitality, however, their well-being is often at stake. Without the 'invitation' inherent in hospitality, individuals entering a space—whether a home or a country—are framed as a potentially harmful or disruptive presence. This, in turn, can lead to precarious living conditions, increased vulnerability, and a lingering fear of deportation. The cycle of marginalization and hardship that ensues as a result of inhospitality not only reinforces the host's perception of the 'other' as a threat but also justifies restrictive policies. It paints those seeking refuge as undesirable or unworthy of care, perpetuating stereotypes and emboldening a narrative that aligns with exclusionary practices. In this way, the very act of denying hospitality contributes to a broader discourse that serves to dehumanize and alienate vulnerable populations.

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Interactions between parties in the host/guest framework are characterized by their intensity. Hospitality involves opening oneself to the other, navigating unfamiliar territory, and confronting both the joys and challenges of human connection in a context where roles, boundaries, and expectations are uniquely intertwined. The French philosopher and psychoanalyst Anne Dufourmantelle portrays the emotional dynamics of hospitality as an "unbearable orb of intimacy" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2), effectively conveying the complex and contradictory nature of the relational experiences that constitute the relationship between guest and host. Dufourmantelle's "orb of intimacy" highlights the vulnerability and tensions that arise as hosts and guests navigate intense points of connection in high-stakes environments. Pointing to the ways in which hospitality threatens sovereignty and privacy, Jacques Derrida identifies hospitality as "the effacement of the limit between private and public, the secret and the phenomenal, the home [...] and the violation or impossibility of home" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 65). Through Derrida's lens, hospitality becomes a space where vulnerability is not merely a risk but also a potential strength. By allowing for the possibility of transformation, hospitality creates opportunities for more authentic relationships and the realization of a shared humanity. The idea of hospitality as an ethical stance invites us to think more critically about our relationships with others, our responsibilities, and how we can foster connections characterized by empathy, compassion, and care.

Of course, hospitality also opens up the possibility of radical violence. Opening up the home to strangers leaves us at our most vulnerable, exposing our family, values, and way of life to risk. As such, the right to offer hospitality, to provide asylum, may seem an unequivocal act of goodwill, but it is also a question of power, sovereignty, and the authority to bestow care. This is where Derrida locates a deeply rooted aporia in the ethics of relationality: where an unconditional welcome opens the possibility for its collapse. One need only look to the ongoing

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legacy of settler colonialism for evidence of this. Opposed to franchise colonialism, which focusses on economic development through resource extraction and labour exploitation, settler colonialism “is a persistent social and political formation in which newcomers/colonizers/settlers come to a place, claim it as their own, and do whatever it takes to displace the Indigenous peoples that are there” (Arvin et al. 12). Initially welcomed as guests into Indigenous territories, settlers leveraged the hospitality shown to them by their Indigenous hosts to usurp sovereignty and establish themselves as gatekeepers. By manipulating Indigenous hospitality settlers gradually repositioned themselves from guest to host, exploiting the tension between welcome and power to assert their own sovereignty and thus guarantee their own right to administer hospitality.

Settler colonialism manipulates hospitality, transforming an opportunity for relationship-building into a means of undermining Indigenous sovereignty. This process illuminates the dual nature of hospitality as both an offering of trust and a potential avenue for exploitation, where the very mechanisms intended to forge connections can be co-opted to further colonial objectives. Through the opportunistic invasion and exploitation of goodwill to assert control, settlers reveal themselves not just as flawed guests but as stark embodiments of the hostility that underscores hospitality, a concept that Derrida captures in the neologism “hostipitality”.<sup>8</sup> Articulated from this point of view, hospitality, in its purest form, is not an agent of violence but a structure that opens doors for profound and transformative connections rooted in vulnerability and mutual care. Yet, because hospitality is defined by a vulnerability—opening oneself or one's space to others—it always carries with it the potential for violence, as the trust extended can be exploited or betrayed. As such, it's crucial to recognize that hospitality's potential is contingent on the choices of those who inhabit its structure. In the context of settler colonialism, the choices made by settlers are illuminating. Their deliberate decision to exploit the invitation and welcome offered to them reveals two contrasting realities. On one side, there is the relational possibility of hospitality—an

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opening for understanding and connection. On the other, there is the harsh reality of exploitation and domination that forms the foundation of sovereignty in colonial nation states. This contrast is a testament to how settlers can twist the potential transcendence of hospitality into something altogether contrary.

In research contexts involving academics and Indigenous participants, the dynamics of hospitality can become distorted in ways that raise serious ethical concerns. Researchers may initially arrive as guests, but often they take on a mantle of "expertise" that effectively positions them as hosts within the Indigenous communities they are studying. This power dynamic reflects Derrida's concept of "hostipitality," a situation in which the guest usurps the host's authority and control. Billy-Ray Belcourt describes this phenomenon as the "Singularity of coloniality," where "Indigenous people sit stilled in the role of the described" within their own homes and communities. Researchers, in their hunger for "racialized simplicity," reduce Indigenous individuals to mere objects of study. This analytical approach treats Indigenous people as something to be fed through "the poorly-oiled machine of analysis," a process that Belcourt likens to vampirism. In this way, the complexities of hospitality and the relationships it entails are reduced to a tool for exploitation and misunderstanding."

The challenge then becomes recognizing and resisting this form of "hostipitality," ensuring that research practices deconstruct scholarly authority while amplifying Indigenous voices. By actively seeking collaboration, consent, and a more balanced power relationship, researchers can work towards a model of engagement that "bring[s] into play," as Orin Starn, argues, "multiple, overlapping fields and scales of geography and social life" (195). Indigenous studies work to disrupt settler articulations of "hostipitality," as it is articulated in research dynamics through the relational practice of visiting. As a methodology, visiting is a means of reconceptualizing how researchers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, conduct research with community, transitioning away

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from the colonial imperatives that often frame the researcher as "host" (i.e., expert) to embracing a relational dynamic grounded in care and accountability. In "Keeoukaywin: The Visiting Way - Fostering an Indigenous Research Methodology," Janice Cindy Gaudet writes about the political implications of visiting, both as a research methodology and as a means of being in relationship with Indigenous peoples. For Gaudet,

The visiting way unsettles historical inaccuracies about Indigenous people... and restores diplomacy by asserting an ethics of care, transparency, and accountability to our kinship relations... being accountable to our relations signifies a call to build trusting relationships and to uphold respectful connections beyond the duration of our research. We must continuously ask ourselves how we can give back and uphold respect, receptivity, and reciprocity while being mindful of what our research may unsettle. (Gaudet 58)

Gaudet situates the concept of visiting within the same frameworks that Justice advocated for in online Zoom encounters. Rather than expecting to be welcomed into a space unconditionally, the "visiting way," encourages researchers to build trusting relationships and maintain respectful connections with Indigenous collaborators. It restores relationality through principles of care and transparency, emphasizing the host's authority and the guest's (i.e., the researcher's) accountability to their hosts.

Opposed to hospitality, visiting is grounded not in an unconditional welcome, but in the acknowledged presence and responsibility of the guest. It foregrounds and privileges the "orb of intimacy" but also how to respectfully engage within it. In "Visiting as an Indigenous Feminist Practice," Eve Tuck, Haliehana Stepetin, Rebecca Beaulne-Stuebing and Jo Billows assert that "being a visitor is showing care and being responsible for our impact and presence" (Tuck et al 1). For Billows, showing care means actively engaging, preserving, and nurturing the places and relationships that researchers encounter as guests in Indigenous communities. Rather than being

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passive observers, visitors actively participate in the places they visit, preserving and honoring histories, thoughtfully engaging with their hosts' perspectives, interacting with the land and its stories, while respectfully acknowledging their hosts' boundaries and protocols. In *Hungry Listening*, Dylan Robinson writes about the centrality of careful listening in his visiting practice: "Whether explicitly or implicitly, visiting is a process of affirming our varied responsibilities as Indigenous people to each other, our responsibilities to the communities we are part of, and asserting this... through a process that has careful listening at its core" (177). Through listening, Robinson argues, individuals strengthen their relationships with others, promote reciprocity, and embody the values of empathy and support that underpin their responsibilities within the communities they are welcomed into. Read through the interpersonal dynamics and responsibilities described by thinkers such as Billows and Robinson, visiting becomes a transformative practice that cultivates reciprocal care while centering the Indigenous host's voice within their communities and territories.

The relationship between visiting and storytelling also transcends mere social interaction, revealing a profound connection in which stories become a means of sharing, engaging with, and welcoming others into our homes and experiences. According to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, visiting is "a sharing of oneself through story, through principled and respectful consensual reciprocity with another living being" (18). Tuck, Stepetin, Beaulne-Stuebing, and Billows argue that "stories invite and invoke relationships" while communicating values "associated with subsistence processes, practices, and protocols" (145). Warren Cariou articulates the power of visiting in terms of literary sovereignty, as developed by Robert Warrior. He proposes that in order to fully engage many Indigenous stories, one should study the community they originate from and the people associated with it. Engaging with stories from this perspective, Cariou suggests, facilitates a hermeneutic approach to visiting, where critics also visit with the text itself:

Visiting the text, like visiting a friend or relation, would mean showing up without an agenda or preconceived notion of what we want to gain from this encounter. It would involve opening ourselves to the story in a humble way. Visiting as a mode of reading is an antidote to the all-too-common practice of extractive criticism. (10)

Here, Cariou foregrounds humility and vulnerability as central means of visiting with Indigenous literatures. As readers and scholars delving into Indigenous literatures, we are urged to pay close attention to not only the content provided by the host within the text but also to the specific methods of engagement they extend. This approach to interacting with a text requires us to set aside conventional literary theories we may have been trained in, such as close reading and study of a text's internal structure, which often disregard the author's intent, the reader's response, historical and cultural contexts, and other external factors that might influence interpretation. Instead, we must be willing to navigate the text by embracing and employing the unique perspectives and ways of understanding that the author, community, or text itself put forth. By aligning our reading and analysis with the intentions and cultural insights inherent in the text's ecosystem, we do more than just interpret a story; we enter into it through a “respectful acknowledgment of a relationship, an opening of the self to the possibilities that can arise in this relationship” (Cariou 8).

In the terms of visiting, storytelling can be seen not just as a creative expression or a means of preserving culture, but a profound gesture of relationality. Stories are shared spaces where principles, ethics, and values are interwoven, forming an invitation that can illuminate the relationship between “host” and “guest.” In what follows, I illustrate what the #HonouringIndigenousWriters edit-athon helps to articulate in terms of visiting with Indigenous literatures. What I attempt to surface through my analysis of the festival's history, context, and, most particularly, its programming, is an outline for considering visiting within the “digital turn” of

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Indigenous literatures. Or, to put it differently, I use #HonouringIndigenousWriters' digital infrastructure, collaborative editing practices, and (cyber)spaces of encounter to outline modes of literary engagement that centre relationality, care and listening over close reading, argument and dissection.

### **#HonouringIndigenousWriters**

In December 2015, Cherokee scholar and author Daniel Heath Justice launched a Twitter campaign to raise awareness about Indigenous literature and Indigenous authors. His initiative involved tweeting information about an Indigenous author every single day for an entire year, showcasing the richness and diversity of Indigenous literary contributions. The campaign began without a container, but Leanne Betasamosake Simpson proposed the hashtag #HonouringIndigenousWriters as a way to effectively organize the campaign's content while also encapsulating the core essence and purpose of the project (*Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* 214). In the end, Justice compiled tweets featuring 366 Indigenous authors, all of which are documented in his book, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*.

In 2018, Erin Fields and I, along with a small but dedicated group of volunteers, began consulting with Justice about extending the reach and influence of the #HonouringIndigenousWriters hashtag on Wikipedia. Fields and I had partnered previously to create Wikipedia assignments for my courses and resources for other instructors.<sup>9</sup> Building on the success of our co-designed classroom assignments, we envisioned a new home for #HonouringIndigenousWriters in an event that channelled the energy of edit-a-thons such as Art + Feminism and leveraged the community that had rallied around the #HonouringIndigenousWriters hashtag. With a small budget in hand, we enlisted the support of graduate students and volunteers from the First Nations and Indigenous Studies Program, UBC Library, and the Centre

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for Teaching and Learning Technology. Collaborating with the First Nations House of Learning, we successfully organized and hosted the first #HonouringIndigenousWriters event in the Sty-Wet-Tan Great Hall, situated within the UBC Longhouse, which is on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the hənq̓əminəm-speaking x̣ẉməθkʷəy̓əm people.<sup>10</sup>

The expressed goal of that inaugural event, drawn from Justice’s Twitter campaign, was to “improve the coverage of Indigenous writers on Wikipedia and to encourage diverse community editors to actively work to disprove assumptions about Indigenous literature by raising their profile in this increasingly influential information source” (Wikipedia: Meetup/HonouringIndigenousWriters). In its inaugural year, with a dedicated group of twenty-three participants, we collectively added 4,250 words to Indigenous literature articles. In the two weeks following the event, these articles were viewed 197 times.<sup>11</sup> It was a modest, but not insignificant contribution. That said, while our outputs did make some impact, what we found most inspiring was the overwhelming interest and dedication we received from the community that joined us. Attendees included faculty, staff, students, and librarians from X̣wi7x̣wa Library, our university’s centre for academic and community Indigenous scholarship. The Indigenous-owned bookstore Iron Dog Books also participated, setting up a book sale on-site and advertising our event through their website and social media. Indigenous authors, including Samantha Nock, Jules Koostachin, and Dallas Hunt, added to the festive atmosphere of the event, reading poetry from newly published collections and works-in-progress. The collective involvement brought a sense of solidarity and celebration to the event, facilitated by a few snacks and music pumped through the Sty-Wet-Tan sound system.

During the entire four-hour event, volunteer instructors worked diligently, teaching attendees how to register a Wikipedia account, add their edits, and respond to editor feedback and deletions. The latter point illustrates that volunteer work required more than a working

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knowledge of digital humanities. Adding content to Wikipedia about Indigenous authors often means confronting Wikipedia editors who erase content based on the platform's "notability" standards. In the context of Wikipedia, "notability" means that an author must be verifiable through significant coverage on a range of reliable sources. However, as Siobhan Senier illustrates, "notability" is hardly apolitical given that it "mimics the centrifugal force exercised by literary canons" in which Indigenous voices are often erased. Challenging editors who erase content based on "notability" means understanding the structural violence that occludes Indigenous histories, aesthetics, and politics. This is to say, the work invested into #honouringIndigenousWriters is specialized and nuanced, requiring guidance from Indigenous scholars, such as Justice, who hosted the inaugural event and Indigenous information scientists, such as the librarians at X̱wi7̱x̱wa.

At the time of this writing, the #HonouringIndigenousWriters Edit-athon is entering its sixth year. Since 2018, it has evolved to include panel discussions, book clubs, performance art, and a variety of workshops. We have partnered with various Canadian academic institutions and organizations, including the Institute for Critical Indigenous Studies, the Public Humanities Hub, Indigenous Programs and Services (UBC Okanagan), B.C. Campus, the University of Calgary, and the NEOS Library Consortium. Satellite events have been held at BCcampus, the University of Toronto Digital Humanities Lab, Kwantlen Polytechnical University, Langara University, Simon Fraser University, and Capilano University. Over the years, the annual event has led to substantial improvements in dozens of Indigenous author pages on Wikipedia. More than 12,112 words have been added, and a total of forty-nine articles have been edited or created, featuring authors such as Billy-Ray Belcourt, Jordan Abel, Kim Senklip Harvey, Lisa Bird-Wilson, and many more. In 2023, Donna Langille, Christian Isbister, Kayla Lar-Son, and Karleen Delaurier-Lyle took over the

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event, uniting the UBC Vancouver and UBC Okanogan campuses in honouring Brian Thomas Isaac and Jessica Johns.

Building a sustainable community of editors, volunteers, and Indigenous authors has been a central element of our work developing #HonouringIndigenousWriters. Fields and her team created documentation that could be used by satellite groups and individuals looking to participate, including an organizer kit, editing and research sprint workshop materials, and the #HonouringIndigenousWriters Challenge Bank.<sup>12</sup> We also published information on how to work in good faith with Indigenous authors, and developed a database of articles that need editing and improvement.<sup>13</sup> During the pre-planning stages, we ensured that all the articles that we would put forward for revision or creation were consented to by the respective authors and we collected and compiled information that the authors themselves wanted to include on their Wikipedia pages.<sup>14</sup> This approach demonstrated to editor participants that #HonouringIndigenousWriters is, despite its online mediation, constructed with and for Indigenous authors. By foregrounding consent and reciprocity in our editing guidelines and events, we established care and active listening as the foundation of our community of practice and built trust so that in our later years authors felt comfortable reaching out to us for help writing or editing their Wikipedia articles.

Given that our edit-athon focuses on stories, storytelling naturally became a rich source of inspiration and connection for our community. Over the years, #HonouringIndigenousWriters has featured many Indigenous poets, novelists, scholars, playwrights, and even performance artists, starting with the first edit-athon in the Sty-Wet-Tan great hall. Featured authors/performers over the years include Samantha Nock, Jules Koostachin, Dallas Hunt, Carleigh Baker, Jessica Johns, Billy-Ray Belcourt, Tenille Campbell, Richard Van Camp, Smokii Sumac, Marilyn Dumont, Joshua Whitehead, Kateri Akwenzie-Damm, Peter Morin, Kim Senklip Harvey, Brian Thomas Isaac, and

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Aubrey Hanson. As it grew over the years, #HonouringIndigenousWriters became a distinctive platform for engaging directly with new and established Indigenous authors. Exceeding the digital space of Wikipedia, it evolved into a dynamic and collaborative community, fostering dialogues and building relationships that bridged virtual and physical spaces. Through the intersection of literature, art, and culture, #HonouringIndigenousWriters creates not only a repository of knowledge but also a living network that celebrates and elevates Indigenous voices, embodying storytelling as a reciprocal act of sharing, connection, and empowerment.

Of course, along with the rest of the world, the pandemic significantly altered how we thought about community and relationality at #HonouringIndigenousWriters. By centering Indigenous authors, serving food, and encouraging conversation and peer-to-peer support, #HonouringIndigenousWriters was a “digital” event that was originally deeply grounded in place, people, and IRL relationships. With that grounding, we were able to nurture learning environments that appropriately supported the work and the content the edit-athon produced. Shifting to an entirely digital format considerably altered how we thought about community, particularly in our relationship to place. Rather than cancel the event, however, we decided to embrace online learning and use Zoom to bring authors into participants’ homes. Following the guidance of digital humanists such as Cathy N. Davidson and Jaqueline Wernimont (“Teaching in the Time of Covid-19”), we consciously opted for asynchronous content in #HonouringIndigenousWriters in 2021. This choice was made to improve the sustainability and accessibility of the initiative while protecting the health of authors and participants. By moving away from a single live event, which could inadvertently exclude potential participants and strain our volunteer resources, we sought to create a more inclusive and flexible learning experience that expanded our reach and community. To facilitate the adoption of an asynchronous model, the planning committee curated a comprehensive resource suite, linking users to static Wikipedia

documentation and pre-recorded training videos like the Art + Feminism "Get Started: Learn to Edit!" series. Additionally, based on our ongoing discussions with Indigenous authors, we shared the list of articles with consent for editing, accompanied by preliminary research materials for editors to utilize.<sup>15</sup>

Despite our interest in asynchronous elements, however, we were not prepared to abandon the synchronous content associated with #HonouringIndigenousWriters, leading us to embrace Zoom, the cloud-based communications software. We understood that moving to digital author readings would sacrifice some of the place-based relationality we valued, but our commitment to live, interactive storytelling remained a central element of our pedagogy. There were also clear advantages to moving online. The flexibility of online readings, coupled with an asynchronous approach to editing Wikipedia, allowed us to engage Indigenous authors from diverse global locations and broaden our audience far beyond Vancouver. Utilizing Zoom, we were able to facilitate 'live' readings that authors and audience members could access from their own homes, whether in Musqueam territory, Treaty 7, or even Australia or India.

We mobilized the benefits of online events to the best of our abilities. Instead of conducting live editing sessions during the readings, we strategically spread the readings throughout March, encouraging participants to engage with asynchronous content after connecting with the authors during the live sessions. This approach afforded us the opportunity to dedicate more time to author readings and Q&A sessions, providing participants with valuable insights to use as inspiration for their Wikipedia contributions. Throughout the live readings, we guided participants towards the training materials and encouraged them to utilize our documentation and examples when editing pages. As a means to further entice would-be editors, the organizing team also created a weekly challenge bank with interactive activities for each event week. These activities were scaled across five difficulty levels, ranging from attending a live

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#HonouringIndigenousWriters reading (level one) to researching and developing a “stub” article about an Indigenous author (level five).<sup>16</sup>

The journey of the #HonouringIndigenousWriters Edit-athon has been an inspiring testament to the power of community, storytelling, and collaboration. From its inception, the event has blossomed into a multifaceted platform that celebrates Indigenous authors, bridging the gap between the virtual world and real-life relationships. The transition to a digital format, necessitated by the global pandemic, presented challenges but also opportunities to expand our reach and deepen our impact. By embracing both synchronous and asynchronous engagement models we were able to make space for a more robust inclusivity, fostering a connection with Indigenous authors and readers across the globe. Through collaboration and creative approaches to knowledge mobilization, #HonouringIndigenousWriters has not only enriched Wikipedia's content but has also shaped a vibrant and caring community committed to, well, honouring Indigenous authors. It stands as a vivid example of how digital tools can be wielded to facilitate understanding, respect, and the celebration of Indigenous voices.

### Visiting the Text

The accelerated development of #HonouringIndigenousWriters' digital infrastructure, facilitated by the pandemic and Zoom culture, liberated the online components of the edit-athon from Wikipedia's flat and relatively non-relational interface.<sup>17</sup> For instance, via Zoom, #HonouringIndigenousWriters, in partnership with the University of Alberta Library, brought Marilyn Dumont to audiences in both British Columbia and Alberta during an afternoon discussion of *The Pemmican Eaters* and Indigenous poetics. Through online infrastructure and a partnership with Iron Dog Books, #HonouringIndigenousWriters also developed an online book club in support of Tenille Campbell's second book of poetry, *nedi nezu*. Participants' engagement with

#HonouringIndigenousWriters expanded to various digital platforms, including Twitter, Instagram, and Tik Tok. The hashtag #HonouringIndigenousWriters regained traction on social media, with users participating in an #HonouringIndigenousWriters Tik Tok campaign inspired by the #passthepencil hashtag challenge.

Contrary to the notion that online culture is inherently alienating, the shift to online #HonouringIndigenousWriters events during the pandemic actually enabled more intimate encounters with Indigenous authors and their stories. The 2021 and 2022 iterations of the festival, conducted almost entirely in cyberspace, emerged as two of the most vibrant and dynamic events in our brief history. The extended author readings, spanning from 60 to 90 minutes, provided digital spaces where authors and audiences could virtually visit with stories and come together from various parts of the world. These immersive readings fostered deep and meaningful connections between authors and participants, breaking through geographical barriers to create a global community centered on Indigenous stories and storytellers.

Contributions from Smokii Sumac and Richard Van Camp were particularly striking in these regards, demonstrating how authors extend hospitality, even in an online setting. Rather than falling into the detachment often typical of virtual events, both Sumac and Van Camp used their skills as storytellers to make their readings engaging and resonant, forging connections that felt intimate and impactful. Sumac's reading, presented from his bedroom, became an immersive experience as he skillfully wove his poetry together with the objects and cultural items surrounding him in that intimate space. His unique approach, which included a reflection on the painting that hung behind him, "Kwe loves herself despite all odds," by Anishinaabe artist Quill Christie, created a unique connection between his personal space and his poetics, adding depth and context to poems about his journey as a Ktunaxa Two-Spirit person. A few days later, on a Saturday morning, Van Camp started #HonouringIndigenousWriters' first children's reading by

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drawing attention to a familiar piece of pop culture hanging above his head in the Zoom: an elaborate Millennium Falcon model. The Falcon was artfully situated in the *mise-en-scène* of Van Camp's Zoom, but it was more than just set dressing; it became the launching point for a very funny story about him and his family. Van Camp recounted the model's journey to its perch above the door, including his own frustrations attempting to hang it and the heroic assistance of his partner, who eventually came to his rescue. Like Sumac, Van Camp engaged his environment in ways that productively blurred the lines between story and place, folding his (digital) environment into his storytelling. In doing so he welcomed his audience into his home, bridging the gap between the digital space of the reading and the physical spaces of both the author and the audience.

Still, while all of the readings offered during the 2021 and 2022 #HonouringIndigenousWriters events introduced enacted visiting at different levels, none did so with the specificity of Joshua Whitehead's *Making Love with the Land* event. During the interview that Daniel Heath Justice conducted with Whitehead during this reading, Justice adeptly delved into the themes of guesthood and relationality that Whitehead raises in the book. He asked, "What are the protocols and approaches that readers need to take up when they are approaching Indigenous literature?" This question provoked a deep and nuanced conversation on the ethics of Indigenous literary studies and the relationship between authors and readers which informed how we imagined the work of #HonouringIndigenousWriters more broadly.

The primary text activating this discussion, aside from *Making Love with the Land*, was Whitehead's second book and first novel, *Jonny Appleseed*. *Jonny* tells the story of a young, two-spirit Indigenous person who makes a living "camming," performing sex work (or "fantasy" work [Whitehead 45]), online. The novel received significant acclaim and recognition, as it was longlisted for the 2018 Scotiabank Giller Prize and shortlisted for both the Governor General's

Literary Award for fiction and the Amazon Canada First Novel Award. The pivotal moment for the novel and for Whitehead came, however, during the 2021 *Canada Reads* competition. *Canada Reads* sets itself apart from traditional literary competitions by adopting a unique approach to evaluation and awards. Like the reality TV show *Survivor*, celebrities on *Canada Reads* champion books and vote titles off the show, aiming to boost their authors' star appeal by engaging a broad audience in dynamic discussions about the power of storytelling. The competition loudly celebrates literary voices, leaving a lasting impact on the Canadian cultural zeitgeist. Through spirited debates and advocacy, *Canada Reads* has propelled a number of Indigenous authors to the forefront of mainstream readers' attention, including Eden Robinson, Richard Wagamese, and Jesse Thistle.

Amidst the pandemic, winning *Canada Reads* catapulted *Jonny Appleseed* to national prominence, making it appear on the landing page of bookstore and library websites all across the country. However, the 2021 contest not only familiarized Canadians with Whitehead's work, it subjected his writing to new levels of scrutiny and appreciation, often at the expense of the author's privacy. Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs, the Mohawk actor and filmmaker known for her role in *Rhymes for Young Ghouls*, was the celebrity chosen to champion *Jonny Appleseed*. Jacobs passionately advocated for the book, highlighting its profound impact on young, queer, Indigenous folk, and its emphasis on Indigenous, queer, and Two-Spirit narratives. Her campaign also emphasized the story's unique and intimate narrative style, shedding light on the complex and sometimes extractive ways that readers engage with the book.

During an interview conducted with Whitehead for *Canada Reads*, Jacobs began by sharing that *Jonny Appleseed* “felt so personal... that I kept forgetting that it wasn't a memoir”. She wasn't alone in this assessment. Whitehead crafts Johnny's narrative in a quasi-autobiographical manner, blurring the lines between fiction and reality in ways that were difficult

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to grasp for many readers and critics. A few journalists even went so far as to refer to Whitehead as “Jonny” during their interviews (*Making Love* 84). Whitehead is clear that the novel does indeed have autobiographical elements, but he is also careful not to identify those moments too specifically (“I’ll let you guess,” he tells Jacobs). The result is a sophisticated and nuanced act of hospitality that many readers overlooked. In creating a narrative with Jonny Appleseed that feels intensely personal and quasi-autobiographical, Whitehead opens a door that invites readers to traverse the blurred lines between fiction and reality. This choice, however, does not grant a license to presume or exploit the personal life of the author. The confusion between character and author betrays a disregard for the complexity and sophistication of the novel, a trespass that echoes the intimate boundaries that the book seeks to interrogate, for instance through Jonny’s camwork.

The sticking point for most critics was genre. By imposing autobiography onto the book, they elided the unique generic formulations that Whitehead plays with in *Jonny Appleseed*. That the novel lives outside of the boundaries of Western genre theory is part of what defines it as a sovereign text: “I have become tired and bothered by these classifications,” Whitehead writes in *Making Love*, “which I read as both boundary and border” (85). While Whitehead resists the boundaries of Western genre in his writing, critics are quick to ascribe them, ignoring the guardrails delineating “guest” from “host.” This is exemplified most explicitly in critics’ tendency to conflate the author and protagonist, disregarding the work’s fictional nature and treating it as autobiography. This misalignment of hospitality and sovereignty, what we might also identify as “hostipitality,” reflects a colonial refusal to read Indigenous literature on its own terms. The failure to recognize the borders and boundaries of *Jonny Appleseed* exposes a wider refusal to engage with Indigenous literatures as sovereign entities. The misstep is not merely a literary faux pas; it

symbolizes a deeper failure to overcome the colonial reading practices that occlude or appropriate Indigenous voices.

What is at stake in *Jonny Appleseed* is the acceptance of an invitation and the delicate boundary that separates respectful engagement from predatory intrusion. The novel feels autobiographical, Whitehead told Jacobs, because of Jonny’s ability to “be in the world and invite you in” (Jacobs and Whitehead). With invitation in mind, the ethics of visiting and hospitality help to further illuminate the costs of *Jonny Appleseed’s Canada Reads* win. Whitehead elaborates on the stakes of Jonny’s invitation in *Making Love with the Land*:

While in Toronto, a reporter, having researched me thoroughly, asked: “So Josh, can you tell me how the death of your grandmother influenced your novel?” Being a fledgling writer at the time, I accommodated the request and reluctantly retold the story of my grandmother’s murder in the sixties—at which the reporter nodded, jotted down notes, quickly thanked me, and said goodbye. What has shaken me about this experience is that it was not the first time that type of extractive questioning about personal histories and my experience with trauma has cropped up, and while the reporter maintained their agency and left unencumbered by wounds, all set with fresh insight into their critical angle about my book, I found myself in downtown Toronto racked with grief and holding myself through a particularly intense anxiety attack. It was a slaughtering. (84)

As this story illustrates, the success of *Jonny Appleseed* opened a very public, if not misguided, window into Whitehead’s private life. Here lies the double bind of hospitality, at least as it plays out in a Derridean framework: when a host welcomes guests into their home, they “accept the risk of the other coming and destroying the place” (Derrida 71). That said, while *Jonny Appleseed* does indeed offer an invitation, ascribing agency to the relational formulation (i.e., to hospitality itself) distracts from the bad faith with which that invitation is taken up by critics and literary

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scholars. The evidence illustrates that journalists and scholars welcomed themselves into Whitehead's "home" by willfully misconstruing the subjectivity of *Jonny's* "I" and then wielding it, much like a crowbar, to extract details about the author's most private life. The act of interpretation in this modality of literary engagement is therefore indicative of hospitality only inasmuch as it animates the colonizing intentions of the reader/guest. What Whitehead illustrates in the example above is not visiting, but cat burglary: brazenly creating points of access to a work in order to bolster a previously defined argument.

As scholars and journalists, we are at a critical juncture in Indigenous literary scholarship. Where the idea of being "unwelcome" in a text may have seemed preposterous two decades ago, Indigenous authors are now publicly renouncing literary hospitality, and for good reason. Decrying the reductive interpretations he has witnessed in readings of Indigenous authors such as Beatrice Mosionier, Maria Campbell, and Terese Marie Mailhot, Billy-Ray Belcourt loudly refuses entry to non-Indigenous critics: "You are not invited into our tent. We are not yet at that point of hospitality. I will not tell you when this time has come." Audra Simpson foregrounds scholarly writing that "acknowledges the asymmetrical power relations that inform the research and writing about native lives and politics" and in turn she refuses research and researchers that compromise Indigenous sovereignty (104-105). Digital tools, like the Mukurtu CMS, mean that it's possible for community members and authors to control who can visit a text and on what terms, if it is not commercially published. By refusing uncontrolled access and instead requiring engagement with community-defined protocols, Mukurtu reinforces the idea that Indigenous knowledge is not an open resource to be freely mined, but something that requires careful, respectful engagement. In sum, as I argue elsewhere, Indigenous literary scholars operate out of a moment defined by closure, a justified response to the "open" research cultures that have facilitated theft and erasure for centuries.<sup>18</sup>

As readers engaging with Indigenous literatures, we must recognize that our welcome is not automatic or unconditional. Despite this, there is a tendency to publish work that perpetuates negative stereotypes, encourages superficial and invasive reading practices, and unapologetically performs colonial identities. Billy-Ray Belcourt highlights a troubling aspect of this approach, noting that the colonial archive is filled with descriptions that deny Indigenous peoples “the right to be unseen and unseeable.” In essence, Belcourt points out the consequence of an assumption that many non-Indigenous readers make when engaging with Indigenous literatures: that they are entitled to full access, even when it infringes on privacy or undermines sovereignty. Whitehead's experience with a journalist gives life to Belcourt's observations, illustrating a scenario where the journalist appropriates Whitehead's voice for his own purposes. Whitehead's encounter with the journalist further animates Belcourt's assessment, capturing the moment when his interlocuter extracts Whitehead's voice and installs it in his own. After the critic departs, “set with fresh insight,” Whitehead is unmoored from his own story and left adrift amidst a cacophony of sound: “I felt disembodied, I reeled amongst an onslaught of noise pollution: honking cars, pedestrian babble, sirens, the heavy rumble of a train” (84). Within this chaotic setting, even Whitehead's expression of grief after the encounter is swallowed up and overshadowed. The irony lies in the fact that, in a piece meant to celebrate the author's distinct voice, the result leaves Whitehead unheard.

### **Conclusion**

In his essay “On Critical Humility,” Warren Cariou writes that “visiting as a mode of reading is an antidote to the all-too-common practice of extractive criticism” (10). Cariou argues, convincingly, that Western approaches to literature can be overly clinical, rendering a story “as an object, a thing” (Cariou 10). By re-conceptualizing the text as a dynamic, living entity, both receiving and

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giving life through the act of reading, Cariou advocates for literary scholarship grounded in humility and relationality, as opposed to mastery and expertise. Building from Cariou, I argue that “visiting the text” is more than a literary methodology or even an ethical stance; it's a spatial epistemology that fundamentally reorients our understanding of and engagement with Indigenous literatures. It assumes relationality and guesthood as a baseline for scholarship, transforming the text from an arms-length object into an invitation into a home or territory. In 'visiting' the text, we acknowledge that we are entering—temporarily—a sovereign space defined by its own integrity, history, and protocols, and we commit to engaging with it through those terms. As visitors in the textual homes of Indigenous literatures, we find ourselves in unique positions of responsibility. Our presence is not merely passive; it involves a relationship with our host—the text and, by extension, the Indigenous community it represents. This relationship requires accountability and attentiveness, not only to the words on the page but to the cultural context, traditions, and voices they carry.

Undoubtedly, some of my readers will see “visiting the text” as obsequious and uncritical. My rejoinder is simply that literary criticism, as it stands, is causing harm. We have evidence of this. Whitehead testifies to this harm. So does Belcourt. For too long, literary studies has assumed its position at the perimeter of research ethics and therefore beyond what research ethics boards refer to as “risk and vulnerability assessment.” Designating text as a static, lifeless object has promoted public dissection and detached autopsy. This approach has also reinforced the dominance of single-author scholarship in our field, where individual interpretations often take precedence over collaborative or communal insights. Rather than employing our analytical tools to carve new windows into the 'home' of the text—a process that may inadvertently dissect, objectify, or harmfully misrepresent—our approach as visitors is guided by a distinct set of principles. Our role transforms into one of amplification and partnership, a conscientious

engagement rather than intrusion. We strive to understand and highlight the protocols, interpretative practices, and cultural wisdom that the host establishes, embracing the hospitality extended without overstepping the boundaries set within and around the text.

Embracing visiting as a methodology for Indigenous literary studies does not signify a relaxation of academic or journalistic rigor; rather, it represents a deepening and enriching of that rigor. It's a nuanced approach that requires a synthesis of careful close reading, thoughtful research, robust conversation with stakeholders and collaborators, and a genuine willingness to engage with the text's intrinsic values and cultural context. In this, visiting requires us to engage skill sets that literary studies have prepared us quite well for: through an education that emphasizes the close examination of texts, an understanding of cultural contexts, and a reflexive critique of one's own reading/writing practices, literary scholars are primed to approach texts with both rigor and empathy. For literary scholars, embracing visiting as a methodological approach means applying our training in ways that resonates with an ethic of care, reciprocity, and respect. I would go so far as to argue that it is a natural extension of our expertise, reimagining the traditional scholarly relationship with text and making space for new engagements and understandings. By shifting the critical lens through visiting, we're not abandoning our critical faculties but sharpening them, attuning them to a richer, more holistic understanding that honors the integrity of the text and the voices it carries.

#HonouringIndigenousWriters demonstrates how visiting as a methodology can gather momentum in Indigenous literary studies. The edit-athon is not merely an academic endeavor, but a collaborative community-building project. By incorporating panel discussions, workshops, performances, and more, it fosters spaces that invite scholars, readers, and Indigenous authors into dialogue. It transcends the traditional landscape of literary scholarship, creating a shared space where territorial integrity is respected, and reciprocity is foregrounded. This approach

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echoes the principles of "visiting the text," treating Indigenous literatures as living territories to be navigated with care, respect, and sensitivity. Storytelling occupies a central role here, acting as a vital bridge connecting various stakeholders and collaborators and fostering a shared sense of understanding, purpose, and connection. This celebration of the dynamism of stories resonates with the concept of the text as a living entity, one that invites engagement, reflection, and mutual exchange.

As it has evolved over the years, #HonouringIndigenousWriters has become a distinctive stage that uplifts and celebrates Indigenous voices. By spotlighting Indigenous authors and providing a space for them to critically engage with literary scholars and scholarship, it emphasizes the importance of consent and amplifying Indigenous voices rather than dissecting text. This approach fosters a sustainable and empowering network that recognizes, respects, and actively collaborates with Indigenous authors. It moves beyond the act of editing Wikipedia to forge a living network that honors Indigenous literatures by foregrounding their complexity, nuance, and sophistication.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Attendees included faculty and students from Macquarie University and The Centre for Canadian Studies at Jadavpur University.

<sup>2</sup> I am very grateful to Joshua Whitehead for reading a draft of this essay and giving me permission to share this story.

<sup>3</sup> Open Education Week, initiated in 2012 by Open Education Global, is an annual event that promotes open education globally. It raises awareness, showcases innovation, and inspires practitioners, educators, and students to engage in and explore open educational practices, fostering collaboration and inspiring accessibility and collaboration in education.

<sup>4</sup> Art + Feminism represents one of the most enduring and successful Wikipedia editathons, with a track record spanning since 2014. This global movement has engaged over 20,000 participants across more than 1,500 events, leading to the creation and enhancement of over 100,000 articles on Wikipedia and related projects ([www.artandfeminism.org](http://www.artandfeminism.org)).

<sup>5</sup> I borrow the phrase "virtual visits" from my colleague Daisy Rosenblum, who details the ways in which the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw Language Revitalization Program, facilitated virtual collaboration through a practice of Bagwansap'ans laxa Zoom ('We visit with each other on Zoom').

<sup>6</sup> Working with kids at home meant requisitioning any room quiet enough for online meetings or classes. On a few busy mornings, the only quiet space in our house was the bathroom off of the main bedroom in our apartment. My partner and I arranged the *mise-en-scene* so that it might appear we were in an office during calls, but the acoustics often gave us away.

<sup>7</sup> Teaching during the pandemic, particularly through platforms like Zoom, was fraught with challenges and often felt unrewarding and draining. The experience of lecturing to a virtual sea of unresponsive, camera-off students was both draining and disheartening, casting a pall of alienation and loneliness over many educators. Yet, it's important to recognize that amid these frequent moments of isolation, there emerged occasional glimmers of connection. For every handful of disheartening encounters, there were singular, relational moments that served as a poignant reminder of our collective vulnerability and shared experience of isolation during those trying times.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida derives this word from his reading of Kant: “the word for ‘hospitality’ is a Latin word (*Hospitalität*), a word of Latin origin, of a troubled and troubling origin, a word which carries its own contradiction incorporated into it, a Latin word which allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite, “hostility,” the undesirable guest [*hôte*] which it harbors as the self-contradiction in its own body...” (“Hostipitality” 3)

<sup>9</sup> Along with Tina Loo, Christine D’OnofrioFields, and Amber Berson, Fields and I helped to create the Wikipedia Toolkit for the Public Humanities Hub: <https://sites.google.com/view/wikipedia-toolkit/home> For more on the classroom-based Wikipedia assignments Fields and I created see Erin Fields and Adair Harper “Opening Up Information Literacy.”

<sup>10</sup> Sty-Wet-Tan was an evocative home for the event. Built out of Western redcedar logs, the space reflects Coast Salish longhouse architecture and features four house posts and two support beams carved by northwest coast carvers. “Sty-Wet-Tan” is a *hənq̓əmin’əm* or Musqueam phrase, meaning “spirit of the west wind.”

<sup>11</sup> We collected this data using the Wikipedia Event dashboard tool:

<https://outreachdashboard.wmflabs.org>

<sup>12</sup> These resources are collected here:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Meetup/HonouringIndigenousWriters>

<sup>13</sup> The database is available here:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Meetup/HonouringIndigenousWriters/Articles>

<sup>14</sup> While this practice goes against Wikipedia's guidelines, it aligns with the accountability approach emphasized by Senier in “Indigenizing Wikipedia.”

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Meetup/HonouringIndigenousWriters>

<sup>16</sup> Weekly activities: <https://hiw.open.ubc.ca/activities>

<sup>17</sup> Wikipedia does, of course, have talk pages where editors can interact with one another. However, as Senier has demonstrated, those spaces are often hostile, particularly so when the article in questions deals with race, gender, or social justice.

<sup>18</sup> Gaertner, “Closed, Open, Stopped: Indigenous Sovereignty and the Possibility of Decolonial DH.”

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## **‘Virtual Reconnections’: Using VR storytelling to reconnect to Indigenous cultural Artefacts**

CHIARA MINESTRELLI in collaboration with PATRICK MAU, ALIM KAMARA and DESPOINA ZACHARIADOU

The use of VR and technology to capture stories of our culture and nature is the way of the future. We have seen organisations like AQIS (Australian Quarantine Inspection Service) use VR to promote caring for Land and how this connects to the Torres Strait cultural responsibility. This has proven effective with the youth, the generation of technology. I believe it is the way of the future of storytelling.

(P. Mau, personal communication, July 28, 2022).

Indigenous stories weave together past, present and future thanks to rich, relational, and connective narratives (see Archibald *et al.*; Barrett and Cocq; Battiste and Youngblood; Hopkins; Nakata; Wingard and Lester). A longstanding human practice that still holds great value for First Nations and tribal communities around the globe, storytelling represents a key asset for the maintenance, transmission, and revitalisation of cultural traditions and values (see Nakata, Wright *et al.*). Today, storytelling and its local derivations, such as the Aboriginal Australian practice of “yarning”,<sup>1</sup> have been used by scholars and community workers alike as a method to foster wellbeing, heal community fractures and trauma (see Atkinson), facilitate collaborative efforts, and help medical research (see Geia *et al.*) Stories are also key to the ways in which human beings make sense of the world. As Marc Cavazza and Stéphane Donikian explain, with the advent of the mass media, “[n]arratives have evolved from their early role in human knowledge transmission into the main content of cultural production” (v). Developing this point, they go on to illustrate the impact of digital technologies on the ways in which we consume and interact with stories today. The emergence of computer-generated

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technologies and their increasing affordability have thus improved the potential of storytelling in terms of reach, reception, and possibilities (immersion, embodiment, etc.).

Since its inception in the 1960s, Virtual Reality (VR) has been applied to the most disparate fields, from the scientific and technological sectors to educational and recreational contexts (see Slater and Sanchez). Therefore, VR has gained popularity over the past forty years thanks to the commercialisation of affordable technological devices that have become more and more ubiquitous and accessible to the general public (Canalys; Cipresso, *et al.*; Flavián *et al.*). Within this panorama, VR constitutes an appealing tool for a holistic, sensorial, and embodied experience that allows for agency, discovery, and the creation of compelling narratives through non-canonical patterns. This is what we call ‘virtual storytelling’ (see Cavazza and Donikian).

With an eye on its criticalities, this paper reflects on the ways in which VR can be used to engage with Indigenous artefacts and knowledge(s). It does so by exploring ‘virtual reconnections’, a way to (re)connect people to cultural objects, at a time when more and more marginalised communities have access to and use different technological devices on a daily basis.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, we aim to investigate VR as a symbolic and concrete space for the reconfiguration of storytelling from Indigenous (*Dhoeybaw* from the *Guda Maluilgal* region of the Torres Strait), Tribal (*Temne* of Sierra Leone) and Southern European perspectives. In so doing we are reflecting on the possibilities and limitations of a collaborative venture that investigates the potential of VR to tell polyphonic stories in immersive ways as old and new challenges intervene in cultural maintenance, transmission, and revitalisation. The Bondo Mask in Sierra Leone and the Turtle Shell mask in the Torres Strait Islands carry with them deep transcultural and cross-cultural meanings, practices and traditions that VR technologies and environments can (potentially) enhance.

The national identities of the people involved in the project (an Italian scholar, a Greek VR artist and a Sierra Leonian artist who all reside in London (UK), together with a Torres Strait Islander artist who lives in Australia) are key to understanding VR as a space for

dialogue, and a place to think about the situated and subjective practices which are embodied and embedded in the narrative and structure of the VR experience itself. By combining these realities, we wanted to show the connective threads that hold these different cultures together, from the legacy of colonialism to the routes of contemporary mobility.

This paper thus constitutes a point of reflection, in terms of methods and theories, on some of the key aspects, possibilities, and ethical questions that may arise as the research develops through different phases and the VR experience takes shape. The adoption and interpenetration of different, and yet connected, methods (decolonising methods, Yarning, Community-based participatory research) provide the methodological infrastructure to discuss, negotiate and create ethical work that supports the entire creative and academic process by holding the researchers accountable at the various stages of the project. Therefore, we have embraced Linda Tuhiwai Smith's approach to decolonising methodologies, together with community-based participatory research as key frameworks to understanding cross-cultural collaboration, the handling of Indigenous knowledges and the digitisation of tangible and intangible Indigenous cultural heritage.

### **The 'real-virtual' continuum: The life of objects**

First Nations peoples around the globe have always demonstrated a keen interest in the uses and possibilities of new technologies which, despite their limitations and shortcomings (see Gingsburg; Hinkson), can provide spaces for agency, opposition, self-representation, political action, and unbounded creativity. Testament to this ingenuity is a series of experimentations where old and new knowledges come together. One such example is the Torres Strait Islander Virtual Reality (TSVR) project, a virtual reality game that recuperates the traditional culture and history of the Strait. Its creator, Rhett Loban, has found VR a suitable means to promote the culture of his community to a wider public (see Loban's "Torres Strait Virtual Reality: Virtual reality" and "Torres Strait Virtual Reality: A reflection"). Similar endeavours within the Australian continent include the digitisation of Aboriginal Songlines (see Leavy *et al.*, *Australian*

*Aboriginal*; Leavy, “Digital Songlines”), the maintenance of Indigenous cultural heritage (see Trescak, *et al.*), the creation of VR films/documentaries that explore ‘Indigenous futures’ (see the project *Future Dreaming*), and the exhibition *Awakening First Nations Knowledge* in Melbourne (Australia), amongst others. These are only some of the many projects that help express Indigenous ingenuity and creativity through digital tools. Talking about the potential of Augmented Reality (AR) from the perspective of Indigenous-settler relations, McMahon *et al.* affirm that: “AR holds potential to expose and challenge representations of settler colonialism while invoking relational ethics and Indigenous ways of knowing” (4531). As they further state, AR, and VR “are increasingly used as a digital storytelling medium to reveal place-based content, including hidden histories and alternative narratives” (4531).

Remediated and connected ways of thinking of VR as an instrument for improving human experience have promoted new possibilities to reconsider social interactions and communicative strategies. Tellingly, core human practices such as storytelling have found new avenues to express and represent the world from various standpoints. Primarily, the immersive, perceptive, and interactive characteristics of VR represent key aspects for the enhancement of stories that aim to revive tangible and intangible cultural heritage through embodiment and the arousal of the sensorial and emotive spheres. Studies into the uses of digital technologies aiming to maintain and revitalise cultural heritage and Indigenous cultural artefacts (see Newell, for instance) have shed light on the complexities related to the digitisation of such objects. Indeed, while ‘real’ (historical/cultural) objects may elicit a series of bodily, spiritual and ‘concrete’ responses<sup>3</sup> in those who connect with them, digital artefacts can be also regarded as objects in their own right (Witcomb). Therefore, it is pivotal to investigate and question the boundaries between real and virtual as they get more and more indefinite and reflect novel ways to respond to digital innovations.

Within the parameters of this project, both the Bondo mask(s)<sup>4</sup> and Turtle-shell mask(s)<sup>5</sup> have become key objects and ‘sites’ for the negotiation of personal and collective stories where the material and virtual come together. In the 1990s, Torres Strait leader and

intellectual, Ephraim Bani, travelled to the UK in the hope of starting discussions and negotiations with British cultural institutions about the repatriation of cultural artefacts from his Country. His endeavours have been recorded in the documentary film *Cracks in the Mask* (1997), where he raises important questions about the legacy of colonialism, the ways in which Western museums manage artefacts and how they respond to demands for repatriation. Over the years, various delegations of Torres Strait peoples have visited different British museums, engaging in transformative performances and works of art that respond to specific collections and/or exhibitions. In 2015, Torres Strait artist, Alick Tipoti, who had created a turtle-shell mask with a combination of artificial and natural materials, performed with the Zugubal Dancers of Badu Island (Torres Strait) for the British Museum's exhibition *Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation*. Showing the connections between past and present, the performers offered international audiences a new perspective on the current significance and vitality of the artefacts (in this case the turtle-shell mask), which are commonly associated with a remote past. In an article on Torres Strait Island material culture, Jude Philips highlights the fact that Torres Strait Islanders still consider the objects held in European museums part of their property. As the scholar affirms: "[t]he styles and aesthetic properties are in part a reminder of their past, but more importantly they still have a reference to the present. They are still thought to be owned by Islanders and it is Islanders who own the knowledge about them" (Philip 14).

Acknowledging these views and with an eye on the potential of new technologies, we argue that 'digital/virtual reconnections' could be the first step towards encouraging the younger generations to engage and/or re-engage with aspects of their culture that may feel distant. Indeed, 'digital reconnections' put an emphasis on the possibilities of VR in terms of agency, empathy and affective arousal. Although this article does not engage in a direct analysis of the intricate dynamics between museums and the pressing calls for the repatriation of cultural artefacts, it draws to some extent from museum studies perspectives (see Clavir; Leavy; Marstine; Simpson) with the intention of transcending the complexities associated with

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the very concept of digital repatriation. Instead, the article adopts the term ‘reconnections’ to suggest a broader and more nuanced understanding of ‘cultural recuperation’. Several scholars (see Bell et. al.; Christen) as well as key stakeholders have notably underscored that the discourse surrounding digital repatriation often casts a shadow over the imperative for physical repatriation. Simultaneously, it brings forth a host of potential quandaries intertwined with digital data management, intellectual property rights, and the intricacies of copyright laws and regulations, among other interconnected concerns. As Bell *et al.* argue:

[w]hile digital technologies allow for materials to be repatriated quickly, circulated widely, and annotated endlessly, these same technologies pose challenges to indigenous communities who wish to maintain traditional cultural protocols for the viewing, circulation, and reproduction of these new cultural materials. (196)

In addition, being a multifaceted process, digital repatriation carries complex implications that transcend a basic view of digital objects as mere ‘surrogates’ (Cameron and Kenderdine). From this perspective, digitised artefacts can be seen as independent from the real object for they have a ‘life of their own’ (see Newell; Witcomb). In line with this view, but aware of its limitations, this research is interested in the ways in which specific communities can utilise immersive technologies to engage and reconnect with cultural artefacts in potentially novel ways. Primarily, one of our first objectives is to use the VR experience as a proxy to establish a (re-)connection between the younger generations and the Elders through objects both in Patrick’s community on Thursday Island (Torres Strait, Australia) and Alim’s immediate community in Freetown (Sierra Leone).

In our examination of the chosen artefacts, namely the Bondo/Sende Mask and the Turtle-shell mask, we have adopted alien phenomenology (see Bogost). This approach, which diverges from anthropocentric perspectives while acknowledging the primacy of human-centric perception, entails an “object-oriented engineering of ontology’s physics” (29) that situates “things at the core of existence” (6) and assigns equal status to all entities. Indigenous ontological and epistemological frameworks have extensively upheld this standpoint by

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ascribing legitimacy to elements that Western philosophical traditions might deem lifeless (see Wright *et al.*). Alien phenomenology is particularly relevant here as we place the masks at the centre of the VR experience, blurring the experiential boundaries between the virtual and real, past and present, human, non-human and more-than-human. Showing the agency, currency and relevance of key cultural artefacts through stories that combine the knowledge transmitted by the Elders with new narratives introduced by members of the two communities in Sierra Leone and the Torres Strait, we thus aim to 're-socialise objects'; not only 'people to objects', but also objects to their contexts and the activities associated with them (See Simpson). In her analysis of museums and restorative justice, Australian scholar Moira Simpson reflects on the fact that "[t]he process of museum collecting can be seen to remove the object from life and remove life from the object" (154). Therefore, engaging with such objects in dynamic ways seems to be the most appropriate course of action, if museums are to promote decolonial approaches to collections, curation and consumption.

### **Can objects speak back? A methodological grounding**

Looking at questions of method as a starting point and a foundational aspect of this research and article, it is pivotal to acknowledge the collaborative nature of this endeavour. All involved parties contributed to the ideation and creation of the VR artefact in different and yet complementary ways. Collaboration is indeed a central part of the research as we aim to remove all hierarchical relations and give every participant equal standing, from the researchers to the community members. Indigenous scholarship on Indigenous methods and methodologies has produced a wide variety of approaches, each centred around different needs, local claims, structures and goals. Within such a rich scenario, we have been inspired by Linda Tuhiwai Smith's third edition of her pivotal work on decolonising methodologies as, after more than 20 years, it continues to offer guidance on how to carry out Indigenous research in ethical and decolonising ways. In discussing the articulation of an Indigenous research agenda,

the Māori scholar explains that there are two specific pathways; namely, “community research” and “institutional” projects that originate from academic research centres (146). Covering both domains, our project aligns with the principles of action research as it engages community members, building on their skills and experience, while erasing all boundaries between participants and allowing for organic cooperation and co-creation of knowledge(s) (see Halseth *et al.*; Stringer). Undeniably, “[c]ritical indigenous inquiry begins with the concerns of indigenous people. It is assessed in terms of the benefits it creates for them” (Denzin, Lincoln and Tuhiwai Smith, 2). In its capacity to promote positive interactions, establish strong collaborations and encourage accountability, ‘yarning’ was also used as a spontaneous and appropriate method (see Bessarab and Ng’andu) for promoting and recording the team’s conversations about the creative process, its aims, and objectives.

Incorporating Indigenous perspectives and adopting decolonised research methods that challenge Western epistemology and prioritise storytelling (Archibald *et al.*), Alim Kamara and Patrick Mau, the two creative artists (musicians, rappers, storytellers) involved in the research, willingly embraced community-based participatory research.<sup>6</sup> Their primary goal was to actively involve and connect with members of their respective communities in Sierra Leone and the Torres Strait (Thursday Island). Throughout the project, each participant contributed their unique knowledge and insights, acknowledging diverse approaches to understanding the world. The other participants, an Italian scholar and a Greek lecturer and VR artist, presented views influenced by their southern European background, thus embodying and enacting a partnership model where Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaborators work together, sharing responsibilities, tasks and experiences (see Tuhiwai Smith). Having four different people who represent unique and contextual aspects of different countries, Sierra Leone (Africa), Thursday Island (Torres Strait, Australia), Italy and Greece (Europe), with London (UK)<sup>7</sup> as a connecting point, provided a productive terrain for cross-cultural discussions, despite the complexities of the project. Working in geographically distant places, having to

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coordinate research from afar, and communicating from different time zones posed some issues that had to be negotiated and overcome. Reflexivity provided a feasible solution to such predicaments as it allowed us to move away from any pretence of objective inquiry.

Critical reflexive accounts have been flourishing since the reflexive turn in the Social Sciences around forty years ago and, since then, self-reflexivity has become the preferred method to examine the power dynamics, but also obstacles, generated during the research process. Despite its limitations, self-reflexivity can also provide a starting point for critical thinking geared towards collective action aiming at dismantling, and not just reinforcing, systems of privilege (Smith). Hence, the researcher's subjectivity needs to be investigated as a precondition to undertaking research grounded in a strong ethical and decolonising ethos that may reduce the colonial distance between 'researcher' and 'researched' (see Aull Davies). Self-reflexivity may thus help understand one's positionality by referring to the local knowledges that have informed particular subject positions, as well as positions of enunciation. Indeed, "[k]eeping one's location front and centre is a way that individuals can consciously assist from where their strength comes, and ensure that their integrity will not become compromised by the trials of academic research" (Kovach, 98). By acknowledging a perspective that does not claim to be firmly unbiased, we thus value reflexive approaches centred on those factors and experiences that have impacted upon the situated presence of the collaborators, but in ways that are meaningful, contextual and strategic.

### **Structure and Design of the VR experience**

First, it is important to note that the VR experience we are referring to in this paper is still under construction. While we have an initial prototype, there are still many technical and thematic aspects that we need to finalise. As a result, this article represents a starting point rather than a point of arrival, or a conclusive piece. By reflecting on the processes that led to the creation of this collaboration, we aim to lay the theoretical and methodological

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foundations that will allow us to build a sound and sustainable project as an open and developing ‘yarn’ (discussion).

Initial ideas for this work emerged from a conversation between me (Minestrelli) and the artists, Patrick and Alim. Having worked with both artists on different projects, we were already connected as friends and collaborators. My previous research in Australian Indigenous expressive cultures, Indigenous politics and media, together with my interest in digital technologies, facilitated conversations where all these elements could come together. We had been thinking about using VR to capture their music performances, but every conversation sparked new thoughts. Eventually, these concretised into a project that would develop in different stages and that responds to Jo-Ann Archibald’s principles of “respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, wholism, interrelatedness, and synergy” (382).

The overall project has been thought of as a two-stage experience to be undertaken in the Torres Strait, Sierra Leone and in the UK, where the artefacts are displayed. The first and current phase of the research precedes all other stages and aims to create the theoretical and methodological ground to reflect on the ethical implications of using VR collaboratively, to animate cultural artefacts. Successively, future phases of the project will address Indigenous/tribal youth<sup>8</sup> in the artists’ communities of origin and in partnership with the Elders. The final stage will take the shape of an installation within the critical institutions where ‘stolen’ cultural objects are held (i.e., various museums and cultural organisations within the UK). In this case, the preferred audience would be non-Indigenous audiences and the same cultural institutions with which we endeavour to start a conversation about ‘digital reconnections’ and the environment in which they originate. Within this context, spatial elements and trajectories of Indigenous artefacts that have been removed from their original place of use to travel to the heart of the Empire have been considered in building the narrative for the VR experience we created as a team.

After some initial discussions about what we sought to achieve with this work, we decided to tell a story from the perspective of cultural artefacts. Patrick and Alim were asked

to choose an object they felt a connection to. They both, serendipitously, chose a mask. Patrick chose the Turtle-shell mask, a popular and iconic object that can be found in the Torres Strait region, between the northern coasts of Australia and Papua New Guinea, and which is associated with rich cultural practices and rituals (see David *et al.*) Alim chose the *Bondo* mask (also known as *Sande*), a wooden helmet mask that represents an idealised form of female beauty, and which is associated with women's initiation ceremonies in West African countries (Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Guinea). Both artists motivated their choice by pointing to the ubiquitous presence of those artefacts in their communities and homes, their significance and connection to the history of colonial theft with its legacy.



Figure 1: Type of Sande/Bondo mask (20<sup>th</sup> Century), Sierra Leone, Mende peoples. Sources: Accessed from: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/317846> and a Turtle-shell mask in the shape of a crocodile from the Torres Trait. Source: <https://australian.museum/learn/cultures/atsi-collection/cultural-objects/crocodile-mask-from-the-torres-strait-islands/>

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With this in mind, Despoina Zachariadou, the VR lecturer, designed the experience in a way to emphasise the agentive qualities of the masks, which are here seen as animate objects. The idea of shifting the players' positions, changing subjectivities and states through the masks, thus crossing the line between human and more-than-human (Braidotti; Wright *et al.*), presents a powerful aesthetic device for thinking about those boundaries and how we can cross them through immersive storytelling.

Despoina decided to mix 3D with 2D elements, a style that is popular in animation, using 2D to create all the different scenes/environments that will be finalised and animated. These are complemented by key 3D elements that are crucial to the development of the story (e.g., hands and sea turtles). Successively, a VFX layer of 3D animated particle systems (i.e., rain, water bubbles, sunrays, etc.) was added, together with lights, fog, and other natural elements that give greater depth and realism to the experience. These aspects, together with the type of technologies utilised to be fully immersed in the experience (ideally through internal devices)<sup>9</sup> will help generate a sense of presence and connection with the story.

Another important aspect is the interactive element. Interactivity and immersion are key features of VR environments (Cipresso *et al.*), therefore, it was important to consider the ways in which users can interact with the virtual world in an accessible way. Thus, more prominence has been given to the embodiment of the experience through specific elements, such as hand visualisation, different scales and in and out-of-the-mask movement. This way, as players turn around, it will be possible to interact with the surrounding environment.

Visual metaphors and symbols (e.g., water) have been incorporated into the graphics without providing too many details so as to produce an emotive and inquisitive response in participants (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous). In this first iteration of the experience, the narrative progresses in a linear format without requiring the player to press any buttons. Yet, players can see themselves alive and responsive within the virtual environment and can focus on the story without breaking the immersion pattern. As a result, the whole experience will be more accessible to a diverse audience with different technological and physical needs. It will

also incorporate smart voiceover by the two artists who will help users understand what they see.

As I previously stated, the various stages of the project are designed to engage Indigenous/tribal youth from the artists' respective communities of origin as active participants in the experiential process. In this manner, the Indigenous knowledge garnered from community members remains intrinsically bound to and upheld within the community itself. In this phase, our primary objective is to cultivate a profound sense of affinity between the youth and the selected artefacts; a goal achieved through the strategic activation of sensory responses facilitated by the immersive attributes of the VR experience. It is worth noting that this immersive quality possesses the potential to evoke a diverse spectrum of reactions and responses.

It is therefore paramount to acknowledge that despite potential resource constraints in certain remote Indigenous communities, the advent of cutting-edge technological tools has the power to stimulate the younger generations into becoming enthusiastic adopters of these innovations (see Carlson and Frazer; Ginsburg). Consequently, our intention revolves around quantifying the influence of our endeavour at the community level. The ensuing phase entails a more dynamic and heterogeneous engagement with an international audience through an installation that will be held within selected British cultural institutions. In this case, participants embarking on the virtual reality experience will be provided with comprehensive guidance both preceding and following their immersion. Such explanations will be delivered by the artists themselves, who will provide contextualisation and elucidate the VR narrative and its relation to the chosen artefacts.

Throughout the duration of the experience, all participants will be prompted to identify with the mask, effectively experiencing the narrative through the lens of the artefact which, in accordance with the tenets of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), possesses animate and agentic qualities. However, it is important to acknowledge that the act of detaching traditional and sacred artefacts from their original contexts does raise a series of ethical

questions. Hence, the ultimate configuration of the experiential design will be meticulously tailored to align with the permissions granted by the Elders, determining the extent to which specific facets of the narratives can be divulged and shared.

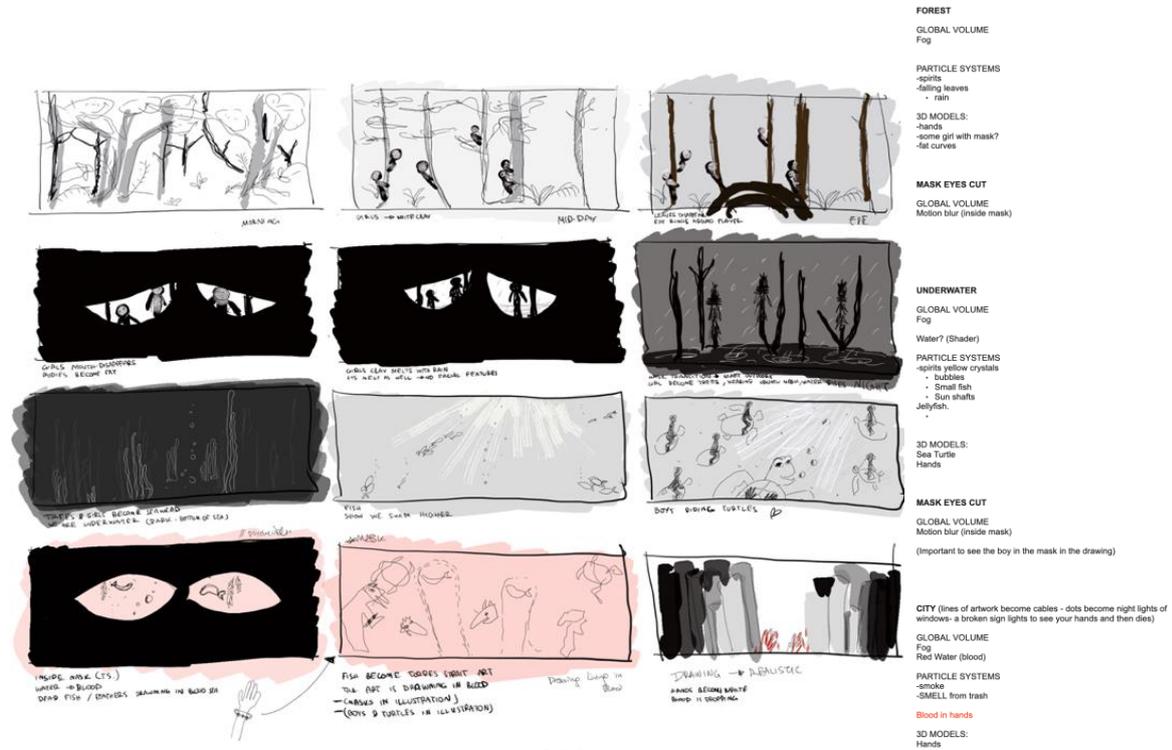


Figure 2: Storyboard with notes

### The story and its ethical implications

The story starts in the forest in Sierra Leone. Here, users see a group of girls hiding behind some trees. They are ready to embark on a journey towards womanhood. During their initiation, the girls will have to wear the *Bondo* mask that represents the transition from childhood to womanhood. Users are positioned at a distance to observe the girls and the ritual, gaining insight through a note that appears (visually) corresponding to the scene. Once they receive this piece of information, the user’s perspective shifts, and they ‘become’ one of the girls with their hands adorned with clay paint. From this vantage point, the world is perceived through the mask’s viewpoint, which is portrayed as a living entity with agency. Guided by the artists’ vocal instructions, the mask leads users through the virtual environment. At this stage, users are prompted to imagine themselves transformed into the mask, an

experience enhanced by the storytelling provided by Alim and the soundscape which mimics the sounds of nature and the laughter of the girls. After this scene, the background changes. The trees start to lose their leaves. The girls' mouths and the clay paint slowly melt and the girls, who are wearing the masks, turn into tree trunks. As Alim will explain (within the VR), users will be asked to transcend binary thinking (e.g., human/non-human, life/non-life, etc.). This process aims to help users re-evaluate the significance of each element within the story by acknowledging their interconnectedness and mutual dependence.

In the subsequent scene, rain falls. The rain, which constitutes a connective element between land and water, helps transition into the next scene/environment. This serves both as a graphic expedient and a symbolic element in the story. Water, as a sentient being and a key element for both African Indigenous/tribal cultures<sup>10</sup> and Torres Strait communities,<sup>11</sup> also represents the connective thread between the two cultures. As the rain continues to pour, the water rises submerging the landscape, and the tree trunks transform into seaweed. Users are asked to embrace a different state of being. The new scene happens underwater. In this new environment, the narrative unfolds as users begin to swim towards the light. They are now in the Torres Strait and are riding a giant sea turtle alongside local kids.

Once more, users see the world through a mask, the Torres Strait Turtle-shell mask. From this vantage point, it is possible to see different types of fish swim and feathers float all around. The boundaries between human and non-human, life and non-life are thus continuously challenged by playing with different subject positions. As the mask fades away, players see the fish morphing into paintings that form a mural with Torres Strait patterns representing children wearing the mask and hunting for fish. After this scene, the black mural slowly turns red, and users are catapulted into a new reality. Participants are now transferred to an urban environment that resembles a metropolis (the reference is to Empire). Here, the tones are dark, and the main hue is given by signs covered in blood. Blood and buildings covered in the corporeal fluid symbolise the violence and cruelty of colonialism, past and present, and the

stealing of Indigenous heritage. At this stage, if players look at their hands, they will see blood on them. The mask vanishes.





Figure 3: Screenshots from the VR experience

Looking at the ways in which Indigenous communities embrace new materials, media and technologies to tell their stories, Candice Hopkins explains how Indigenous peoples have been successfully using new tools to express themselves, subverting dominant narratives, representations and formats. As she affirms: “[i]t is through change that stories and, in turn, traditions are kept alive and remain relevant” (Hopkins, 342). This principle resonates with the ways in which Patrick and Alim approached the plot, structure and aesthetic choices for the VR experience. Indeed, the story develops by association between natural elements (e.g., water as an element for transition between two environments and a highly charged symbol) rather than internal cohesion. Such associations help strengthen the idea of the continuum between human, nature and more-than-human, life and ‘non-life.. As users live the experience from the point of view of the mask, these boundaries are further challenged visually and in terms of narrative. According to object-oriented phenomenology, the mask is not just an ornament that can be worn, but it becomes an agentic life-giving and life-receiving element. Therefore, primacy is given to the way in which the mask<sup>12</sup> becomes one with the participant. This particular point can be one of contestation if not handled with care, as identification with different subjectivities can potentially clash with the beliefs and cultural practices of the involved communities. Therefore, such a delicate aspect will be resolved through direct consultation with the Elders and members of each community. As Cree scholar, Margaret Kovach aptly affirms, “[r]elational responsibilities exist between the Indigenous researcher and the Indigenous community; the Indigenous community and the researcher... non-Indigenous researchers and the Indigenous community; and between the academic community and

Indigenous methodologies” (178). Such a relational approach further promotes accountability, giving prominence to Indigenous methodologies as sustainable and decolonising approaches to collaborative research.

Further, as we were developing the story, we had several discussions about the way in which the initiation ceremony of the *Sende* girls should have been represented, whether or not we should have included ‘blood’ and how to make the presence of the two artists, Alim and Patrick, more visible within the experience. Looking at the Bondo mask, Alim has always been very careful to avoid any authorial voice over such a sacred and gendered object. Indeed, his approach is one of reverence and respect for knowledges that cannot be disclosed to men or those who are not part of the inner circle within his community. The idea to look at the *Bondo* mask was motivated by the constant presence of this object in West African houses. Growing up between Sierra Leone and London, Alim kept on seeing the mask as an object that anchored him to his culture in unique ways. He talks about the mask as something that people in his community are afraid of. As he says: “if you happen to see someone wearing the mask, you just run”. There is a sacrality attached to it and an aura of mystery connected to the practices of female genital mutilation. This particular point was one of contestation within the group, as Despoina, the VR lecturer, affirmed:

I had a lot of thinking about what to say about the masks and their stories and I found myself struggling a lot with the initiation ceremonies, having experienced myself strong social, work and life stereotypes for being a woman. I am very sensitive to these topics of either young girls or boys getting physically hurt in poor conditions and having to carry the role of a ‘good wife’ -or a warrior/strong man that kills the prey. (Zachariadou, D., personal communication, May 5, 2022).

Questions connected to such practices are now increasingly challenged by Western African women who are taking action to increase the safety of young girls, as Alim mentioned, but they also constitute core beliefs in other sections of the population. Considering the complexities around debates on FGM, from cultural relativist approaches to the question of

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universal human rights, gender equality and safety issues, we decided to look at the Bondo mask from a different angle without wanting to neglect the important implications of the context of its use. We have done so by incorporating blood as an element to end the story, which can be seen as a metaphor for female genital mutilation (FGM), while also symbolising colonial violence. This conclusive part, characterised by a diverse assemblage of symbols, will deliberately retain a semantic openness, strategically designed to prompt discussions surrounding intricate ethical queries. Yet, this deliberate approach ensures that such exploration neither detracts from nor eclipses the core focus of re-establishing profound connections with the cultural artefacts.

### **Concluding remarks**

As digital technologies are becoming more affordable, many of the voices who have been historically silenced are now eager to experiment with the affordances and possibilities offered by such platforms. In this paper, we have emphasised the potential of Virtual Reality as a well-consolidated and established tool to tell stories in immersive ways, engage myriad audiences and look at the future through past and present. The *Bondo* and *Turtle-shell* masks are here considered sentient beings that work in symbiosis with participants, guiding them through the VR experience and questioning the often-porous boundaries between the animate and the inanimate. Each researcher has engaged with the narrative by mobilising personal and community knowledges and connections through a dialogic, relational, and collaborative model.

In the next phase of the project, we will examine the direct impact of virtual technologies within the artists' communities and their relevance to international publics. Looking at points of connections and departures, similarities and differences, as we developed some of the ideas contained in this paper, we started to elaborate a series of questions that will function as guiding principles for the next stages of the project. Primarily, our queries endeavour to investigate the ways in which we can mobilise VR technologies and experiences

to connect, or reconnect, the younger generations of Indigenous/Tribal youth to their culture through stories around ‘traditional’ objects. We are also asking: how can we spark interest in cultural proximity and differences in non-Indigenous publics? How can we use Indigenous/Tribal artefacts to foster pride and interest in local cultures and encourage cross-cultural communication? Is there value in adopting the latest technological innovations for cultural revitalisation efforts? Such queries will guide us in the future as we set out to examine the value of VR in (re)connecting communities to their cultural objects. With this in mind, ‘virtual reconnections’ have provided and will provide a productive concept to investigate the complexities connected to the digitisation of cultural artefacts (see Crawford and Jackson). Undeniably, the digitisation of material culture allows creators and participants alike to explore the tangible and intangible aspects of local cultures in unprecedented and ethically complex ways.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Yarning’ can be defined as a way to share stories, learn from others and build strong relationships.

<sup>2</sup> Despite greater use of innovative technologies, Indigenous communities often lack access to such resources, as pointed out by several scholars (Hinkson, Ginsburg) who have addressed the question of the digital divide in their works.

<sup>3</sup> Some of these responses could be associated to connections to status, hierarchies, law, etc. These hold key relevance primarily within the Indigenous communities where they belong.

<sup>4</sup> Female Sande (Mende) or Bondo/Bundu (Temne) societies utilised carved wooden helmet masks. These masks were worn by esteemed members of society, specifically the dancing Soweï, referred to as ‘ndoli joweï’ among the Mende or ‘a-Nowo’ among the Temne (see [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E\\_Af1886-1126-1-a-b](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1886-1126-1-a-b)). The mask we are referring to here is the one chosen by Alim Kamara and displayed at the British Museum. Yet, for the VR experience, no specific type of mask is referenced.

<sup>5</sup> Turtle-shell masks are ‘traditional’ objects from the Torres Strait Island and have been used for ritual performances ([https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E\\_Oc1855-1220-169](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Oc1855-1220-169)). Turtle-shell masks can vary in form and typology. Like the Bondo mask, it is possible to see a Turtle-Shell mask at the British Museum in London. The VR experience does not represent a specific mask, but a generic type which is invoked and evoked through the graphics.

<sup>6</sup> More structured community-based research entailing interviews and informal conversations with community members will be conducted in the next phase of the project.

<sup>7</sup> Alim, Chiara and Despoina currently work and reside in London. Patrick, who lives in Australia wishes to promote his work in London.

<sup>8</sup> In many Indigenous communities around the world, the younger generations are often disconnected from their culture, or tend to shift away from the cultural practices of the Elders due to several socio-economic, colonial and generational factors.

<sup>9</sup> We need to differentiate between 'external devices' such as computer screens, smartphones, etc. and internal devices, which facilitate immersion into different locales and realities thanks to their abilities to stimulate the senses (see Takatalo *et al.*)

<sup>10</sup> Water and water spirits/deities hold a significant place in the beliefs of the Sande/Bondo communities, particularly during their initiation ceremonies. Headdresses adorned with water-themed motifs, representing ripples of water or even water creatures/spirits symbolising unattainable beauty standards, also serve as powerful references to cosmic forces and act as protectors of these peoples' medicines (see Drewal).

<sup>11</sup> For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, water bears immense social, spiritual, and cultural meaning, beyond its more practical uses. This is evident in Indigenous art, narratives, and rituals. Water is also often linked to ancestral beings, Indigenous cosmologies and ontologies.

<sup>12</sup> The mask will change depending on the story and this will be signalled through a different design for the space around the eyes.

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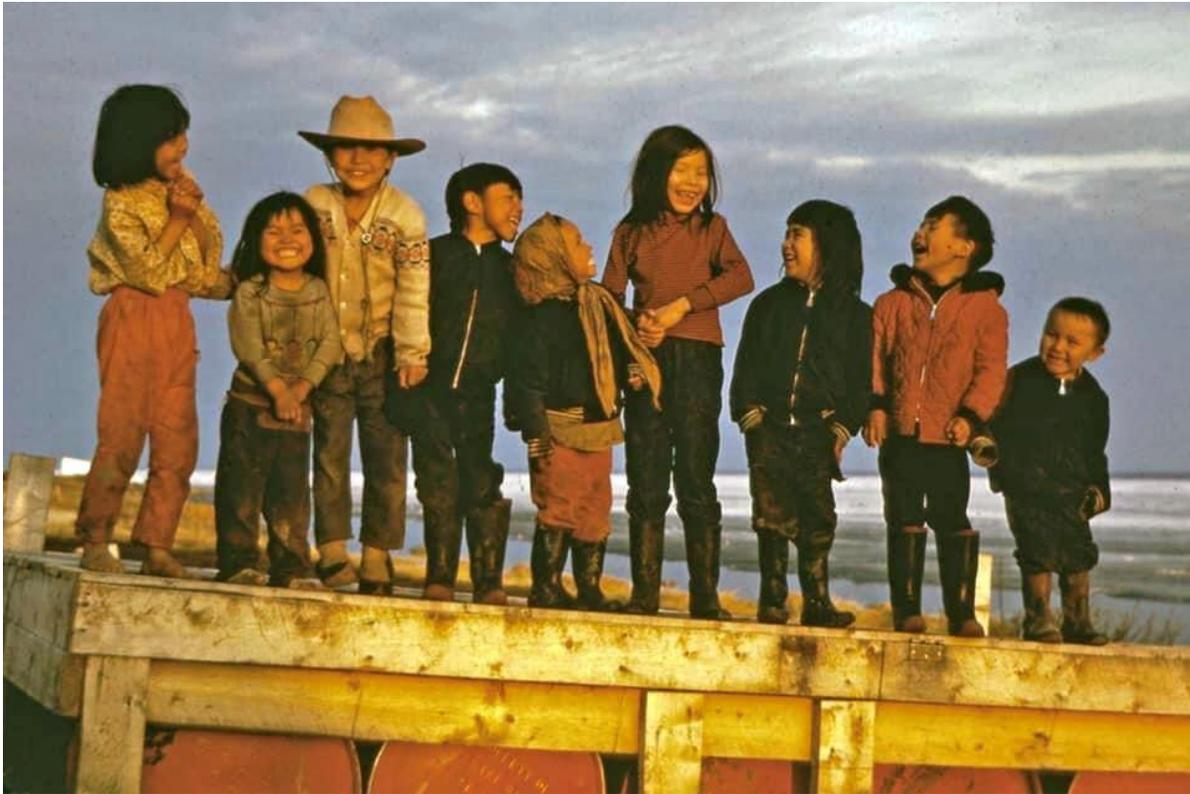
## Beyond Nostalgia: Networks of Indigenous World-Making with Paul Seesequasis

TANJA GRUBNIC

Paul Seesequasis is a Plains Cree writer, journalist, cultural commentator, and curator from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. He is most well-known for his work as the independent curator of the *Indigenous Archival Photo Project*, a social media-based project he initiated in 2015. The project shares an abundance of photographs taken of Indigenous people across Canada and the United States since the late nineteenth century that have been stored in archives, museums, private collections, auction houses, and other repositories, with the intention of restoring visibility to portraits of Indigenous life in a way that centres the communities to whom the photographs rightly belong. The original photographs, so often taken or displayed in an extractive, decontextualised manner, rarely named the people or places captured by the camera's lens. By sharing these images on various social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook, Seesequasis has connected with community members from various Indigenous nations that have provided opportunities for re-storying these images. The project transcends mere photo-sharing, and it is about more than just nostalgia. Many community members have identified and continue to identify friends and family members, sometimes even themselves, as well as the places and communities in the photographs. These instances of identifying the people behind the lens not only humanise the subjects, but also instigate a collective process of memory reconstruction and world-making, where once-lost stories are reclaimed and re-storied back into a myriad of Indigenous cultural narratives among communities. The project has initiated profound dialogue online that challenges the historical anonymisation and marginalisation of the people in the photographs. Through these identified faces and places, a new narrative emerges that honours the resilience,

diversity, and enduring vitality of Indigenous communities across generations past, present, and future.

~ *This interview has been edited for clarity, brevity, and style.* ~



A group of smiling children in Déliņę, Northwest Territories taken in May 1968. The children from left to right are: Bernice Taneton, Goldie Modeste, Patricia Takazo, Paul Kodakin, Lucy Ann Kenny, Anne Marie Bezha, Carolina Kenny, Steven Taneton, and Leonard Kenny. The photograph was taken by Rene Fumoloeau (1926-2019); originally from France, he spent most of his life in the Northwest Territories photographing Indigenous communities. This photograph has been sourced from the Northwest Territories Archives and the Rene Fumoloeau fonds.

### An Interview with Paul Seesequasis

**TG:**

Thank you so much for meeting with me. I was hoping to start off by giving you a chance to introduce yourself, your work, and the project.

**PS:**

Okay. my name is Paul Seesequasis. I am Plains Cree background, born in Saskatchewan. I'm living in Saskatoon currently, which is more or less a hometown. I've lived out east, out west, pretty much several places in Canada. So, I moved around a bit in my lifetime.

The project is almost a decade old now, more than a decade old perhaps. The Indigenous Archival Photo Project began by happenstance, I guess. I was always interested in imagery and narratives around Indigenous images—and the issue of, you know, all the tropes and stereotypes and everything else that goes along with that word “Indigenous,” which, as we know, is kind of an umbrella term that lumps together quite diverse people. It's one of those imperfect words, but it's what we're stuck with now. So, it became the Indigenous Archival Photo Project.

Part of it was this idea you mentioned of a new “digital literary culture.” I think part of what made the project possible was that it was operating within the parameters of the internet and social media. It was, by its very nature, a bit transgressive in regard to collections and museums and archives.

I never went about trying to—and it's not like I'm trying to—do the equivalent of reclaiming items out of museums and stealing them. That wasn't the framework I was looking at. My framework was more the issue of liberating these images, if you will, from the “bricks and mortar” or the “archival drawers” and getting them seen again in the communities. I was fortunate to build up

enough of a following that when I began to post these images, I would get an increasing amount of responses like, “That’s me!” “That’s my auntie!” “That’s my uncle!” “That’s George, 40 years ago!” That kind of thing.

This whole other narrative began to surface, which I wasn’t curating. It just happened spontaneously from the posting of a photograph. You’d get a narrative from people in that community. And then a whole storyline would develop, which did not exist prior to that image being shared online. The image may or may not have been named. It depended on the circumstance, but it just involved the creation of a new literary subtext to the photograph that was organic in that it came directly from people who had some relation to that photograph. That obviously didn’t happen every time, but it happened enough times that it began to germinate into the idea of where this project could go, what its use could be, and how it could resonate in a way that made it worthwhile to direct my energy into. And then it took off from there.

My primary source material comes from museums, archives, and historical societies, but also now private collections and things that people send to me. It certainly has grown. It’s been a very interesting project that kind of developed on its own. I then responded to where I see I can take things to a different level. The project has spawned externally into a series of physical exhibitions that I’ve curated on photography, as well as the book *Blanket Toss Under Midnight Sun*, and numerous articles, features, that sort of thing. It’s become its own thing. It’s been interesting and fun. And, I think—I hope—beneficial for a lot of people. It provides that kind of...I wouldn’t call it affirmation—well, I guess it is affirmation—to get that response on social media. The response on social media has provided enough affirmation for me to stick with it and to feel that it’s something worthwhile. I don’t feel that it’s something that is taking me away from other things. It feels like it’s a part of what I enjoy doing.



A young Inuk woman smiles at the camera. This photograph was printed in the March 1945 issue of “The Beaver Magazine,” published quarterly by the Hudson’s Bay Company since 1920. While Indigenous men were often named in the magazine, albeit with names misspelt, women or girls were rarely named. They were usually only given a generic reference, like “A young lady,” with no name or location mentioned, which is how this woman’s photograph was labeled. The woman has not been identified, but a community member has suggested that the woman is wearing a Kitikmeot style parka likely worn by Innuinnait women near Kugluktuk, Cambridge Bay, Umingmaktok, Kingauk. This photograph was taken by J.H. Webster (1903-1991), an Anglican missionary, and is now part of Canada’s History Archive, featuring *The Beaver*. The magazine, which is still in print, was renamed “Canada’s History” in 2010.

I think that covers most of it. The project has that social media aspect to it, but it also has the book aspect, articles, magazines. Narratives that are put into publication, either online or on paper. And the physical exhibition.

**TG:**

It's really interesting to see what the project is about and how it's evolved. You mentioned how important social media has been to the formation of this project, and I noticed in the prologue to *Blanket Toss Under Midnight Sun* that you wrote this project would not have been possible without social media. Can you say a bit more about how social media has been particularly important for this project? What has social media enabled that may not have otherwise been possible?

**PS:**

It's enabled the project to exist, really. It's hard for me to imagine this working without the internet. It can't, you know. I'm old enough to remember the early internet and pre-internet days, and it would be impossible. I don't know what you would do. You couldn't do it because there's no gathering place, really. There was no network of gathering places. So, it relied on what was formerly Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram more recently. But those became the three main platforms of connection. And it's really what the project relies on in terms of reaching an audience.

There are two sides to the internet audience. One side is people who are just generally interested in whatever—from wherever they are coming from—either in Indigenous culture, or old photographs, or history, or archival materials. It attracts a fairly broad spectrum of people who are followers, but who do not have a relationship to those images, if you will.

Then, there's the other audience that the project cannot be successful without. These are the people who have a direct connection to those images. They're the ones who feed the narratives; who generally provide the stories; who often provide a corrective. There could be a mistake in

the captioning of the image, or a mistake I've made; in the early days, I occasionally would guess where the photo was taken—which I learned not to do after being corrected by the audience.

It tracks those two types of people. The general interest types, who are the majority, and a smaller number that are directly related. Those people I can connect to only because the internet exists, only because there are platforms like Facebook and Twitter, and that's where those people are. So that's the invite, I guess. That's the connection. The connector.

It's unlike writing a book. When you write a book, you publish it, but you have no control over who's going to read it or how it's distributed, or how many copies are going to sell, other than what you do with your own promotion. It's very much a different world where the book is on your shelf and you have no control what you do with it. But when you're connecting online, you don't know when it's going to end or when it's going to start. It's a different kind of connection online. It's more vibrant. More unpredictable. Sometimes, I'll get a comment on a photo that was posted three years ago that suddenly sparks a whole other debate. If I post something say on a Tuesday, it's not necessarily over by Thursday. It could come back three years from now. That's the weird thing about the internet. It has this almost infinite possibility of something coming back. It doesn't always happen, but it does happen enough that I've noticed it. That gives it a different nature than anything else.

For a physical exhibition, you're reliant on the people who come to see it. Of course, the audience, as in readings with books and stuff, you have that connection. But with the internet, it's 24/7 and it's continual. I don't want to say it's permanent though, because nothing on the internet is permanent as we know. There are, you know, attempts at internet archives. It's an issue I've thought about, as this project goes on: Am I properly archiving this process itself? That's something I'm paying more attention to now than I did in the beginning. Even if I go back five or six years, I

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don't remember everything. And, you know, things disappear off of social media. I think on Facebook, once you start going back five, six years, it becomes very difficult to recover your posts.

And, you know, I'm not looking for a picture of my favorite cat from five years ago. I'm trying to find these images that I had posted; I'm thinking strictly project-wise. It does have that impermanent side to it as well. It's contradictory in that way. It comes back often years later, but it's also impermanent in that unless you archive it or save it in some other way on a hard drive, it eventually evaporates. The issue of preservation takes on a different nature. It's more difficult. It's a challenge for me. A book you preserve in a library or on a bookshelf. Even photographs you can preserve by taking scans of them. But that relationship to the audience that exists on the internet, that is much more ephemeral. It's much more of a challenge.

**TG:**

I think these are really important insights, like thinking about how online environments challenge time. I'm intrigued by what you said about how the internet provides these kinds of meeting spaces. So often, the internet is thought of as this "place-less" kind of no man's land. It doesn't exist. It's not real. It's not a thing that you can sit on or stand on. But I'm wondering if this project potentially challenges that kind of view of the internet as not being, or not having a sense of place or space. And I'm wondering if you think that this project might help us understand the connections between and across land and the digital. I'm also thinking about how the project is kind of a "traveling" project, right? It goes from the internet, to the art gallery, to the book, to the magazine, to the communities. It's not contained only within social media.



Two young Tuscarora women selling crafts to tourists in Niagara Falls. This photograph was taken in 1860. Notably, the women are wearing conventional, day-to-day attire. This candid photograph marks a departure from most studio portraits that imposed a stereotypical “traditional Native look” onto Indigenous people by the outside gaze. The photograph was taken by William Notman (1826-1891), one of Canada’s first internationally renowned photographers, and is currently stored in the McCord Stewart Museum Archives. The women have yet to be identified.

**PS:**

Yes. I think, definitely. It's a really good question. That's an important aspect of it—the gallery space. It allows you to have the actual images or photographs mounted and seen. It's a much more, for lack of a better word, analogue experience for people because you see the photo. I'm

not going to say you can touch it, but you can see it. It's right there. You can see other things that may be part of the exhibit, like notebooks or cameras, that sort of thing. So, there's that analogue aspect of it, which is lacking with the internet. With the internet, you're looking at a screen of course and you see the image reflected in pixels.

The advantage is that on the internet, you potentially reach a lot more people than you do through a physical exhibition or even a book. It's spontaneous. An exhibition takes months to plan; a book takes years. In that regard, it's much less work. If I find an image that's interesting, an hour later, it can be up on the internet as part of the project. If I'm going to do an exhibition with that image, it's going to take, you know, six months down the road. A book is going to take a few years. And then there's this question, how am I going to finance that over years? It's also more expensive—the actual book and exhibition world—than the internet is. Short of paying my monthly internet fee, my expenses are minimal.

Maintaining a website that is connected has its expenses as well, but it has a kind of affordability and democratic reach—democratic in that it's open to anyone who's following you or people who aren't following you, but who happen to see it because it gets retweeted or reposted on whatever platform. It branches out.

When I do the project online, I think that's an important factor—when you're talking about the difference between the physicality of exhibitions and books, magazines, whatever, and the kind of spontaneity and unpredictability of the internet in terms of reaching people.

Now, on the other side of the equation, there is that ephemeral sense or quality to it. There's so much information flowing on social media, and it's all over the place. It's really easy to just be a pebble on that huge beach that is the internet. You drop it in there, and it's easy for it to become almost forgotten or inconsequential. That happens occasionally. I get reminded of a photo that I

completely forgot about. I find that is something that I'm trying to weigh when I talk about the importance of archiving this stuff—to find some sort of permanent record of the internet side of this project. Because it is the key part of the project and stimulates the other parts of it. But I also want to protect that source material.

**TG:**

I think that really got into my question thinking about how this project travels across digital and physical places, especially when you started talking about the analogue dimensions of the project and how there's a difference between seeing the physical photograph versus looking at it through a screen as a digital file. Either way, I think there's something about seeing images of the past that make us feel like that history is now somehow more real or alive. But I wanted to segue into a question about nostalgia because I think it's about more than just a feeling of nostalgia to see and connect with these old photographs. How might nostalgia contribute to a rewriting or reclaiming of history?

**PS:**

These photos kind of show another world. It is another world. So many of the images in this project fall into that kind of framework of it being another world—a world that's gone. That's part of what photography is. It shows little freeze frames of a departed world, if you will. Even if it's a contemporary photo or a selfie we're taking today, you look back on that five years from now, and, well, "that was me," but you're no longer that person. That world that you're looking at is no longer there. I mean, the places are still there, but the people have changed, the culture's changed, everything's changed.

I think one of the things that resonates with the project is it rekindles the memory of those worlds for the people who see those images and respond to them—especially if they have a family connection to them or some sort of kinship. They see a world that’s no longer there. It’s not just



Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in Chief Isaac (~1847-1932) and Eliza Isaac (nee Harper) in Dawson City around 1898. When the Klondike Gold Rush happened, thousands of gold seekers flooded to the area; Chief Isaac took the community to Moosehide Village, a few miles upriver, to safeguard against people becoming consumed by the gold rush fever. He even sent the traditional songs and dances to their Han relations in Tanacross, Alaska for safekeeping. Thanks to his foresight, over a century later, the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in are still alive and thriving in Dawson City, while the gold rush is just a memory. The Isaac family patriarch and matriarch consists of Chief Isaac and Eliza Harper (daughter of Chief Gä St’ät). Chief Isaac is from the Wolf Clan and Eliza Harper is from the Crow Clan. This photograph is currently stored in the University of Alaska (Fairbanks) Archives with the title “Canadian Indian or Alaska Native Couple,” demonstrating how this image has been stored (and storied) in a way that erases the identities of these important leaders and obscures their community’s history of resilience. The photographer is unknown.

about loss, though. And it's not just about nostalgia. If it was just that, it would not be that interesting of an approach. I think it's more about building a sense of continuity to family histories and to the past.

In a world where we're bombarded with so much information and imagery and everything else, one of the things that a project like this does using images and the internet is that it gives us something we can personalise and somehow hold onto to anchor who we are, what makes us unique.

If we're just floating in the present, we don't have that. You feel much more rootless. But if you do have a sense of something you can hold onto, it gives you the strength. It's like that cliché of the person holding onto a tree in a huge windstorm. You have something that hankers you, so you don't feel lost within this information age. I think in that way, this project goes beyond nostalgia. It reminds us of things we can hold onto that define our own place. I think that's where it's resonated with people.

**TG:**

I really like what you said about this not being just about nostalgia. This makes me think that nostalgia is not just a passing emotion, but something that actually creates a dialogue and reframes history.

**PS:**

That's really an important point. Nostalgia can go in many ways. It can go into a kind of romanticisation of "the good old days." You know, all the clichés, rose tinted glasses, all those things looking back. And that's not necessarily just a harmless kind of force. It can also be a very negative force. You know, "Make America Great Again," or "back to the fifties," every house with

a white picket fence and a mom staying at home raising the two kids, oh, and daddy works. It provokes a thing that never existed in the first place for the majority of people. One of the things I'm aware of with this project is refreshingly the lack of that kind of nostalgia with it.

I often avoid using images that are stereotypical, of beads and feathers and that sort of thing, unless it has a context to it in terms of identification. But I'm not trying to replicate a nostalgia for some sort of “old days” when things were better or when we were traditional and stuff like that. I think that all cultures and societies are adaptable and have always been adaptable. They've never been stuck in one kind of framework that defines who they are. That's an important aspect of this project. And you see it in the imagery, how people change. So that's that side of nostalgia.

But the other side, which I think you're getting at, is the important side. And that's the recovery of things that have been lost either through neglect or through politics or war or environmental change, whatever the cause may be. These old photographs provide the opportunity to reclaim that history. It can provoke that kind of thing, which is about loss. But through that loss, you get a sense of the determination of people to get through hard times, or to survive. I think it provokes that kind of reminder for people. So, it's less a romantic nostalgia as opposed to a reaffirming of the memory of where we come from.

**TG:**

I think that's really important. I think it is a sort of a re-framing of the past because it's not romanticised, right? Not everything is filtered through those rose-coloured glasses. I think that translates in your book as well, especially through the work that you do within community.

There are a few inter-related questions that I'm thinking of that tie into this. We've kind of talked about this a little bit, but the internet is sort of a “mixed bag.” For all of the wonderful things the internet has enabled, what are the risks? How have you approached or navigated these risks to

centre joy and healing, which are important aspects of this project? And what are some of the ethical considerations that arise and that you navigate when doing this work?



This photograph is of the Cree performer, orator, and singer Frances Nickawa (Fanny Beardy) (1898-1928). She was called the “Second Pauline Johnson” and was known for touring around North America extensively. She even performed in England and Australia before dying at the young age of 29. Reminiscent of Johnson, Nickawa would first perform in a European-style gown before changing into an “Indian” dress made of buckskin fringe and strings of beads, like the one in this photograph. She reportedly made the dress herself. Despite her fame and prolific career, she has largely been forgotten today. This photograph was taken in 1924. In the 1930s, the Reverend Egerton Ryerson Young Jr. (1869-1962) wrote a biography about Nickawa, but it was never published. The photograph remains a part of the Egerton Ryerson Young Jr. Fonds along with other biographical materials and is stored in The United Church of Canada Archives. The photographer is unknown.

**PS:**

Good questions. Well, you know, the internet can be a very caustic, unfriendly place. Whether it's trolls or political debate, or people who are rage-farming certain issues. Fortunately, I'm not a frontline journalist, or a pundit who's throwing themselves into those battles. So first, I guess, is to consider my place of relationship to the internet. To be aware why I am on there—and I'm on there in regard to this project. I do occasionally, rarely post personal stuff, but it's usually separate from the project. This project has its own space on the platforms. It's not me. It's not my cat pictures or anything. I'm careful to not blur those boundaries. I view them as quite separate things. This project is my work. It's not how I feel that day or what I had for breakfast. It's not that kind of thing. It's the project.

In regard to the negativity of the internet, because I'm not engaged in those kinds of debates, I don't have that energy drain with the project. On the rare occasion, there are comments from trolls, inappropriate or offensive comments, which doesn't happen very often. It has happened on occasion, but I'd usually just mute that person. I don't block people. If they're determined, they tend to come back in another form and they don't need to know they're blocked, you know?

There's never been an issue that has derailed a narrative or caused a whole string of replies. Usually, people doing that are fishing for a reaction, and fortunately, they've never had bites off my site. So that's a good thing. It's because of what I'm doing and having a sense of purpose that I don't get drawn into that side of the internet. It's not an issue. And I'm glad for that.

Then there's the second part. There are several ethical questions. I guess the first ethical question is, do I formally have the right to reproduce these images from archives and museums? In most cases, it's not an issue because in recent years, most institutions, archives, museums, et cetera have

digitised their collections in order to increase access for communities and for their audiences. I've always been careful to credit the source. That's always important.

Where it becomes more of a question of ethics is deciding what images do I post? When I began this project, I really was about reframing through photography the Indigenous experiences that are outside of the usual kind of ideas of victimhood, or of trauma-sourced imagery, that sort of thing. I very much avoid that within the project. Even on issues like residential schools, I don't post, rarely post images that were of residential school students or that sort of thing. If I do get those presented to me through private collectors or sources, I'll forward them to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Ottawa who have people on staff and who are getting paid to do this sort of stuff. That's their place to archive that, not mine.

Ethically, since the early days, I made a conscious curatorial decision that this is what the framing of this project is about. It's not about denying bad things that have happened—colonialism, all that stuff. It's not about denying that. It's about reaffirming the dignity and the strength and vibrancy of people through these times, and even the hardest of times. That's what the project's been about.

So ethically, I haven't had to deal with showing images of trauma, you know? Things like that, and trying to provoke pity or outrage... I'm not going in there posting a photo to get people angry, like "look at what you guys did." That's not what I do. I don't want to farm photography in that way. By farm, I mean I'm not trying to cultivate a response to it. I avoid those kinds of photos and that's a moral decision for the project. I also avoid anything that is, from my sense—and this is a personal take, and I'm not saying it's a perfect take, but it's a personal take—anything that could be seen as private or ceremonial, like sun dances. I don't do ceremonial imagery because those weren't meant to be shared in the first place.

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I don't want to be reinforcing photography as an extractive art form. I mean, obviously photography is an extractive art form, but I don't want to frame it as being extractive in the negative. It's not what I'm trying to do with this project. Ethically, I think that covers it. I think there's maybe been one or two cases where I've taken down a photo because of something that's arisen about that person's history, or what happened where I felt that it could be a reminder of trauma or of tragedy. But those instances are very rare and are usually unconnected with the photograph itself. It might be a photograph of an individual, but it's not the photograph of the plane they were on when it crashed sort of thing. It's just by unfortunate circumstances that something happened to that person's life when I've taken down the photo. But those are very rare.

I feel ethically it's a nice place for me to be. I think it's appreciated by people who follow the project. In some cases, some of these exhibitions and photos have gone on to be sent to the families or returned to those communities. So that's also a nice closure to it. A nice, ethical closure is the return of these prints to the communities or to the families. So, it works in that way as well. That's more or less the ethical code to it, I guess.

**TG:**

It sounds like there's a great deal of responsibility that goes into this project that might not always be thought of, like deciding what photos to share and all these other factors. It's been illuminating to bring up some of those considerations.

**PS:**

Oh, entirely. Just to add to your point there, probably three quarters of the images I look at or might consider for the project, I do not use.



Community members have identified the man in this photograph as Fred Long Claws Jr. (Dakota Ojibway) from Waywayseecappo First Nation in Manitoba. According to one community member, Fred stood over seven feet tall. The photograph has been attributed to Alexander J. Ross (1851-1894) a photographer known for his work documenting First Nations people in Winnipeg before establishing his own studio in Calgary in 1884. This photograph was given to Seesequasis from a private collection, but at least 125 of Ross's photos are stored in archives like the Glenbow Archives at the University of Calgary. It has since been returned to the Waywayseecappo First Nation. The exact date is unknown, but it would likely be from the 1880s.

**TG:**

Wow. That's important to note. I think it really highlights that there is a hidden side of the project, which is deciding what gets included and possibly even leaving some things out.

**PS:**

Oh, for sure. And that sometimes is not an ethical question. It's almost an aesthetic taste question as well. I like to feel something when I look at an image, a curiosity, or just being taken by the aesthetic quality of the image, you know? And that's a subjective thing, I admit. But that can frame what I post as well.

**TG:**

I think this ties really well into another question I had, which is how do you approach or potentially redefine the role of curator?

**PS:**

How do I? I'm not sure. I don't want to say I redefine it because that feels presumptuous on my part, you know, that I reinvented it. But I can answer in terms of how it works for me. As a kind of self-taught curator, I'm not... I don't come from or have links to any institutions or museums. I've never been employed as a curator. Well, I shouldn't say I've never been employed as a curator because I am curating online. I'm curating physical exhibitions, but that's a freelance kind of relationship. I've never been on the staff of a museum or a curator at a museum or anything like that. So, it's not my employment. It's not my vocation. On one level, it's good. I'm not beholden to anyone. I'm not working with an institutional framework.

The negative side to that, I guess, is that when you're freelancing, you're always kind of scrambling to do the kind of research you want to do. But how? Because I'm not an academic and

I'm not institutionally connected, I don't have access to SSHRC<sup>1</sup> grants or things that other academics potentially could get research monies from. I'm often excluded from that. A lot of research takes money.

One thing I found from this project is that there's a huge difference between doing research online and seeing what's digitised, and actually going to a major archive, museum, or institution and having a chance to go through their archives. You find so much more. But to do that costs an airfare and hotels and all that stuff. So, being freelance means being inventive and trying to find ways to get around that. Sometimes you just can't, unfortunately. There's only so much you can do. So, it can be frustrating being an independent curator, I guess.

Being an independent online curator, there's a positive side. It's always exciting. You never know what you're going to find any day that you go on and start doing that kind of online research. I'm never tired of it, and I'm pleased for that. It's never bored me, you know, or I'd stop doing it. It's always been interesting. It's often spontaneous discovery—it's not something I was looking to find. I just find it.

Sometimes I challenge myself on ways of finding material. It involves using search engines in the creative sort of way. Not getting too set in your ways. I've been doing this for over a decade, so I know all, or most, of the major museums, collections, and historical societies that I would normally count on. But I try not to get into that rut of that's the only place to go. I'll check auction houses. I'll check licensing sources like Getty or Alamy because sometimes really interesting images surface there that I never would've thought.

It's not just restricting myself to the "official" archival stuff in museums. It's about looking at private auction sales. It's about doing online searches, whether it's Firefox or Google, and keying in a couple of words like, I don't know, "Buffalo woman" or something and seeing what comes up as

under images. It's like, “oh, wow, where's that from?” It's making those discoveries that makes it interesting. Little, little treasures that you weren't expecting. That's how I like to think of it, I guess. That makes the project more interesting.

In short, I think being an independent curator—and it's not just me, I'm sure a lot of people are finding this—requires being your own mother of invention and finding things that work for you. It makes it a very interesting vocation. Some drawbacks, as I stated. Resources are always a factor. Money's always a factor. It's never a deciding factor because you can always get around it, but it does limit what you can do. I have some ideas of things that I'd like to do, but to do them, I have to source funds to make it possible. I don't believe at all in this “starving artist” thing. Good art requires funding. Being anxious about the lack of funds does not promote creativity. It stifles it. That's always a factor in being an independent curator, money.

**TG:**

That's a really good point. So, I think the open-ended question I'll leave off with is: what does it mean to work in community to you, and how does this change depending on the platform, whether it be on social media, or in a gallery, or in a book?

**PS:**

It's really different. I was at an event a few months ago where I spoke and showed images that were taken right after the first World War around 1919 of three or four leaders and residential school survivors and other people were there. The dialogue and the relationship of taking these images, these photographs, and having them in a real three-dimensional space with actual living people who have a relationship to those photos is an entirely different experience than anything that can be replicated online. And that includes the most positive and interesting stories that develop off, say, you know, *Blanket Toss Under Midnight Sun*—a lot of stories developed on

Facebook, et cetera, from people recognizing people. It's one level, but it's an entirely different level when you actually are in a space where people have a connection and that kind of analogue experience. That tactile experience hits on a different emotional cord for people.

It's cool when you see people with those images. It's happened a few times with the project where they're holding a picture of themselves forty years ago, that kind of thing. You get that continuity and that kind of sense that these are real people and that resonates. You can't really replicate that. The internet has the opposite effect. It kind of disassociates our sense of self and reduces it to the image we are on the internet, if you know what I mean. Whether it's, and so much of it is, you know, our own self-image now, or how we promote ourselves, or whether we're influencers and that sort of stuff... That's the nature of things.

I'm not trying to be critical of it. I'm just saying it's kind of a performative aspect, but when the physical exhibition takes place, there's that opportunity to connect with actual people and discussions. It reminds one of the importance of that kind of in-person discourse and how it strikes much more resonant chords than the internet does. We've become, I think, so acculturated, if that's the word, by social media and by computers and by the screens that it can be unhealthy without that counterbalance. So, for me, the physical exhibitions, and the book, and other things like that, readings and speaking to groups, et cetera, in person ideally, is a counterbalance. It's a healthy thing not just for me, but for the project as well. And it's an important aspect of it. So, while a good part of this project has existed and could only exist because of the internet, it would be lacking without going outside the internet.

**TG:**

I guess it was never meant to stay only on the internet. I think it was meant to have that bigger impact that it has had.

**PS:**

I don't know if I was smart enough to see it that way when it began, so thank you. I won't claim credit for that, but it's a necessity for it. Time has taught me that, I recognise fully now.<sup>2</sup>

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Tanja Grubnic chose images for this interview in consultation with Paul Seesequasis, expanding his social media captions to provide additional context and information. Details such as birth dates and locations are included if known. All images are believed to fall under fair use.

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## Digital and Environmental Erotics: Reflections on the 42<sup>nd</sup> American Indian Workshop

JAMES MACKAY

It's strange to recall the 2021 meeting of the American Indian Workshop – principally because, as life has returned to normal over the past couple of years, it becomes increasingly hard to remember the way things were in the pandemic era. Having originally intended to hold this conference in my home city of Nicosia, Cyprus, I instead found myself working out how an online event could be as welcoming and stimulating as a physical meeting. This was especially important given the topic of the erotic, a concept that in Audre Lorde's formulation involves "those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings" (56). Without physically being in the same room, might our thoughts about the sensual be diluted? Spread half way across the world, with some participants joining us just after waking up and others joining after dark had already fallen, could there be any sense of psychic connection?

These questions matter, and they matter now. In the networked world, we as academics have to face up to the fact that the big international conference has to find a way to truly decarbonize (Reyes-Garcia *et al*; Parncutt; Klöwer *et al* 356; Etzion *et al* 350-351; Bjørkdahl 1-7; Shift Project 3). Although carbon offsetting is often proffered as a fig leaf, the truth is that many if not most carbon offsetting schemes have been exposed as environmentally damaging, unsustainable, or sometimes even fraudulent (Watt 1069; Broadhead and Placani 410-412; Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 58; Guix *et al* 11-12). Multiple studies have sustained the extraordinary difference in environmental impact between online and in-person, with the online conference having as much as a 98% lower impact on the planet (Evrard *et al* 205-210; Jäckle

456-457; Achakulvisut; Froilan *et al* 1-2). To read a truly comprehensive account of the damage and immorality of academic flying, I recommend the open access collection *Academic Flying and the Means of Communication*, edited by Kristian Bjørkdahl and Adrian Santiago Franco Duharte.

Indigenous Studies should be feeling this pressure most intently, given the disproportionate impact of global heating on Indigenous communities (Baldwin and Erickson 3-11; Kåresdotter *et al*; Suliman *et al* 318; Adams 282-284). The old model of the academic conference, in which academics fly long distances, emitting clouds of greenhouse gases behind them and in some cases merely reading a twenty-minute paper to a few people before wandering off to do some sightseeing, is immoral, unjust, and a tool of climate oppression (Barnett 1-6). Academics who continue to participate in this economy while preaching activism may see this as a necessary hypocrisy – but then, every colonizer and ecocidist has thought in terms of necessary hypocrisies (Cesaire 31-33; Douglass; Dunlap 80-83).

These are not the only problems with the standard international conference. As a white male-presenting able-bodied in-post academic with a loud voice, I admit that it took me a while to realize how much the physical conference can be a hostile environment for others. But those of us who enjoy these privileges should not deny the disadvantages faced by new mothers or disabled persons in even getting to a physical conference, or the problems students and adjunct faculty in poverty, not to mention academics such as myself working long distances away from the metropole experience in having to pay vast sums for hotels, conference fees, networking banquets (Bos 755-756; Oswal 21-22; Wing 53-72; Mooken and Sugden 595-597; Vossen 126, 129; Niner and Wasserman). And, though I am myself often an enthusiastic participant in the after-hours alcohol-fueled camaraderie of the conference bar, recent articles on the barriers to networking this creates for people who do not drink (alcoholics, expectant parents, Muslims and other religious minorities), and the opportunities inequality and alcohol create for sexual predators, show just how the academic conference is imbricated with structures of patriarchy and

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white supremacy (Kean 178-179; Nicholson 59-61; Flores 139-140; Kibbe and Kapadia; Karami; Biggs 393-396; Jackson 694-699).

This insight was reinforced by the decision of the AIW committee to announce at the conference that they had awarded the following year's conference to Hungary. LGBTQ+ attendees and others made it clear that they would not be comfortable attending a conference in a country that had just passed a law outlawing "homosexual and transsexual propaganda" (Bayer). Many of the papers offered at the 42<sup>nd</sup> AIW might be considered in breach of this law. The conference went ahead nonetheless, placing barriers in the way of trans and queer academics who might otherwise have attended in person. Although hybrid conferences are often suggested as a solution to access barriers, it takes a high investment of time and technology to make an event truly "hybrid" rather than creating a second class tier of digital attendees. Such investment is beyond the budgets of most conferences in the humanities.

Yet if the erotic contains teachings, those surely concern the power of the physical to create connection, love, empathy and compassion. As the world has spent more and more time staring at screens, getting instant dopamine hits from smartphone and tablet, we have seen the rise of figures such as Andrew Tate and the many, many far-right politicians who outright reject empathy and compassion for anyone unlike themselves (Bauer 2-4). The virtuality of our shared experiences, while it may not be the only explanation for such a deadening of collective compassion, surely accelerates it (Terry and Cain 58; Andrejevic and Volcic 295-297; Hodalska 421-422; Sergura 9-10). In a time when we are facing unprecedented threats to the rights of women, ethnic minorities and queer identities, we need to find methods of creating collective experiences through the liquid crystal display which include empathic and intellectual engagement (Yu and Bailey 8-11). This becomes harder when the distractions of the real are always intervening. Many of us at this conference had children in lockdown and schooling from home, and even beyond the covid era it is always true that online experiences can be interrupted by a

colleague popping in to discuss an urgent matter, a dog throwing up on the carpet, a sudden power outage (or, in this case, my children bringing in a sick bat while I was hosting one session).

There is an increasing number of studies on how to adapt the conference format to the online environment (e.g. Raby and Madden 3607-3613; Oruç 231-242; Falk and Hagsten 718-719; Cai 8358-8361; Popovic and Kustra; Rich *et al*). In structuring “The Sovereign Erotic” I freely borrowed from several of them. Papers other than keynotes were restricted to ten minutes apiece, making fewer demands on the collective attention span, communicating key insights only. The next stage was what mattered most – the group was randomly split into smaller virtual rooms of only 5-8 people, giving their immediate unstructured responses to the papers, one participant being tasked with leading the discussion and synthesizing the responses. This randomness turned out to be the key, democratizing the encounter and pushing everyone who participated to think about the issues raised in every paper. Rather than focusing on three or four panelists’ responses to random audience questions as in the traditional model, these encounter groups pushed all of us to engage with themes beyond the individual papers. Only after the group leaders had reported back did we open for a general full-conference discussion, by which time everyone had skin in the game and was willing to engage through the digital void. Since there were no parallel sessions (the conference was spread over six days to accommodate time zone differences) this created rich discussions of very diverse themes with equally diverse audiences. The friendly atmosphere thus created was attested to by the large numbers attending the “hangout sessions” at the end of each day – lasting connections were forged, and in some cases have blossomed into new collaborations that continue long after the conference itself has finished. When one misjudged contribution triggered trauma for several delegates, it was in one of these rooms that Ashley Caranto Morford (and others) brought empathy and compassionate presence to a moment of shared healing that I will not soon forget.

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Most of all, looking back at the conference, I will remember the keynotes – superbly meaningful work from Lisa Tatonetti (who, I want to note, only agreed to keynote once she had confirmed that all other keynotes were by Indigenous academics), talking about the responsibility to others inherent in the erotic. Kai Minosh Pyle, speaking about their research into buried lines of two-spirit connection. Chrystos read poetry and discussed the liberation to be found in sexual connection, in a talk that was messy, funny and deeply honest. And Shaawano Chad Uran’s keynote, reproduced in this section, ... no, actually, I don’t want to tell you. Read it for yourself. Just know that there was laughter, and there were tears, from more than one attendee. There were also many brilliant papers, of which the following section is just a selection.

I offer these recollections not to memorialize this one event, but to show that there truly is a better way forward, one that needs to be adopted more widely. Far from being an alienating, remote, cold experience of screens and switched off cameras, this was as friendly, involved, intellectually and emotionally stimulating an event as I have ever attended. There are many alternative options. Rob Raven and his co-authors have proposed hub models for conferencing, involving local meetups as well as international collaboration via digital streaming media (1-5). Mattia Thibault *et al* describe methods of gamifying the conference experience (161-164). Laura U. Marks, who points out that the Jevons paradox means that even a move to digital may not be enough to truly decarbonize, has done amazing work on small-footprint collaboration methodologies (Marks and Przedpełski a 207-210; Marks and Przedpełski b; Makonin). Even streaming platforms themselves offer a plethora of tools, tips and hints for making digital collaboration work (Wiederhold 437-438). Yet instead of learning the lessons from the pandemic, we again hear online conferences constantly referred to as second best options (Bastian *et al* 12). Far too many of the conferences in the Humanities that do take place online are organized using the deathly dull three-20-minute-papers-followed-by-questions template.<sup>1</sup>

The sovereign erotic, the focus of this conference, is a way of conceptualizing the role of play, of sex, of presence, of beauty, of the physical, of the sensual and sensory, in the continuation and healing of communities and people after the experience of trauma (Driskill 52-54; Burns 30-31; Siepak 497-498; Schellhammer 95). I do not believe that such work can be aided by a community of scholars stubbornly resistant to changes to the status quo and wedded to the way things have always been done. If anyone reading this is organizing an event, I urge them – I urge you – to think creatively about whether you can reduce, even eliminate, carbon emissions in the process (without recourse to offsetting) while still creating joy. There are many resources available to conceive of alternative conferencing mechanisms, many of them in the bibliography of this introduction (see e.g. Mulders and Zender on VR conferencing). There are numerous games available to help you think through the impact of your activities. Those of you on the boards of larger organizations might think about taking up a workshop from *Ma Terre en 180'*, a game designed for just such a group. Living as I do in Cyprus, a country that will likely see a sharp rise in temperatures out of proportion to the rest of the planet's overall heating, I hope we manage to make this move as a profession.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> I base this assertion on a review of the CFPs found on the Upenn server's "online conferences" tab.

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**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.

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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]

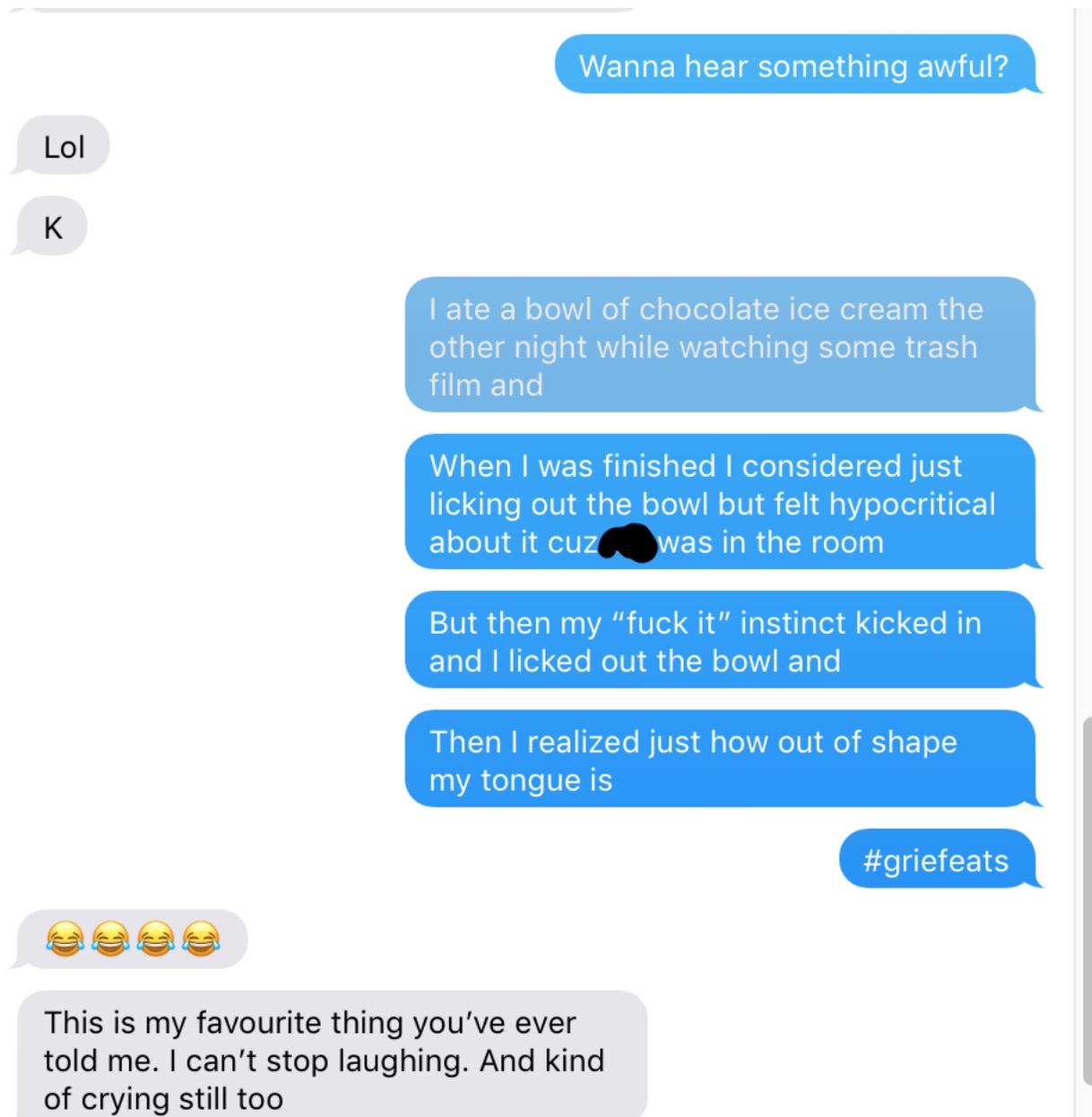
But then my “fuck it” instinct kicked in and I licked out the bowl and

[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.

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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.

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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.

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## To Choose Responsibility: (Queer) Indigenous Existentialism in A History of My Brief Body

EMERSON PARKER PEHL

Billy-Ray Belcourt (Driftpile Cree) begins *A History of My Brief Body* (2020) by foregrounding the ancestral with a letter to his kokum. He acknowledges his “inheritance” of her philosophy of love, which Belcourt also views as a theory of freedom that informs his (or an) Indigenous narrative of joy (6).<sup>1</sup> While the radical potential of affective joy is reiterated in the “Introduction: A Short Theoretical Note” where he exhorts the reader to not overlook joy in his narrative for a redundant, (settler) “parasitic” misinterpretation, Belcourt does concede that the following “pages don’t eschew sadness and sorrow: in fact, many of them traffic those hard feelings in” (9). With this context of the discordant affective “cacophony”—or an interwoven ambivalent<sup>2</sup> array of negative, neutral, and positive feelings—throughout *A History of My Brief Body*, I am interested in attending to Belcourt’s seemingly rhetorical question in “Can the Other of Native Studies Speak?” (2016): “What does it mean that my work looks mostly like the heartbreak of disappointment, like a half-written suicide note, hinting at the ways the ‘fucked-up’ is keeping me from breathing?” If his outlined theoretical underpinnings in *A History of My Brief Body* have been adhered to, an ostensible understanding of his poignant work could be its viability as (re)validating marginalized queer, Indigenous kin through the affective resonations with Belcourt’s queer, Cree body and the complexities of this embodiment.

Furthermore, though, Belcourt’s embodiment is descriptive and demonstrated survivance, as theorized by Gerald Vizenor (*White Earth Anishinaabe*), where through his textual self-narrative—an admitted affectual cacophony—there is a reiteration of the immediacy of his

(bodily) presence in the text, and in the world, as queer and Indigenous. By applying Brendan Hokowhitu’s (Māori) theory of Indigenous existentialism, a theory that offers an existentially “freeing” reconceptualization of the Indigenous present, instead of Muñoz’s “theory of queer futurity that is attentive to the past for the purposes of [merely] critiquing a present,” (Muñoz 10) it is possible to interpret Belcourt’s affective spectrum as necessary for an intelligibility of his Indigenous immediacy, or the here and now of the “everyday,” instead of merely as a reactionary resistance to the socio-political settler context that ascribes an Indigenous “‘victimhood’ [which can be] conceived of as the genealogical descendant of the trauma of colonisation” (Hokowhitu 103-104).<sup>3</sup> The intelligibility of Belcourt’s Indigenous immediacy through his ambivalent affect offers a linguistic shift away from a Hegelian dialectic of “resistance” to the settler-colonial state to one of enacting a loving “responsibility” to queer, Indigenous kin, conceivably to put us back into relation through Kim TallBear’s (Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate) notion of caretaking, which then makes Belcourt’s utopic “haven of a world” tenable to a broader audience (Belcourt 128).

Many of Hokowhitu’s theoretical moves within “Indigenous Existentialism and the Body” are seemingly in concert with some of Belcourt’s own reflections throughout *A History of My Brief Body* and “Can the Other of Native Studies Speak?” In Hokowhitu’s theory of Indigenous existentialism he, like Belcourt, problematizes the tendency for ‘tradition’ and ‘decolonization’ to be the primary concepts of study, even within Indigenous studies, as it negates the consideration of Indigenous immediacy in favor of a futile “search for pure traditions and precolonial authentic identities [that] relocates an Indigenous sense-of-being in the past” (103).<sup>4</sup> While ongoing settler colonial structural event(s) can lead Indigenous people to a dialectical understanding amongst the destructive and creative divide of settler/Indigenous, which again limits the Indigenous to “preservation of Self” and “resistance against Other,” Hokowhitu reiterates that these reactionary

discourses “not only fall[] on deaf ears, [they] limit[] Indigenous people to a colonised/coloniser mentality, while ignoring Indigenous responsibility in the immediate context” (106). It is through the concept of self-determination that Hokowhitu articulates the Indigenous ‘responsibility’ “for colonisation[;] not to release the coloniser from responsibility, rather to reclaim [Indigenous] freedom to choose beyond a colonised/coloniser mentality” (107). This existentialist intervention allows for attention to the immediacy of the historical and contemporary Indigenous conditions, which, he argues, can be theorized through the “strenuous analyses into the immediacy of the Indigenous body as an existing, living, breathing, playing, thinking, working, aging and dying physical agent” (Hokowhitu 113, original emphasis). Significantly, Hokowhitu reiterates that

Indigenous theorising cannot fully develop without the possibility for existential agency, for it cannot be the atrocities of colonisation can be the defining point.... Indigenous existentialism must materialise beyond such embodied and genealogical pain. The physical endurance of pain may not be a choice, but Indigenous people can choose to live beyond the genealogical scarring inflicted by colonization. (113)

As Alice Te Punga (Te Āti Awa, Taranaki) invertedly explicates the Hegelian dialectic, while settler colonialism “must always contend with the Indigene (vanishing, exterminated, agentic, or whatever), Indigenous studies and Indigenous worlds are always bigger than experiences, and even analyses, of colonialism” (4 emphasis added).

Indigenous existentialism, as invoked through the immediacy of the Indigenous conditions/body, would presumably then be an appealing theoretical point of departure for Belcourt who is committed to the (utopic) survivance of (queer) Indigenous kin in the present, not merely just the future. Importantly for Belcourt’s commitments to a utopic future and present, “[e]ffecting an Indigenous existentialism through the realisation of the material immediacy of the Indigenous body will enable Indigenous people to live beyond the search for a pure-pre-colonial

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past and the limits of a mind/body duality” (Hokowhitu 116, original emphasis). While Hokowhitu theorizes the immediacy of the Indigenous condition through an eloquently poignant description of contemporary Māori rugby play,<sup>5</sup> Belcourt should also be understood as attending to the immediacy of the Indigenous condition through the theorization his own “everyday” queer, Indigenous body that feels such an affective cacophony.

Arguably, the entirety of *A History of My Brief Body* can be understood as Belcourt’s affective ruminations of his queer, Indigenous body in the contemporary “everyday.” While revisiting Belcourt’s description of his text as attending to “those hard feelings” of sadness in a declared narrative of joy, it becomes imperative to speak against any overdetermination of the negative affective as well as to posit the affective experience of ambivalence, or to feel many (discordant) feelings at once (Miller & Rollnick). The harmonious cacophony of his ambivalent affective experience is the reality of his (queer) Indigenous immediacy in the present, or “the here and now; ‘the everyday’” (Hokowhitu 103). With reference to a concise instance, I consider Belcourt’s second vignette in his chapter, “Gay: 8 Scenes,” a recounting of his Edmonton “sexual debut,” as bursting with affective ambivalence from his expansive “sexual possibility” (51):

I expand with sexual possibility. Which is another way of saying I’m incredibly horny. I have little sexual experience, but I’m not technically a virgin. I have not slept with anyone in Edmonton; I’m an Edmonton virgin. I download Grindr. For my profile picture I use a tightly framed shot of my torso with the waistband of a jockstrap peeking out at the bottom of the screen. Almost immediately my phone buzzes with a message from a similarly beheaded torso: hey, looking? He has a couple of abs, which already makes me feel as though I’m touring through a foreign world. He doesn’t have a car and can’t host me at his apartment, so he suggests we fuck in the exercise room in the basement of his building, which he

presses is rarely used, especially so late on a weeknight. This jettisons me outside the neighborhood of old feeling, where there is nothing but red flags, somewhere outside ordinary time. I vibrate with worry so much that it feels like my skin is loosening. I pick him up and drive back to my apartment, where I unfold into him, without grace, like a crumpled map, long discarded (Belcourt *A History*... 51).

To be young, gay, and Cree with feelings of lust, desire, and arousal that will hopefully be fulfilled with right swipes on Grindr, the feelings of surprise, excitement, and anxiety that a match messaged immediately to ask “hey, looking,” to the feelings of disappointment and worry that are overlaid on eager anticipation during the metaphorical and literal cruise, and, finally, those feelings of vulnerability and self-consciousness intermixed with feelings of excitement, joy, ecstasy, and gratification while sexually “unfolding” into him. The affective ambivalence postulated in this interpretation of Belcourt’s vignette should both restate the mistake of overdetermining the presence of any negative affect, as well as rearticulate how his Indigenous immediacy is theorized through his ambivalent affective experience throughout this particular moment and throughout his text.<sup>6</sup> Through Belcourt’s narrative, it is possible to conceive of his, and other (queer) Indigenous kin’s, Indigenous immediacy through these affective experiences in all their ambivalent complexities (Hokowhitu 103). It is this reality of discordance and ambivalence in his affective experience, I posit, that foregrounds the immediacy of the queer, Indigenous conditions necessary for Hokowhitu’s Indigenous existentialism that has other world (re)making potential for Belcourt’s project. With the immediacy of the queer, Indigenous condition located in Belcourt’s affective theorization of his own body, it is possible to recognize how an Indigenous existentialism manifests in Belcourt’s text as a joyous and loving responsibility to kin.

“Please Keep Loving: Reflections on Unlivability” is a chapter that can be interpreted as Belcourt’s progression into an Indigenous existentialism that exemplifies his responsibilities to and caretaking of queer, Indigenous youth. He attends to the devastating reality of Native youth

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suicide and how the biopolitics within settler and tribal nations have seemingly overlooked how homophobia and transphobia, within and outside of reserves, significantly contribute to the unlivability in this world for queer, Indigenous youth. Belcourt critiques “suicide prevention” as an analytic which “cherry-pick[s] ways of being over others” instead of “making new forms of collective NDN life” (111). Invoking the concept of choice, necessary for Indigenous existentialism, he critiques how “Reserves can be incubators of transphobia and homophobia as a symptom of the Christianizing project carried out by settlers for decades; that history, however, doesn’t absolve NDNs of making use of a single-issue focus on race that ignores to a grievous degree the pain of the doubly and triply marginalized” (Belcourt 111). While theorizing against a colonized/colonizer mindset that ignores, or inadvertently/intentionally fosters, the contemporary unlivability for queer, Indigenous youth, Belcourt asserts that “This [chapter], then, is an experiment in writing in the direction of a time and place that doesn’t produce suicide as a chronic condition, as a suitable response to trauma;” in time and place neither in the settler nation-state nor in Indian country, but beyond (104-105; Hokowhitu).

Throughout his own reflections on his evolving feelings and understandings of queer/Indigenous suicidality, Belcourt demonstrates an Indigenous existential reframe which transitions from the initial reactionary to the settler nation-state, to the realization of the limits of tribes interpellated in the present dialectic, to finally recognize his responsibility to draw upon his kokum’s philosophy of love as a theory for radical world remaking for those who are queer and/or Indigenous. The linguistic and grammatical shift away from the “haunted speech” of suicidality as ‘indigenous pathology,’ which is simultaneously normalized within settler logics of elimination (Wolfe), towards choices that humanize and recognize queer, Indigenous youth and their experiences is an initial, formative gesture of his choice for responsibility, and subsequently caretaking. This loving humanization validates rather than shames the complex, and potentially agonizing, ambivalence of existing in the unlivable, with affective resonations of a romanticized

“unconditional love” amongst kin, allows Belcourt to acknowledge that “Suicide prevention, then, can’t simply be about keeping NDNs in the world if it remains saturated by that which dulls the sensation of aliveness for those who are queer and/ or trans and/ or two-spirit... suicide prevention thus needs to entail a radical remaking of the world” (110-111). Belcourt’s concluding compelling plea that “NDN youth, listen:... Please keep loving” exemplifies his Indigenous existentialist choice to be responsible to queer, Indigenous youth by alluding to the joyously radical (other world-making) possibilities of affective ambivalence - of love in addition to all else - that can create the “good life” in an “elsewhere and somewhere” (Belcourt 111).

It is this appeal to experiencing affective ambivalence of seemingly incompatible feelings and longings, here amongst other locations throughout the text, that encourages his audience, specifically those who are queer and/or Indigenous, to acknowledge their immediacy through their own complex affective experiences which might bring about an Indigenous existentialism for themselves. This is to say, through the disentanglement of Indigenous selfhood from the “colonized mindset,” there is radical potential for Belcourt’s aspirations of world re-making to occur as more Indigenous actions shift away from a dialectic of “resistance” to those of existentialist “responsibilities.”<sup>7</sup> For freedom, in addition to responsibility and choice, as a necessary constituent to an Indigenous existentialism (Hokowhitu), “is itself a poetics, in that it seeks to reschematize time, space, and feeling in the direction of a future driven by an ethics of care, a relational practice of joy-making that is ours to enact” – even right now (Belcourt 128). Throughout *A History of My Brief Body*, Belcourt engages in an atemporal relational practice of joy-making, as informed by his inherited philosophy of love, which not only demonstrates his freedom to choose responsibility to kin(ship making) through an Indigenous existentialism of caretaking relationality,<sup>8</sup> but also conceivably provokes Indigenous existentialism in his readers that makes his aspirations for “start[ing] anew in the haven of a world in the image of our own radical art” enduringly tenable (128).

Circling around,<sup>9</sup> I conclude with ruminations on Belcourt’s question, “what does it mean that my writing looks this way,” to offer not a definitive answer but to instead emphasize the radical possibilities that his ambivalent affective experience offers for radical world remaking when read through Indigenous existentialism. For his sadness and sorrow, not to be overdetermined as debilitating to his narrative of joy, are integral aspects of his affective spectrum as he locates the immediacy of the present Indigenous condition through his own queer, Indigenous body. The Indigenous existentialism that manifests throughout *A History of My Brief Body* allows “for the holes in the fabric of a colonial world [to be] revealed” to see an illumed exit route (9): By choosing to regard Belcourt’s “HOPE settler state ≠ the world” with atemporality, we can not only hear the “rallying cry” for a utopic future but also a liberatory potential for the present, contemporary Indigenous conditions as well (82).

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Having inherited your philosophy of love, which is also a theory of freedom, nōhkom, I can write myself into a narrative of joy that troubles the horrid fiction of race that stalks me as it does you and our kin.... It’s likely that you might feel confused at times by my style of writing, its dexterity, its refusal of easiness, but I know that you’ll sense the affection bubbling up inside each word. That affection is joy, and it started with you. Now, I see it everywhere” (Belcourt *A History...* 6).

<sup>2</sup> “Ambivalence is simultaneously wanting [/feeling] and not wanting [/feeling] something, or wanting [/feeling] both of two incompatible things. It has been human nature since the dawn of time” (Miller & Rollnick 6).

<sup>3</sup> Where, “The idealism Indigenous people locate in the pure-past limits how we conceive of ourselves through the *immediacy* of [contemporary] experience” (Hokowhitu 103, original emphasis).

<sup>4</sup> “Native Studies, putatively defined against the neoliberal university, is a discipline from which renegade knowledge is to be generated, one whose foundational object – the Native – shores up modes of intellectual production meant to depart from, and, in this, attack the colonial episteme itself... However, I intend to argue... that the Native is the subject, intelligible in form, who comes into being prior to the study in order to conduct that study. *There is a history of coming-into-being that needs to be fleshed out*” (Belcourt “Can the Other...” emphasis added).

<sup>5</sup> “Produced as Māori *culture*, but never conceived of as ‘Māori culture’” (Hokowhitu 115 original emphasis).

<sup>6</sup> Where Belcourt experiences the simultaneity of wanting and not wanting (Miller & Rollnick).

<sup>7</sup> “What will matter in the end isn’t how many days I endured in the battleground of linear time, but what every fiber of me aspired to – something more than the gift of mortality... something

only fully and fleetingly realized in the hands and mouths and chests of those whom I encountered as a mark on this ghostly page” (Belcourt *A History...* 103).

<sup>8</sup> “If one refuses Indigenous elimination and a de-animating possession of us, then a new redemptive narrative, a different creative move is required” (TallBear 36).

<sup>9</sup> Where stories, and research, go in circles (Wilson 6).

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## Erotic Art as A Material Cultural Representation of Indigenous Decolonial Sexuality

DEANNE GRANT

This paper theorizes the importance of Indigenous erotic art as a sexual imagining and analyzes its use as the material representation of an Indigenous decolonial sexuality in the *Native American Body of Art* exhibit. I argue that Native peoples can imagine alternative decolonial sexual realities by drawing from Indigenous self-representations, traditions, and histories represented in art by showing Indigenous depictions of matrilineality and Native women's traditional or pre-colonial influence in society.

Indigenous erotic art offers visual creations about the body, motherhood, and sexuality by centering the perspective of Native artists and self-representations. I reference Indigenous erotic art as the material for imaginings that promote a future where Indigenous decolonial sexuality is a cultural norm in Native communities. As I develop herein, the guiding principles of Indigenous decolonial sexuality are respect, open communication, awareness of Indigenous sexual stories, living as a sexually sovereign person who acknowledges the effects of settler colonialism upon gender and sexuality, and actively works to decolonize their own sexuality. Indigenous imaginings in Indigenous erotic art contribute to Indigenous decolonial sexuality as representations of what the erotic is, according to Indigenous perspectives. My conceptualizations of the erotic as a useful form of self-expression and power draws from self-described Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet Audre Lorde, specifically *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* and her poem *The Black Unicorn*.

Lorde’s writings about power and sexuality are unique given that she breaks several boundaries through her cultural critiques and rejection of forms of social domination, while offering new imaginings of what could be. As a poet, Lorde understands the influence of writing poetry to promote change by altering peoples’ feelings (*Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years*, 0:44). Lorde’s intersectional contributions are grounded in her own identities, contributing to the feminist movement in a manner that recognizes difference amongst women. This acknowledgement of difference that exists amongst women refuses a limited monolithic view of women and allows me to embrace her ideologies of the varying degrees of sexism experienced by women and find the places where she “fits” with an Indigenous feminist analysis of Indigenous erotic art. Lorde’s attention to difference amongst women allows for specific interpretations of experiences with violence. The differences amongst women when centering the topic of sexuality is essential to the critiques of settler sexuality. Lorde states, “Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women’s joint power” (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 117). Lorde’s contributions actively work against gender and sexual dominance through recognizing the fallacy of accepting white American normativity as the ideal standard with specific critique aimed at heteropatriarchal dominance. Lorde states,

It is not the destiny of Black america to repeat white america’s mistakes. But we will, if we mistake the trappings of success in a sick society for the signs of a meaningful life. If Black men continue to define “femininity” instead of their own desires, and to do it in archaic European terms, they restrict our access to each other’s energies. Freedom and future for Blacks does not mean absorbing the dominant white male disease of sexism (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 63).

Lorde’s reference to a “sick society” is about white supremacy that continues to terrorize American society today. Lorde cautions African men in the US to avoid sexism by understanding the

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European ideals of femininity as a white male disease within a sick society.<sup>1</sup> Lorde later claims that Africana men who assume privilege and harm Africana women are only serving colonial interests by perpetuating oppression within Africana communities (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 63).

Rather than idealize the norms of white American society, Lorde encourages Africana communities to actively reject white ideals of femininity because they are based in dominance over others and ultimately serve white supremacy. Black sociologist Patricia Hill Collins states, “All women engage an ideology that deems middle-class, heterosexual, [W]hite femininity as normative” (193). These standards of femininity and beauty create dominance over all other women that serves patriarchy. For example, while Africana men may benefit from the privilege of being men within a heteropatriarchal society, these practices are based in a society of supremacy and sickness that is nothing to be endorsed (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 63). This caution is also important to Indigenous peoples because it demonstrates the need to reject white supremacist ideals, rooted in sexism and ideals of femininity, which relate to sexuality and the process of decolonizing sexuality. The re-definition of beauty and femininity based in Native standards is necessary and artwork can provide those examples.

In a similar way, I advocate for Indigenous peoples to critique and ultimately reject heteropatriarchal oppressions within Indigenous communities based on two main points: 1) The current status quo of sexual hierarchies that exists in the US are based in oppression and dominance over others and serves a heterosexual, white male agenda and 2) There are other ways of sexually relating to each other, as human beings, that are culturally distinct and worth recovering based within Indigenous conceptions and representations. As an example, Indigenous erotic art offers sexual imaginings based in Indigenous perspectives about motherhood, body types, and sexuality—all of which I address in this essay through my discussion of contemporary Indigenous artists.

Lorde offers a new way of thinking about women’s sexuality as a sensory connection to the erotic, based on the complicated relationship between women’s erotic power and society. When I read *The Black Unicorn* by Lorde, I understand the possibility that the Black unicorn is Black women’s sexuality.

The black unicorn is greedy.  
The black unicorn is impatient.  
The black unicorn was mistaken  
for a shadow  
or symbol  
and taken  
through a cold country  
where mist painted mockeries  
of my fury.  
It is not on her lap where the horn rests  
but deep in her moonpit  
growing.

The black unicorn is restless  
the black unicorn is unrelenting  
the black unicorn is not  
free (Lorde *The Black Unicorn* 3).

To reimagine Black women’s sexuality as both greedy and restless, impatient and unrelenting, and mistaken and free reveals a tension in wanting to be understood on Black women’s terms, after all Black women are the one’s living Black women’s sexuality. Black women’s sexuality, like all women’s sexualities, are never solely their own but defined by those outside of women’s

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categories. The projection upon Black women's sexuality, like Native women's, is stereotypically fraught with problematic ascriptions of hypersexuality, sexual availability, and promiscuity that all align with the settler colonial agenda of *taking*. Instead, Lorde promotes a Black women's sexuality that wants redefinition and has grown impatient from being misunderstood. She wants a Black women's sexuality that is free, like my desire for Native women's sexuality to also be free.

This new way of thinking about women's sexuality allows for other possibilities to exist outside of the current violence many Native women experience in their sexual encounters. The ongoing violence waged against Native girls' and women's bodies results in a dearth of sexual self-expression and awareness. My understanding of the erotic is based on Lorde's approach, given the expansive way she employs mythical poetic expressions as a means of connecting the erotic to sensorial experiences. Re-defining the erotic is useful for decolonizing Native women's sexualities, especially as this topic remains predominantly centered in colonial violence. Indigenous women's re-definition of sexuality should not be informed by white male viewpoints, similar to the way Indigenous feminisms defines itself as not wanting to inherit the objects, positions, or worldviews of white men in dominant society (St. Denis 48). Instead, a rejection of sexual violence, exploitation, and predatory behavior/thoughts is going to encourage differing sexual expressions with the possibility of creative rebirth and sexual significance. Indigenous women have sexual expressions and desires that are their own, rooted in cultural framing. For example, Lorde shares a perspective on ethical lovemaking through being conscious of our erotic feelings and to *share* in the power of each other's feelings, as an antidote to heal the damage previously done to the body through living in a violent society (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 58).

This is a new way of viewing women's sexuality that can be useful to Native women's re-defining of sexuality because it is based in experiences with multiple ways of knowing joy within the erotic that does not prioritize penile-vaginal sex. It is this longing for joy within the erotic that is relevant to an Indigenous decolonial sexuality, as demonstrated in some of the Indigenous erotic

art I analyze in this paper. Indigenous erotic art can represent this heightened sensual awareness and should be shared amongst Indigenous peoples for greater understanding of how sexuality and the erotic is understood.

The ways Native women are interrogating the erotic for themselves and how other women who view their work in the exhibit makes a valuable contribution to an Indigenous decolonial sexuality. One reason for this meaningful contribution of Indigenous erotic art is that it is rare, and representation is crucial to imagining *how* Native women’s sexuality can be expressed. Unsurprisingly, Native women do not portray Native women’s erotic life as damaged, sexually exploitative, shameful, or having inclinations to non-consensually dominant others. I argue that Indigenous erotic art materially supports Indigenous decolonial sexuality as a representation of what is possible. Indigenous erotic art is demonstrated through Lorde’s theory of the erotic as power, leading the artwork itself to represent Indigenous decolonial sexuality.

Many of the women artists I spoke with who contributed to the Indigenous erotic art exhibit were met with concerns about community critique and disapproval of their work due to the sexualized nature of the project. Some of the artists shared concern about the anticipation of criticism, which could have held them back from participating in an exhibit featuring nude Native bodies, yet they bravely contributed. In US society, broadly speaking, women are overtly sexualized, but once women re-define their own sexuality by returning the gaze through their art, they are often met with harsh criticism, shame, and other ways of controlling women’s sexual self-expression. To challenge colonial patriarchal systems, Native women must be encouraged to self-actualize and self-define Indigenous sexuality.

An ultimate form of control over women’s sexuality is expressed in the ways people restrict themselves and each other (Lorde and Rich 730). In short, Native American communities can challenge perceptions of what is considered perverse in dominant society rather than adhering to normative understandings that discussions about sex are to remain silent (Foucault 4).

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Indigenous erotic art has a great potential to open these conversations and make it acceptable to talk about sexuality within Native societies.

I consider the *Native American Body of Art* exhibit a contribution to the erotic as a form of power and analyze the art of three Native American women artists who presented their artwork at this exhibit. It is my intention to show Indigenous erotic art as a valuable contribution to Indigenous decolonial sexualities through the creative force of the art that re-imagines the Native erotic.

### **Native American Body of Art**

As a trained artist, Cheyenne-Arapaho member Brent Learned paints nudes. During a phone call with Learned in 2018, he shared he has seen many nude artworks of people from a variety of races represented in museum artwork, but never nude Native American bodies. Learned opened the exhibit to both men and women artists but prioritized having women be the majority of the contributing artists to this exhibit. Learned wants to challenge some Native Americans who think that any nude artwork is taboo, which he attributes to assimilationist ideals perpetuated through churches and boarding schools (2018). Colonial assimilation erases and replaces ideas, including those about sexual taboos. Key to Indigenous resurgence is uncovering and tracing Indigenous ways of being, given the significant colonial influence upon Indigenous peoples.

As a Native artist, Learned chose to commission an art exhibit in Oklahoma City at A. Art Gallery, now JRB Art at The Elms, with primarily Native artists to control the dialogue from a Native perspective. Learned wants to tear down boundaries and provoke conversation, rather than remain silenced in shame about the human body, specifically the Native body. The exhibit primarily features nude Native women, which is intended to provoke conversations about Native women, abuses against Native women, and overall dehumanization of Native women. The exhibit is meant to feature Native women in realistic and erotic ways as multi-dimensional peoples.

Many of the representations of Native women are inundated with colonial influence and violence, robbing Native women of significant histories that define roles, responsibilities, and imaginative spaces. The absence of these histories makes this work more important in a contemporary and immediate sense as an addition to Indigenous feminisms. Indigenous feminisms make Indigenous women visible in both the material and theoretical spaces, and that is what the exhibit intends to do (Hall 31).

### **Indigenous Mothering in Indigenous Erotic Art: Oneka Jones and MaryBeth Timothy**

Many of the Indigenous artists in the exhibit depict Native women in gender-specific roles, like mothering. These artists were asked to depict nude Native American women's bodies for the exhibit and symbols of traditional mothering are featured as erotic moments, including breastfeeding and bathing children. The erotic power of women as a source of strength and information that is deeply female and spiritual is represented in traditional Indigenous mothering roles. Following Lorde's interpretation of the erotic as deeply feminine experiences with honor and self-respect, once women become aware of this power, they begin to seek life pursuits that are supportive of these beliefs (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 57). This is certainly not merely a sexual erotic power, but a sensual power related to a deep influence within women, including mothers. The women in the paintings could be said to be fully conscious of what they are doing in these moments with their children while evoking an assertion of the literal lifeforce of women.<sup>2</sup> As a use of the erotic, Indigenous mothering has great potential to service Native families, starting with women's acknowledgement of this power.

Within numerous Indigenous histories are examples of how Native women's experiences existed in stark contrast to the stereotypes Native women face today. Traditional Indigenous motherhood is a sacred role that has strategically been under colonial attack (Anderson 83-85). Some of the paintings created for the exhibit depict Native mothers in various expressions of

typical parental activities, including bathing with their children, breast feeding, and pregnancy, which shows one area that Native women are experiencing a sense of power and visibility (see Figures 1 and 2). Oneka Jones and MaryBeth Timothy imagined Native mothering when creating their art for an exhibit about a Native nude woman (2018). The power of the erotic is demonstrated in their artwork through these traditional representations of motherhood, but each painting also supports Lorde's theory that the power of the erotic should not be relegated to the bedroom or sex as an act but in *all* aspects of our existence (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 57).

Indigenous mothering practices relate to the erotic as power by connecting intimate moments in life to a creative, powerful, feminine force that represents life-giving joy (Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 57). These moments include bathing children, breast feeding, and pregnancy, to mention a few examples.



Figure 1. *Motherhood* by Oneka Jones

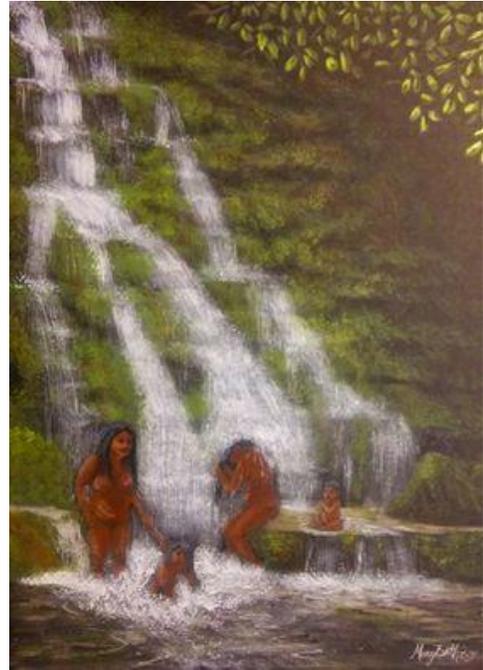


Figure 2. *Bathing at Mingo* by MaryBeth Timothy

In efforts to include expansive interpretations of Native womanhood, traditional Indigenous histories again provides stories of Native women having and representing power. For many Indigenous societies, Native women held these positions of influence prior to colonization, and through acknowledging the use of erotic power in Indigenous erotic art, Native women may find this source again as a spark to continue to shape the efforts of Indigenous feminisms and understand the erotic as significant to daily life.

### **Native Women and Body-Image: MaryBeth Timothy**

Cherokee artist MaryBeth Timothy agreed to participate after confirming with Learned that she would be free to create whatever she wanted. Timothy made a commitment to create historical and empowering pieces along the theme of nude art. Timothy is critical of the pressure women experience to possess certain body types and believes that body shape does not determine how

beautiful women are (2018). This was a significant motivation for her participation in the exhibit. To challenge beauty standards, as they largely relate to body type, is a contribution to Indigenous decolonial sexualities.

As a result, for the *Native American Body of Art* exhibit, Timothy created *Ancient Soul: Shedding Her Skin* (Figure 3). This piece shows a woman baring her insides by pulling apart her skin. Timothy describes the piece as empowering and historical. The Native woman in the painting has a heavier build, a visible C-section scar, and stretch marks. The insides of the woman reveal southeastern tribal symbols, illustrate that women are more than just what the physical body looks like and to make an internal cultural connection. For Timothy, Indigenous peoples carry within them history, family, and stories that “make us who we are, and that’s what makes us beautiful” (2018). Timothy knows that this woman’s body would be considered less-than-perfect due to her heavier build, scar, and stretch marks.

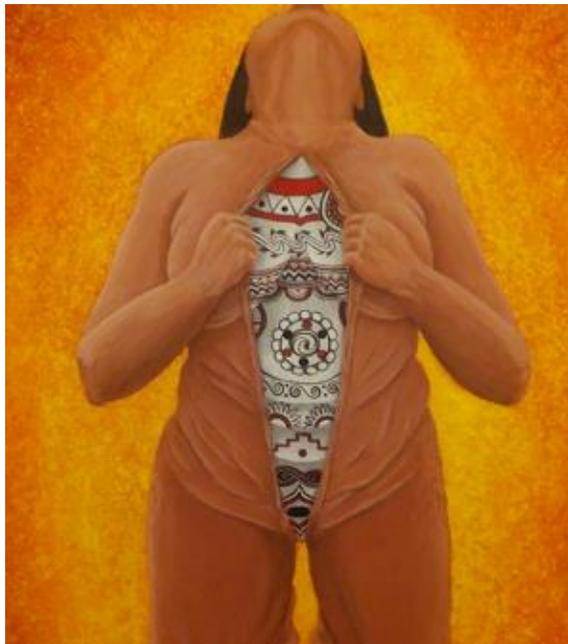


Figure 3. *Ancient Soul: Shedding Her Skin*

For Timothy, depicting this woman as someone with deep connections to tribal histories, and as a representation of the past and present, as well as ties to family, friends, and life experiences is

more important than depicting an ideal body type. Timothy states, “We are made up of so many things. It’s those things and our individual stories that mold us and shape us into the beautiful beings we are. It’s in your spirit, your soul...the mirror cannot reflect that” (2018). To focus more on the cultural and social ties within an individual Native woman’s body rather than imagine an “ideal” body type for women is an empowering choice that challenges colonial constructions of Native women’s bodies and contributes to Indigenous decolonial sexualities.

Indigenous erotic art can encourage a healthy and culturally based body-image for some Native women seeking visibility, reference, and understanding about sexuality. For many women, body-image is a significant factor in sexual function. How one feels about their body is a significant factor in how one relates to their sexuality. While engaging in sexual activity, studies show that if a woman thinks negatively about their appearance, it can lead to a decrease in levels of sexual satisfaction (Pujols. et al. 906). How women conceptualize their physical appearance is important to a healthy sexual life. Moreover, my vision for an Indigenous decolonial sexuality promotes body satisfaction, especially when considering a recent study of urban Native American youth that shows, “approximately one-third of the boys and one-fourth of the girls were satisfied with their bodies” (Rinderknecht and Smith 322). For many, having a healthy sex life will require the decolonization of ideal body image and challenge normative beauty standards to promote self-acceptance of one’s body outside of colonial constructs, a considerable and multi-faceted task.

For many women, healthy and positive body-image remains a lifelong struggle. Timothy reveals that battling these ideas of “ideal” body type have stayed with her since Junior High School. She created *One of These Girls is Not Like the Others* (Figure 4 below) upon remembering what it meant to attend school where the predominant student population was white.

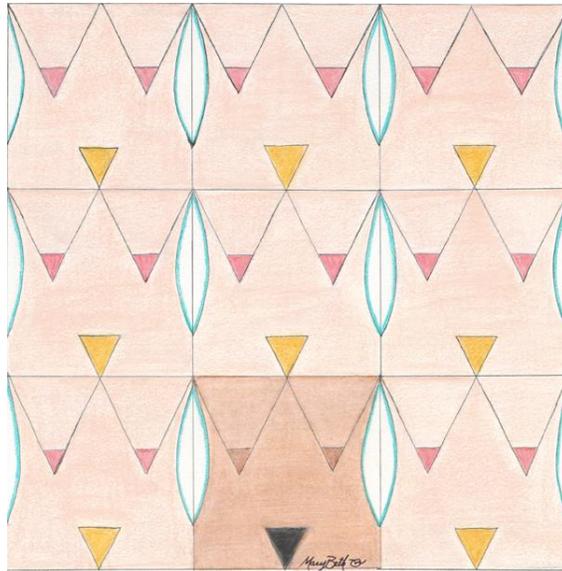


Figure 4. *One of These Girls is Not Like the Others*

As a basketball player, she recalls after the first practice when all the girls went to shower. It was at this moment that Timothy recognized she had the only non-white body in the locker room, causing her to feel embarrassed and different. She ended up waiting for the other girls to finish before taking her shower and felt like she did not fit in for many years after this experience.

Timothy states:

If our society could just realize, body image isn't about what they see on tv, in magazines, on the internet or even in the locker room. It's about loving yourself, inside and out, flaws and all. We should each embrace our uniqueness! Let it empower us! I finally learned, that although we may not always look like those around us, we are all human, we all have flaws, we all have fears. And that is part of what makes us who we are. Love who you are and don't be afraid to be *Not Like the Others* (2018).

Timothy makes an important contribution to Native women's representation by not only noting the differences in bodies but offering the difference as something to be loved and worthy

of representation. Timothy allows her imagination and artwork to generate creative space for a potential reality, not yet experienced by reclaiming the insecurities of her youth in *One of These Girls is Not Like the Others*. Timothy reimagines the art world by creating a Native female nude image who possesses cultural depth and familial ties in *Ancient Soul: Shedding Her Skin*. Both pieces allow for Native women to see parts of themselves within artistic representation. Indigenous artwork that promotes Native women’s visibility, especially in an embodied way with cultural reference, allows for normalization of Native women’s bodies and challenges the primacy of “ideal” body types, which contribute to Indigenous decolonial sexualities. These images may include heavier bodies, C-section scars, and nude brown bodies, which allows many Native women to see themselves and share an understanding of how these differences are strengths and make the familiar publicly visible.

Representation of the Native female nude is an important gesture within the imaginative space of the artworld but can also impact the present-day Native women who find themselves relating to aspects of these images. The images can also evoke conversations between Indigenous women about sexuality, birth, weight, body image, and culture. These conversations promote open discussions about sex, self-perception and experiences that all contribute to Indigenous decolonial sexualities. It is important to note the different ways the artists in the exhibit approach the exhibit, as well as the differing ways women relate to their bodies, the art, and each other. There is not one single way to promote Indigenous decolonial sexualities and the art reflects this.

In conclusion, under US colonialism and white supremacy, Indigenous peoples must re-define sexuality on their own cultural terms and one way of doing this is by creating Indigenous erotic art. A small, yet significant, effort to create Indigenous erotic art exists and with conscious decolonial efforts, can produce the representations of the Indigenous erotic imaginary. The *erotic* acts as a weapon against sexual assault and violence against Indigenous women, while also

promoting key Indigenous feminist ideologies that re-make how Native women are understood in society and how they see themselves.

Despite these challenges, Indigenous communities can resist further sexual violence and colonial control over sexuality by supporting Indigenous and Africana erotic art, as well as see the crucial imaginings of sexual alternatives through poetry and other forms of creative expression. People can support Indigenous erotic art by simply viewing it, making it, and engaging the imaginaries the artists present in a way that considers how the imaginary can become reality. Indigenous erotic art offers a way to redefine sexuality as a political statement that is necessary for community change and understanding Indigenous erotic art as an extension of the erotic as power, which challenges sexual violence.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I use the term “Africana” throughout this article instead of the more colloquial terms Black or African American, given the intellectual history and representation of this term. Africana, as an intellectual concept, allows for people of African descent to draw across nationalities, disciplinary boundaries, and to unite people of continental and diasporan African descent; Reiland Rabaka, *W.E.B. Du Bois and the Problems of the Twenty-First Century: An Essay of Africana Critical Theory* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 6.

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## **“I want to taste your language”: Sovereign Erotics and Language in Indigenous Women’s Poetry on Turtle Island**

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In 2002, Deborah Miranda, quoting Chrystos’ assertion that “Native women’s love poetry and erotics are so invisible, so far back in the closet, that they’re practically in someone else’s apartment,” confirms Chrystos’s words as “the most astute analysis of the situation to date” (146). Two decades after Miranda analyzed the invisibility of Indigenous women’s erotics, this is changing. The American Indian Workshop’s 42<sup>nd</sup> annual conference, “The Sovereign Erotic” (2021), and the present special issue of *Transmotion* clearly celebrate the flourishing and ever-growing presence of Indigenous erotica in arts and academia.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the also growing body of Indigenous erotic literature is produced by Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQIA+ people. As keepers of knowledge and language in their communities (Anderson 71), Indigenous women are “caretakers of this land” (Maracle 42), they embody and promote resurgence (Simpson, *As We Have Always Done* 27-37), and they contribute to “the well-being of the community and the nation as a whole” (Maracle 41). Because of this, Indigenous women have been disproportionately targeted by settler colonialism, which makes their critiques of heteropatriarchy, racism, and settler colonialism as interlocking systems even more telling.<sup>2</sup> As I will demonstrate in this article, Indigenous women’s erotic poetry in Turtle Island affirms their importance in cultural and linguistic continuity and reflects the linguistic variety found in Turtle Island, which includes more than 150 Indigenous languages spoken on these lands as well as colonial languages such as French, Spanish, and English.<sup>3</sup> While some texts are written in one of these colonial languages, others are composed in an Indigenous language (e.g., Inuktitut, Cree,

Innu), and many include several languages. In what is now called Canada, Indigenous writers, scholars, and translators question and confront the colonially-imposed English/French divide to revitalize Indigenous languages and knowledges and to challenge colonial languages and ontologies.<sup>4</sup>

For many authors, artists, and scholars whose work explores questions of sex and gender, sovereignty and sexuality, and decolonization and erotic – including the authors presented here – the erotic is not only sexy but also political since “decolonizing sexuality, and sex positivity and healing more broadly, [are] key to curbing violence in our society in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities” (Tallbear, *Tipi Confessions*). Even more so, for them

to address Indigenous sexuality is to multiply decolonize: the lands overtaken by white settlers; the sexual Puritanism, capitalism, and heteronormativity that necessarily accompanied colonization and that continue as the dominant cultural form in postcolonial societies; and the Indigenous cultural and social histories overwritten by self-serving missionaries and politicians and further obfuscated by well-meaning academics who believed the words of the former. (Mayer 3)

The power of the erotic then lies in dismantling colonial structures and (re)imagining Indigenous present and futures. The importance of language – both the revitalization of Indigenous languages and the reinvention of colonial languages – in Indigenous literatures has also been well documented (e.g., Harjo and Bird; Maria Campbell; David; Bradette). However, to my knowledge, the intersection between the erotic and language in Indigenous women’s erotic poetry has not previously been analyzed and this is what I set out to do here. Both Indigenous languages and sexualities/erotic have been colonized by white settlers. And colonial languages have been wielded to oppress Indigenous erotics: “a Christian language of sexual sin [and] condemnatory language” indeed targeted/targets Indigenous erotic, sex, sexuality, and joy (Mayer 3). It is in

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this context that exploring Indigenous women's erotic poetry as a decolonizing intervention that challenges and transcends linguistic boundaries becomes significant.

Building on an extensive pool of Indigenous women's creative and intellectual expressions, this analysis thus aims to reaffirm Indigenous women's vital role in language preservation and to emphasize the erotic as a communal language that connects individuals, bodies, and communities. In this paper, I analyze selected poems by Melissa Begay (Dine), Tiffany Midge (Hunkpapa Sioux), Chrystos (Menominee), Tenille Campbell (Dene/Métis), January Rogers (Mohawk/Tuscarora), Marie-Andrée Gill (Innu) and Natasha Kanapé Fontaine (Innu) to see how the erotic and language are interrelated. Through this trans-Indigenous (Allen) analysis of Indigenous women's poems, I demonstrate that the erotic contests and transcends the colonial languages and connects to and takes root in Indigenous languages. This paper thus examines the potential of an Indigenous sovereign erotics across languages in Indigenous women's erotica.

Since settler concepts of sexuality have impacted Indigenous peoples and are intrinsically linked to sovereignty and colonialism, "a return to the body" is necessary (Driskill 51). A return to the body is part of what Driskill<sup>5</sup> calls "sovereign erotics" – "an erotic wholeness healed and/or healing from the historical trauma that First Nations people continue to survive, rooted within the histories, traditions, and resistance struggles of our nations" (51). Language, I argue, is an essential part of such histories, traditions, and resistance, especially in the move to revitalize Indigenous languages and in the argument that Indigenous resurgence is rooted in these languages (e.g., Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*). Even more so, the poems show that "erotic wholeness" can be achieved by grounding the erotic in Indigenous languages to affirm community and kinship.

I have come to understand the term "sovereign erotics" through translation. In an earlier stage of working on this project in French, I was propelled to think through translational choices, particularly for "erotics." Erotics can be translated in French as "érotisme," a noun referring to the

erotic character, tendency, or theme of something, or “*érotique*,” an adjective meaning related to physical love, pleasure, and sexual desires distinct from procreation. Occasionally, the adjective “*érotique*” can be used as a noun and should, in that case, be understood as the concept or practice of eroticism. I thus understand “erotics” as an Indigenous concept and practice of the erotic as it seems more aligned with various Indigenous understandings of the sovereign erotic that consider the erotic as a source of power. As Audre Lorde argues, the erotic gives individuals and communities power: “Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning in our lives” (11).

**“in the dark / we become the / entire tribe”: sex, sovereignty, and solidarity**

Mark Rifkin argues that struggles for sovereignty and decolonization also need to be struggles for sovereign erotics; he notes that decolonization based on a sovereign erotic will transform how the relation between sexuality and sovereignty is understood and articulated (174). Instead of seeing (Indigenous) sexuality as a reason to exclude an individual or a nation from sovereignty, as colonial discourse does, a sovereign erotic proposes that reappropriating the body and reclaiming the erotic lead exactly to sovereignty and contribute to the decolonial process (Rifkin 174; Finley 41). As Chris Finley argues, bringing “sexy back” to Indigenous Studies

can imagine more open, sex-positive and queer-friendly discussions of sexuality in both Native communities and Native studies. This not only will benefit Native intellectualism but also will challenge the ways in which Native nationalisms are perceived and constructed by Native peoples, and perhaps non-Native peoples. (32)

The poems read here present such a sovereign erotic as they use the erotic to question and rethink various aspects of sovereignty. For example, Chrystos’s “Song for a Lakota Woman” represents Indigenous people’s bodily sovereignty:

As we came  
 around the curve  
 of a bluff      the lake opened on spread wings  
 of a white egret  
 You turned to me with tiny wildflowers in your hands  
 murmuring softly *Winyan Menominee*  
*Anpetu Kin Lila Wasté*  
 all my feathers shone in your voice  
 Brushing through leaves growing from fiery earth  
 we came to a place where we knew  
 our mouths would meet  
 Hurrying to an anonymous room  
 we showered & plunged into bed  
 Your soft arms shining brown over me turning  
 me wild in your hands  
 a flying lake you drank  
 flowers in your eyes  
 as I shouted too loudly coming  
 open (42, emphasis in original)

The poem presents a contrast between a natural environment (“lake,” “white egret,” “wildflowers”) and a contemporary urban setting, “an anonymous room / [where] we showered and plunged into bed.” The anonymous room paints a picture of a one-night stand and the desire between the two women, thus underscoring their individual sovereignty as they determine

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themselves who has access to their bodies and when. Despite their differences, their respect is mutual: the poem is a song for the Lakota woman, and this woman recognizes the Menominee identity of the other saying in Lakota « *Winyan Menominee / Anpetu Kin Lila Wasté* » (translated in a footnote as « Menominee woman, you are good & beautiful »). Additionally, these words in Lakota emerge, just like their desire, in an otherwise English poem (and collection of poetry). As Chrystos herself pointed out during her keynote address at “The Sovereign Erotic” conference, this poem is the first time that an Indigenous language has been used in an erotic Indigenous poem. The very inclusion of an Indigenous language in erotic Indigenous writing embodies sovereignty since the self-determination of one’s language of expression is vital to sovereignty.

Moreover, the other woman is recognized, significantly, in Lakota, which appears here as an intimate language. If the lovers each speak a different language (Lakota and Menominee), expressing oneself in Lakota presents oneself “with a full knowledge of who [one] is and what [one] is to [their] community” (Brant 45) and as such speaks to the intimacy of that moment. The enjambment after the verse “we came to a place where we knew” highlights the power of “presenting oneself” (Brant) and underscores the lovers’ intimate connection to each other as well as to their communities. As a result, where Indigenous erotic and Indigenous language (Lakota) meet, kinship is embodied. Readers are distanced from that intimate moment and only have access to it through the poem and through the poem’s translation into English, unless they are Lakota readers. The appearance of the English translation in a footnote further underscores the reader’s distance. This displacement decenters the supposed “dominant” language and relegates it to the margins to make space for the erotic affirmation and transformation in Lakota. Lakota as language of intimacy and secrecy thus becomes the “private-in-public” to resist colonial conceptions of Indigenous sexualities and erotic writing. Also, the erotic is located precisely within Lakota, and the two lovers, although from different linguistic backgrounds, speak the common language of the erotic to connect them. This way of “presenting oneself” in Lakota and in the

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Menominee song allows the lovers to transform their world into one of Queer Indigenous love, joy, and sovereignty.

Sioux poet Tiffany Midge also demonstrates the relationship between sovereignty and sexuality in "Sweetheart." In this poem, the erotic is linked to individual and collective sovereignty as it not only allows individual bodies to become a symbiotic couple but also for them to become the whole tribe:

when we make love

press brown skins

& lovely bones

together

& are 2 half-

breed hearts

grooving

to the same fullblood

dance

we create not only

a whole indian song

(your chippewa chants

to my lakota tune)

but sweetheart

in the dark  
we become the  
entire tribe (WR 54)<sup>6</sup>

While the lexical field of division (“half,” “2”) and the ampersands underline that this poem is about two individuals, the recurring plural first-person pronoun “we” and the lexical field of wholeness (“together,” “same,” “whole,” “entire”) underscore the union between the two bodies/people/lovers. The intermingling of division and union reinforces the relationality between the individuals as well as between their different communities and cultures while considering their differences altogether. In this respect, the poem’s and the lovers’ inscription in traditions – dance, music, and language (Chippewa and Lakota) – is all the more significant. The sexual relationship is a dance through which the two characters create a “whole indian song.” Strikingly, the verse “(your chippewa chants / to my lakota tune)” has been placed between brackets, suggesting these differences are a side thought all the while acknowledging these differences between the two characters and communities during their sexual interaction. Different tribal ties do not restrict their sexual relationship; rather, they appear as the very source of desire, and they enhance their relationality.

The erotic connects two bodies, two individuals from different tribes beyond their communities and cultures to “become the entire tribe.” Given the historical relations between the Lakota and Chippewa – who were enemy tribes in the mid-1600s (Risch 23; Bray 8) – the union of the characters is even more telling; in this way, the poem showcases both individual and collective sovereignty. Individual sovereignty appears in the individuals’ self-determination of and responsibility for their body and erotic encounter, similarly to Chrystos’ poem. Collective sovereignty – which designates self-determination with respect to the organization and government of territories, the preservation and revitalization of language(s), and the continuation

of ceremonies and governance in order to ensure a nation or community can function autonomously – occurs in the characters’ respect for each others’ community ties. It materializes when these two individuals – one Chippewa, the other Lakota – build their own tribe “in the dark” through their sexual encounter despite the historical differences and relationships between the two tribes.

While “in the dark” might simply refer to it being night in the poem, it also could suggest that the relationship is private and/or hidden. In that sense, the verse refers to Indigenous sexualities being pushed into the dark corners of the closet, to build on Miranda’s metaphor cited earlier, since colonization forced Indigenous people into silence around sexuality as a way to survive (Finley 32). At the same time, in that private/ hiding place the differences between the two bodies become invisible which contributes to creating mutual recognition. The lack of capitalization in the terms “indian,” “lakota,” and “chippewa” support this recognition by placing the tribes on equal footing with each other – showing simultaneously that historical tensions between tribes can be overcome. In this way, Midge transforms the dark, colonial space of hidden sexualities into an erotic space of individual and collective sovereignty and community-building through the lovers’ sexual encounter.

In a different but related way, January Rogers challenges the sovereignty of Canada as a nation-state in the poem “Confederation 150.” From the first verse, “Ah Canada,” Rogers calls Canada’s national anthem into mind. Later, she writes: “there is no home if there is no native land,” which is a criticism of the anthem’s line “our home on native land,” which continues to erase Indigenous peoples as original inhabitants of these lands. Amidst the numerous other criticisms of the anthem, confederation, and celebrations of “Canada’s 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary,” Rogers also critiques the country’s official bilingualism:

did you remember

to ask permissions

or make paper consultations

using the queen’s english

ah Canada

do not slip me the tongue

and call it a french kiss

how do two languages survive 65 or more? (30)

Addressing the state (“you”), Rogers critiques the consultations and treaties that were carried out and written in English without regard for Indigenous languages, knowledges, and treaty-making practices. In fact, at the time of numbered treaty signings, many Indigenous signatories did not speak or read English. And, even more importantly, Indigenous treaty-making practices, which are relational, have been ignored by settlers – the British in particular (Vowel 248).<sup>7</sup> Referring to English as the “queen’s english,” Rogers underscores the colonial nature of the language and of said documents and consultations. However, the lack of capitalization of ‘english’ challenges its power and supposed superiority. Capitalization of words is indeed closely related to recognition of identity and power: capitalization of Indigenous terms recognizes Indigenous peoples’ identities, institutions, and collective rights and “redress[es] mainstream society’s history of regarding Indigenous Peoples as having no legitimate national identities; governmental, social, spiritual, or religious institutions; or collective rights” (Younging 77). While Rogers capitalizes most terms related to Indigenous identity and rights to acknowledge them, she refuses to capitalize ‘english’ and ‘french’ in this poem, thus displacing them as institutional and rightful languages.

Rogers’ critique of French that follows is embodied and connected to the erotic through the slang/colloquial expression “slip someone the tongue,” meaning French kissing. The negative imperative (“do not”) is used here not only to stop the other from kissing the poem’s speaker but also to prevent them from “slipping her the language,” so to speak, thus establishing sovereignty by setting physical boundaries and determining which language one speaks. The poem’s speaker

does not want to be forced to speak French – or English as affirmed in the previous verses. Moreover, the verse “and *call* it a french kiss” (emphasis added) alludes to the state’s tendency to wrap truths in distracting words to cover up their real meaning and avoid making significant changes, especially regarding reconciliation.<sup>8</sup> Whereas a French kiss is often regarded as erotic, here it disguises the ugly truth of colonial languages still being forced upon Indigenous peoples, as confirmed in the last verse of the poem, “how do two languages survive 65 or more?” These verses show that the speaker’s being slipped the tongue, in both senses of the word (kiss and language), is non-consensual: this links colonial sexual violence toward Indigenous women to the attempted erasure of Indigenous languages and imposition of colonial languages. Hinting to the erotic, Rogers thus criticizes and challenges the state’s sovereignty by including various critiques such as that of Canada’s supposed bilingualism.

In her poem “La Cueillette” (the gathering or harvest in English), Innu poet, artist, and activist Natasha Kanapé Fontaine also mobilizes the erotic to create lines of solidarity across peoples. While Midge portrayed community building between two Indigenous individuals from different tribes, Kanapé Fontaine displays relationality between Indigenous peoples and BIPOC elsewhere, specifically Haitians. In the poem, the *bleuets*, blueberries, represent Indigenous people in Canada, and the *abricots*, apricots, represent (Creole) Haitians. Although I have analyzed this metaphor in detail in previous work (see Brouwer 2017), I want to emphasize here how solidarity and community between Indigenous peoples in Canada and Haitians is expressed partly through the erotic. This solidarity is underlined by the poetry collection’s title, *Bleuets et abricots* (*Blueberries and Apricots* in English translation). This metaphor is intertwined with an erotic image of these two fruits entering the speaker’s body, amounting to the union of the speaker and a male lover:

mes artères draineront mon sang

monte la fièvre

gonflent mes seins  
 gonfle ma vulve  
 exalte le fruit du désir  
 rien que pour poindre le jour  
 avec la sensation d'être pleine  
 il viendra  
 à moi  
 bien-aimé  
 gonfler mes songes (43)<sup>9</sup>

It is through this sexual encounter that the speaker finally feels full or complete. The erotic character of the poem is strengthened by the enumeration that follows later on:

femme indigène  
 femme front  
 femme territoire  
 femme terre noire  
 femme plaisir (43)<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, accumulating various recognitions of women across boundaries, “Indigenous woman, territory woman, black earth woman,” the stanza ends – or climaxes, if you will – in “pleasure woman.”

The reference to Haitians, especially in relation to sexual pleasure, is also strengthened by Kanapé Fontaine’s intertextual references to one of the key texts of Négritude, namely Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*. In another poem, for example, Kanapé Fontaine writes, “*aho pour la joie / aho pour l’amour*” (58 and 60, emphasis in original), referring to Césaire’s words “*Eia pour la joie / Eia pour l’amour*” (121). Négritude was developed by francophone intellectuals, writers, and politicians from the African diaspora in the 1930s and recognizes a

Black African culture – including economic, political, intellectual, moral, artistic, and social values – among the people of Africa and its diaspora across continents.<sup>11</sup> According to philosophers of Négritude, it is crucial to connect with Black roots. So, through these references to the *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, as well as the symbolism of the apricots representing Haitian Creole people, Kanapé Fontaine's poem (and her collection of poetry) brings together Africans, Haitians, and Indigenous peoples to show that origins play an essential role in identity as well as to demonstrate that differences can be surmounted. And, significantly, the erotic plays an important part in that return to and reconsideration of origins, as “femme plaisir” and “*aho pour la joie / aho pour l'amour*” demonstrate.

Strikingly, “La cueillette” contains verses both in Haitian Creole and Innu:

Une douce langue dira à toutes les oreilles

*Mwen fou pou li*

*Tshetshue nitshishkueikun, tshetshue nishatshiau* (42, emphasis in original)<sup>12</sup>

In the English translation in *Asymptote*, Howard Scott translates these verses in a footnote: “I am crazy about him / it is true he makes me dizzy, it is true I love him” (Kanapé Fontaine, “Gathering”). Interestingly, Fontaine uses two languages to express love, while the first verse suggests there is only one language. Similar to Rogers' play on the expression slipping someone the tongue, Kanapé Fontaine uses the ambiguous meaning of ‘langue’ for “une douce langue” to mean both a soft/sweet tongue and a soft/sweet language. As both language and body part, this one ‘langue’ positions love and the erotic as a universal language, which is underscored too by the metonymy « à toutes les oreilles » referring to all humanity. In addition, the double meaning of “douce” as soft and sweet is not only appropriate in a poem about fruit, but also positions the language as something that can be tasted and is embodied. The collection of poetry in French does not provide any translations of the verses in Innu and Haitian Creole, which could create a sentiment of distance or exclusion in the non-Innu or Haitian Creole-speaking reader and

a sense of inclusion among those who do speak (one of) those languages.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the absence of translation refutes the supposed domination of the colonial language, even more so since this affirmation of the erotic and love is done in two « minority » languages. However, the idea of the erotic as a universal language suggests that a literal understanding is not needed to comprehend the language of the body, the erotic, and love. In this way, the colonial language becomes superfluous. Situating the erotic in two Indigenous languages, Kanapé Fontaine thus positions the erotic as a universal language to demonstrate the relationality and solidarity between peoples, in particular Haitians and Innu.

**“lécher la surface de l'eau avec la langue que je / ne parle pas”: the erotic as a universal language and embodied language learning**

The erotic as (universal) language and means of communication is explored by other authors as well to demonstrate how the erotic brings people and communities closer together. The body speaks, and bodies connecting speak. Dine poet Melissa N. Begay, for example, writes in her poem ‘Clips from a desert in Arizona’:

what has become my unfinished dialogue  
 emerges in the strength of your kiss  
 speak with the rapid movement of your quiet hands  
 the tongue is a metaphor of love and evolution  
 (...)  
 the scorching sun blinds my view of you  
 complete and unbroken  
 pieces of wet dirt fill my spaces where you will  
 return later and cleanse my wounds (WR 99)

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Intimacy and the erotic are portrayed as a language, as is underscored by the lexical field of communication (“dialogue,” “speak,” “tongue”). Begay positions the body as a means of communication through expressions like “speak with the rapid movement of your hands” and “speak through gestures.” Additionally, the ambiguous meaning, again, of “the tongue” connects communication and the body into one. If the tongue, in both meanings, “is a metaphor of love and evolution,” the erotic becomes a universal language.

Erotica and the language of the body have long been silenced by colonialism and the fear that came with it, as Midge alludes to in “The Night Horse”:

(Remember) those nights waiting  
for the dark flash of motion  
to repeat our names  
in a language we feared to speak? (WR 69)

In the same poem, however, Midge suggests that love and eroticism can liberate Indigenous people from this (colonial) fear:

We say the night  
is the only sense  
there is  
because only in the darkness  
can we begin to see.  
And so we say  
love is a delivery  
from something called fear (that  
terror like entering  
the throats of wounded animals).  
(...)

Night and day  
 darkness and light  
 exchange elegant gestures  
 like dreams captured in a net  
 of frozen stars.  
 And we say  
 only in the dark  
 can we begin to see. (69)

The repetition of “only” positions eroticism as the sole means to connect to someone and to understand the world. The recurrence of the verb “say,” in turn, indicates that the erotic as language has an essential role in that. Moreover, the enjambments in “night and day / darkness and light / exchange elegant gestures” put the onus on the communication that exists between two opposite but complementary elements, while the ambiguous meaning of “darkness” in these lines referring to it being night, to dark times, as well as to the “private-in-public” (similar to “in the dark” cited earlier) strengthens the importance of the common language of the body that liberates Indigenous erotica. Here too, eroticism is a form of communication and connection between human beings; one that, even in the dark and amidst fear, allows us to see hope and love. As Audre Lorde writes,

The sharing of joy whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessons the threat of their difference. (Lorde 10)

As we have seen so far, several authors play with the double meaning of tongue, thus inscribing language in the body and the erotic: Rogers uses the double imagery of “slipping the tongue” to denounce sexual violence against Indigenous women and the imposition of colonial languages on Indigenous peoples; Kanapé Fontaine and Begay use their word play on ‘langue’ and ‘tongue’ to

position the erotic as a universal language. Two other authors, Marie-Andrée Gill and Tenille Campbell, use its double meaning to explore language learning as an embodied process.

In *Framer*, Gill writes: “lécher la surface de l’eau avec la langue que je / ne parle pas” (24). The enjambment in the first verse evokes at first glance that “la langue” is simply the speaker’s mouth’s tongue that licks the water’s surface. However, the second verse, “ne parle pas,” grammatically connects to “langue” and translates to “the language that I don’t speak.” Gill thus creates an image of an unspoken language licking the water’s surface. This can be read as a testimony to language loss and revitalization among many Indigenous peoples: the poem’s speaker does not really speak her language, Innu, which enables her to access the knowledge only on the surface. Several Indigenous writers assert that understanding traditional knowledge comes from speaking (and learning) one’s ancestral language(s). Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, for example, argues that Indigenous resurgence is deeply rooted in Nishnaabewomin, and possibilities for decolonization are embedded within the language itself (*Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back* 49-64). In that sense, these verses point to the limitations one might experience from not speaking the language and being able to access only the surface of what there is to know. At the same time, however, the connection from the language to the land – or the water in this case – is not to be underestimated. In her famous “Land Speaking,” Jeanette Armstrong asserts that Indigenous languages are born and learned from the land:

As I understand it from my Okanagan ancestors, language was given to us by the land we live within. (...) I have heard elders explain that the language changed as we moved and spread over the land through time. My own father told me that it was the land that changed the language because there is special knowledge in each different place. All my elders say that it is the land that holds all knowledge of life and death and is a constant teacher. It is said in Okanagan that the land constantly speaks. It is constantly communicating. Not to learn its language is to die. We survived and thrived by listening intently to its teachings – to its

language – and then inventing human words to retell its stories to our succeeding generations. It is the land that speaks N’silxchn through the generations of ancestors to us. It is N’silxchn, the old land/mother spirit of the Okanagan people, which surrounds me in its primal wordless state. (146)

If language can be learned from the land, the speaker in Gill’s poem might just learn a piece of her language each time she licks the water’s surface. In that sense, the tongue is both the tool used to learn and that which is learned. Language, body, and land thus become closely intertwined as embodied language learning.

In *Good Medicine*, Tenille Campbell connects language and the erotic to demonstrate how language is learned during and through erotic encounters, thus positioning language learning as an embodied experience as well:

I want to taste your language  
 as you whisper it into my mouth  
 let my tongue lick and suck  
 your vowels and consonants (20)

Language learning is here a physical, embodied experience. This is underscored by the sensory verb “to taste” and by the lexical field of the mouth (“mouth,” “tongue”). The mouth gives a double image: on the one hand, language is spoken through the mouth by the movement of lips and tongue; on the other hand, language is here an erotic experience. In the verse “as you whisper it into my mouth,” the verb “whisper” paints an intimate image. Usually, language is whispered into someone’s ear, so it is easier to hear and so that the information conveyed stays intimate and confidential. However, in Campbell’s poem, it is not the ear that receives the language but the mouth, again highlighting the physicality and erotic aspects of language learning. In that sense, language learning happens through feeding of each other and appears as a form of nourishment. The next verse confirms this as the speaker’s tongue “lick[s] and suck[s]

[their] vowels and consonants,” thus connecting language and the body again through sensory, sensual, and sexual experience. Indeed, the senses play an important role in these verses: taste (“taste”, “mouth,” “tongue,” “lick and suck”), hear (“whisper”), and touch (“lick and suck”) are essential parts of the sensory, erotic, and embodied way of language learning.

**“make me / speak pleasure / once again”: language, erotic, and tradition**

By challenging sovereignty and linguistic power imbalances and situating the erotic as universal language and embodied language learning, the poems discussed here assist in a (partial) return to Indigenous languages and cultures. Even more so, the sovereign erotic traced across languages in these poems constitutes a resurgence and a continuance of the complex dynamics and traditions of gender and sexuality among Indigenous peoples that have often been hidden and targeted by colonial discourses and cultures. In that sense, the erotic enables access to ancient languages, traditions, and knowledges. In *#IndianLovePoems*, Tenille Campbell writes:

broken Cree words  
whisper down my body  
between my legs  
into my universe  
where you tell me stories  
with tongue and lips  
and I take  
tradition into me  
until I burst

I feel invincible  
almighty and woman

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with legs splayed

letting him see

what pleasure looks like

without shame

this is what my ancestors

must have felt like

come to me again

my gifted Cree man

taste your language

on my skin

in my pleasure

make me moan

in those forgotten

syllables

make me

speak pleasure

once again (42)

Language is indeed a physical experience. The verses "broken Cree words / whisper down my body" and "taste your language on my skin" show that language is felt on the body. The first stanza positions the erotic as tradition: storytelling is not only a physical act, being spoken "with tongue and lips," but also an erotic one. If "tak[ing] tradition into me" symbolizes the act of sexual penetration and "until I burst" the female climax, Indigenous erotica is celebrated as a continuing

tradition – as Chris Finley notes, in Indigenous communities “sex is always there” and “sexy never left” (42). Campbell indeed portrays this continuance as she writes, “this is what my ancestors / must have felt like,” thus inscribing the erotic (back) into generations of Indigenous peoples and making the body a translator of the past into the present and future. Similar to Roger’s poem, Campbell links the attempted erasure of Indigenous languages to the colonization of Indigenous (women’s) bodies. The verses “broken Cree words” and “in those forgotten / syllables” refer to the loss of Indigenous languages, while the fact that these “forgotten syllables” are “moaned” suggests that the erotic had been suppressed as well. The last stanza of the poem portrays the erotic as a language: “make me / speak pleasure / once again.” The adverbial phrase “once again” underlines the renewal of the erotic language. Although the poem deals with language loss and colonized Indigenous bodies, it focuses on the continuance of languages and the erotic as a tradition that is accessed through the interconnection between them (and their bodies).

In another poem, Campbell develops this idea of erotic tradition by including several Dene words and verses to express eroticism and intimacy:

I want to kiss  
 dënësuliné  
 back into your skin  
 lips to your shoulder  
 nails tracing kinship  
 down your back  
 down to your feet  
 where you are grounded in us

I want to give you ceremony  
 under gentle moons and watchful stars

I want you to moan nezų  
 taste the language on your tongue  
 as you enter me  
 I want my ehaskëth  
 to be your first taste  
 of our oldest medicine

lie in my bed  
 under thick mink blankets  
 arms curled around you  
 tracing features  
 them dene naghé from black lake  
 cheekbones from fond du lac  
 those lips from la loche  
 helch'ul from patuanak  
 don't you know you are one of us  
 neᓃá nohonᓃë nechá  
 come back to us  
 sehel hıgqı (*Good Medicine* 90-91)

Tradition made physical and erotic can be read throughout the poem through the themes of kinship, ceremony, and medicine. Kinship is first made physical in the verses "nails tracing kinship / down your back / down to your feet." Later, it is expressed through the physical traits from other Indigenous communities/nations: "them dene naghé from black lake / cheekbones from fond du lac / those lips from la loche / helch'ul from patuanak." Once again, cultural difference becomes

the very source of sexual desire as the poem's speaker seeks Indigenous people from various Indigenous communities. Similar to Midge's poem, Campbell uses the erotic to surmount differences between lovers from different communities. Despite their differences, these individual bodies become part of collective bodies as is affirmed in the verse "don't you know you are one of us." This kinship building is further expressed through ceremony and medicine.

In this poem, erotic encounter is ceremony. The repetition and parallelism of "I want" in the second stanza indeed build up to the ultimate ceremony: "I want you to moan nezų / taste the language on your tongue / as you enter me." And as this ceremony takes place "under gentle moons and watchful stars," it is witnessed by the whole universe. In that sense, the lovers affirm their place in the universe through their sexual encounter. These verses connect back to the previous poem in which the speaker took "tradition into [her] / until [she] burst[s]." The third repetition of "I want" introduces, literally, the climax to this stanza and to this ceremony: "I want my ehaskĕth / to be your first taste / of our oldest medicine." According to the glossary provided in *Good Medicine*, "ehaskĕth" is Dene for orgasm. Thus, Campbell portrays orgasm as ceremony and even more so as Indigenous peoples' "oldest medicine," good medicine. The use of Dene throughout the poem (notably "nezų" meaning "good" and "ehaskĕth" orgasm) reflects the desire to kiss the Dene language back into the body as the first verses of the poem announce: "I want to kiss / dĕnĕsulĭnĕ / back into your skin." "Dĕnĕsulĭnĕ" can refer not only to the Dene language, which confirms here the intrinsic connection between the language and the erotic, but also to the Dene people, which then suggests that eroticism connects Indigenous people to their languages, communities, ancestors, and future generations. This connection to other Indigenous people through the erotic is also confirmed in the last stanza that recognizes people from other nations and communities through their physical traits. Moreover, the last verses contain a call to the lover to "come back to us," their people, since "neᵗá nohonıᵗĕ nechá," "because of you our story is big."

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The erotic, rooted in Indigenous languages, is a way back/to community. The intersection between the erotic and language here thus amounts to kinship building across differences, spaces, and generations.

### **“I want to taste your language”: Conclusion**

These poems reveal a deep relationship between erotics and Indigenous languages; as Tenille Campbell writes, “when we fuck (...) ancient languages are understood” (*Good Medicine* 83). These poets employ Indigenous languages to convey the erotic and thereby challenge colonial languages and discourse, while the erotic as a language overcomes linguistic boundaries between various languages/individuals/bodies. The erotic as a universal language connects the Indigenous speakers and characters in the poems to the land, their ancestral languages, their communities, other Indigenous communities, and other BIPOC communities. That is, the erotic, as it appears in these poems, creates lines of solidarity across languages. A sovereign erotic across languages thus lays bare how state sovereignty is challenged (Rogers) and Indigenous sovereignty achieved (Chrystos; Midge); how community and solidarity are built among Indigenous peoples (Chrystos; Midge; Campbell) and between Indigenous peoples and BIPOC elsewhere (Kanapé Fontaine); and how the erotic becomes a language for connection (Chrystos; Kanapé Fontaine; Begay) and embodied language learning (Gill; Campbell). In this respect, the cross-lingual sovereign erotic in Indigenous women’s poetry is anti- as well as decolonial and firmly places itself within Indigenous languages, cultures, traditions, land, and knowledges. After all, Indigenous sovereign erotics is sexy and political: Indigenous presence and continuance, sovereignty, language learning, connection and solidarity and pleasure are, to borrow from Campbell, “why we [Indigenous people] erotica Indigenous” (83).

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm's ground-breaking anthology *Without Reservation: Indigenous Erotica* appeared in 2003, only a year after Miranda's observation. Single-authored books of Indigenous erotics have been published by writers such as Tenille Campbell, Chrystos, Arielle Twist, and Virginia Pésémapéo Bordeleau (author of the first erotic novel written in French by an Indigenous woman). Artistic expressions comprise the exhibition 'Native American Body of Art' (2017) by Brent Learned and the "sexy performance laboratory" *Tipi Confessions* produced by Kim TallBear, Tracy Bear, and Kirsten Lindquist. In academia, key work in Indigenous erotics and sexuality comes from Mark Rifkin, Deborah Miranda, Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, Daniel Heath Justice, Chris Finley, and Lisa Tatonetti, among others.

<sup>2</sup> Joanne Barker, Alison Hargreaves, Dian Million, and Grace Ouellette, among others, have demonstrated the uneven impacts of the Indian Act's regulations on Indigenous women and children. Rita Dhamoon, in turn, analyzes how settler colonialism, racism, sexism, heteropatriarchy, and classism intersect in the matrix of domination. In addition to Indigenous women, 2SLGBTQIA+ Indigenous people have also been disproportionately affected by settler colonialism. Two-spirit and queer bodies were/are seen as an extreme threat to settler society and colonization, resulting in a repeated attacks on their bodies, beings, and knowledges (Simpson; Belcourt). For more information on queer Indigenous resistance, see, for example, the work in *Queer Indigenous Studies*. And see *In Good Relation*, edited by Sarah Nickel and Amanda Fehr, for an exploration of the interconnections between Indigenous feminist theories and Indigenous queer studies.

<sup>3</sup> Turtle Island is used by some Indigenous peoples to refer to the continent of North America. As this paper focuses on language and particularly the use of Indigenous languages in Indigenous women's poetry across Turtle Island, my referring to the continent as Turtle Island rather than North America mirrors the poems to challenge settler colonial geographies and ontologies. While I only mention French, Spanish, and English as colonial languages present in Turtle Island (since these seem to be the major ones), I recognize that other colonial languages (e.g., Dutch, Portuguese, German) are also spoken here and that they have impacted Indigenous peoples. This article is influenced by my position as a settler scholar fluent in three colonial languages – Dutch, French, and English.

<sup>4</sup> Around the challenging of the English/French divide and the importance of Indigenous languages in Indigenous literatures, see for example Bradette; Brouwer, "Comparative Indigenous Literature" and "Indigenous Literatures at the Crossroads of Languages."

<sup>5</sup> In October 2023, the Tribal Alliance Against Frauds issued a report stating that Qwo-Li Driskill does not have Cherokee, Lenape (Delaware) and Osage ancestry (as Driskill had claimed) which is supported by genealogical documents and "letters from all the nations they falsely claim ancestry from, who all clearly state that neither they nor their ancestors are citizens of their nations" (Tribal Alliance Against Frauds). Much of their academic work is based on their "experience" as a two-spirit Cherokee person putting into question the validity of these works. I, nevertheless, engage the notion of the sovereign erotic, proposed by Driskill in their 2004 essay "Stolen from Our Bodies," and its basic definition by Driskill here since this theory of the erotic has been used in similar and expanded ways by other queer Indigenous writers including Chrystos, Deborah Miranda, and many of the poets in this article. Additionally, *Sovereign Erotics*, co-edited by Driskill, Justice, Miranda and Tatonetti, includes essays by many respected Indigenous scholars, so the term "sovereign erotics" itself is recognized and used in the academic community. Although I briefly mention the introduction of the "sovereign erotic" by Driskill here, the article centers other (poetic) interpretations of the sovereign erotic.

<sup>6</sup> The poems by Tiffany Midge and Melissa N. Begay referenced in this article have been cited from Kateri Akiwenzie Damm’s anthology *Without Reservation*. I will cite these poems with the abbreviation WR followed by the page number.

<sup>7</sup> See Chelsea Vowel’s *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis, & Inuit Issues in Canada* (notably chapters 27 and 28) for an overview of treaty-making and the different kinds of treaties (e.g., friendship, numbered, and modern treaties). Vowel points out that the renewal of treaty relationships is a core aspect of treaty-making.

<sup>8</sup> There have been several critiques of Canada’s reconciliation discourse which, as some argue, sounds promising but has not produced (enough) significant change. Rachel Flowers, for example, is critical of the pressure to forgive placed on Indigenous peoples in the context of reconciliation. She proposes a refusal to forgive as a powerful form of resistance to “this old relationship in new clothes” that is steeped in a politics of recognition (42). A politics of recognition ultimately upholds settler superiority and power (Coulthard). David Garneau, in turn, argues that the use of the word reconciliation provides a false understanding of our past and “constricts our collective sense of the future” (30). Instead, he proposes to think of Indigenous-settler relations in terms of conciliation, an ongoing process, and a continuous relationship.

<sup>9</sup> “my arteries will drain my blood / fever rising / my breasts swell / my vulva swells / excites the fruit the desire / just to see the break of day / with the feeling of being full / he’ll come / to me / the beloved / to swell my dreams” (Kanapé Fontaine, *Blueberries and Apricots* 24-25).

<sup>10</sup> “indigenous woman / cheeky woman / territory woman / black earth woman / pleasure woman” (Kanapé Fontaine, *Blueberries and Apricots* 25).

<sup>11</sup> In addition to Aimé Césaire, other writers and philosophers of *Négritude* include Léopold Sédar Senghor and Leon Damas. The three are often considered the “fathers” of the movement. More recently, the work of sisters Paulette and Jeanne Nardal has been recognized as also having played a vital role in laying the theoretical foundations of *Négritude*.

<sup>12</sup> “A sweet tongue will say to all ears / Mwen fou pou li / Tshetshue nitshishkueikun, tshetshue nishatshiau (Kanapé Fontaine, *Blueberries and Apricots* 24)

<sup>13</sup> I have analyzed the translation and non-translation of Innu in Natasha Kanapé Fontaine’s poetry in more detail elsewhere. See Brouwer 2021.

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## Alternative Indigenous Narratives and Gender Constructions in Sydney Freeland's *Drunktown's Finest* (2014)

GEORGES DE MEDTS

In this article, I will examine how alternative narratives of gender and sexuality update and diversify the catalog of images of Indigenous people through the 2014 drama *Drunktown's Finest*.<sup>1</sup> Written and directed by the Navajo filmmaker Sydney Freeland, this film questions the possibility to assume a Two-Spirit identity on and off the reservation.<sup>2</sup>

Sydney Freeland's film reminds the audience of the deep respect that has characterized traditional tribal relationships with Two-Spirit people for a long time, conveyed through the story of Felixia, a transgender woman. Living with her traditional grandparents, a medicine man and his wife, she is completely accepted by them because the concept of third and fourth genders is part of the Navajo/Diné culture, whereas the younger generation does not seem so tolerant. This dynamic allows Freeland to participate in a larger fight against homophobia that replicates the dominant cultural norm and penetrates Indigenous communities. Ultimately, Felixia learns from her grandfather about Navajo *nádleeh* and finds her inner balance<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, in this artwork, the enactment of what Qwo-Li Driskill calls "sovereign erotic"<sup>4</sup> becomes a trope for Indigenous survivance.

### Bringing more diversity on screen

Conceived as a visual counter narrative to the derogatory nickname "Drunk Town, USA," given to director's hometown, Gallup, New Mexico, in an episode of the ABC TV show *20/20*, *Drunktown's Finest* follows three young Navajos living in the fictional reservation-adjacent town of Dry Lake and its environs.

One of them is Nizhoni, an eighteen-year-old woman adopted by a White family who engages as a volunteer in the reservation in the secret hope to find clues about her biological parents. Another one is Luther "Sick Boy," an expectant father who considers joining the army to support his family. And there is also Felixia who lives on the reservation with her grandparents, while nursing the dream of being featured in the newly announced Women of the Navajo Calendar.

As a result, by including transgender issues in the narrative, Sydney Freeland's film brings more diversity in the representation of Native Americans on screen. As the issues of gender and sexuality become central to the Indigenous struggle for sovereignty and decolonization, recognizing diversity becomes crucial to our efforts to understand Indigenous cultures and policy.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, Sydney Freeland participates in the process of "indigenization" of mass media, especially by focusing on and diversifying the representation of indigenous women. Centering the narrative of a transgender woman allows Freeland to challenge the stereotyped image of Native American, and at the same time to change the paradigm of transgender imagery by "indianing" it. As a Native American filmmaker, in *Drunktown's Finest* Sydney Freeland offers a distinctively indigenous point of view and takes control over dominant narratives and imagery by "indigenizing" them, to borrow Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's term.<sup>6</sup> Freeland's inclusive approach allows the director to discuss gender issues by connecting the audience to the plight of a Navajo nádleeh person. Awarded in many festivals, *Drunktown's Finest* is acclaimed by its audience for the "authenticity" of its characters.<sup>7</sup> In her 2014 interview with Sydney Freeland for *Filmmaker Magazine* at the Sundance Film Festival, critic Lauren Wissot praises the film's "novel characters I actually haven't seen on the big screen before" (Wissot 2014).

*Drunktown's Finest* follows its characters over the course of one weekend as they pursue their objectives, "just doing what they can to get by" as Lauren Wissot puts it, and not without some trouble, (Wissot 2014). This includes Felixia leaving the house secretly at night to run her

successful sex work business that she manages through her Facebook page. In the reservation-adjacent city, Felixia crosses paths with various people. One of them is her gay friend Eugene, who provides her a false driver's license in Felixia's woman's name that will enable her to audition for the *Women of the Navajo* calendar. Through the film narrative, we understand that Felixia has adopted the modern way of life, while remaining connected to her land and origins. Freeland's film reflects Indigenous' complexities by situating Native's stories in a multivalent context and provides new images of Native Americans dealing with a multicultural world. Through self-representation on screen, the Navajo filmmaker participates in a struggle to reestablish Indigenous agency and authority, achieving what Michelle Raheja calls "visual sovereignty" in cinema.<sup>8</sup> As part of what Robert Warrior calls "intellectual sovereignty,"<sup>9</sup> it is a process through which artists assert their power to make decisions that affect their lives.

In his 2010 book *When Did Indians Become Straight?: Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty*, Mark Rifkin argues that the US government's project to civilize Native peoples "can be understood as an effort to make them 'straight'" (8). This assertion allows us to understand what is at stake in the choice made by Freeland to present Two-Spirit and queer characters on screen. These alternative representations of gender and sexual non-conformities counteract their erasure from colonial narratives and illustrates Native resistance and survival.

The characters of *Drunktown's Finest* have adapted to changing historical circumstances and situations and have taken control over their destinies. Ultimately, Nizhoni will discover her ancestry and find out that she is Felixia's cousin as they have the same grandparents. Luther "Sick Boy" will overcome his temptation for drugs, alcohol and gang-related crime, to instead support his wife and his sister, who is preparing for the puberty ceremony under the guidance of Felixia's grandfather, the medicine man. And Felixia will receive a plane ticket for New York City from a Facebook client, who wants to help her financially, so she can get surgery. Freeland's characters attest Indigenous survival, perseverance and ongoing presence and their stories are what Gerald Vizenor calls stories of survivance: "more than survival, more than endurance or mere response; the stories of survivance are an active presence" (Vizenor 15). In

her thesis, Dawna Holiday-Shchedrov sees the characters of *Drunktown's Finest* as embodiments of survivance: “Their ability to be resilient [...] is a testimony to their survival as resistance” (125). The presence of a transgender woman among them speaks of Indigenous people’s resistance to the colonial attempt to erase gender distinctness in Native cultures.<sup>10</sup>

### **Reminding the tribal tradition of acceptance and deep respect**

In her 2011 article “Decolonizing the Queer Native Body,” Chris Finley claims for a more critical gaze on traditionalism in Native communities. “Native peoples,” she writes, “are often read as existing outside homophobic discourse or as more accepting of trans and queer people in Native communities because of traditional Native ideas regarding gender and sexuality” (Finley 38). This romanticized and essentialist vision does not correspond to the reality faced by Two-Spirit Native people whose human and civil rights are not always recognized.

Freeland was unaware of traditional acceptance for gender non-conformity in Navajo culture until she moved to San Francisco. As she explains in her interview for *Filmmaker Magazine*, “I grew up on the reservation but had no idea about this aspect of Navajo culture” (Wissot 2014). So, her film acts against ignorance and cultural loss, which contribute to maintaining homophobia in the Navajo community, even if the director declares she did not approach her movie with an agenda: “I simply wanted to tell the best possible story I could tell” (Wissot 2014).

Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the persistence of homophobia as part of modern Native nations building that constitutes the filmic context. Introduced by settler colonialism, which imposed heteronormativity to Native Nations and was subsequently internalized by community members, homophobia still affects some aspects of community life. As a 2013 *Navajo Times* article describes: “Only five of the nation’s 500-plus federally recognized tribes recognize same-sex marriage. The Navajo Nation isn’t one of them because of the Diné Marriage Act.”<sup>11</sup> Back then, voices emerged seeking to repeal the Diné Marriage Act of 2005

which prohibited marriage between persons of the same sex. For scholar Jennifer Denetdale, what is important is that “there is an indication that there have always been multiple genders in societies including the Navajo society” (qtd. in *Navajo Times*, 2013). In this context, *Drunktown’s Finest* emphasizes Indigenous conceptions of gender and acts toward recognition and acceptance of gender nonconformity through the character of Felixia. Felixia is accepted by her grandparents, because the concept of third and fourth genders is part of their culture; however, the younger generation does not seem to have reached this level of acceptance. These tensions come to a head in the scene of the calendar audition.

Coming to apply for the audition, Felixia enters the room where several young girls are present and hesitates for a while before taking her place apart from the other candidates. One of the girls, who is also a former schoolmate, recognizes her and comes closer: “Felix, what are you doing here?” she exclaims. Embarrassed, Felixia mumbles some confused explanation about being accompanying her cousin. The cinematography conveys a sense of proximity between the viewers and the character, placing the camera close to Felixia’s, who is sitting, while a low-angle shot shows the other girl’s face, who thus appears as threatening. A closeup shows Felixia’s gaze as seeking help while the girl insists, amused: “You are not auditioning, are you?” At this moment, a woman calls Felixia’s name. Felixia stands up and follows the woman. The girl turns towards the other candidates, sneering: “I know him.” The use of the pronoun “him” demonstrates her refusal to recognize Felixia’s new identity. Right from the start of the dialogue, the girl deadnames Felixia, emphasizing her hostility. With this scene, Freeland makes us understand that Felixia’s gender specificity is not acknowledged by everybody in the community and that people like Felixia are not accepted by the young women of her generation.

Notwithstanding, Felixia keeps pursuing her dream to perform for the *Women of the Navajo Calendar*. The day of the photo shoots, she is praised by the jury for her beauty, and for her ability to speak Navajo. In fact, among all the Navajo candidates, she is the only one who speaks their language. Felixia is radiant, happy to pose under the flashes of the

photographs. For a little moment of time, we share her joy, until the moment when she is betrayed by her biological sex becoming obvious under her skirt. Felixia is forced to run away and while backstage, she encounters her contender and former schoolmate, who shows her the box of Viagra she had introduced in Felixia's drink.

The hostility faced by Felixia illustrates Navajo youth's refusal to acknowledge gender diversity and informs us about their ignorance of cultural specificities. Though pretending to represent Navajo women in photographs in a calendar, these young people do not even speak their language. They do not recognize that Felixia is not Felix dressed as a woman, but rather a Two Spirit person who does not fit into a male/female binary. Through the character of Felixia, Freeland achieves to connect her audience to the plight of a Navajo *nádleeh* person on the reservation, showing that the way for acceptance is long and difficult.

As a transgender woman, Freeland felt it was very important to cast someone who was transgender for the role of Felixia. As the director explains in her interview, she was "very grateful to have met Carmen Moore, who is both trans and Navajo ... she brought a depth and authenticity to the character that very few people would have been able to" (Wissot 2014). Moore's character is a present-day young person, living a modern way of life, enjoying parties and using the Internet. But she is also attached to her Navajo culture and proud to speak the Navajo language. And it is in the Navajo knowledge that she will find support.

Freeland offers key contextual information to the film's audience through the story of the *nádleeh* people narrated by Felixia's grandfather, Harmon. The scene is set in the intimacy of the family house, in the morning of the puberty ceremony organized for Sick Boy's sister Max, which is to be performed by the medicine man. Felixia is in her bedroom, feeling somehow apart from all these preparations, when her grandfather joins her. A middle shot of them sitting face to face in each extremity of the bed creates a sense of intimacy with the viewer. The old man smiles and starts to tell a story:

A long time ago, all Navajos lived alongside the Great River. Men, women, and the *nádleeh*. One day, they began to argue over who was

more important than the other. The men said they were, because they hunted, and the women said they were, because they tended the crops. On and on they argued. Until finally, they decided, maybe they were better off without each other. The men rafted across the Great River, and they took the nádleeh with them. And for a while, everything was fine. Then the men began to miss their wives and children. But they were too proud to go back. So they sent the nádleeh back, to check on things, and the nádleeh returned with the message, that things weren't so well with the women, and that they missed the men, and that they had no one to hunt for them. It became apparent, both sides needed each other: the men needed the women, and women in turn, needed the men. And they both needed the nádleeh. To this day, we carry this lesson, this balance.

This scene evokes the transmission of the knowledge from the elder to the younger generation through the oral tradition and Freeland invites her audience to share the legend that forges social acceptance and respect for diverse gender expressions, with the aim to help us understand the Navajo worldview. It is also a reminder to the younger generations who have abandoned much of their Indigenous culture. In doing so, *Drunktown's Finest* acts towards an acknowledgement and understanding of gender diversity. As Harmon concludes, "I know you, you're struggling with acceptance. This world can be cold, and hard on our people. But you must always remember, wherever you go, whatever you choose to do, you'll always have a home here, in this place." The medicine man's words underline the importance of spiritual support for Two-Spirit people's quest for acceptance. As Lee Schweningen points out in his article about the film, "The nádleeh story, [...] suggests an important theme running throughout—that of the fundamental and inherent need for a place for the nádleeh in Navajo life and culture" (Schweningen 110, 111).

*Drunktown's Finest* teaches us that Navajo Nation, and other Indigenous communities as well, must find cultural meaning and strength in the aim to fight homophobia and promote acceptance for gender-diverse people.<sup>12</sup>

### **Disrupting established power relationships**

In their “Tools for IINA (LIFE) Curriculum,” scholars underline the importance of the Navajo conception of gender diversity for the community as one of the foundational concepts of the Ways of Life. They argue that “[w]ithout the presence of Third and Fourth gender people, the Diné could not have survived as a people and become a nation, and the oral traditions convey a very strong appreciation for people of all genders” (Arviso et al. 135). Promoting Indigenous knowledge has psychological, social, and political implications in Native peoples’ lives. Through the character of Felixia, Freeland enacts what Qwo-Li Driskill calls a “Sovereign Erotic” which, according to them, “relates our bodies to our nations, traditions and histories” (Driskill 52). Then, the “sovereign erotic” grounds healing and regeneration in Indigenous knowledge, and encourages a renewal of Native nationality through queer pride, following a long and painful history of land and body dispossession, to paraphrase Driskill. Thanks to alternative narratives of gender, Indigenous people recover their ability to become agents of their own stories. Grounded in a specifically Indigenous way of knowing, the character of Felixia embodies the connection between the personal and the cultural. Considered by many Indigenous GLBTQ2 people as “at once a point of continuity with tribal traditions and a statement of contemporary intertribal identity and politics,” Two-Spirit identity helps us understand Indigenous constructions of personhood and gender, and Freeland places her character at this point of continuity between tradition and modernity (Driskill et al. 14).

In Freeland’s film, Felixia receives recognition from her grandparents and after having heard the story of the nádleeh, she joins her grandmother in the kitchen, where they prepare the traditional fry bread together. Then Felixia is invited to take part in the ceremony, and she

joins Max's family and they all head for the fields as the sun rises. Thus, Felixia finds her inner balance in her connection to her family, their land, and their traditions.

The final scenes of *Drunktown's Finest* invokes Mark Rifkin's definition of erotics as "interrelations with others, the land, and ancestors" (39). Inviting Felixia to the ceremony signifies that she is fully accepted by the community as a part of this community. Moreover, this pattern suggests the opening of more than one possibility for young Max, who has just entered puberty. Thus, Felixia's participation in the kinaaldá ceremony organized for Max suggests new perspectives on Indigenous womanhood including alternate possibilities for gender construction.<sup>13</sup>

Aware of the importance of resisting the imposed what? by the colonial orders of heteropatriarchy and gender roles,<sup>14</sup> Freeland introduces elements of Navajo cultural tradition such as the kinaalda celebration which honors "a young woman's entry into adulthood, and emphasizes a woman's role as a maternal guardian and leader in a matriarchal and matrilineal society" (Arviso et al. 135). Staging elements of the traditional puberty ceremony on screen allows Freeland to reaffirm Navajo matriarchal order and matrifocal jurisprudence against US law. By opening new possibilities for gender constructions in her film, Freeland opposes heteropatriarchal order based on gender binaries, while simultaneously resisting to essentialize Navajo culture. As Sophie Mayer observes, "the kinaaldá does not just represent an essentialist femininity predicated on biological fertility, but an entry into citizenship [...]" (11). The final images of *Drunktown's Finest* reunite Felixia, her grandparents, her cousin Nizhoni, Max, and her brother Luther, and illustrate the Navajo worldview and sense of kinship and community, which include men, women and the nádleeh.

The film's ending conveys the sense of balance and harmony encapsulated in the Navajo concept of hozho.<sup>15</sup> According to Michelle Kahn-John and Mary Koithan, encompassing both a way of living and a state of being,

the Hózhó philosophy offers key elements of the moral and behavioral conduct necessary for a long healthy life, placing an emphasis on the importance of maintaining

relationships by "developing pride of one's body, mind, soul, spirit and honoring all life. (citation)<sup>16</sup>

Thus, in *Drunktown's Finest*, Nizhoni is satisfied in her quest toward finding her true self by reconnecting with her biological family and achieves a state of peace, Sick Boy chooses a healthy and responsible behavioral conduct, and Felixia finds inner balance, and all three advance towards a state of wellness. In her 2020 article, "Reel Restoration in *Drunktown's Finest*," Renae Watchman argues that through hozho, translated as "to be in a state of wellness, balance, peace and harmony, culminating in beauty," Freeland's characters ultimately find their Indigeneity and humanity (Watchman 29).

In her 2015 review of the film *Drunktown's Finest* for *Indian Country Today*, Jennifer Denetdale argues that the author did not go far enough in condemning the roots of the injustices caused to the Navajo, and that the film end could be seen as suggesting a simplistic means of healing an ongoing trauma only through traditional spirituality.<sup>17</sup> According to Denetdale, "The separation of 'tradition' from the 'politics' of challenging structures of domination and exploitation individualizes our responses to self-healing and keeps the undercurrents of a town like Gallup intact" (Denetdale 2015). However, Freeland's strategy seeks to bring awareness for social justice around the issue of gender diversity to heterogeneous audiences and elaborate a basis for ethnic solidarity as well. *Drunktown's Finest* is a fiction where the individual character stands as a signifier of the collective and the personal story as emblematic of the political.

Through her filmic message, Freeland underlines the importance of preserving Native worldview in the process of indigenous nation building. Thus, reflecting and reaffirming Navajo spirituality and understanding of the world, *Drunktown's Finest* opposes existing power relationships which reflect colonial modes of thought such as heteropatriarchy and gender roles, required by the colonial regimes, and acts towards decolonization and sovereignty.

In his 2017 film comment on IMDb, one of the netizens, darrellwatvhman,<sup>18</sup> criticizes Freeland for failing to address the issue of violence against women and Two-Spirit people.

However, this painful subject is treated in a subliminal way in the scene showing Nizhoni during one of her nocturnal marauding as a volunteer with the social services of the reserve. At the side of the road, the torches of the officers accompanying Nizhoni illuminate a dead horse covered by red handprints. Suddenly, in Nizhoni's mind, other similar images intermingle, giving the young girl an impression of déjà vu. Indeed, Nizhoni had seen these pictures in her dream, thus relating to her Diné identity and to the Navajo dream culture as an important element of Navajo identity. As Watchman explains, this prophetic dream foreshadows the identity of Nizhoni's biological parents whose family name was Pinto: "A pinto is a spotted or painted horse" (Watchman 38).

Moreover, in Native American culture these marks are the symbol of the violence suffered by women, children, and Two-Spirit people, revealing the reservation as a site of violent events which still occur in the present day. Thus, through the symbol and without words, a single image is enough for Freeland to poignantly evoke Indigenous victims of violence from past and present. At the same time, *Drunktown's Finest* clearly shows Freeland's intent to present a positive and optimistic image of Native American women instead of their persistent stereotypical representations as victims. Here, Nizhoni as well as Felixia, take control of their lives and pursue their aims accordingly with their own decisions.

In *Drunktown's Finest*, Freeland examines the fragility of Felixia's sexual life. The spectator can see Felixia with a client in a car, or lying in the bed in a hotel room, in a moment when a client gives her money and leaves, while a very close up on Felixia's face reveals her sadness. Freeland's exploration of the character's intimate life allows us to understand that in her search for love and affection, Felixia cannot establish a balanced relationship. In her struggle to reconcile her psychological and physical being, she is helped by her grandfather, the medicine man. Acknowledging herself as nádleeh and understanding her place in the world, Felixia can engage in what Driskill calls the "journey back" to the "first homeland: the body" (Driskill 53). In so doing, Freeland's nádleeh character establishes the notion of

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Sovereign Erotic as a means of healing Native's sexuality from the historical trauma that Indigenous Two-Spirit people continue to survive.

According to *Drunktown's Finest's* narrative, Felixia envisions going to New York City, and the film does not give more information. Whether she will return or stay there, she does not know. As Lee Schweninger observes, Felixia's possible desire to have surgery is never clarified in the film and this idea could be seen as corresponding to audiences' perception which tend to reduce gender diversity to gender binary.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, Felixia's excitement and joy about the trip reveal her expectations for more than a mere adventure. Her choice is personal and sovereign, and her determination indicates the failure of governmental strategies to control indigenous sexuality through education, religion, and law. But she knows, as do spectators too, that she has a family that supports her. As Felixia's grandfather told her, "wherever you go, whatever you choose to do, you'll always have a home here, in this place." Thus, the film uses such an approach to underline the need for spiritual support that only the reservation home could provide.

In *Drunktown's Finest*, Felixia's gender identity is distinct from those of Luther and Nizhoni. They all complete and balance each other. As in a triptych, Freeland paints the portrait of Navajo youth: a young man, a young woman, and a Two-Spirited person, thus echoing the origin story Harmon has told, and the film clearly shows that the community needs women and men, but also the nádleehi. At the same time the film conveys the idea that all three are part of the portrait of the Navajo nation which also includes elders and children. Through the sovereignty of the erotic, the transgender character of *Drunktown's Finest* finds routes to self-determination. Felixia's relation to her family, history and land speaks to her affect, it is related to her family, history and land. But the film also reinforces the deep respect that tribal nations have long had in their relationships with Two-Spirit people, thus engaging Indigenous knowledge routes toward hope.

In *Drunktown's Finest*, the presence of a Two-Spirit character on screen not only counteracts their erasure from colonial narratives but also claims the need for acceptance and

spiritual support for indigenous queer and Two-Spirit people, and through the Sovereign erotic, ultimately challenge established power relationships. The very presence of a queer character, as well as its centrality in the film, update and diversify the catalog of Indigenous images, bringing together traditional and modern aspects of the ever-evolving Indigenous culture and ultimately make manifest their survival. By exploring different dimensions of identity, *Drunktown's Finest* contributes to the modernizing and de-essentializing Native American's representations in cinema. By imagining alternatives of Indigenous beings, Freeland's film participates in what Dean Rader calls aesthetic activism, a "political and social activism that finds representation in the artistic realm" (Rader 5).

The alternative representation of gender in *Drunktown's Finest* works towards an acknowledgement, acceptance, and respect for queer and Two-Spirit indigenous people as well as a claim for acceptance and respect for all kinds of difference.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> With respect to indigenous people's sovereignty and inherent right to the North American continent, in this article I use the hyperonyms "Native American," "Native," "Indigenous," "Indian," and "American Indian" interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> Adopted in 1990 at the Third International Gathering of American Indian and First Nations Gays and Lesbians in Winnipeg, the term Two-Spirit encompasses complex gender systems in various tribal societies and responds to the necessity of a term specific to Indigenous experiences, cultures and histories.

<sup>3</sup> Nádleeh is a Navajo concept of gender distinctness, rooted in the Navajo origin story.

<sup>4</sup> In their 2004 article "Stolen From Our Bodies: First Nations Two-Spirits/Queers and the Journey To A Sovereign Erotic," Cherokee scholar and poet Qwo-Li Driskill writes about "historical trauma" and proposes the erotic as mean of healing Native peoples sexualities, forwarding the concept of Sovereign Erotic which, according to them, is "a return to and/or continuance of the complex realities of gender and sexuality that are ever-present [...], but erased and hidden by colonial cultures" (51, 56). Driskill defines the Sovereign Erotic as "an erotic wholeness healed and/or healing from the historical trauma that First Nations people continue to survive, rooted within the histories, traditions, and resistance struggles of our nations" (51).

<sup>5</sup> In the Introduction to their 2011 book, *Queer Indigenous studies: Critical interventions in theory, politics, and literature*, the authors observe: "Indigenous GLBTQ2 peoples appear as part of the diversity of their own nations and of Indigenous peoples generally, crossing many cultural, national, racial, gender, and sexual identities" (9).

<sup>6</sup> See Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 1999. *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. Zed Books Ltd.

<sup>7</sup> As Leung describes in her 2016 article "Always in translation: Trans cinema across languages," at Vancouver's Queer Film Festival, *Drunktown's Finest* was acclaimed by a long standing ovation, and "At a panel discussion held after the screening of her film, Sydney

Freeland was inundated with questions about how she was able to bring such ‘authenticity’ to the film” (12).

<sup>8</sup> See Raheja, Michelle H. *Reservation 303ealism: Redfacing, visual sovereignty, and representations of Native Americans in film*. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2011. According to Raheja, visual sovereignty “intervenes in a larger discussion on Native American sovereignty by locating and advocating for indigenous cultural and political power within and outside of Western legal jurisprudence” (1162).

<sup>9</sup> See Warrior, Robert Allen. *Tribal secrets: recovering American Indian intellectual traditions*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1995. In his chapter(?) Warrior states that, “The decision to exercise intellectual sovereignty provides a crucial moment in the process from which resistance, hope, and, most of all, imagination issue” (124).

<sup>10</sup> Over the last few decades, notwithstanding the lack of information that makes any study in the area “partial” and “unsatisfying” as Daniel Heath Justice points out in his 2010 article “Notes toward a Theory of Anomaly,” scholars demonstrated how colonization and religion have shamed and erased traditional Indigenous beliefs about sexuality and family structure. However, as queer Indigenous scholar Craig Womack observes, the resulting silence which surrounds queer Natives does not signify their absence.

See Justice, Daniel Heath. “Notes toward a Theory of Anomaly.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16.1-2, 2010, pp. 207–242.

See Womack, Craig. “SUSPICIONING: Imagining a Debate between Those Who Get Confused, and Those Who Don’t, When They Read Critical Responses to the Poems of Joy Harjo, or What’s an Old-Timey Gay Boy Like Me to Do.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16.1-2, 2010, pp. 133–155.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.navajotimes.com/news/2013/0713/070413marriage.php>, consulted 09.27.2020.

<sup>12</sup> In the columns of *Navajo Times*, Denetdale underlines: “What’s important about the current issues facing Navajo LGBTQ is the significance of the creation stories, in which they draw upon the story of nádleeh to validate their places in society” (Quoted in *Navajo Times* 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Discussing the critical revision of the image of the Indigenous woman in *Drunktown’s Finest*, in her 2015 article “Pocahontas No More: Indigenous Women Standing Up for Each Other in Twenty-First Century Cinema,” Sophie Mayer notes that: “Felixia’s participation in the ceremony holds out the possibilities of gender distinctness and fluidity to Max as a Navajo way of life [...]” (10).

<sup>14</sup> Andrea Smith declares in her 2015 book, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, that “It has been through sexual violence and through the imposition of European gender relationships on Native communities that Europeans were able to colonize Native Peoples in the first place” (139). Smith considers that Native people will be unable to decolonize and fully assert their sovereignty, if they “maintain these patriarchal gender systems” (139).

<sup>15</sup> See Yazzie, Melanie K. ‘Narrating Ordinary Power: Hózhóójí, Violence and Critical Diné Studies.’ *Diné Perspectives: Revitalizing and Reclaiming Navajo Thought*. Ed. Lloyd K. Lee. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014, pp. 83–99.

<sup>16</sup> In their article, “Living in Health, Harmony, and Beauty: The Diné (Navajo) Hózhó Wellness Philosophy,” Michelle Kahn-John and Mary Koithan propose routes for healing and wellbeing in accordance with the Navajo philosophy.

<sup>17</sup> Denetdale, Jennifer. ‘Drunktown’s Finest’ Papers Over Border Town Violence and Bigotry’, *Indian Country Today*, accessed 07.21.2021.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3091286/> User Reviews, consulted 09.27.2020.

<sup>19</sup> See Schweninger, Lee. “Nádleeh and the River.” *Transmotion* vol. 7. no. 1 (2021), pp. 110-131.

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## IN THE NAME OF LOVE: Queering Relationships in *Princess Pocahontas and The Blue Spots*<sup>1</sup>

ELENA CORTÉS FARRUJIA

*Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* (1991), written by the Kuna-Rappahannock author Monique Mojica,<sup>2</sup> constitutes a palimpsestic performance wherein the playwright recuperates the voices of well-known figures like Pocahontas or La Malinche, questioning their portrayals in the European imaginations and decolonizing their stories. The transnational polyphonic space created by Mojica not only exposes the long-lasting and broad repercussions that these European narratives have on Indigenous women, but it also enables the configuration of a genealogical anthology of Indigenous and Chicana Feminist, Queer, and Two-Spirit knowledge. By sewing the works of other Indigenous – mainly Queer – authors (women warriors), like Chrystos (Menominee) and Beth Brant (Mohawk), and Chicana creators like Gloria Anzaldúa, whom Mojica quotes both at the beginning of the play and then reinvokes at the end in a bibliographical recommendation that provides both “good and bad” sources to read further and comprehensibly understand the Pocahontas’ paradigm, Mojica resituates Indigenous women in North America and reevaluates the sexual dimension of colonization.

Framed as a beauty pageant,<sup>3</sup> the performance disrupts chronological time and space by gathering the different asynchronous characters to tell their stories in a humoristic yet bitter tapestry of 13 transformations (instead of “acts”). The subversion of Western/European frameworks is not only structural but also thematic, for Mojica wittingly merges “historical” (both in the European and Indigenous sense), literary, and actual representations of Indigenous women's experiences to address how European representations and stereotypes have

certainly impacted the everyday life of Indigenous women throughout history and up to the present day.

Beth Brant, one of the authors Mojica includes in the reading recommendations list, was also engaged in the deconstruction of these stereotypes and the retrieval and amplification of the voices of (queer) Indigenous women. This reciprocal commitment is also acknowledged in her work, for instance, in her celebrated collection of essays, *Writing as Witness* (1994), wherein Brant notes that:

Even in our grief, we find laughter. Laughter at our human failings, laughter with our Tricksters, laughter at the stereotypes presented about us. In her play, *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*, Monique Mojica, Kuna/Rappahannock, lays bare the lies perpetrated against Native women. And she does so with Laughter and anger – a potent combination in the hands of a Native woman. (14-5, emphasis original)

Ever since Monique Mojica’s outstanding work *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* was first played and published in 1991,<sup>4</sup> it has sparked attention among Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars about the radical reflections embedded in the spectacle, from the transnational associations among the different characters that are summoned onstage, to the politics of memory, embodiment, and healing of the ceremony.<sup>5</sup> For instance, Maria Lyytinen has reckoned that the deconstruction of the figure of Pocahontas along with that of the “other stereotyped representations of Native women” that Mojica enacts onstage to make sense of the “collective memories of Native women” ultimately serve as a way to “come home” to who she is: “a contemporary Native woman in North America” (79).<sup>6</sup> This movement “inwards,” through the questioning of what these representations stand for, agrees with Alex Wilson’s notion of “Coming In,” understood as “an act of returning, fully present in our selves, to resume our place as a valued part of our families, cultures, communities, and lands, in connection with all our relations” (3).

There have been several approaches to the performance and their characters, from the roles they have been said to play during colonization and how they are questioned

throughout the play (e.g., Knowles, Kuwabong, Huhndorf) to the elements of the Guna and the mola found in the contemporary artistic stance taken by Mojica (e.g., Carter, Wayne Hopkins).<sup>7</sup> This intervention adheres to these previous inquiries and offers a different reading of Mojica's performance by acknowledging and delving into Brant's influence in the text, especially when considering questions about the performance of relationships and kinship onstage.

The artificiality of the discourses about Indigenous women in Western imaginations is confronted in several ways in the performance. For instance, Mojica represents Pocahontas – and the other characters connected to her – in an anti-essentialist manner by distinguishing between diverse constructions and interpretations of the character that have been deployed with concrete goals behind them: either as legitimizing the Western settler colonial structures of gender, race, and sexuality; or as ways to position the bodies of Indigenous women as “exotic,” “desirable” consumable goods. This is observed, for example, when Mojica embodies the personality of “Storybook Pocahontas,” whose story acknowledged the “white savior” role of colonizers; that of “Lady Rebecca,” which popularized the reproduction of Christianity in Native communities; or that of the figure of “The Squaw,” which was defined after the “hypersexuality” of Indigenous women whose “lust” was interpreted through Euro-American's gaze. The latter is manifested in “Cigar Store Squaw” in the play, pointing at the discourses of desire intrinsically associated with the consumption of tobacco, equating her body and her sexuality to the plantations ready to be harvested and exploited at the hands of white entrepreneurs and consumers. All these characters are indeed similar in the sense of their creation for and by the Western male gaze, which has – constantly – tied them to Western heteronormative accounts of “love,” disengaging them not only from their own community but also from the land.<sup>8</sup>

Mojica includes other female characters who have indeed been shaped by European imaginations while concealing the Indigenous realities behind them, as it occurs with the role of the “Goddess of the Puna,” whose sexuality has been overwritten with chaste and “virginal”

aspects. She points to the fact that "La Virgen del Carmen (La Tirana), and La Virgen de Guadalupe are only two of the Catholic virgins to whom devotion was built upon already existing reverence to female deities and leaders" (Mojica 15). Moreover, Mojica writes the role of "Princess Buttered on Both Sides" as standing for the figure of the Trickster, who is "stuck" in the talent section of the beauty pageant, which illustrates the importance of Indigenous feminist storytelling throughout the performance to "unstuck" both the Trickster and imaginary self-determination from the "ahistorical" loop wherein these representations are entangled.

On the other hand, the story of Anna Mae Aquash, an activist and "freedom fighter" who was murdered and to whom Beth Brant dedicates the first edition of *A Gathering of Spirit*, is included in conversation with the story of a Chilean girl who was sexually tortured at the border, transculturally portraying the violence Indigenous women have suffered as well in contemporary times. Thus, these two characters interpolate the many stories of MMIWG2S (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirits) across the continent.<sup>9</sup> That Mojica incorporates their voices to narrate the horrors suffered by Indigenous women (of all ages, tribes, geographies, and circumstances) coincides with Sara Deer's statement about self-determination in the introduction to *The Beginning and End of Rape*: "Self-determination for individual survivors and self-determination for tribal nations are closely connected. It is impossible to have a truly self-determining nation when its members have been denied self-determination over their own bodies" (xvi). Thus, the performance creates a Third Space where all these stories commingle, raise awareness, and give voice to all those silenced since colonization began, impacted by its consequences, to reclaim self-determination over their bodies and stories.

In *Writing as Witness*, Beth Brant examines how representations of heteroromantic love have wounded Indigenous communities, particularly undermining the inclusivity professed in matrilineal systems before colonization:

The love that was natural in our world, has become unnatural as we become more consumed by the white world and the values therein. Our sexuality has been colonized, sterilized, whitewashed. Our sense of spirit has been sterilized, colonized, made over to pander to a growing consumer need for quick and easy redemption. What the dominant culture has never been able to comprehend is that spirit/sex/prayer/flesh/religion/natural is who I am as a Two-Spirit. 'Now we no longer love each other.' (59-60).

This statement does not only refer to sexual relationships, but it also encompasses "self-love," the love for one's culture and identity. Hence, Brant calls for the denaturalization of the Western discourses that have fragmented the significance of love in their communities which transcend heteronormative understandings of sexuality. Similarly, Daniel Heath Justice argues that "[the] Invasion depended on the subjugation of Indigenous women and their frequent positions of authority as much as it depended on the erosion of affirming sexual pleasure and diversity of gender roles and identities" (364). Therefore, this erasure becomes inherent to colonizing processes, and as the thorough works by Indigenous feminists and LGBTQ/Two-Spirit theorists (like Brant and Justice) demonstrate:

Heteropatriarchal colonialism has sexualized indigenous lands and people as violable, subjugated indigenous kin ties as perverse, attacked familial ties and traditional gender roles, and all to transform indigenous peoples for assimilation within or excision from the political and economic structures of white settler societies. (Morgensen 4)

As a result of these processes, Brant addresses how the mission to restore and recover the accounts that preceded colonization is indeed a complex one, for "[o]ur world was splintered, and we are left the excruciating task of finding the pieces of our world and making it right again, making it balanced again" (50). In the performance, Mojica herself exposes how European representations have left Indigenous women without a map to reconnect with their past and truthful ancestors: "No mark, no trail, no footprint, no way home" (31).

This journey of self-discovery, of "coming in," is primarily conveyed through the only characters shaped by Mojica herself, "Contemporary Woman #1" and "Contemporary Woman #2," the first being from North America and the second from South America. Although their voices are prominent throughout the whole journey, the fact that they are unnamed is directly related to Mojica's intention of portraying the complicated task of Indigenous Women finding their identity through the accounts that have silenced the voices of their ancestors. Moreover, as explained above, these depictions have also radiating effects, impacting their relationships with their community, with the land, with other than human beings, and with themselves. In this sense, Kim Tallbear and Angela Willey explain that:

The valuation of friendship as a site of intimacy, meaning-making, resource-sharing, and transformation has the potential to unravel stories about the specialness of sex and to fuel our imaginations to rethink forms and structures that exceed the ideal of settler family, which may sustain and remake us. (8)

In the same line, Daniel Heath Justice defines kinship as "what we do, what we create, as much as what we are," shaping Indigenous communities (and their sovereignty) "[as] a delicate web of rights and responsibilities," which interconnects Indigenous peoples to animate and inanimate beings, integrating other human beings, animals, spirits, and natural elements in harmonious and inclusive coexistence (353, 357). Since this form of relationality goes beyond the Christian heteronormativity of the settler family unit imposed by Western settler structures, Indigenous kinship can be considered, to a certain extent, queer in itself. As Chris Finley argues, this heteronormativity has impacted Native communities since "[a]ll sexualization of Native peoples constructs them as incapable of self-governance without heteropatriarchal influence that Native peoples do not 'naturally' possess" (35). Nevertheless, as a result of this sexualization that led to their loss of sovereignty (Finley 34), Indigenous hegemonic masculinity/heteropatriarchy has imposed itself as "traditional," naturalizing and institutionalizing heteronormativity in the communities at the expense of Indigenous women and

Two-Spirit peoples, excluding them “from community, from ritual, and from existence” (Hokowhita 91-92).

Thus, as I contend in these pages, Mojica does not only decolonize the identities of Indigenous women by embodying and re-mapping a genealogy of Indigenous women across the continent and over time, but also by imagining at the end of the performance a network of queer kinship patterns that recuperate intergenerational bonds, heal the relationship with the land and the Spirit, and restore and enhance (queer) Indigenous sorority and sexuality. Furthermore, this paper aims to explore the queer potential of Mojica’s play by reading it in conversation with Beth Brant’s work, whose discourse provides new and unexplored insights into the performance.

On the one hand, such a frame uncovers the mechanisms on display of the European romances, which have instrumentalized the name/idea of love as a colonial apparatus to articulate and impose Western heteronormative models upon Indigenous communities, thereby justifying European sexual relations with Indigenous women, especially through sexual violence, by creating the stereotype of them as willing receptacles for their colonial desire.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, by applying Brant’s *A Gathering of Spirit*, Mojica’s text reveals a turning towards queer kinship as an alternative to heteronormative relationships by retrieving the erotic potential of appointed female elements, such as the moon, the water, or even oranges. Ultimately, this gathering of multiplicity of female voices creates a Third Space for the healing of Indigenous women “in the name of love.”<sup>11</sup>

As previously mentioned, the structure of the performance contests European theatrical norms by breaking with the notions of chronological time and space and by unfolding the rhizomatic plots throughout “13 Transformations,” “one for each moon in the lunar year.” Each Transformation builds up in Mojica and Nuñez’s bodies as “Contemporary Woman #1” and #2 as they summon the ghost-like/spirit voices of the diverse characters onstage, up to three per transformation, into the present moment. Thus, their bodies function as a compass when invoking the narratives of the women who had been inscribed in European discourses, as shown

in the stage directions leading “Transformation 3:” “As each woman, a group of women or Spirit is named, she is placed at each of the four directions in the following order: (counter-clockwise). East, North, West, South” (22). By placing the “East” as the first direction, Mojica is also subverting Western geographical knowledge that has always taken itself as the discursive center; hence, she is contesting the agency of the West in the representation of Indigenous womanhood from the very structure. Mojica herself acknowledges in the “notes on the structure”: “13 moons, 4 directions; it is not a linear structure, but it is the form and basis from which these stories must be told” (Mojica 16). She also applies this transformational basis to the set: “objects and set pieces appear to be one thing but become something else; they can be turned inside-out to reveal another reality... At the end of the show, the stage is littered with debris from the stories that are told” (Mojica 17).

This turning “inside-out” is undoubtedly associated with Brant’s definition of transformation as connected to healing: “We begin by changing the internalization of homophobia into a journey of healing. There is a coming-clean that takes place on this journey. We cleanse ourselves according to our spiritual beliefs and worldviews” (44). Mojica herself understands healing as a collective responsibility, and, according to Jill Carter,<sup>12</sup> Mojica recognizes that “the artist’s job is not to tell a story about healing but to devise an aesthetic experience that effects that healing” (4). Therefore, the “Transformations” located in the performance are connected to the healing of Indigenous sexuality and retrieval of eroticism and desire as defined in non-Western/European terms, disentangling the artificial European discourses surrounding each of the characters until unveiling the Indigenous version of the story, turning the stories inside-out.

This is the case of “Pocahontas,” who in “Transformation 6” appears represented in a complex, anti-essentialist manner: “I have many names. My first name was Matoaka. Some people call me Lady Rebecca, but everyone knows the little Indian Princess Pocahontas, who saved the life of John Smith” (27). Before this moment, she had been introduced to more humoristic depictions through the interactions of “Princess Buttered-on-Both-Sides” and

“Storybook Pocahontas,” giving exaggerated versions of their stories to question their veracity. For example, “Princess-Buttered-on-Both-Sides” sings in a Marilyn Monroe style: “Captain Whiteman, I would pledge my life to you ... Captain Whiteman, you’re the cheese in my fondue” (26). On the other hand, the mimic presentation of “Storybook Pocahontas” in “Transformation 5” ends with “Contemporary Woman#1” asking the audience: “Where was her mother?” to question the youth of the girl and the sexual depictions around her (28). Then, Mojica presents the diverse “names” and the stories behind Pocahontas, starting with the most famous one and ending with the most “unknown” – to Western audiences –hence “turning back time” until Matoaka’s voice is manifested. Matoaka’s account certainly provides a sense of balance with nature being retrieved, as she collects medicinal plants: “find[ing] the right roots, / Put them in your basket woman/child,” and connects with the other-than-human elements that surround her: “all around your world, everything is alive! / Everything is growing, (embraces tree), everything has spirit” (34). Thus, her character embraces Indigenous knowledges and, along with “Ceremony” (one of the characters), she performs her initiation ritual into womanhood: “Nubile child, ... strong, fast, free woman/child” (34).

Most of the conversations between the voices of “Pocahontas” or “La Malinche” concentrate on disclosing how their sexuality (and the sexuality inscribed in their ontologies) had been colonized. This is exemplified, for instance, by Mojica’s embodiment of “the Goddess of the Puna,” calling out colonizers who turned her into a sexless Virgin and erased her identity, disconnecting her from kinship relations to the land and to the natural forces of the world: “No longer allied with the darkness of moon tides/ but twisted and misaligned/ with the darkness of evil/ the invaders’ sinful apple in my hand!” (37). “The Goddess of the Puna” further claims that Europeans had inscribed her in a fixed, whitewashed figure, utterly detached from her “humanness,” her bodily pleasure, and her spirituality: “Sexless, without fire / without pleasure /without power /encased in plaster / painted white” (37). Mojica also addresses the figure of La Malinche, whose sexuality has become a reason for the loss of kinship relations in Indigenous communities and the establishment of heteronormativity among

Indigenous peoples. La Malinche – as Pocahontas – has been continuously appointed as a “traitor” to her kin, being rejected due to her relationship with the Spanish and her resilience skills for survival. However, in the performance, “La Malinche” looks back at those who criticize her, who overlook how her body had been used as currency between the Spanish and her own kin:

That I opened my legs to the whole conquering of the army? They were already there. I was a gift. Passed on. Handed on... You say it was me betrayed my people, but it was they betrayed me!... Puta, Chingada, carbona, India de Mierda, hija de tu mala madre, Maldita Malinche.... Born from the earth, fed with my blood, anything alive here is alive because I stayed alive! (24-25)

Nevertheless, the process that Mojica undertakes to retrieve queer kinship does not only include the retrieval of these voices but also the healing of Indigenous communities, including Indigenous men. In “Transformation 8,” Mojica rebalances the relationship between Contemporary Woman #1 and her male ancestors: “my grandfathers,” remembering them and embracing their memory. “Contemporary Woman #1” follows “the sound of the drum” to tell the story of her life,<sup>13</sup> or rather to celebrate the survivance embodied in the singing and dancing of her kin.<sup>14</sup> She is especially moved by the “brotherhood of old, brown men mourning their lost home,” recognizing her grandfather’s work in the land and the perpetuation of Indigenous ceremonies: “I recognize my lifeline in your face when you bow your head in respect / to hold a single kernel of corn in your hand; / and Grandpa planted corn in the backyard” (39).<sup>15</sup> Thus, once this multitemporal and ceremonial connection is established, she encourages “The Man” to stand up, fight for self-representation along with women, to acknowledge how detrimental heteronormative structures have been to their kinship relations – to themselves and the access to the land – therefore situating women back at “the centre of the hoop of the nation” (39). This encouragement overall vindicates equality in the relationships with men: “Stand up and walk next to me,” and further explains that men are required to complete the ceremony of regeneration and healing of kinship: “I don’t want to do

this without you” (40).

In addition, said “cleansing” ceremony appears on several occasions throughout the performance of Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots, as a process generally associated with spirituality and sexuality as a whole. For instance, at the end of the performance, “Contemporary Woman #1” and “Contemporary Woman #2,” after the embodied journey enacted onstage, “they wet each other's faces, hair, arms; purifying. With a cupped handful of water each, they sprinkle the stage in opposite circles” (59). This reciprocal care is repeated several times while they “invoke” contemporary Women Warriors and announce their words onstage:

Contemporary Woman #1: (in front of pyramid, upstage left) Gloria Anzaldúa!

Contemporary Woman #2: (singing softly, under throughout)

Una nación no será conquistada...

hasta que los corazones de las mujeres

caigan a la tierra.

Contemporary Woman #1:

“What I want is the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own, gods out of my entrails.”

Dips hand in basin again, sprinkles water to stage right.

Diane Burns describes that to hold a brown-skinned lover

means: (face to face, they wash each other's chest over heart)

“we embrace and rub the wounds together” (59).

In this purifying ritual, the two women, embracing as the lovers described by Burns, softly touch each other, reclaiming self-determination over their bodies and their own representations, acknowledging that this healing is an embodied, erotic, and communal practice. In this line, Brant also suggests that a form of healing kinship is found in sexuality and “the magic abilities to produce orgasm,” identified as another way of ensuring balance in the world, further

arguing that Sexuality and Spirituality cannot be separated (55). Thus, by retrieving Indigenous sexuality and eroticism, queer kinship connections are re-established.<sup>16</sup>

One of the most exciting episodes of the performance takes place in "Transformation 12," involving "Contemporary Woman #1" and "Spirit-Sister." The Transformation/scene unravels in a dialogue that is constantly surrounded by singing and the recorded voice of Contemporary Woman#1 playing on a tape in the background: "When you tasted of salt and oranges, and the moon sang her happiest song to us, – heart offerings when we remembered her, when you tasted of salt and oranges, and the falling stars took our breath away..." (55). Although the scene does not explicitly show sexual intercourse per se, the dialogue transforms itself into a sensory and erotic journey that does not only involve the two female characters present but also the landscape: "I give myself to this land...My heart pierced, my back split open. Impaled. My blood stains this piece of earth – a landmark for my soul. I promise to return to love you always (...)" (56-57). The connection between the sexual encounter and the land "naturalizes" the queer, erotic relationship between "Contemporary Woman #1" and "Spirit-Sister," who asks her to "call to [her] in a language / I don't understand," either referring to her using the English language to articulate the queer erotic encounter or as them starting to communicate said eroticism in a language unknown to English, calling therefore as well for linguistic (erotic) sovereignty.

The climax arrives in an orgasmic chant while the "Spirit-Sister" sings, "my spine arches from neck to tail ... when you tasted of salt and oranges / I howled at the pulling / in my womb, / - your own shaking / not quieted by whispers - / (of no, no, no)" (57). After this orgasmic connection between the "Spirit-Sister" and "Contemporary Woman #1," this one confesses that she "put[s] down [her] sorrow in / an ancient / place, / ahh ahh ahh ahh" while the voice of Spirit Sister says "wordless, I walk into the sea... and the moon she will sing," both voices gathering in a final chant: "ah ah ah ah ah ah / ah ah ah / AH AH AH!" (58). Indeed, this orgasm is not only enacting a queer erotic relationship between two women but between the embodied/material, the spirit, and the land, mending their kinship relations to

“Contemporary Woman #1.” In this sense, Mojica follows Brant’s assertion that an act of love between two women is regarded as a way of mending the broken circles of life, providing other women with new maps for their lives through the depiction of sensual encounters (17).

This re-mapping is also enacted onstage while the sexual/erotic encounter occurs, serving as a new map where sexuality and spirituality are jointly located onstage as “Contemporary Woman #1” takes a bucket of sand, “empties it centrestage, and makes footprints” (57); but also as providing Indigenous women with new footprints to follow to return to queer kinship and to their own identities, self-determination, and erotic-sovereignty overall. In “Stolen from Our Bodies,” Qwo-Li Driskill refers to this act “as a return to and/or continuance of the complex realities of gender and sexuality that are ever-present in both the human and more-than-human world, but erased and hidden by colonial cultures” (57); which resonates with Mojica’s text when in this singing-dialogue, both “Contemporary Woman#1” and “Spirit-Sister” repeat: “I promise to return to love you always” (57).

By the end of the ceremony, “Contemporary Woman #1” merges with the figure of the “Dyke,” identified by Paula Gunn Allen as a “medicine woman,” one that bonds with the Spirit and is intimately connected to other women (257). Mojica enhances the “medicinal powers” of “Contemporary Woman #1” and associates them with the importance of writing and storytelling, self-representation and Indigenous literatures. In “Transformation 8,” “Contemporary Woman #1” declares: “Sometimes when you are not with me, I pull long, long strands of black hair, that doesn't belong to me, from between my sheets, from between the pages of my notebooks” (38), a fascinating image that weaves together the importance of sexuality and desire in Indigenous women's writing, described by Brant as a gift given on behalf of love; as an act of sovereign erotic (53).

To conclude, Mojica ends the play by claiming the urgency and requirement of Indigenous feminisms to be an indispensable part of the feminist discourse (that, up to that moment – and even nowadays – has utterly forgotten about Indigenous women’s claims), cathartically concluding with “Contemporary Woman #1 and #2” “cleansing each other,”

vindicating for self-representation and sexual and gender fluidity. This transformational journey to “come home” to oneself and to one’s community that Mojica has been tracing in such a healing and hybrid performance (in form, content, development, etc.) is epitomized at the closing of “Transformation 8” “What I want is the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to fashion my own gods out of my entrails” (Mojica 59). The performance closes by quoting the Cheyenne saying in a polyphonic and bilingual singing: “Una nación no será conquistada hasta que los corazones de sus mujeres caigan a la tierra...A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground ... Then, it is done, no matter how brave its warriors, nor how strong its weapons” (Mojica 60). Thus, the performance displays a turning towards queer Indigenous Kinship as an alternative to heteronormative relationships, retrieving the erotic potential of appointed female elements, such as the moon, the water, or even oranges (as Paula Gunn Allen argues), as well as by gathering the multiplicity of female voices that create this Third Space for the healing of Indigenous women in the name of love.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper was read at the “AIW 2021: The Sovereign Erotic,” and before that, it constituted a chapter of the homonymous BA thesis I defended in 2019 at La Laguna University (Tenerife, Spain). As a still-learning, white heterosexual scholar, this work started my academic journey. Hence, with hindsight, I am aware of its flaws, the readings and works I should have included, and the terminology that needs to be addressed carefully, given that it is entrenched with (symbolically) violent connotations. Plus, I run the risk of unintentionally reinscribing the gendered and colonial/imperialist meanings that feminist Indigenous theorists, writers, and activists have pointed out and questioned for so long, so I acknowledge this position, and I am open to criticism.

<sup>2</sup> Born and raised in a family known for its Indigenous feminist theatrical productions, the Spiderwoman Theatre, Mojica has been attached to performing arts in all the possible spheres: as an actress, as a founding member and artistic director of diverse companies, as an editor and contributor to several publications, like the *Canadian Theatre Review*; and as a playwright; being best known for her first full-length script *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* (1991).

<sup>3</sup> This has always been an element shortly addressed in previous approaches to the play. Whereas it is not farfetched to assert that this setting is not arbitrary, given that it justifies the appearances of several characters onstage – judged by their gender and sexuality, their “beauty”– I do believe that Mojica deconstructs as well the overall ideal of white, heteronormative beauty by making the stories relevant once more, by retrieving the voice of the characters and their body sovereignty; all of which unquestionably acquires a new layer of significance if considered along the fact that, as studied by Kathleen Glenister Roberts, beauty contests in powwows revolve around who has the best talent, generally this display being “like a communal sharing of knowledge” (266). See: Glenister Roberts, Kathleen. “Speech, Gender,

and the Performance of Culture: Native American ‘Princesses.’” *Text and Performance Quarterly*, vol 22, no 4, 2002, pp. 261-279.

<sup>4</sup> Although Mojica wrote and starred in the performance, it was directed by Muriel Miguel, and Alejandra Nuñez also played some of the roles onstage. This is all disclosed in the production notes preceding the play’s script.

<sup>5</sup> See Scott, Shelley. “Embodiment as a Healing Process. Native American Women and Performance.” *Native Performance and Representation*, edited by S.E. Wilmer. University of Arizona Press, 2009, pp. 123-135.

<sup>6</sup> Knowles’ approach to the performance is indeed compelling when considering memory as an “active, embodied” exercise to counter their “monumentalization,” which “buries the past rather than keeping it alive” (144). See as well, Beck, Günter. “‘If you remember me...’ Memory and Remembrance in Monique Mojica’s *Birdwoman and the Suffragettes*.” *Indigenous North American Drama: A Multivocal History*, edited by Brigit Däwes, State University of New York Press, 2012, pp. 177-189.

<sup>7</sup> Such images were mainly widespread by the work of literary authors who fantasized about these encounters and regarded these contact zones as the perfect spaces to establish not only the nature of the Other but also to position themselves as superior, legitimizing the imperial projects and the reconfigurations of identities and nations under their dominions. Thus, authors built around the figures of Native women a romantic discourse, positioning them as “princesses” who rejected their own cultures and religions for the love of the colonizers, submitting themselves to the dominance of the white settler. As doubly-colonized subjects, they are interpellated not only by the White, Euro-American gaze (and the oppression coming with it), but also by the Indigenous hegemonic masculinit(ies), which has either appointed them as “traitors” or subjugated them under the heteronormative and patriarchal patterns that were enforced by settler administrations (and reproduced by Indigenous men). For more on this, see, for instance, Green, Rayna. “The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture.” *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1975, pp. 698–714; Valaskakis, Gail Guthrie. *Indian Country: Essays on Contemporary Native Culture*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005; or Merskin, Debra. “The S-Word: Discourse, Stereotype, and the American Indian Woman.” *The Howard Journal of Communications*, vol 21, 2010, pp. 345-366; and Hokowhitu, Brendan. “Taxonomies of Indigeneity: Indigenous Heterosexual Patriarchal Masculinity.” In *Indigenous Men and Masculinities: Legacies, Identities, Regeneration*, ed. Kim Anderson et al., University of Manitoba Press, 2015, pp.80-95.

<sup>8</sup> As not imagined in Western ontologies since these narratives “justified” the indigenization of the settlers to dispossess Indigenous communities of their territories.

<sup>9</sup> Here, Mary Paniccia Carden’s approach to MMIWG2S seems in line with Mojica’s take. See Carden, Mary Paniccia. “Verbs That Will Story Our Bodies into Something More Than Missing’: Poetry, Presencing, and MMIWG2S.” *American Indian Quarterly*, vol 46, no 3, 2022, pp. 155-188.

<sup>10</sup> See Smith, Andrea. *Conquest: Sexual Violence and the American Indian Genocide*. Duke University Press, 2015; Hargreaves, Allison. *Violence Against Indigenous Women: Literature, Activism, Resistance*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2017; Andreson, Kim. *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood*. Second Story Press, 2000; Driskill, Qwo-Li, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen, editors. *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*. University of Arizona Press, 2011; Arvin, Maile, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill. “Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy.” *Feminist Formations*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2013, pp. 8-34; De Vos, Laura. “Settler Colonial praxis and gender in contemporary times.” *Settler Colonial Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2021, pp. 103-117; and Rifkin, Mark. *When Did Indians Become Straight? Kinship, the History of Sexuality and Native Sovereignty*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> The wording used here is intentional, trying to bring about all the popular cultural references including it, for instance, U2’s song “In the Name of Love,” but also to acknowledge Sara Ahmed’s influence in the development and writing of both the thesis and this paper, after her

magnificent chapter "In the Name of Love," in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Carter draws on Mojica, Monique, and Ric Knowles. "Creation Story Begins Again: Performing Transformation, Bridging Cosmologies." *Performing Worlds into Being: Native American Women's Theater*, edited by Ann Elizabeth Armstrong et al., Miami University Press, 2009, pp. 2–6.

<sup>13</sup> This "sound of the drum" brings to mind Brant's essay "Keep the Drum Playing," where she talks about the importance of Indigenous storytelling and writing, indicating that this "is not a reaction to colonialism, it is an active and new way to tell the stories we have always told" (40).

<sup>14</sup> Understood in Gerald Vizenor's sense as an "active presence," "the continuance of stories" (1).

<sup>15</sup> The Ceremony of Corn is also hinted at several times throughout the performance and in the published edition of the script. This ceremony brings together "the four spheres of the Nahua universe: earth, sky, ocean deeps, and underworld" (See Sandstrom, Alan R. "The Tonantsi Cult of Eastern Nahuatl." *Mother Worship: Theme and Variations*, edited by James J. Preston, University of Carolina Press, 25-50.).

<sup>16</sup> On this topic, the work of Mark Rifkin is foundational: Rifkin, Mark. *The Erotics of Sovereignty: Queer Native Writing in the Era of Self-Determination*. University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

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**Bronwyn Carlson, Jeff Berglund, editors. *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up: The Global Ascendency of Social Media Activism*. Rutgers University Press, 2021. 260pp. ISBN: 9781978808775**

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Indigenous peoples have always been leading innovators of technology. As Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice (2018) asserts, since time immemorial, Indigenous peoples have used the media and technologies available to them towards Indigenous life, sovereignty, and future-making (21-22); and Indigenous peoples have also, and always, been vital in creating and transforming technologies, including digital and social media environments. For many years, Indigenous peoples have been creating and fostering Indigenous territories on and through social media — territories brimming with Indigenous life, love, joy, and land-based connections. *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up: The Global Ascendency of Social Media Activism*, edited by Bronwyn Carlson and Jeff Berglund (Rutgers University Press, 2021), celebrates the complex and nourishing processes of Indigenous life making, community organizing, collective sharing, and knowledge creation occurring within and across global Indigenous territories through social media environments. I come to this book as a settler of colour who has spent my entire life living within the Global North, specifically the Indigenous territories currently colonially occupied by the US and Canadian regimes. My perspective has been shaped by my positioning, and I recognize with humbleness the limitations of my knowledge and lived experience as I engage with and reflect on *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up*. I also recognize with gratitude the generous opportunity for learning that this book – and the diverse perspectives and experiences encompassed within it – offers.

While there is increasing scholarship on the potentials, possibilities, and impacts of Indigenous social media environments, the book's scope and objective is exciting, ambitious, timely, and original. Featuring chapters by independent, emerging, and established Indigenous and Indigenous Studies scholars, the work seeks to provide a global perspective on a broad array of Indigenous social media spaces, "such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Vine, Snapchat, Instagram, and TikTok" (Carlson and Berglund 2), and it is the first book to "focus specifically on Indigenous social media use and activism in a globalized context" (2). As such, this collection offers an important and necessary divergence from the predominantly US-centric focus of much digital humanities and new media discourse. Within anti-colonial organizing spaces and discussions, as well, activists and scholars in the Global South have been calling on those of us in the Global North to be more mindful of and accountable to the ways in which we overlook, ignore, and fail to engage, draw on, and center the knowledges emerging from and rooted in Global South mobilizing and scholarship. The need for Indigenous Studies to amplify the voices, perspectives, writings, and knowledges of Indigenous peoples located in the Global South has also been asserted within social media spaces by Indigenous scholars like Jessica Hernandez (Maya Ch'orti' and Binnizá). Though *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up* does continue a predominantly Global North lens, with the majority of its contributors writing from and living within Indigenous territories in the Global North, it begins to address the need for Indigenous Studies to include, support, and center Indigenous voices, perspectives, and experiences from the Global South, with Amazigh scholar Mounia Mnoeur's chapter which "shed[s] light on the contributions that [...] Indigenous communities in Morocco and in the diaspora accomplish through Facebook" (Mnoeur 81). Importantly and excitingly, then, this book begins to provide much-needed recognition of Indigenous social media presence and activism throughout and across various parts of the world, and it draws attention to the need for a more

rigorous and dynamic examination of Indigenous digital engagements beyond the US and, ultimately, beyond the Global North.

Relatedly, as editors Carlson and Berglund suggest, “Social media technologies bridge distance, time, and nation-states to mobilize Indigenous peoples to build coalitions across the globe to stand in solidarity with one another (including, for example, other social movements such as Black Lives Matter)” (3). *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up* invites consideration of the types of cross-cultural, cross-communal, translocal, and transnational coalition building that could be or have been strengthened and nourished through fast-paced and widespread social media environments, including translocal and global organizing in support of #IdleNoMore, #noDAPL, #MeToo, and #BlackLivesMatter. While a chapter on Māori Twitter discourse in the aftermath of the anti-Muslim Christchurch massacre does not center its discussion on the possibilities, potentialities, and impacts of Muslim-Māori solidarities against colonial violence and white supremacy, the chapter’s focus on the anti-Muslim attack as a way to confront white supremacy in New Zealand/Aotearoa invites embodied consideration of the transformative potentials, responsibilities, and accountabilities of such coalition building across communities that are differently but connectedly impacted by white supremacist colonial violence. Indeed, as the writers of the chapter – Steve Elers, Phoebe Elers, and Mohan Dutta – assert, social media provides the “potential to evoke solidarity, such as a shared recognition of the impact of colonization and its continuity” across communities (69). Furthermore, social media helps to raise understanding of “the connection between racism toward immigrants and refugees and racism toward Indigenous peoples” (74), what they refer to, drawing on Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s work, as “the tangled colonial relations of power and privilege” (69-70). Given my positioning as a racialized settler in so-called North America, a key concern that drives my work and my commitments is how my community – the diasporic Filipinx/a/o community – can be better relations and kin to Black and Indigenous communities within and beyond so-called North America, and to think and work through the messy incommensurabilities and possibilities of solidarities between and across Black, Indigenous, and people of colour communities. *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up* draws attention to how social media platforms provide opportunities for expansive, global, and rapid cross-cultural solidarity movements and mobilizing. It also begins to reflect on how these online movements resist the vast and interlocking ways that (settler) colonial systems enact oppression translocally and transnationally.

At the same time, while social media has enabled, fostered, and encouraged global and cross-cultural solidarities and mobilization, so too has social media been a territory where – as within land-based territories – colonial violences are enacted, an issue that various chapters of *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up* speak to and contend with. In the context of the Americas, from which I live and write, one particularly pervasive and violent form of colonial harm within and beyond the social media sphere is anti-Black racism. The anti-Black racism encountered and perpetuated within social media environments includes violence against Afro-Indigenous and Black Indigenous community members in the so-called Americas. *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up* discusses recent critique regarding Afro-Indigenous writer Rebecca Roanhorse’s book *Trail of Lightning* (2018), but does not recognize, address, nor contend with the anti-Black harassment and harm directed at Roanhorse that fuelled this critique and that was perpetuated through and within social media spaces, an issue Diné/Anishinabe artist Kayla Shaggy has powerfully written and spoken out about both through and beyond social media platforms. Contending with and addressing ongoing anti-Blackness is an urgent, necessary, and crucial aspect of ending the multipronged violence of colonialism. As Black, Indigenous, and Afro-Indigenous feminist scholars and organizers living and writing within the so-called Americas — including Robyn Maynard, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Sefanit Habtom,

Megan Scribe, Amber Starks, and Tiffany Lethabo King — assert, Black liberation and Indigenous sovereignty are intertwined (Maynard and Simpson 2022; Starks 2021; Habtom and Scribe 2020; Lethabo King 2018).

This book — its intentions, limitations, diverse chapters, and ambitious scope — makes clear that social media environments are fraught and complex ecosystems simultaneously filled with immense possibilities and potentials to harm and to surveil, as well as to heal, care for, and nourish relationships. *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up* provides a timely and much-needed introduction to the ever-expanding complexity and vibrancy of Indigenous life on and through social media. The editors of the collection recognize that a book on international social media will always inevitably be incomplete and limited in what it's able to share and address. As Carlson and Berglund write, "Social media is ever-changing [...]. We know that the experiences of Indigenous social media users are too diverse to ever contain within a single book" (12). Despite its limitations, the book contains an abundance of what Justice would call good medicine stories: stories to be celebrated and that celebrate the rich beauty, care, and innovativeness of Indigenous life and relationality, stories by Indigenous peoples that "heal the spirit as well as the body, remind [readers and listeners] of the greatness of where [Indigenous peoples] came from as well as the greatness of who [Indigenous peoples are] meant to be" (Justice 5). As Justice says, these good medicine stories "give shape, substance, and purpose to our existence and help us understand how to uphold our responsibilities to one another and the rest of creation, especially in places and times so deeply affected by colonial fragmentation [...]. They tell the truths of our presence in the world today, in days past, and in days to come" (2). We might understand many of the stories of *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up* — its chapters and the memes, tweets, videos, and other social media that they celebrate and share — as being what Anishinaabe New Media scholar Jennifer Wemigwans (2018) has termed "digital bundles" for Indigenous people while they navigate and build community within social media spaces: as Wemigwans discusses, a bundle, "from a community-based Indigenous perspective, refers to a collection of things regarded as sacred and held by a person with care and ceremony" (34). Within and across its introduction and fourteen accompanying chapters, *Indigenous Peoples Rise Up* tells many good medicine stories — teachings that hold care-filled knowledge, or bundles, for and by Indigenous communities — about the brilliance, impacts, and possibilities of Indigenous social media activism across a wide expanse of issues, concerns, and experiences, which intersect and include protecting Indigenous communities and knowledges from digital data mining, surveillance, appropriation, and extraction, and honouring, practicing, and nourishing Indigenous feminisms and Indigiqueer epistemologies, Indigenous performing arts and creative expression, and land-based pedagogies.

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**Copp lie Cocq and Thomas A. Dubois. *S mi Media and Indigenous Agency in the Arctic North*. University of Washington Press, 2020. 334 pp. ISBN: 9780295746609**

<https://uwapress.uw.edu/book/9780295746609/S mi-media-and-indigenous-agency-in-the-arctic-north/>

*S mi Media and Indigenous Agency in the Arctic North* is part of a series called *New Directions in Scandinavian Studies*, which is set on offering interdisciplinary approaches to the study of the Nordic region of Scandinavia and the Baltic States. This book's focus area is on the S mi and their agency through – and use of – different media, and it is written by Copp lie Cocq, professor of European Ethnology at the University of Helsinki, and Thomas A. Dubois, Halls-Bascom Professor of Scandinavian Studies, Folklore, and Religious Studies at the University of Wisconsin. The acknowledgments also display the highly collaborative groundwork for this book, recognizing the help from a series of sources, where many are S mi themselves and/or come from the field of S mi Studies and the broader Indigenous Studies, as well as Communication and Digital Studies.

The book is written with the intention of including a multitude of voices that enrich the material in various ways, leaving it to the final two authors to weave the material into a cohesive book. This, however, seem at times to be a challenge. It is clear that the authors want to show how agency and activism through media are part of a process of decolonization, where S mi create and take back the agency of self-representation, but there are some stumbles, especially concerning what media the authors want to cover and how. For instance, the blurb on the back of the book highlights how it contributes to how digital media have become an integral part of daily life, yet this is not the turning point of the book. Or rather, it's not for at least the first four chapters. The reasons seem to stem from the use and appliance of the term "media" when speaking of S mi media.

"Media" is a slippery term because it constitutes different meanings depending on which field the term is used in. The book itself is located in this muddy field, as it tries to merge different conceptualisations of media. These conceptualisations are media as material, media as socio-technical formats of cultural expressions, and media as communication technologies. While "media" and "mediation" can have onto-epistemological meaning following Media Theory and, for instance, media philosopher John Durham Peters, other disciplines treat media as material or as a defined type of cultural artifact (arts). Others again see media as either mass media and social media, meaning media which transmit human forms of communication through semantic signs, being either presentational (the latter) or representational (the former). Here, the focus is not on the material, as much as the communication.

While there are certain chapters in the book that are a joy to read, while also providing the reader with important insights and thorough analysis, the book as a whole seems to want to say too much. This can be seen in the various rationales provided in both the introduction and the concluding chapter of the book. In the introduction, the book is described as covering "S mi language communications" (5), where song and film seem to be treated as the same type of communication (or medium) as a social media platform. This is also echoed in the concluding chapter, which summarizes the book as providing the reader with "self-representations through different media" (276). The scope is defined as presenting and analyzing how "Indigenous identity become articulated in media products" (27), but also S mi "presence and activism in modern digital media," and further on stating that the matters discussed are produced

*media* and *participatory social media* (28). This is, however, the clearest summary of the book, which also presents an interesting scope because it indicates that the text will look at both the media products themselves (as media) as well as the presence of Sámi in communicative media and social media, as just two examples. Accounting for what was stated earlier in the introduction, there must also be a semantic element of Sámi language present in the products and communicative acts done through the communicative media.

The book is divided into seven chapters (plus an introduction and a conclusion), progressing chronologically from mainly the 1970s to today; each chapter uses a specific Sámi word for “snow,” representing and naming the era in which the chapter is situated in relation to the state of Sámi agency. Chapter 1 reads as a sort of historical summary of Sámi media pre-1970s. The chapter chooses, as a describing media produced for this time, a particular song from the 1600s, and the communicative functions realized through song as a medium in this historical context. Chapter 2 concerns the use of images and sound in mass media in relation to a demonstration and protest, focusing on how Sámi agency and activism tied to the Alta protests were presented in mass media at the time, as well as the adoption of radio and television used by the Sámi. Chapter 3 then takes a step out into the global world, and how Sámi participated in showcasing “otherness” and making it a positive attribute. Chapter 4 gives an overview of the main features of recent Sámi film and music in relation to activism through the choice of four films and four music videos, from the turn of the century up to today. Here, we have reached the media products of today, and there is a change from one main product to multiple products being addressed.

While films and music videos rightly took up a lot of cultural space at the start of this century, it seems strange to not include any other media products beyond the audio-visual. A new medium, which carries the same type of aesthetic function as novels, films, and songs, is games. In addition to games, there are also graphic novels and digital literature, as well as multiple cultural artifacts produced and distributed outside traditional established channels. Since this book is published in 2020, it seems weird not to mention the Sámi influence of the Disney movie *Frozen*. Last year saw the release of *Skábma* (2022), a game fully voiced in Northern Sámi, following the trail of the *Sami Game Jam* of 2018 and games such as *Gufihtara eallu* (2018) and *Rievssat* (2018). These games seem to qualify for inclusion since the theme of Cocq and Dubois’s book is related to agency and activism. Novels as medium also seem to be missing, without the authors explicitly stating why. Here, Swede and Sámi author Ann-Helén Laestadius has made a noticeable impact in the Nordic countries. Likewise, the Norwegian and Sámi author Sigbjørn Skåden has been particularly noticeable in the Norwegian public and literary sphere.

Chapter 5 contextualizes the Sámi use of participatory online media, and thus starts the second part of the book, which looks beyond media products, instead focusing more on digital social media as communicative and participatory media. This is followed by Chapter 6, which goes deeper into the role of social media in relation to the Sámi community. The contextualization shows good use of highly relevant sources (Bruns, Fuchs, Morozov, and Jenkins) in relation to understanding contemporary digital social media and how participatory online media has the potential for challenging structural power relations. However, it does fall short, after a while, in its dealing with social media as social media. One such shortcoming is in comparing the online community forum SámiNet with Facebook, when the more proper comparison, at the right scale, would be with a specific Facebook group.

Chapter 7 addresses how digital media can be used for outreach by Indigenous online communication, especially concerning language revitalization and Sámi representations and imagery. As one example, the text discusses the activist-artist collective *Suohpanterror* and how they use social media to disseminate their works and practice digital activism. The chapter addresses digital activism and touches upon the use of hashtags, but it does not otherwise engage with the established field of hashtag activism research, and engagement with the processes of

digital activism falls flat. Likewise, the chapter draws upon research concerning the structures of Web 1.0, without any reflection on whether these results fit with the Web 2.0 infrastructure of today. The chapter also has a sub-par walkthrough of the concept of filter bubbles, when it applies, and to what it applies, instead choosing not to use the most established research on the phenomenon (i.e. *Are Filter Bubbles Real?*, by Axel Bruns (2019)), even though Bruns is cited earlier in relation to social media in general. Overall, the authors' hold on and knowledge of social media seem at times to be a bit shallow, as evidenced when they write that "Social Media is identified as a place where young people spend time" (255).

With the advent of Web 2.0 and the dominance of Instagram over Facebook in the later years (now replaced by TikTok), there is also a trend of Indigenous influencers which could have been addressed in this particular chapter. Maxida Mäarak, while being primarily known as an artist, has also taken on the role of a Sámi influencer on Instagram. Likewise, the Sámi opera singer and influencer Adrian Angelico has, for the last few years, used his status on Instagram and TikTok as a way to promote Sámi visibility through online engagement and activism, both in-reach and outreach. This dual work that so many Indigenous influencers do today is an important aspect and is something that was greatly missed from Cocq and Dubois's chapter. The chapter could also have benefitted from a more thorough analysis of power relations, mediation, and agency in relation to the use of different social media.

As can be seen, the media products (produced media) are mostly covered in the first part of the book, while the use of communicative media are covered in the latter half of the book. They otherwise do not engage much with each other, an issue which could have been mitigated by looking at a specific media product in a particular social media context. Where are all the media products of today? And how do Indigenous identity and activism get entangled in the larger media ecologies of media products, accounting for the type of distributional and communicative media that take part in the life of a cultural artifact (or "media product," to use the authors' preferred term)? It could have helped to have a rationale for why cultural artifacts are suddenly bracketed, while technologies and new mediative ways are centered in the last three chapters of the book.

This lack of a structural rationale may make the text challenging to read for those in working in Media Theory, as the focus of media changes: from artistic media as cultural artifacts (such as songs and movies) to communication technologies and technology as distributional media for communication. However, it should be noted that there is an attempt to merge these concepts through "the evolving sociopolitical project of building Sámi indigenous awareness and solidarity" (6). However, following this statement is a definition of communication which seems to use a very American pragmatic communications studies approach and which strays away from communication in relation to media and mediation. This means that the book can (perhaps a bit shallowly) state that the northern Sámi translation of communication, *gulahallan*, emphasizes not what is transferred but the process of meaningful interaction between two people in conversation. As the authors write, "*gulahallan* connotes more a sense of negotiated and then mutually shared understanding than a simple transfer of property or information" (11-12), a definition which, they say, is different from the common definition of communication. But from a media theory point of view, *gulahallan* is actually not that different from how communication as mediation is defined. Here, it could have been fruitful to use the works of the previously mentioned media philosopher John Durham Peters, who has written two important works on communication and media, or to use the (European) media ecological perspective, which, as an onto-epistemological framework, has much in common with many Indigenous epistemologies on how to view the world in relations and entanglements and not as simple transfers.

However, there are some other caveats in the first chapters of the book as well, especially concerning the commodification of cultural otherness presented in Chapter 3. The chapter is

missing some specificities tied to how the Sámi language gained success internationally and on what grounds. The text further states, concerning the music of the 1970s and 80s, that “Swedish and Norwegian groups were having their greatest economic success mimicking the sounds and whiteness of America” (86). But if we are to turn to the influential Norwegian pop group A-Ha in the 80s, this problematizes such a statement. Both the name (a Norwegian expression) and syntax (singing “take on me” instead of the grammatically correct English phrase “touch me”) were ways of promoting their Norwegian-ness. While it might be true that internationally Scandinavian pop singers sang in American English, using sounds and rhythms derived from international pop music norms, it is a stretch to say that the globalization of American pop music does not come without any opposing forces. Globalization is often conceived as the reproduction of the same culture throughout the world, but looking closely, there is always an element of glocalization happening. Further on, the 1970s and 80s also saw great success in the use of Norwegian in songs (look to the major success of the Norwegian genre *trønderrock*, for instance) from pop stars who never ventured outside of the Norwegian borders or sing in English.

While the presence of joik in Norwegian Eurovision was mentioned in Cocq and Dubois’s text, it is odd that the authors do not mention the contested aftermath of this song, as deranged versions of the joik were sung at Sámi people to harass them in Norway. The push-and-pull factors of gaining agency and visibility also brought with it unwelcomed side-effects which are still present in Scandinavian society today.

Having said that, I want to end by highlighting the parts of the book that are particularly interesting. Chapter 3 is a strong media-sensitive analysis and close-reading of a multimodal work made from the practice of combining image-making and poetry. Here, the authors show how Vakeapää’s *Beaivi ahcazan* (1989) is a product resulting from working with the concept of a book as a medium and what it is like to approach a book as raw material, part of the cultural products itself. Further on, the analyses of movies such as *Ofelas* (1987), *Sameblod* (2016), and *Kautokeino-opprøret* (2008) are a joy to read, and which are all beautifully written as well as informative mediations on Indigenous agency through the film as a medium. Here, the authors show their excellent grasp of film as a medium.

Likewise, the section on SámiNet (the first Sámi social media platform) and the use of social media which followed afterward, is an informative account of the road we have all traveled when it comes to the social media of the internet. Here, the same processes which moved the internet from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 also affected agencies of different groups and communities, as platforms became global corporations at the same time that our chief ways of communication became these platforms. A similar reflection on how this changed persons to users, and how a similar forum, Echo (for the east coast of the US), once thriving, became replaced by the Web 2.0 social media, can be found in *Lurker: How a Person Became a User*, by Joanne McNeil (2020). Reading Cocq and Dubois’s chapter in combination with McNeil’s work is an offhand recommendation I want to include in this review.

To conclude, the book is a useful resource when looking at specifics, especially SámiNet, and certain media products as examples of self-representation through different media. But the work as a whole lacks coherence. There are some insightful chapters in this book, but they are better as single contributions which stand alone as fantastic media artifacts. I predict the life of the book will be living as loose chapters on different curriculums, instead of as a complete work, well-read on someone’s shelf.

Perhaps there should have been two books: one focusing on important Sámi media artifacts related to Sámi agency and their circuits of distribution in shifting media ecologies and ecosystems, the other focusing on the use of social media for activism, and as communicative

media, part of the contemporary culture of the Sámi. Merging these two different ways of the contemporary post-digital life of Sámi today can be a challenge, as can be seen in this book.

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**Sarah MacKenzie. *Indigenous Women's Theatre in Canada: A Mechanism of Decolonization*. Fernwood Publishing, 2020. 184 pp. ISBN: 9781773631875.**

<https://fernwoodpublishing.ca/book/indigenous-women8217s-theatre-in-canada>

In her monograph *Indigenous Women's Theatre in Canada: A Mechanism of Decolonization*, Anishinaabe/Métis/Scottish scholar Sarah MacKenzie examines subversive representations of gendered colonialist violence in plays by Monique Mojica, Marie Clements, and Yvette Nolan. Noting that sexual violence against Indigenous women "is a fundamental mechanism of the colonial project," MacKenzie argues that "[a]cknowledging this history," which has long been denied, "is essential to creating a new, decolonial future" (3). In her nuanced close readings of *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* and *Birdwoman and the Suffragettes: The Story of Sacajawea* (both by Monica Mojica), *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* and *Now Look What You Made Me Do* (both by Marie Clements), and *Annie Mae's Movement* and *Blade* (both by Yvette Nolan), MacKenzie posits that "gendered violence is represented as an embodied reminder of colonization, with Indigenous women portrayed as active agents of resistance as opposed to emblems or passive victims" (28). Expertly weaving together historical research with feminist post-structuralist, postcolonial, and decolonial thought to provide new critical insights into these ground-breaking plays, *Indigenous Women's Theatre in Canada* provides a compelling argument for the transformative power of feminist and decolonial theatre that represents Indigenous women not as empty, dehumanized ciphers "signifying colonial destruction, but rather as indomitable, empowered leaders" (14).

Although the scope of MacKenzie's monograph, which focuses on six plays by three Indigenous women written and produced in Canada during the period between the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, might seem narrow, the revisionist texts that she analyzes cover a vast range of historical, cultural, geographic, and nationalist contexts that open up a larger discussion of feminist and decolonial strategies of representation. In her discussion of Mojica's richly intertextual and creative reimagining of maligned, forgotten, and misrepresented Indigenous women in *Princess Pocahontas and The Blue Spots*, for instance, MacKenzie carefully unpacks the multi-layered historical references and cultural allusions that inform Mojica's revisionist staging of multiple and diverse voices. Deftly combining feminist post-structuralist theory with a great breadth of historical research, drawn from Indigenous and decolonial texts that include Mojica's own critical writing and source texts as well as more recent revisionist histories, MacKenzie thoughtfully analyzes Mojica's poetic and highly politicized representations of real-life Indigenous women from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, spanning multiple nations, lands, and cultures: among them, the Nahuatl translator Malina, more commonly known as La Malinche in Mexico; the Powhatan girl Matoaka who would later be remembered as Princess Pocahontas; the Métis, Cree, and Algonquin wives of the fur traders in the land now known as Canada; and the Quechua women "who fled the Spanish court, resisted Christianization and forged a new community of women in the Andes mountains" but whose legacy of resistance was later co-opted by the Catholic church into the image of goddesses and virgins (33). In the chapters that follow, the same careful attention to historical and biographical research is applied to contextualized close readings of plays by Clements and Nolan. In her perceptive analysis of Nolan's *Annie Mae's Movement*, for instance, MacKenzie examines biographical

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information, the misogyny of the male-dominated American Indian Movement, the failure of the masculinist and colonialist justice system, and contested accounts of the life and death of Mi'kmaq activist Anna Mae Pictou Aquash.

MacKenzie's selection of texts and her sensitive analysis provide an ethical response to the paradox at the centre of her study: the urgent political need for subversive representations of colonialist gendered violence that neither reify this violence nor reduce the women affected by it to stereotypical victims and emblems of colonial destruction. Not only does this approach to representation often pander to the voyeuristic white gaze and provide an outlet for what MacKenzie dubs "empathy porn" (128), the cultural fixation on violated victimhood dehumanizes Indigenous women while also running the risk of re-traumatizing survivors. The plays examined in her study, by contrast, employ creative and poetic means to empower these women, releasing them from the role of passive victims. Indeed, MacKenzie notes that surreal staging and magical elements are used as a decolonial tool that gives previously silenced women back their individual voices, identities, and human agency so that they can re-emerge as heroes and subjects of their own narratives. This practice also connects characters to their cultural roots and the spirit realm. MacKenzie's analysis of the spectral women whose strong personalities and sense of community take centre stage away from the unnamed serial killer in *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, for instance, provides a clear demonstration of how revisionist theatrical texts and performances have the power to transform social and cultural scripts by resisting sensationalist media portrayals of gendered and racialized violence that fetishize violence and glorify male perpetrators. Nolan likewise rescues the historical presence of Annie Mae from the position of tragic victim, depicting her as a warrior woman who fights against intercultural and intracultural misogyny. The menacing supernatural figure of the Rugaro, representing male violence, is pitted against the protagonist whose courage and strength emphasizes her role as a powerful leader and a voice of resistance in Nolan's text. Tracing a similar trajectory in the work of Monique Mojica, who restores misrepresented women from the past to the sacred role of grandmothers, MacKenzie argues that these revisionist texts engage in an important feminist and decolonial project of cultural recuperation and healing.

This insightful study argues persuasively for the cultural and political value of feminist and decolonial theatre that counters colonialist stereotypes and misrepresentations by providing alternative herstories that celebrate women's power, agency, and resistance. Underlying this argument is an ethical appeal for challenges to representation not just for the sake of artistic experimentation but for social and political change. In her view, the feminist plays that she analyzes "not only revise colonial stereotypes but reimagine incidences of racialized and gendered violence in a manner that empowers Indigenous women, encourages understanding on the part of audiences and ultimately promotes healing" (28). Though this goal might seem utopian, the nuanced post-structuralist theory and historical examples that MacKenzie provides make a compelling case for the very real material and political effects of cultural representations and ideologies that construct social identities and power relationships.

The strength of this book lies not only in its nuanced close readings that draw on a wide range of contemporary theory and historical research but the way in which it allows the playwrights and their plays to lead the way in imagining a decolonial approach to theatrical representation. MacKenzie shows a deep respect for the works and the political

aims of the writers, as evidenced by her careful attention to their own words and sources, giving the impression that the concepts drawn from feminist, literary, theatrical, postcolonial and decolonial thought serve the texts and not the other way around. This is very different from some early postcolonial studies of Indigenous drama that used the plays programmatically to illustrate abstract theories, often problematically reinforcing colonialist forms of knowledge production in the process. The attention to the artists' voices and discussion of grassroots movements in this work provides a more broad-based understanding of the Indigenous political movements, communities, and ideas that inspired the texts under discussion. The cultural work of healing and reclamation that MacKenzie links to the aesthetic and political aims of the playwrights also influences her approach to the subject matter. Like the plays that she analyzes, MacKenzie pays homage to the legacies of the Indigenous women whose stories have been eclipsed and distorted by patriarchal and colonialist representations.

Offering a comprehensive theoretical, socio-political, cultural, and historical framework for understanding feminist and decolonial revisionist writing and performance, MacKenzie also provides useful and concise background on the playwrights and the theatrical production of their plays to contextualize their work. Arguing that her study is deliberately contained to Canadian drama and contexts, and thus bound to a particular white settler nation-state, she links this approach to her desire to explore the history of colonization in her own homeland and the benefits of local, "community-based activism" that has often led to "visible, immediate improvements in the lives of Indigenous women" (142). At the same time, she acknowledges the limitations of her monograph, which did not allow sufficient space for a detailed analysis of transcultural and cross-cultural Indigenous women's theatre. MacKenzie's engagement with Mojica's transcultural and transnational coalition building across Indigenous nations and continents in her plays and critical writing links Canadian texts and contexts to transnational Indigenous women's theatre histories and approaches, however, opening up a discussion of the political significance of working across cultural and national boundaries. The concluding chapter uses the example of Mojica's theatrical work and that of her mother and aunts who formed Spiderwoman Theater in New York, the longest running Indigenous theatre in North America, as a model for cross-cultural Indigenous theatre, inviting future scholars to take up the mantle of studying Indigenous women's drama in a comparative framework that is transnational. This call to action, like the plays MacKenzie analyzes, reminds the reader of the many lacunae in the study of Indigenous women's theatre, not unlike the premise of her book which seeks to redress the fact that more scholarly attention has been devoted to drama by Indigenous men than women in Canada. While the texts of Mojica, Clements, and Nolan have been studied in isolation, the act of reading these plays in conversation with each other and letting them point the way toward more ethical and empowering representations of Indigenous women, past, present, and future, serves as an important step toward creating a more diverse and inclusive view of Indigenous theatrical writing and performances. Though this is not explicitly stated, the fact that Mojica, Nolan, and Clements have been leading figures and innovators of Indigenous theatre in Canada for decades as artistic directors and founders of important Indigenous and feminist institutions, as noted in MacKenzie's contextualization of their plays, also suggests that they deserve more critical attention like the women leaders whose stories they reimagine on stage.

The notion of working across cultural differences and coalition building forms another crucial thread of the decolonial project envisioned by MacKenzie. This becomes another way to

dismantle white supremacy and heteropatriarchy in her view by unfixing binary constructions of gender, sexuality, culture, race, and nation. In raising this argument, she repeatedly draws attention to the notion of coalitions across Indigenous nations and cultures and between white settlers and Indigenous peoples as a form of resistance. This makes sense in the context of a study that examines Indigenous women's responses to, and subversions of, gendered colonialist violence; it also speaks to the question of Métissage represented in many of the plays and critical theories that Mackenzie studies by women who identify as MacKenzie does as Métis or of mixed ancestry. The question of coalition building could also be usefully explored in relation to the connections between Indigenous and Black women and women of colour. Djanet Sears, a leading figure of African Canadian theatre, for instance, served as both a director and dramaturg for Mojica's *Princess Pocahontas* in 1989. It is also worth noting that the period of the twenty-first century has seen a rise of intercultural and cross-cultural theatre in Canada that brings together artists of different racialized and cultural backgrounds. This is beyond the scope of the well-defined and well-argued parameters of MacKenzie's cogent study, of course, but it could be counted as yet another example of the gaps in knowledge that she addresses in her final chapter, which calls on future scholars to open up new directions for thinking about the diverse, and often overlooked, field of Indigenous women's theatre.

Due to its interdisciplinary approach, this book is essential reading not only for students and scholars of drama and theatre studies, but across the disciplines of Indigenous studies, gender studies, literary studies, performance studies, sociology, and history. Its careful articulation of decolonial and feminist thought, and its use of drama and theatre as a site for exploring these views in both historical and present-day contexts that extend across a range of transcultural and transnational contexts, makes a compelling case for the wider political and social significance of Indigenous women's drama as a medium for engaging in timely and relevant debates about decolonization, anti-racism, and violence against women.

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**Cherie Dimaline. *An Anthology of Monsters: How Story Saves Us from Anxiety*. University of Alberta Press, 2023. 42 pp. ISBN 978-1-77212-682-2**

<https://www.uap.ualberta.ca/titles/1050-9781772126822-anthology-of-monsters>

I fully admit that I thought Métis writer Cherie Dimaline's *An Anthology of Monsters* was, well, a book of monster stories. But the slim book uses the metaphor of monsters to, as the subtitle suggests, understand "How Story Saves Us from Our Anxiety." By using "our," Dimaline invites us to her kitchen table by acknowledging how many of us have "anxiety, panic, and all their asshole acquaintances" (n.p); this is a communal journey, not a solitary one. Dimaline perceptively asks, "Why are we so mean to ourselves? What is it about anxiety that makes us so full of empathy and understanding for others but so decidedly evil to ourselves?" (14). Dimaline uses stories to create a path so we can better accept ourselves, to investigate "how our anxiety uses stories against us, how we can create stories to fight back, and how life is basically an anthology of both" (40). In other words, Dimaline is calling for both a resistance to anxiety and the use of storytelling tools learn to live with anxiety. In other words, is it possible to become kin with anxiety?

This push and pull between the collective and the individual dealing with anxiety are key to Dimaline's thought process in *An Anthology*, which stems from her 2022 CLC Kreisel Lecture (you can watch the lecture here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-tFpRFldgM>), published in book form by the University of Alberta Press. The book, featuring illustrations by Jill Stanton of a woman about to set fire to an overwhelmingly large pile of sticks, is broken into sections chronicling Dimaline's journey with anxiety. She begins by recounting her panic attack when she was seven as she prepares for her first communion (wryly noting that it showed her "relationship with the Catholic Church wasn't going to work out" (6)). She becomes more and more nervous, worried about messing things up: "What if I pee my pants in front of everyone" or "What if I take the Eucharist and then throw up the Eucharist, full exorcist-style?" (7). Dimaline recalls how her perception changed, like looking down a cardboard tube with the voice in her head suggesting "no big deal, Psssst. Maybe you're dying" (7). Dimaline manages to attend her first communion but is left with the worry that another panic attack (though she didn't have the ability to name it) would happen again. Dimaline copes with this panic by craving patterns and moving things to create a sense of control in her life. She also becomes an avid reader to "experience life from a sense of safety," finding stories that echoed her own experiences with anxiety in her early twenties (10). She wonders how her life would have changed if she had access to stories like the ones she writes for young adults like *Funeral Songs for a Dying Girl* (2023) about "a halfbreed girl from the Georgian Bay who could throw a mean right hook, who lived with panic attacks instead of dreams?" (10).

Dimaline credits Lee Maracle (Stó:lō) for fostering her love of story and for encouraging Dimaline to stand on her own two feet. Maracle perceptively told Dimaline that she could "hear your grandmother in your work. So you stand for your grandmother" (26). Dimaline begins to realize that we may not know the path we're on, but "We need to trust ourselves and those who came before us to break that path," like "[Maracle] did for so many of us" (27), a handing down that Dimaline does for so many Indigenous writers. Dimaline also spoke to an Elder based in Saskatchewan who stressed the importance of story, inspiring Dimaline to write her community's narrative. This advice reminds Dimaline "that I am part of something bigger, an important part of a larger narrative. . .that I am part of these specific and resilient people, all the way back in time rolling up to today. I am enough" (18). It is gratifying to Dimaline that she can use stories in the way

that her grandmother and her grandmother's sisters suggested: to hold anxiety at a distance as a story, "to not let [anxiety] run amok as I grew up" (24).

One of these stories Dimaline's relatives use is the Rougarou, the shapeshifting Métis werewolf-like creature, a being I've written about and teach about in my Indigenous horror class. Dimaline continues her use of the Rougarou as a metaphor for colonization, resource extraction, and gendered violence but also stresses that the creature is real and not relegated to "folklore." She uses the Rougarou in *An Anthology* to realize that "uncertainty does not always mean doom or chaos" (21). The Rougarou can be charming and scary "to teach and protect the community, even if his ways are harsh" (23), a way to think about how to live with anxiety.

Dimaline uses *An Anthology* to become kin with her anxiety monsters, a gift she shares with us. She also stresses the importance of balance despite the danger of "sharp rocks but we can choreograph joy and accomplishments over their edges" (36). She reminds us of RuPaul's maxim "It's none of my business what other people think of me" (41) and invites us to make our own anthology of monsters to help with anxiety but to remember to "celebrate ourselves, sing the song, write the story of us" (42).

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**Deanna Reder. *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition: Cree and Métis âcimisowina*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2022. 179 pp. ISBN: 9781771125543.**

<https://www.wlupress.wlu.ca/Books/A/Autobiography-as-Indigenous-Intellectual-Tradition>

My father has always been enthusiastic about his children’s post-secondary education. He was dismayed when, between the first and third grades, I was steadfastly determined (in the way only a six-year-old can be) that I would never to set foot in a university. But I changed my mind—and, over the years, he has collected an array of T-shirts and sweaters emblazoned with the logos of all the universities my sister and I have attended. My mother has been more guarded in her support. Shortly before I left home and my community, the Georgian Bay Métis, for an undergraduate degree in English literature, she was quietly sorting through the things I was to take with me, and she surprised me by saying, “Don’t you learn to be ashamed of us.”

Cree-Métis scholar Deanna Reder’s *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition: Cree and Métis âcimisowina* (2022) reminded me of this pivotal moment in my life. It did so not only through the resonances with Reder’s own post-secondary experiences—the tensions she describes between being “an academic and a Métis woman” (126)—but also through the challenge Reder poses to Euro-Western approaches to literary studies in her assertion and application of Indigenous autobiography as methodology. She writes, “Instead of considering my experiences as a deficiency, I began to consider my life story as method, as a tool to rely upon when evaluating texts by Indigenous writers” (8). In her introduction, Reder describes how she “was raised listening to my mother’s âcimisowin” and how, because of this familial narrative background, she “was not surprised” to find that “Indigenous authors integrated autobiographical detail” into their writings (7). Given the importance of such autobiographical detail, however, she was “surprise[d] ... that this archive has been understudied and undervalued” in academic contexts (7), and she critiques common, culturally-uninformed interpretations of Indigenous autobiographical writing that trade on Euro-Western preconceptions of Indigenous cultural values as well as the publishing industry’s dismissal of or harmful engagement with Indigenous autobiography.

At one point, Reder mentions listening to renowned Métis writer Maria Campbell “share[] a Cree concept, *kwayaskwastâsowin*,” meaning to “put things to right” (55). In *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition*, Reder herself sets out to put things to right. Pivoting from an initial “plan[] to draw on the techniques developed by autobiography theorists,” Reder decides to focus her research instead on a vital component “lack[ing]” in the study of Indigenous autobiographical writing: “Indigenous perspectives” (8). In analyses of autobiographical writing by James Settee, Maria Campbell, Edward Ahenakew, James Brady, and Harold Cardinal, Reder considers how these Cree and Métis writers “all draw on similar worldviews—ways of knowing or ways of seeing (*nêhiyawitâpisinowin* [Cree worldview])—that emerge from a common language spoken in similar parts of the world” (11-12). In a style that is both highly accessible and critically engaged, Reder generously—and I think bravely—interweaves her scholarly study of these writers’ âcimisowina with her own and her family’s stories, revealing not only their interconnections with some of the writers but also how her life story and community perspective offer a culturally-specific frame for interpreting these writers in new ways that are more complex, rigorous, generous, and ethical. Reder’s contributions are essential and manifold. Besides those already mentioned, she frames her book as an intervention in language revitalization by structuring each chapter around “a concept expressed in *nêhiyawêwin*,” the Cree language (11), and she forgoes the academic terms and

frameworks of postcolonialism and autobiography studies in favour of a focus on “Cree paradigms,” values, “understanding[s] of history, pedagogy and relationships” (121). In other words, *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition* not only brings Indigenous perspectives into an ongoing academic discourse about Indigenous autobiographies but also reframes that discourse through “nêhiyawimâmitonêyihcikan, translated as nêhiyaw thinking or Cree consciousness” (19).

The intellectual beauty of *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition* is reflected in its cover, a painting by Plains Cree artist George Littlechild, who listened to Reder’s family story “about how [her] kôhkum cured a man from blindness, and translated the story into an image that celebrates kôhkum’s power, intelligence, and beauty” (139). Reder refers to this story recursively throughout her text, meaning that she returns to it multiple times but from different angles that continuously add to the complexity and significance of her literary analysis. I loved these narrative acts. They reminded me of listening to my family’s own stories and how the meaning of these stories depends on the teller, the listener, and the time and place—or, as Reder puts it, how narratives “shift[] ... based on who is telling the story, and when and in what context” (128). Reder’s retellings of this story serve as examples of the importance of community knowledges and how stories speak to different cultural values and personal responsibilities for listener and teller (131). Reder emphasizes such community knowledges not only through the Cree concepts that structure each chapter, but also in pages prefacing each chapter—written in both nêhiyawêwin and English—that share a lesson central to understanding the literary analysis that follows. Although Reder critically responds to discourses within English literary studies, these prefatory pages signal the (re)focusing of her analysis around nêhiyawî-itâpîsinowin and family and community knowledges, lending to the overall impression that *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition* is a book with a great deal of heart.

At the same time, it is a book that is rigorous in its literary analysis. The first two chapters of *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition* consider momentous autobiographies written in what is now Canada. In “Chapter One: âcimîsowin: Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition,” Reder reads Cree writer James Settee’s “Settee’s Life” (1891) in relation to Anishinaabe author George Copway’s *The Life, History, and Travels of Kah-ge-gah-gah-bowh* (1847). Although “few have had the chance to read” Settee’s “recently uncovered” essay, Settee has the distinction of being one of “the ‘earliest Cree Writers in Saskatchewan” (Kristina Fagan Bidwell qtd. in Reder 32), and Copway’s autobiography is the first-known “published text by a First Nations author” in Canada (26). Reder interrogates common academic preconceptions about Indigenous autobiography as “derivative of European models,” arguing instead that Indigenous autobiographies are expressions and “continuation[s] of varying Indigenous intellectual traditions” (26, 29). She also demonstrates how “prioritiz[ing] Indigenous perspectives of the historical context when we read Indigenous autobiographies” leads to culturally-sensitive and decolonizing interpretations of these texts (15). “Chapter Two: Interrelatedness and Obligation: wâhkôhtowin in Maria Campbell’s âcimîsowin” focuses upon “the most famous Indigenous autobiography in Canada” (15), Campbell’s *Halfbreed* (1973). Reder applies the Cree cultural values of “wâhkôhtowin, the interrelatedness of all things,” and respect “for multiple perspectives” to a reading of Campbell’s autobiography (48). At the same time, she considers how colonial legislation and the publishing industry work against wâhkôhtowin in the narrative and production of Campbell’s text (45, 53). Reder demonstrates how she practiced the value of wâhkôhtowin in her own academic engagement as she and Alix Shield worked to recover and return to Campbell a passage of the text that Campbell’s publisher had “excised without her permission” (54-55, 53).

The following two chapters focus on the autobiographical writing of Cree Anglican priest Edward Ahenakew. In “Chapter Three: Respectful Interaction and Tolerance for Different Perspectives: kihcêyihitamowin in Edward Ahenakew’s *Old Keyam*,” Reder compares the narrative “Old Keyam” in *Voices of the Plains Cree* (1973)—a compilation of two of Ahenakew’s texts edited by settler author Ruth M. Buck—with Ahenakew’s unpublished original version to interrogate contradictions within the text. Although she discusses Buck’s editorial intrusions upon Ahenakew’s narrative and the contradictions that these intrusions entail, Reder also applies “the cultural value of kihcêyihitamowin, respect between people,” to think about how, “[i]n a time of tremendous change and challenges, Ahenakew tried, as an expression of a Cree value, to make peace with the viewpoints of both the Cree and of the colonizers, by trying to hold what sometimes were irreconcilable perspectives” (73, 75). Reder builds on this analysis in “Chapter Four: Edward Ahenakew’s Intertwined Unpublished Life-Inspired Stories: âniskwâcimopicikêwin in *Old Keyam* and *Black Hawk*” in her consideration of the final chapters of Ahenakew’s unpublished *Old Keyam* manuscript, which Buck cut when compiling *Voices of the Plains Cree*. She applies the concept of âniskwâcimopicikêwin, “the process of connecting stories together” (Neal McLeod qtd. in Reder 80), in her contention that “it is impossible to understand Ahenakew without access to all his work” and ultimately offers a more nuanced and informed representation of Ahenakew’s interconnected writings (80).

While Reder’s personal and family stories are interwoven throughout *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition*, they appear somewhat more central to chapters five and six. In “Chapter Five: How âcimisowin Preserves History: James Brady, Papaschase, and Absolom Halkett,” Reder considers how famed Métis political leader Jim Brady’s autobiographical writings preserve the history of Chief Papaschase as well as how her mother’s âcimisowin preserve community memory of Brady and Halkett, who went “missing without a trace” in 1967 (103). Noting community suspicions of foul play and police ambivalence, Reder discusses how “âcimisowina document stories about people and events that otherwise would be forgotten” (17) and asserts that, through these stories, it is evident “that relatives and communities cared,” despite there being “times that we couldn’t do much” (108). In “Chapter Six: kiskêyihitamowin: Seekers of Knowledge, Cree Intergenerational Inquiry, Shared by Harold Cardinal,” Reder reflects upon her academic journey in relation to a 2005 public lecture by Cardinal, a prominent Cree lawyer, in which “central to his approach are autobiographical questions” (122). Building upon Cardinal’s discussion of “iyiniw kiskêyihitamowin, which means ‘Indigenous People’s Knowledge’” (118), and the teachings about “what it means to be nêhiyaw” (17) that he learned from a Cree Elder and shared with the audience, Reder considers how the Cree “concept of intergenerational and holistic search for knowledge” impacts her relationships to earlier and future generations as well as her own academic work (121). Particularly striking for me, given my mother’s fear that university education might cause me to forget who I am, was Reder’s reflection about the International Feminist Book Fair at the University of Montreal during her undergraduate degree. She remembers attending a “session of about a dozen poets, all Indigenous women from across North America who were giving readings of their work,” and thinking “[f]or the first time” at university, “Yes, my mother would be comfortable here” (126).

I never did learn to be ashamed of my community. And, while my father’s enthusiasm for learning inspired me, my mother’s warning always lingered protectively between me and a curriculum that prioritized Euro-Western literature and ways of thinking about the world. I tell this story out of respect for Reder’s autobiographical methodology and in gratitude for the way her book has encouraged me to rethink the tensions between my identity and education—to see how my community’s intellectualism persisted in Euro-Western academic spaces in ways that I had not previously recognized. By encouraging such personal engagement and self-reflection, Reder effectively creates space for Indigenous scholars and culturally- and community-specific

intellectualism within the academy. She also demonstrates how university education and resources can be mobilized responsibly to support the interests and projects of Indigenous writers and communities. And even as she does all of this, Reder offers a model for respectful and informed literary engagements with archived and understudied Indigenous writers and those who have encountered barriers and harms within the publishing industry. *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition* is a necessary read for anyone interested in the archival recovery of Indigenous literatures, the work of Indigenous language revitalization, and the practice and study of Indigenous autobiographical storytelling.

*Erin Akerman, Brock University*

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**Georgiana Valoyce-Sanchez. *A Light to Do Shellwork By*. Scarlet Tanager Books, 2022, 68 pp. ISBN: 9781734531350**

<https://scarlettanager.com/a-light-to-do-shellwork-by-poems-by-georgiana-valoyce-sanchez/>

Georgiana Valoyce-Sanchez's long-awaited debut collection is, at its core, a book about family, though family is ultimately a very large concept for her. Dedicated to her Chumash father, John Joseph Moreno, and her O'odham mother, Rosita Olea Moreno, *A Light to Do Shellwork By* highlights the myriad connections that endure over time, through place, and along the varied pathways of human lives. In characterizing the book in this way, I am self-consciously trying to avoid words that suggest the blending of different heritages or traditions. For one of the most immediate impressions produced by Valoyce-Sanchez's work is how meaningless tired tropes of mixed identity and culture (which tend to suggest divisions needing to be reconciled) are for her. Rather, the poems in this collection highlight how, in her experience, being an Indigenous person in California is about having a sense of deep connection with a rich and complex world, one that is eternally present and marked by unities, not gaps.

*A Light to Do Shellwork By* opens with a prose poem titled "The Gathering," a piece that is simultaneously very precise in its presentation of a location (Gaviota, CA, the historical site of multiple Chumash villages and petroglyphic art) and timeless in its depiction of a moment (the beginning of ceremony). Like many of the pieces in the collection, this is a simple poem on its surface that contains great profundity underneath. The sun rises. The smells of coffee and bacon mix with the sounds of people waking. An elder blows into a conch shell to call the people to prayer. The people come. In that simplicity resides the poem's fundamental meaning, which provides a keynote for the book. Ultimately, it is the moment of gathering, presented as an act of continuity and community untroubled by the passage of history, that is the sufficient climax, the essential act. The poem needs no other subject. And what Valoyce-Sanchez goes on to do throughout the book is to continue this act of gathering, weaving together family memories, ancient stories, and a range of places that crisscross the southern California and Arizona landscape.

In one of the early poems in the collection, "The Dolphin Walking Stick," Valoyce-Sanchez recalls her father engaged in an act of storytelling as he shows her an object of great importance to him (and now to her). As the poem progresses, the reader is reminded that in the Chumash creation story, an important moment is the migration from what are now called the Channel Islands to the mainland, using a rainbow bridge created by Kakunupmawa (the Sun) and Hutash (the Earth Mother). During the journey along that bridge, some of the Chumash people fail to follow Kakunupmawa's instruction to not look down at the waters far below. Losing their balance and falling into the sea, they are subsequently transformed into dolphins, a moment that establishes an enduring relation between two now distinct, but connected People, some living on land and some in the deep waters of the central California coast. The presence of the walking stick as the focal point for this moment of storytelling weaves together multiple layers of meaning tied to this knowledge. For what Valoyce-Sanchez's father is teaching her is that the Chumash homeland, the dolphin people leaping from the waters, coated in their rainbow glister, and the relations between them, are all imminent in her being. Father and daughter literally walk with these stories every day, if they only



physical space does not emphasize loss, however. Rather, her mother's memory and vision render the seemingly absent past present again: "There is it there/it is/she says pointing/ to a thirty-acre scar/of bare earth/seeing/so many almond trees/that aren't there anymore" (32). Similarly, in "Starry Night," Valoyce-Sanchez focuses on the ghost town (a term she complicates) of Picacho, CA, which is located on the border with Arizona. Many Californians would think of Picacho as an abandoned mining town, now buried underwater after the completion of the Imperial Reservoir, if they thought of it at all. For Valoyce-Sanchez, though, the site of the town (which was founded by her O'odham great grandfather, José María Mendivil) evokes something different. Her poem recounts a camping trip, walking in the hills and looking at the stars. Recollections of star-stories of the Seven Sisters (the Pleiades in Euro-Western traditions) shared by various Indigenous peoples dominate Valoyce-Sanchez's thoughts on this "profound Picacho night" (52). And in such a context, the meaning of the place loses any sense of loss it might have taken on in the hands of another writer. "Ghosts walk among us," in Valoyce-Sanchez's version of this ghost town:

Great-Granpa  
long dead    the old Picacho townsite  
transparent in starlight

Gramma    Daddy    Mama  
Breathing in our midst  
the light of stars long dead    alive  
and shining this dark night. (53)

Placed as the penultimate piece in the collection, the title poem offers perhaps the most condensed expression of Valoyce-Sanchez's core artistic values in this book. Dedicated to her father's memory, "A Light to Do Shellwork By" recalls "The Dolphin Walking Stick" in certain respects. The poems' situations have some similarities, with father (now old) and daughter again sitting alone and talking together, but now driven by the appearance of sunlight filtering through bedroom window curtains to reflect on abalone shellwork. Abalone shells come in many colors, of course, but in Chumash decorative art, one often finds an emphasis on three central colors and their associated elements--white (wind), red (fire), and blue (water)--all of which I mentioned earlier as recurrent motifs in the collection. Valoyce-Sanchez highlights those colors, among others, in the poem, while also referencing her father's focalization of the connections between sun and ocean. All of this, I would suggest, calls to mind again the story of Chumash migration highlighted in the earlier poem:

My father turns his head to acknowledge the sun  
The light    the light  
he says  
and the light within

It's a good light to do shellwork by

The ocean sang in my father's hands  
Abalone pendants shimmered rainbows (61)

In this moment, Valoyce-Sanchez highlights how extension from the past is a form of connection to it, in the way she compares the writing of a poem to the act of working a shell:

I hold my father's hand  
my own shellwork      words  
my poet's eye noting the light (62)

This use of the theme of light to connect father and daughter/past and present/land and water appears also in "There is a Fire," the final poem in the book. There, Valoyce-Sanchez recalls a dream her father had, one month before he died. While swimming in darkness in the sea, and growing increasingly weary, he saw the light of fires on the shore. Seeing in this an image of those "who made it" (in what surely also recalls the earlier act of migration), he gains new hope. Valoyce-Sanchez describes herself as driven by that same kind of vision and hopefulness, rooted in a sense of connection:

I am sure      I have seen  
the same light in the eyes  
of the Seekers  
who dare to believe  
and follow  
their own good destiny  
despite all of the odds  
against them (64)

When she reflects on the firelight of her father's dream, Valoyce-Sanchez notes that this light "cannot die" as "It is more ancient and sacred/than the universe" (65). As such, she observes, "It will always flare forth/like sunrise/bringing life/to our sleeping world" (65). In this moment, one might hear the echoes of her father as storyteller in "The Dolphin Walking Stick," as when, in his final reflection on the tale of Chumash migration and relation in that poem, he notes "Someone told me that story/long before I ever heard it" (5).

This sense of a world of imminent presence, full of profound connections waiting to be found in moments of clarity, is what drives this collection. As poet Denise Low correctly notes in her forward to the book, the history of Indigenous California is one characterized both by "egregious losses" of land and an "ongoing miracle" of cultural survival (xi). When one reads *A Light to Do Shellwork By*, characterizing the land as "lost" becomes much more complicated, however. And it seems to me that one also begins to view such survival not so much as a miraculous occurrence, but rather as an inevitability.

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

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/611543/making-love-with-the-land-by-joshua-whitehead/9780735278868>

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.

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**Adler, Nathan Niigan Noodin. *Ghost Lake*. Neyaashiinigiing, ON: Kegedonce Press, 2021. Print. 307 pp. ISBN: 978-1928120247. \$19.95.**

<https://www.kegedonce.com/books/ghost-lake/>

Nathan Niigan Noodin Adler is a Two-Spirit Anishinaabe and Jewish writer from Lac Des Mille Lacs First Nation in Ontario, Canada. He holds a BA in English and Native studies from Trent University, and an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia. He also earned a BFA in Integrated Media at OCAD (Ontario College of Art & Design University) and works with multiple media, such as audio and video, painting, and even glass. He currently teaches Creative Writing, Indigenous Literatures, and Oral Traditions as Assistant Professor at the University of Toronto Scarborough.

Adler is a laureate of the REVEAL Indigenous Art Awards granted by The Hnatyshyn Foundation. His previous Indigenous horror novel, *Wrist*, won the prestigious Governor General's Award for English-language poetry in 2016, and its companion volume, *Ghost Lake*, won the Published Prose award in the English fiction category at the 2021 Indigenous Voices Awards, a competition focused on works by emerging Indigenous writers in Canada. His short story "Abacus" was part of *Love After the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction* edited by Joshua Whitehead, awarded the 2021 Lambda Literary Award for LGBTQ anthology. His first speculative fiction anthology *Bawaajigan: Stories of Power*, co-edited with Christine Miskonoodinkwe Smith in 2019, features icons of Indigenous literature like Richard Van Camp and Lee Maracle but also emerging writers of Native speculative fiction such as Gerald Silliker Pisim Maskwa. As the title, *Bawaajigan*, the Anishinaabe word for *dreams*, indicates, this collection explores the transformative power of stories and dreams; as such, the work is representative of Adler's on-going use of dreams as fundamental in shaping the destiny of his characters and confronting the readers to examine their own impressions of reality.

In both his works of horror and Indigenous futurisms, Adler considers the modernity and diversity of Indigenous cultures and spirituality. *Ghost Lake* not only explores the characters' struggles in navigating a racist, misogynistic, and capitalistic postcolonial society, it also celebrates the diversity of their mixed racial, cultural, and sexual identities. Adler brings up several themes quite common in contemporary Native literature – such as intergenerational trauma, loss, and grief – yet treats family tensions, recovery, and various avenues for healing in a truly endearing way that invites an empathetic response, without any compromise on the spooky, the gore, or the grisly that we expect from a work of horror.

Chapters in *Ghost Lake* are built on a succession of shifts in focalization and types of narrators. The novel opens with Garion, a third-person omniscient narrator who brings the reader with him thanks to a well-executed back and forth between direct and indirect discourses and internal focalization. The stream of consciousness is a stylistic tool that Adler reuses throughout, but the style of discourse adapts to each alternating narrator in fascinating detail. Aanzheyaawin is another third-person omniscient narrator, yet the vocabulary and syntax are beautifully adapted to fit her personality and point of view. Zaude and Fanon take turns giving their internal perspective on the events, one installed as a non-omniscient I-narrator, the other written in an uninterrupted stream of consciousness, pushing the reader closer to the characters with each change of narrator. In a delightful twist, Kylie, Issa, Tolton, or Cadence, previously seen as secondary characters in the various interrelated

storylines, later get their own chapter as protagonists, and with it their own distinctive focalization and perspective. References they make to the events are not always enough to quickly identify the teenagers, and the switches might push an inexperienced reader to flip through previous chapters to verify whose thoughts they are given access to in each new chapter, but the confusion is more enthralling than alienating. *Ghost Lake* is a mystery, after all.

*Ghost Lake* explores the challenges of navigating intergenerational trauma, cultural identity, and personal healing in a contemporary Indigenous context. Following Anishinaabe cosmology of thirteen moons, the thirteen chapters are organized around complex and multi-dimensional characters at different stages of life. Despite their respective vocabulary, perspective, and references, they are still diverse. Aanzheyaawin and Zaude both mourn the death of a sibling, but one is consumed by her desire for revenge while the other investigates mysterious clues. Fanon and Kyle both face hostile natural catastrophes, yet their respective struggles might have more to do with angry spirits than just bad weather... They all share a common propensity for doubt, constantly questioning their sanity. Adler expertly disguises the past with the present and blurs colonial understandings of imagination versus reality, pushing his characters and his readers to interrogate their instincts. When the characters question their visions to the point of self-diagnosing mental illnesses, the reader has to examine their own propensity for logical fallacy.

The abundance of references to nature and cosmology keeps the characters' debates on superstition in the realm of the possibility for the sublime. Confronting our current postcolonial reality with other understandings of time, *Ghost Lake* hints at examining the simplistic associations between Indigenous epistemologies and nature we continue to see in literature. Following Anishinaabe conceptions of chronology, Adler presents us with cycles of life built on centuries of memories. The characters keep returning to the lake, because the lake remembers, and nothing is lost nor destroyed, but simply transformed or transferred. Frequent references to spiders and butterflies serve as culturally appropriate allegories for cycles and continuation, but it is important to notice that it is the characters who make these associations: they, themselves, are not reduced to creatures of nature. Adler's detailed, vivid descriptions of the natural landscape of northern Ontario surely advertise the beauty of the land and anchor the characters in the physical realm. This should not be misconstrued as romanticization: *Ghost Lake* and its characters are definitely contemporary and embody the multiplicities of today's Indigenous communities, including urban and disconnected Natives. After all, the spirits of the lake do not enforce a hierarchy based on language proficiency or cultural practices: they recognize all the characters as Anishinaabe and will continue to haunt them until they find a way to make amends.

The carefully crafted chronological structure of the chapters could have been confusing or complicated, were it not so perfectly orchestrated, with every detail falling in place when we least expect it. The multi-faceted layers of reality combine, separate, or expand from one chapter to another. No matter how attentive the reader is in spotting the references, they always come unexpectedly, like delicate but bright flowers peeking through snow, creating a sense of wonder more than surprise. Adler plays with repetitions and accumulations, interlocking explicit figures of style like ediploses and anadiploses into a web of references which tie the multiple perspectives into a studded concatenation of points-of-view. He skillfully weaves anaphora with epistrophe in each new chapter to anchor the specific speech of the character serving as a narrator for a section, then surprises us with various symplotes sprinkled throughout the whole novel to link the sections together and bring the various characters together on yet another level, this time linguistically and syntactically.

If the nuanced yet endearing characters are not enough to convince horror aficionados to dive into this unsettling weave of spooky secrets, the combination of Adler's evocative prose and his expert level of stylistic craft should do the trick. *Ghost Lake* is a jewel example of both the booming genres of Native horror and Indigenous futurism, and it deserves its spot in bright sunlight as what Cherokee writer and scholar Daniel Heath Justice defines as Indigenous wonderworks, or stories rooted in Indigenous epistemologies, offering a new space for other meaningful ways of experiencing our and other worlds "through lived encounter and engagement, through ceremony and ritual, through dream" (Justice 152).

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