Chapter 1

How Do We Learn to Be Human?

> Raven shaped us; we are built for transformation. Our stories prepare us for it. Find freedom in the context you inherit—every context is different: discover consequences and change from within, that is the challenge. Still, there is horror at having change foisted upon you from outside.
>
> —LEE MARACLE (STÓ:LŌ), "GOODBYE, SNAUQ"

Although we are born into human bodies, it's our teachings—and our stories—that make us human. Whatever our particular gifts or limitations, no matter how our specific biology influences our decisions and behaviours, our humanity is far greater than the simple consequence of being born into the species *Homo sapiens*. The exchange of DNA is as much an accident of history as it is an act of will, and culture and kinship travel different (though often parallel) currents. Our biology is only a very small part of our humanity; the rest is a process of becoming.

We tend to like our metaphors, analogies, weathered old chestnuts, quick-and-easy examples, especially for this most elemental of questions. In the old "nature vs. nurture" debate, we might think of nature being the clay and nurture the act of sculpting. The medium of clay determines much of what can be achieved, but it's the care or negligence of the sculptor that has the greater influence. Of course, this presumes that the clay itself has no further role to play than to simply be, and it also ignores the ways that moisture, light, temperature, and other environmental conditions can affect both the process and the final result, so in the end this hackneyed metaphor, like most, falls short. Metaphors alone can't encompass what it is to be human, nor can lived experience.

For that, we need stories.

We learn to be human from everything around us, as the worlds we inhabit help to define both the limits and the possibilities of our humanity. And because the specificities of each of our experiential worlds is different—as Lee Maracle writes above, the contexts we inherit—there can never be a single way of being or becoming human, though no doubt some ways have a great deal in common with one another. That's the role of experience, of teaching, and of story—to help us find ways of meaningful being in whatever worlds we inhabit, whatever contexts we've inherited. This is what I take Thomas King's oft-quoted words to mean: "The truth about stories is that that's all we are." Our lives are incarnations of the stories we tell, the stories told about us, and the stories we inherit. They are both the process and the consequence of the transformations into the fullness of our humanity. Indeed, without those stories, without the teachings about the *who*, *how*, and *why* of us, something is profoundly, almost existentially amiss. We don't need to speak them to live them; even those not given voice are inextricably embraided in our sense of self. We know ourselves *only* through stories. The unstoried life is a terrible thing to comprehend, a soul-deep desolation.

Yet not all the stories that shape us are our own. Most, inevitably, are not, and these are the legacies we inherit, the formative context of our being. That's part of the beauty and frightening power of story: sometimes the shaping stories are an empowering blessing, sometimes they're a disfiguring curse, sometimes they offer a bit of both shadow and light. But they're always part of who we know ourselves to be.

Although the US-based Ojibwe writer Louise Erdrich is rightly famous as a prolific and award-winning novelist, it's her small nonfiction travelogue about writing and reading, *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*, that I like best, in part because it so beautifully articulates the profound human longing for stories that crosses space and time. In the book, Erdrich travels through northern Minnesota to the Great Lakes region of southern Ontario on a kind of memory quest, mapping Ojibwe writing through the land, language, and history of her people. She notes that her own career is both a personal calling and a natural extension of cultural values, gesturing even to one possible origin of the word "Ojibwe" itself: "The meaning that I like best of course is Ojibwe from the verb *Ozhibii'ige*, which is 'to write.' Ojibwe people were great writers from way back and synthesized the oral and written tradition by keeping mnemonic scrolls of inscribed birchbark. The first paper, the first books." Throughout the journey, Erdrich punctuates each chapter with the refrain "*Books. Why?*" and offers different answers each time. At the book's end, after she has returned home to Minnesota, she reflects on a question she's pondered since childhood: if stranded alone on a desert island with just one book, which book would you want it to be? It's an anxiety-producing question for any book lover, let alone a writer and bookstore owner, but her answer is simple, and brilliant: a dictionary, the source of endless story possibilities. And then she offers the following thoughts, almost a departing blessing:

Books. Why?
So I can talk to other humans without having to meet them.
Fear of boredom.
So that I will never be alone.

The aloneness of reading isn't loneliness. With books and other stories, whether experienced in solitude or lived community, we abide in human presence beyond the flesh and blood of personal experience. It's a remarkable alchemy, this storied transformation of self to other, and back again.

When we're in the presence of stories, we're never truly alone. But that's not to say that all stories are welcome companions. We must take care with the company we keep, for some of these stories do far more harm than good. And the stories of how we become and remain human are some of the most dangerous of all.

The struggle to understand and articulate our humanity is at the heart of most literatures, customs, laws, faiths, nationalisms, identities—even our basic sense of self. All peoples have developed complicated understandings of that existential question and the ways it has fascinated, frustrated, and frightened all human cultures throughout our varied histories. Some of these understandings are expansive and generous, considering the category of human to be a broad and multidimensional one that includes kinship with a whole range of beings that share something we might call "humanity," while others—perhaps most—are more narrow in their definition, limiting "human" to specific classes of beings, with powers and privileges distributed accordingly. It's what Nigerian storyteller Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Igbo) so brilliantly warns about in her 2009 TED

Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," wherein she identifies Euro-western literature as a particularly insidious purveyor of corrosive singular stories about all kinds of peoples, especially those of lands colonized by Europeans—in this case, the "authentically African" story that presumes that there's only one narrative that represents thousands of cultures and millions of people over one of the largest land masses on Earth. And she makes the point that the expression of the single story is inherently an expression of power:

> Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, "secondly." Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.

Single stories are shallow, but easily mobilized to support inequality, bigotry, and self-interest. Complexity challenges manipulation—it's why the most cynical politicians and talking heads go out of their way to evade complexity and opt for the sound bite, or, when that fails, excessive volume. Yet even in more exclusive contexts that insist upon singularity over multiplicity, the privileged category of the moment is always in flux—it's inevitable, as the complications of the world and its myriad relations evade these simplistic categories, and stories find their way free to disturb the status quo and to liberate people to express all the rich, bewildering diversity of their lived experiences.

In thinking about how we learn to be human, we also have to keep firmly in mind that Indigenous traditions generally don't limit the category of *person* solely to the *human*. As humans, we're simply

one of many peoples, and depending on the tradition, there are also animal people, bird people, rock people, fish people, and so on, alongside human people. Multiplicity is inherent in kinship; good relations require acknowledgement and, importantly, mindful accommodation of difference. All these peoples have their languages; all have customs, habits, strengths, weaknesses, and personalities. For all we know—and certainly Indigenous traditions teach us that it's the case—these other peoples have their own story traditions, too. And many of the mainstream settler culture's assumptions about which qualities are entirely unique to humans—language, a moral sense, rationality, tool use, etc.—have little purchase in cultures where untold generations of close observation and abiding relationship have given ample evidence otherwise.

The mainstream is also increasingly out of step with Eurowestern science, especially ethology, the study of animal behaviour, which continues to demonstrate just how little we understand about the complex subjectivities of our other-than-human neighbours, especially when it's a self-referential comparison with our own limited sensory comprehension of the world: crows and badgers and bonobos use tools; whales and prairie dogs have grammatically rich vocabularies; dogs can assess the fairness of situations; elephants grieve their dead; octopuses problem-solve and create underwater gardens arranged in ways practical and even pleasing to octopus aesthetics. The list is as varied as the species. And why do we even ask why animals aren't more like humans? We wouldn't measure so well against migratory birds in assessing travel based on the Earth's geomagnetic field, after all. In fact, we'd utterly fail that test on our own merit and without the benefit of technological assistance, and might well be considered quite stupid and barely sentient if bird sense was the standard against which *we* were measured.

The only thing that really seems to be unique about humans as a species is our capacity for wilful, self-deluding destruction. We're *really* good at killing, maiming, and spoiling things, and doing it

with pleasure. And we always have been—Indigenous traditions are well stocked with warnings against human destructiveness and lessons for more respectful co-existence with our other-than-human relatives. In Cherokee tradition, for example, it is humanity's mindless cruelty that leads to the presence of disease and suffering in the world; as a result of widespread slaughter of our beast-kin, the chiefs of the various Animal and Bird peoples cursed us with every imaginable disease and debilitating ailment. It's only due to the generosity of the Plant peoples that we've managed to survive to this point, as they each provided a cure to one of the Animal-inflicted maladies. And although some cultures and many individuals have worked to act more responsibly in our relationships with these other-than-human peoples, as a species we've repaid their generosity with wide-scale extinction, deforestation, climate catastrophe, and poisoning of the earth, air, and waters.

The deeper you go into definitions of the human, the less clear and more arbitrary everything becomes. We find ourselves to be more like other animals, and our dependence on the other-than-human world becomes even more evident. This isn't a bad thing; indeed, it should make us humble and thoughtful. But it doesn't, not really, at least not on the planetary scale. While many traditional peoples continue to practise lives of accountability and honour with the world, a great resource-consuming mass of humanity is busy ravaging those delicate threads of interdependence. The horrors of factory farming are worse than ever, and as we become more distanced from the actual animal lives and deaths associated with our meat consumption, the suffering of untold numbers of fellow creatures becomes increasingly abstract; neonicotinoid use is devastating bee and other insect populations, but rather than reflect on the unfolding catastrophe, pesticide industries are lobbying for even more environmental deregulation. These are only two of a litany of examples, and the list is long and ugly. The world increasingly becomes a commodity to be purchased, consumed, and flushed away

(but to where?) to poison the lands and oceans and skies that we all depend upon for survival.

In such a perspective, there are still plenty of folks out there who will insist on not just our distinctiveness but also our unchallenged superiority. While not entirely a result of colonialism, this attitude is deeply entrenched in settler colonial cultures that are themselves embedded in culturally specific understandings of what it is to be human. In the Eurowest, the dominant stories of humanity are rooted in the Abrahamic traditions, notably those of the militant, hierarchical versions of Christianity that have justified centuries of expansion, invasion, expropriation, and exploitation; while there have always been other Christian traditions, these by and large have had a negligible impact on colonialist policy and practice. In the dominant Abrahamic stories, there is a fiercely maintained boundary between human and nonhuman, and even in the former category, there is a clear hierarchy: men are more human than women, European colonizers are more human than Indigenous and other colonized peoples, the rich and titled are more human than the poor and oppressed, Christian capitalists are more human than animist traditionalists, and so on. While the Enlightenment wrested much of the West's interpretive authority away from Christianity, its fundamental structure didn't change; European philosophical and scientific traditions remain heavily invested in an ethos of human exclusivity.

Not surprisingly, artistic and ceremonial representations of their solitary deity (or, for Christian Trinitarians, a three-in-one god) fully reinforce the social hierarchies, most often showing some version of a white patriarch in white robes surveying and/or judging the world of his unassisted creation. He could be an old man (Jehovah) or a young man (Jesus), and he might be surrounded by his celestial host or the writhing souls of the damned, but either way he generally stands alone atop the cosmic order with an air of unassailable authority. And when the creeds of this

socio-religious tradition insist that "man was made in his own image," it's no great leap to see how an exclusivist god of the heavens is used as a divine model and mandate for narrower hierarchical definitions of humanity on earth.

Yet for all the bluster and self-justifying rhetoric of the social hierarchs, the insistence on these firm boundaries is far from a sign of confidence. If anything, it's clear evidence of a fundamental insecurity, a concern that their singular vision doesn't quite hold up to close scrutiny, that the diversity of humanity is far too complex and dynamic to be contained in their limited definitions. And as new information and contrary evidence is brought to bear on the question, it's either dismissed, attacked, co-opted, or gradually incorporated into the dominant order, destabilizing the power structure's claims to monolithic authority while reinforcing its seeming inevitability. Only rarely does new knowledge break down that existing structure. Yet the destabilization is significant, as it opens and empowers spaces of dissent that make possible the larger, more important transformations.

In those Indigenous cultural understandings that have withstood such colonial intrusions, the status of "human" is intimately embedded in kinship relations. It's why some version of the question "Who's your family?" or "Who are your people?" continues to be so important in Indigenous conversations: such questions don't just connect you to a lineage, however that may be understood—they place you in a meaningful context with your diverse relatives and the associated relationships of obligation, where you have people who claim you and who have, hopefully, trained you well in the ways of being a good human being. In other words, kinship isn't just a thing, it's an

active network of connections, a process of continual acknowledgement and enactment. To be human is to practise humanness.

It's why even those of us not brought up on the land or in community publicly affirm our affiliations: to say that I'm a citizen of the Cherokee Nation is, in some way, to acknowledge not just my genealogical and kinship connections to a particular polity in a particular place (distinguished from those of the Eastern Band of Cherokees or the United Keetoowah Band), but to acknowledge that I belong to them, to whatever degree they decide to claim me, which in turn is to take up as best I can the responsibilities that come from that acknowledgement. And even that's not the end of the story. I might belong as a Cherokee in certain recognizable ways, but those aren't static either, and other Cherokees will let me know to what degree I'm legible to them *as* a Cherokee person, absent other linguistic, religious, and land-based relationships. Layer upon layer, complication after complication. And it all comes down, in one way or another, to kinship.

One of the richest novels about Indigenous kinship is *Waterlily*, by the Yankton Sioux ethnologist Ella Cara Deloria. Written in the first half of the twentieth century and unpublished during her lifetime, it was drawn from her widely lived and professional experience, as well as extensive interviews with traditional Dakota community members, and offers a powerful account of Dakota lives and lifeways from their full experience on the edge of American settler colonialism. Its terminology and language are somewhat dated, and the stiff formal register can be a bit off-putting for those more inclined toward today's emotive prose. At times, the novel's gender dynamics are uncomfortably resonant with the broader patriarchal norms of Deloria's time, and perhaps demonstrate more than a passing influence of Judeo-Christian intrusions, especially given her family's deep Episcopalian faith and her own precarious position as a strong-minded woman committed to respectfully representing women's experiences in a profession that privileged men overwhelm-

ingly, both in scholarly focus and in career advancement. Yet for all these challenges, *Waterlily* remains a finely crafted novelistic study of the ways that kinship shapes self and identity, and of how the contexts of our relationships determine who we understand ourselves to be and what our duties are as a result.

Told through the birth, childhood, and maturing adulthood of the title character, *Waterlily* articulates in fiction what Deloria eloquently described elsewhere:

> [T]he ultimate aim of Dakota life, stripped of all accessories, was quite simple: One must obey kinship rules; one must be a good relative. No Dakota who has participated in that life will dispute that. In the last analysis every other consideration was secondary—property, personal ambition, glory, good times, life itself. Without that aim and the constant struggle to attain it, the people would no longer be Dakotas in truth. They would no longer even be human. To be a good Dakota, then, was to be humanized, civilized. And to be civilized was to keep the rules imposed by kinship for achieving civility, good manners, and a sense of responsibility toward every individual dealt with.

To be human is to be a good relative, and in so doing to be respectable and dignified. This is a very different mode of "civilization" than that imposed by Eurowestern missionaries, militaries, teachers, and policy-makers. As Deloria's statement and novel make clear, kinship makes peoples of us through responsibilities to one another; settler nationalism, focusing ever more on individualism in opposition to community, makes us lonely and isolated subjects of an ultimately unaccountable state authority. Penelope Myrtle Kelsey (Seneca) argues that "all aspects of the complex plot of *Waterlily* are driven by kinship obligations and what both female and male characters must do to fulfill them. Kinship acts as a standard for civilization by which Deloria measures the Dakota. It is a measure that is defined by

the Dakota themselves." And that measure isn't just about Dakota-specific identity, but the proper behaviour of a good human being.

For readers steeped in the individualist ethos of contemporary capitalist consumer culture, Waterlily's world is a bewildering place. Take, for instance, her adjustment period as a new bride. Consenting to an offer of wife-purchase from the respected hunter Sacred Horse, in part to honour the wishes of her recently deceased grandmother, Waterlily finds herself outside her own kinship circle and embedded in a new one. The complexities are many, but not foreign:

> For a Dakota bride, the major problem was not that of adjusting to her new status of wife, which was private and personal, but adjusting to her husband's family and relatives, which was a social matter. . . . She must make this adjustment smoothly and correctly, or her kinship training at home would be in question. Dakota kinship rules, especially where relatives of marriage were concerned, were very exact and exacting. Her first step was to learn by subtle observation who was what to her, and then she must proceed to conduct herself properly in each case, as prescribed by kinship law. But this was not too complicated, after all. Anyone with ordinary intelligence, who had been brought up within the framework of the system, understood all its intricacies. Nevertheless, a relentless watchfulness was needed, especially at first.

Waterlily's gradual understandings of her place within this new kinship network—and the profound mutuality of responsibilities that come from such an understanding—serve as the novel's central concern and help place the reader within that growing awareness. Her growth is our growth, and what might to many non-Dakota readers seem initially to be little more than a prison of obligations and expectations becomes gradually revealed to be a durable but flexible system that accommodates individual talents and personalities while upholding the well-being of the wider

community of relatives. Birth, death, love, loss, longing, laughter—we encounter all the stuff of lived experience as she travels with her new family on their annual cycle through Dakota territory. We're embedded in a fictionalized but carefully rendered Dakota world of careful observation, or social duty, of gentleness and profound care; we're also in a world of conflict, of resentments and failed obligations, and of the many customary and ritual methods, large and small, for rebuilding frayed social bonds in a very intimate sphere.

At one point late in the novel, in the aftermath of a snowstorm, strangers come to the Dakota camp: an older couple, two young women, and three small children. They are a rude, disagreeable bunch, likely outcasts without even the basic social graces; the warriors suspect that the children are the result of incest between the man and his daughters. Waterlily's camp nevertheless offers generous hospitality to the strangers "out of human decency" and "for their own reputations as hosts," taking seriously the admonition to "treat as a man any stranger in your tipi who bears the physical semblance of a man," but fully mindful that "what sort the man might be was not the determining factor for extending such courtesies."

Yet it's not the shifty-eyed man, his disengaged wife, or his boorish grown daughters that trouble Waterlily the most: it's the young children, who recoil from kindness, stick their tongues out at the dignified Dakota women, and show themselves to be "unbelievably wild, untutored children." Waterlily observes:

> No one had ever said to them, "No, don't do that … see, nobody does so!" and thereby shamed them into good behavior toward those about them. There were no others about them from whom they might learn by imitation. And so they were growing up without civility—and the results were terrifying to see. Camp-circle people were civilized; they knew how to treat one another. They had rules. These children were wild because they lacked any standards of social behavior.

"Civilization" here isn't the punitive system of English language use and literacy, Christian conversion, white supremacy, and capitalist acquisition so brutally imposed on the Dakota peoples of Deloria's time—the shadow of which lingers just on the edges of Waterlily's changing world—nor is it the white prejudices that held Dakotas to be "savage" and "primitive" because they didn't beat their children into docile submission or force women into malleable household servitude and men into wage labour. Instead, civilization is measured by the practice of thoughtful relations, good behaviour, and generosity of spirit, all of which made for stronger communities and more responsible individuals within the social network:

> It came over Waterlily as she observed the unfortunate children, so unkempt and so hostile, how very much people needed human companions. It was the only way to learn how to be human. People were at once a check and a spur to one another. Everyone needed others for comparison, for a standard for himself. This measuring and evaluating of self was only possible in camp-circle life, where everyone was obliged to be constantly aware of those about him, to address himself to them in the approved ways. Thus only did people learn to be responsible for and to each other and themselves.

Even some of the less pleasant aspects of social life become transformed within this system of care:

> Waterlily used to think that critics and gossips were a public nuisance. But now, seeing these wild people with nobody to criticize them, she decided that perhaps they were an actual necessity, that maybe they could not be spared. If it were not for the critics, people could never know whether they were being at their best or their worst. Here were people unquestionably at their worst—and they did not know it.... It was a tragic thing, to stay alone like this, in a benighted state.

For Waterlily, to be isolated from social accountability is to be something less than human. But even in their frightening disconnection from good human behaviour, they are still people in need, and the strangers are treated with courtesy and sent off with food. Their own lack of generosity is a stark contrast to the Dakota camp and its gossipy but largely healthy social system; it's Waterlily's camp that sets the standard for practising what it is to be human, a standard embedded in an ethos of hospitality. And that generosity isn't predicated on whether or not the strangers are deserving or even in need, but simply because it's the right thing—the *human* thing—to do.

It's no accident that Deloria set her novel in the nineteenth century, just on the edge of the massive socio-political disruptions of Eurowestern invasion and the catastrophic effects of racist government policies on Dakota communities and kinship networks that still reverberate today. *Waterlily* is an imaginative, culturally informed if somewhat limited window onto a time before the worst of these impositions and traumas, a partial reminder of what might have been, and, perhaps, what could be again. As Waterlily repeatedly observes, these practices are *learned*—they're not inborn, nor do they ride the currents of blood or sit upon the rungs of the DNA ladder, but are instead a complex and deliberate but entirely learnable process of cross-generational education and social exchange between people. Importantly, as María Eugenia Cotera reminds us, Deloria "immerses the reader in Waterlily's world, not as an outsider or an 'objective' observer, but as a participant in the camp circle, figured in the novel as a rational, ordered social universe: a place with a past, a present, and most importantly, a future." And this process takes place between specific humans on specific lands to which they belong, and in relationship with the specific ancestors and the other-than-human world with which they so intimately abide.

Yet what about those who, through no fault of their own, exist outside of those intimate familial contexts, or who have lost their

families to circumstance or violence, or for whom—as is still the case for many queer and two-spirit Indigenous people—the birth family is a threat and a danger rather than the comfort and connection of "chosen" family? How do they learn to be human after centuries of settler colonial assaults on the health and well-being of the very Indigenous kinship structures and social values that have determined our distinctive humanity?

Many of us today, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, were born into a social context of some degree of familial fragmentation and mobility, where family are those people visited across vast distances on holidays and special occasions rather than a network of affiliations and obligations that require constant care and commitment. And far too many are born into families ravaged by various traumas. How, then, do we learn to be human when Waterlily's "camp-circle life" isn't a viable option for so many of us anymore—or may not actually have been the space of full dignity and connection for all that many people, even in her own time?

Indigenous writers have long taken up these challenging questions, and rarely are there easy answers. Settler colonialism isn't something one just gets over; it's woven into all aspects of our experience, and those strangling threads are too often invisible and all the more wounding as a result. What Indigenous texts do is make visible what's so often unseen, and suggest a much more complicated perspective on what is too often grossly simplified in popular culture and mainstream media. And in considering the frayed edges of kinship that so many of us have worked to reweave in our own lives and those of so many of our communities, Indigenous writers have offered powerful, provocative, and often quite deliberately "unsettling" visions that chronicle the challenges of rebuilding what settler colonialism has mangled.

The Last of the Ofos, a novella by Cherokee-Quapaw/Chickasaw writer and scholar Geary Hobson, is a compelling example, one I've written about before but which is eminently deserving of further

study, especially in this discussion. We start with the title, a cheeky reference to James Fenimore Cooper's influential 1826 novel *The Last of the Mohicans* and its settler colonial fantasy of Indians disappearing, in resignation or in rebellion, but disappearing nonetheless, before the ostensibly unstoppable superiority of white frontier patriarchy. At first glance, we might think that this story follows a similar line: the protagonist, Thomas Darko, is the last of his Louisiana-based Ofo people. We accompany his reminiscences from his earliest days in bayou country until he returns to his childhood home as an adult, and fully acknowledges that he's the last speaker of Ofo and the last of his always-small, immediate family left alive. His final years, the only part of the novella not in first-person narration, are tellingly appended in the form of a 1997 death announcement in an anthropological journal.

Yet it's what happens between the pages that fully distinguishes *The Last of the Ofos* from *The Last of the Mohicans*, and offers insight into the interventions of Indigenous writing into the still-dominant stereotypes about Indigenous humanity. Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales series (*The Last of the Mohicans* was one of its five volumes) extol the "pioneering spirit" of westward expansion, a celebration of the bloody heroism of white settler men fighting all the fearsome forces of Nature—including savage animals and savage Indians—as they bring Eurowestern civilization to the benighted wilderness. Humanity is defined in absolute contrast to the wild places and creatures of the continent, and although there's inevitable ambivalence throughout, especially in the frontiersman character of Natty Bumppo, who straddles these worlds, it's ultimately an epic about settler colonial erasure of Indigenous presence. The Canadian equivalent of this well-established frontier story is John Richardson's 1832 novel *Wacousta*, a phantasmagoric invocation of settler violence set during Pontiac's siege of Fort Detroit, and an equally troubling exploration of white supremacy and Indigenous diminishment.

Hobson's quiet novella offers a far different perspective. Thomas Darko reflects on his life, which spans nearly the entire twentieth century and includes brief stints as a bootlegger and jailbird, a Marine, a Hollywood extra, and a language keeper at the Smithsonian Institution, but only as part of a much larger story: namely, the struggle and rise of American Indian populations from the low ebb of the first half of the century to a position of comparative strength at its end. Yet the larger context of Indigenous resurgence is tempered by the many indignities Thomas faces throughout his life as a poor Indian man, as well as the loss of every other Ofo speaker in the world. While serving time in Angola Prison, Thomas learns that most of his family has been killed in a freak accident in which a train car broke loose and smashed into the family truck. He drifts into a fog of depression, one that's intimately tied to his understanding of his humanity as an Ofo man being intimately interwoven with his family and the language they share:

> I realized, too, about this time, that I had pretty well even stopped talking to people, unless I was talked to by them first, and always in English, and all the time I was thinking Ofo things in Ofo and aware that now I might never git to speak the language again since everybody but me was gone. But more hurtful than that was the flash that I had that I would never get to hear it spoke out-loud by anybody other than myownself. Then it was that I felt like I was a lone cypress in a cleared-off bayou bottom.

While he has Tunica and Biloxi cousins, those that shared his specific understanding of Ofo kinship, as expressed through shared language and experience, are gone. The metaphor of clearcutting is an apt one. It's a terrible blow, and, as he grows older, becomes a heavy responsibility as well.

We can and must celebrate the victories of our nations' survival, but even in our successes we have to acknowledge the losses.

Most Indigenous languages in North America are threatened; many are critically endangered; some exist only through the memory of their fullness in the pages of academic treatises and dust-gathering linguistic accounts. Yet are they dead, or merely sleeping? Indigenous language revitalization efforts increasingly focus on the language of sleep rather than death; after all, if these languages belong to this land and have been spoken here since time immemorial, and if our knowledge comes from the land, then as long as our relationships to the land persist, there are possibilities for reawakening what has gone dormant. And if the land speaks, too, then there's something even more profound at work here, possibilities for continuity unavailable in a world where humanity is the only form of personhood.

It would be easy to read Thomas's experience as a recasting of the vanishing Native stereotype, but it would also be a misreading. Whereas Cooper's Indians fade into nothingness before the unstoppable onslaught of white "civilization," Hobson's Indians challenge both the idea of Indigenous erasure and the presumption of settler colonial inevitability. Although he disappears into grief and depression after learning about his family's fate, Thomas doesn't remain there. Unlike Cooper's Chingachgook, who embraces his symbolic displacement by aiding in Natty Bumppo's wilderness acculturation, Thomas Darko doesn't surrender. He acknowledges the pain of his newfound poverty—not in material goods, but in family: "I was a poor man, but not jist cause I had no property. No, I was poor cause I no longer had a family. This is real poorness. It can't never git no worse than that." And he continues to speak his language, but only when away from other human ears: "I would talk to myself in Ofo, and it would seem to me like I could hear answers come back to me in the limbs and leaves of the cypresses and live oaks." This is a reversal of sorts from the desolation of the "cleared-off bayou bottom."

Thomas continues to live his life, lonely but not isolated, and eventually, after a brief descent into alcoholism and a short stint as an extra

in Hollywood westerns, he returns to his bayou home to "do some doctoring with plants and what-all" for his Tunica relatives. Yet the surest sign of a shift from the narrative of Indigenous erasure is the next step on his journey, when he travels to Washington, DC, is employed by the Smithsonian Institution, and briefly helps staff linguists and anthropologists develop a dictionary of Mosopelea, the Ofo language.

His Washington visit doesn't last long, but not from a lack of interest or commitment on Thomas's part. He works hard to share what he knows, in spite of his constant battles with the condescending and ravenous Dr. Smight, as well as his alienation from assimilated urban Indians who insist that one needs a US-issued card to be a "real" Indian, a notion fundamentally at odds with his own grounded experience. Rather, his time at the Smithsonian ends when he and a group of white staff are taken to the nearby Pamunkey Reservation in Virginia. There he witnesses the brutal strapping of Indian pupils by Mr. Gant, the white teacher, when two Pamunkey boys are caught speaking their own language—and no one intervenes on the children's behalf. It's a breaking point: "Somehow or other, it dawned on me that I jist didn't see the value in what we was doing—especially in what I was doing. A shikepoke like Smight can git paid to learn Indian languages and things, and Indian kids git whipped for talking it."

Thomas leaves after a short and frank conversation with Dr. Payne, a gentle old man who had known Thomas's older relatives, and who, along with the younger Dr. Bledsoe, was one of the two scholars who treated him with genuine kindness. It's a tender moment between two very different men from very different worlds who connect in a moment of profound mutual respect:

> He listened politely, then he say, "Sometimes scientists and scholars kill the very things they love, don't they, Thomas?"
>
> I stop, then look right at him and forgit about talking to him about hunting and what-all.

> "Yes, sir. That is really right."
>
> "Thomas, I could go on at length about the old adage of the often necessary action of breaking eggs in order to make omelets, but I don't expect any of it will matter. Am I right?"
>
> "Yes, sir. I just think I be tired of seeing too many people be the eggs you talk about."
>
> "I agree with you, Thomas." He stopped and taken a drank of water from a glass by his bed. "Sometimes I have been very discouraged by the Mr. Gants in the world and—I apologize for speaking disparagingly about colleagues—the Dr. Smights. But then we must remember the Dr. Bledsoes. And, most of all, Thomas, I remember that there are people like you." He looked straight at me and took my hand in his. "You are a good man, Thomas. Your grandpapa and parents would be proud of you. You are a great Ofo."

Along with this acknowledgement of Thomas's Ofo humanity, Dr. Payne gives him two final gifts: an Ofo switch-cane flute, snuck out of the Smithsonian holdings—and Dr. Smight's acquisitive grasp—by young Dr. Bledsoe, and a farewell benediction: "'Remember, Thomas,' he say as I am leaving. 'You are an entire nation. No nation anywhere could have a better representative.'"

Encapsulated in these last words is the telling difference between *The Last of the Ofos* and *The Last of the Mohicans*, and the exchange of the words and the flute make possible the novella's heart-wrenching conclusion. Thomas's "lastness" isn't an absence—it's a profound and powerful presence. To acknowledge the losses is not to be defined solely *by* them. Thomas isn't the deficient, bedraggled last gasp of a once-great people, but the dignified bearer of a living legacy, a nation of one carrying the memory of all those who came before, and one who continues to help his extended Tunica relatives long after he returns home to Ofo country. He grieves his losses, but still serves his people, both the living and the dead.

The last scene in Thomas's narrative voice takes place at night, after he's recorded some of his travels on tape for the Tunica chief to share with the rest of the community. He takes up the switch-cane flute he was given by Dr. Payne. The flute has returned at last to where it belongs, the bayou country and Ofo Town, to carry the living breath of its Ofo creators and to bring their music back into the world. He plays for a little while, then switches to a soft song in the Mosopelea language, which he sings into the night:

> I had a great-big lump in my throat, and soon my low-talking become kind of loud, and then I wudn't so much singing as yelling. My face and eyes was wet, but I keep on singing till my voice become raspy, like an old lady's with a real-bad cold. I was beginning to git tired and also kind of chilly, but I sung on, and the lump got smaller and smaller and then it was gone. When I finally stopped, it seem to me like I could still hear me in all the trees around and out over the water. I turned and walked back to the bank, and I knowed pretty good that things was alright for the time being. But, if they wudn't, then I figgered I could come back out here tomorrow night and sing again.

The novella ends with the dispassionate notice of Thomas's death in 1997. The anonymous writer cites Dr. Smight bemoaning the uncompleted Ofo dictionary, and recounts the rumour that "from the time he returned to Louisiana after his stay in Washington up until his death, Mr. Darko was never known to have uttered a single Ofo word publicly"—a romanticized notion that's fully contradicted by the scene of Thomas singing into the bayou night. The Ofo language, like the Ofo people, carries on, night after night, but not under the surveillance of settler scholars and their ilk. It carries on in Thomas's service to his relatives, in his songs in voice and on the flute; to return to Maracle's opening words, it's Thomas's continuing service to the full "context he inherited." In spite of all his losses,

he doesn't surrender; he doesn't fade or vanish. Throughout it all, Thomas honourably remains true to the lessons of Ofo humanity, and as a nation of one, he embodies multitudes.

Even then, we might be inclined to think, "Yes, but he still dies at the end—and with it, the Ofo language is no longer spoken." And it's true: there's no getting around or denying the impact of colonization and the losses we've experienced. Even in our affirmations of survival and endurance we must acknowledge what we've lost, because the losses are real and profound. Some losses can't be compensated; some wounds can't be healed, at least not in this lifetime.

But it bears repeating that if we focus entirely on the losses, we lose sight of what our families and our communities—and even, to invoke Thomas, "ourownselves"—have managed to maintain. It presumes that we're only in a position of trying to hold on to a finite set of resources, and doesn't take into account our capacity to grow anew and to create new practices, relationships, and cultural forms. Like all humans, Indigenous peoples are creative and visionary. The losses of the past don't inevitably determine the possibilities of the present and future. Given how the dominant deficiency narratives about Indigenous peoples are firmly rooted in the idea of absence, it's not too far a leap from acknowledging our losses to figuring our humanity *only* in terms of loss. We're more than absence.

A certain moment in the novella reminds us of this important truth. Before Thomas leaves Washington, DC, he goes to a high-powered gathering of well-to-do American Indians held in the city. It turns out to be a very troubling confrontation between Thomas and "Princess Moneybags," a light-skinned, condescending Mohawk from New York who insists that to be Indian one must have US identification and who praises the catastrophic Termination policy, whereby many smaller tribes lost federal recognition and thus protection of their lands, going quickly from self-sufficiency to impoverishment. Thomas is bemused and defiant, and is joined in his outrage by a young Pueblo man named Simon—

perhaps a fictional appearance by Hobson's very real contemporary, the Acoma Pueblo poet Simon Ortiz? The old Ofo and young Pueblo stand out in this well-heeled, assimilated, and avaricious crowd, and eventually leave to continue their conversation. It's the early 1960s, just on the cusp of the civil-rights movement and Red Power activism. Simon's prophetic words echo through the book and well past its conclusion: "I was in Texas and Arkansas and Louisiana and Alabama, Georgia, Florida—all places where there's not supposed to be any, or at least a very few, Indian people. But, you know, I find Indians all around—Indians are everywhere." In a settler colonial world that insists upon Indigenous absence, this isn't just a statement of personal observation: it's an affirmation and an invocation alike.

Indeed, Indians and other peoples *are* everywhere, as are Indigenous stories. And Indigenous writers have done much to articulate the stories of that which continues, that which *remains*, as Métis writer and critic Warren Cariou so eloquently reminds us:

> So much of the literature by Canada's Aboriginal writers is written against forgetting, against the obliterating narratives of conquest and progress and profit that have made the nation possible. These writers give us stories of dispossession, of the loss of land and language and identity, but they also, crucially, give us narratives of persistence and survival and even celebration. They remind us of what has been lost, but they also remind us that not everything is lost. After a fire, something always remains: something that must be accounted for and honoured if we are to have any idea where we are and where we are going.

This, too, is why the contemporary is so significant to Indigenous writing, of any era: in a world that so often wants to see us only as historical artifacts, writing about the *now* is a powerful refusal to disappear into the symbolic frontier of the settler colonial

imaginary. Thomas King is perhaps most eloquent on this point in *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*, when he writes:

> What Native writers discovered, I believe, was that the North American past, the one that had been created in novels and histories, the one that had been heard on radio and seen on theatre screens and on television, the one that had been part of every school curriculum for the last two hundred years, that past was unusable, for it had not only trapped people in a time warp, it also insisted that our past was all we had.
>
> No present.
>
> No future.
>
> And to believe in such a past is to be dead.
>
> Faced with such a proposition and knowing from empirical evidence that we were very much alive, physically and culturally, Native writers began using the Native present to resurrect a Native past and to imagine a Native future. To create, in words, as it were, a Native universe.

And while there are certainly some writers for whom the more distant past still leaves some glimmerings of possibility for imagining otherwise, King's observation is a sound one. To write of our lives today is to affirm, firmly and undeniably, that Indigenous peoples are still very much part of the world *now*. We, too, are human beings, not merely symbols or relics of a bygone age.

Yet the world of now, as opposed to the worlds of *Waterlily* and *The Last of the Ofos*, is one marked by very mixed assumptions of just what it is to be human, especially for Indigenous peoples. Certainly many of the old dehumanizing stereotypes and biases are rampant—the stories of Indigenous deficiency—but so, too, are more insidious ones. "Ethnicity" is a particularly problematic concept for Indigenous peoples. Unlike Waterlily's kinship camp or Thomas Darko's Ofo Town, where one's identity was embedded in one's

practice of good relationship, contemporary identity in Canada and the US (and elsewhere) is figured in one's ethnic heritage and "blood" rather than in one's obligations to kin and place. Thus we have people who proudly identify as Irish Canadian or Italian American who've never been to either country, don't speak the languages, practise little of the cultures of the homeland or the diaspora (aside from enjoying a few ethnic foods or desacralized holidays), and know little of their family's or extended community's history beyond some vague notion of inherited ethnicity.

To be clear, I'm not saying that these identities are invalid or illegitimate—they're clearly deeply cherished, and millions find even these attenuated ties meaningful. What's important to this discussion is the ways in which this particular idea of inherited identity has become seemingly naturalized in Canada and the US, when in reality it's a very modern product of settler colonial nationalism and mobile, market-driven demographics. The more people move around and become distanced from legacies and histories of place, the more their identities become commodified and separated from specific obligations to kin and community, the more they privilege the nation state and its consumable symbols for notions of belonging—and the more they dismiss and disregard kinship- and land-based identities. The contemporary nation state, in fact, *depends* upon people understanding themselves in this way to ensure that they privilege their obligations to country and commerce above those to kin and relation to territory.

And after centuries of sustained, relentless assaults on our communities and kinship practices, Indigenous peoples, too, have come to be enmeshed in these particular ideas about belonging. It bears repeating that kinship was *specifically* targeted by colonial authorities in their efforts to destroy Indigenous communities; indeed, kinship was the primary target. This is nowhere more horrifically evident than in the Indian residential school system in Canada. As communities and family homes tended to be sites of

consistent and successful resistance to assimilative practices of Canadian education and missionization, reserve-based schools were found to be ineffectual, and off-reserve, long-term residential schools took their place. This, combined with the legalized restriction of movement off reserve, made it increasingly difficult for families to maintain links with children. The settler colonial authorities knew exactly what they were doing, as shown by this excerpt from a 1889 letter from Assistant Indian Commissioner Amédée Emmanuel Forget to the Indian agent at Blackfoot Crossing, Alberta:

> I have the honour to inform you that the visits of Indians to Industrial Schools, for the ostensible purpose of seeing their children, have grown to be so frequent that they have come to be regarded by the Department [of Indian Affairs] as a very serious evil, to be discouraged, because they tend to unsettle the minds of the children, confirm and foster idle and wandering habits in the parents, and cause an unjustifiable expenditure of supplies both on the reserves and the school.

The language says it all: Indigenous families "unsettle the minds" of children.

Indeed.

Yet with every generation subjected to the symbolic and physical violence of assimilationist policies, with every family bond weakened or broken, with every person forced away from community, homeland, and history, the intrusions of white-supremacist, settler colonial notions of "race" and "ethnicity" gradually replaced the collectively based network of social relationships. And in the twentieth century, with so many Indigenous peoples living in urban areas far from their homelands—as a result of economic displacement, as well as legalized dispossession, such as the Termination and Relocation policies of the post-WWII era in the US—

Indigenous identity became inextricably entangled with dominant presumptions about what makes us human.

This is a complicated and depressing history, but what does it all have to do with literature? Simply put, these issues—and their associated stories—are all about our sense of belonging and what defines our humanity. Indigenous writers have always struggled to articulate different understandings of who and what we are in relation to our histories and current experiences. If our humanity is defined in large part by the stories we tell, then the storytellers have a vital role to play in bringing us back to healthier relationships with ourselves and with one another. They remind us of who we are and where we come from, and Indigenous texts offer possible visions for who we might once again be.

I've already given attention to fiction writers and essayists in this chapter. Now it's time for the poets. Poetry is a particularly compelling literary form for confronting the ruptures of history and the fragmenting effects of settler colonialism. Poetry distills the rage, pain, and defiance of Indigenous peoples, who remain under ideological and physical assault by settler populations that so often insist that our continued existence is an affront and an impossibility. Yet given its intimate subject matter, its sensual rhythms, and its bittersweet distillations of love and longing, poetry is also an ideal form for naming the fierce beauty of contemporary Indigenous personhood.

Certainly this dual purpose isn't unique to Indigenous poets; poetry is the language of love and war alike, often both at the same time. It resembles cultural traditions of oratory and song more evidently than does prose, and so often poetry is most powerfully experienced in person, embodied, and in shared, vocalized, breath-filled performance with other humans present. If we're asking how we learn to be human, pushing against the limits of colonial definitions and opening up space once again for our older understandings and articulations, Indigenous poetry takes us to that question and

its possible answers in a more visceral way than other forms, a powerful distillation that lingers long after the initial experience. And this has long been the case. For generations, the Mohawk writer and performer E. Pauline Johnson/Tekahionwake (1861–1913) was anthologized and variously praised and dismissed as a sentimental late-Victorian writer of wilderness elegies that looked backward to a bygone age of Canada's noble past and its fading Indian peoples. Yet throughout her lifetime and even today, her writing has been overshadowed by her performances, especially her practice of reciting poetry in proper, upper-class English evening attire, and then changing clothes halfway through into hyper-romanticized "Indian" beads and buckskin (and sometimes reversing that order). This has fascinated white observers and commentators for over a century, from journalists and scholars to playwrights, novelists, and other artists. Their questions are telling. What was she doing in these performances? Was she Mohawk or white? Was she just "playing Indian" for the white folks? Was she celebrating assimilation? Demonstrating subversive resistance as a Mohawk woman of light skin trying to make a living in a white-supremacist society? Was she selling out, settling scores, torn between two worlds?

Whatever her (likely complicated) reasons for these performances, they're far less interesting to me than her poetry, which is very much concerned with the question of Indigenous humanity. Consider the time in which it was written and published: Indian residential schools and all the paternalistic horrors of Canadian settler colonialism were in full throttle; American Indians in the US were under relentless assault from what Theodore Roosevelt would praise as "the mighty pulverizing engine" of land allotment and other policies intended to "break up the tribal mass"; Kānaka Maoli in Hawai'i were experiencing the overthrow of their traditional monarchy and illegal annexation of their homelands by US corporate and missionary interests with the support of the US Navy; gold fever in the Klondike was accompanied by catastrophe for the

Indigenous peoples of the region. This appalling list goes on and on. Indigenous populations in the lands claimed by Canada and the US dropped from millions in the eighteenth century to just a few hundred thousand by the first decades of the twentieth due to imported diseases, massive population displacements, destruction of traditional foods and medicines, rampant violence, and outright extermination.

We can't emphasize enough just how pervasive the miasma of white settler colonial supremacy was in Johnson's time. "Indians" were simply not humans to most Canadians and Americans; and, if they were, their status was of a decidedly lower order, an infantile stage in human progression, of which white settlers and their descendants stood as exemplars of the maturity of human accomplishment and civilization. It might therefore come as a surprise to read these scathing lines from "The Cattle Thief" in Johnson's first book of poetry, *The White Wampum*, published at the very end of the nineteenth century and told in a Cree woman's voice after her father has been murdered for stealing white men's livestock and his body threatened with mutilation:

> You have killed him, but you shall not dare to touch him now
> he's dead.
> You have cursed, and called him a Cattle Thief, though you
> robbed him first of bread—
> Robbed him and robbed my people—look there, at that shrunken
> face,
> Starved with a hollow hunger, we owe to you and your race.
> What have you left to us of land, what have you left of game,
> What have you brought but evil, and curses since you came?
> How have you paid us for our game? how paid us for our land?
> By a *book*, to save our souls from the sins *you* brought in your
> other hand.
> Go back with your new religion, we never have understood
> Your robbing of an Indian's *body*, and mocking his *soul* with food.

> Go back with your new religion, and find—if find you can—
> The *honest* man you have ever made from out of a *starving* man.
> You say your cattle are not ours, your meat is not our meat;
> When you pay for the land you live in, *we'll* pay for the meat we eat.

Or the final lines from "A Cry from an Indian Wife," wherein the speaker says farewell to her "Forest Brave" as he prepares for war against Canadian soldiers "marching West to quell / Our fallen tribe that rises to rebel": "Go forth, and win the glories of the war. / Go forth, nor bend to greed of white men's hands, / By right, by birth we Indians own these lands, / Though starved, crushed, plundered, lies our nation low . . . / Perhaps the white man's God has willed it so."

The book is named *The White Wampum* in reference to what is often considered the peace colour of wampum, with the darker purple beads being representative of conflict or discord. Yet so many of Johnson's poems in the collection are fierce condemnations of Canada's inhumanity, spoken in the voices of defiant Indigenous women taking steady and unflinching aim at the blind self-justifications of the patriarchal Canadian state and its citizenry. Throughout these works, Johnson's argument for Indigenous humanity is often implied through its oppressing opposites: settler colonial Canada is hypocritical, debasing, brutal, dishonest, and ungrateful; it offers false gifts and temporary promises, all with the ultimate purpose of taking the land and erasing Indigenous presence.

This isn't the Pauline Johnson many Canadian readers grew up with; this isn't the Johnson that Canada regards as its own. Her nature poems invoke the almost iconic vision of Canada's wild northern hinterlands and have been the subject of generations of commentaries and reprints. Take "Autumn's Orchestra," which imagines the speaker's journey through a mixed-wood forest as a nature symphony that reminds her of a lover across the ocean; or "At Crow's Nest Pass," where the elements battle one another for supremacy in the high mountains, far from the concerns of humanity far below.

Some of her patriotic odes to Canada could be repeated at Canada Day celebrations without much difficulty; others, such as the lamentably stereotypical rendering of the docile Japanese subject in "The Man in the Chrysanthemum Land," are less easily incorporated into today's stereotype of a progressive, enlightened Canada. As is so often the case, Johnson was complicated in her own time and certainly remains so in ours, and it's in her complications that her most significant contributions are realized.

In her essay "The Good Red Road: Journeys of Homecoming in Native Women's Writing," Beth Brant acknowledges the popularity of Johnson's much-anthologized nature poem, "The Song My Paddle Sings." She adds that, "in reading Johnson, a non-Native might come away with the impression that she only wrote idyllic sonnets to the glory of nature, the 'noble savage,' or 'vanishing redman' themes that were popular at the turn of the [twentieth] century," just before insisting on the revolutionary politics of "The Cattle Thief." As Brant argues:

> Pauline Johnson was a Nationalist. Canada may attempt to claim her as theirs, but Johnson belonged to only one Nation, the Mohawk Nation. She wrote at great length in her poems, stories and articles about this kind of Nationalism. She had a great love of Canada, the Canada of oceans, mountains, pine trees, lakes, animals and birds, not the Canada of politicians and racism that attempted to regulate her people's lives.

Particularly important here is Brant's observation that "the key to understanding Native women's poetry and prose is that we love, unashamedly, our own. Pauline Johnson wrote down that love." And that love is as much for the People as for the land, because the two are bound inextricably together. Care and regard for one translates into care and regard for the other.

In a similar vein, Dory Nason (Anishinaabe) has written on the power of "the boundless love that Indigenous women have for their

families, their lands, their nations, and themselves as Indigenous people," particularly but not exclusively in reference to the Idle No More political movement. Put simply, "Indigenous women's love is powerful. It is a love that can inspire a whole world to sing and dance and be in ceremony for the people. This has always been so." Yet that power has been targeted by the forces of misogyny and patriarchy; the backlash against Indigenous decolonization and resurgence has specifically targeted the power of writers and activists like E. Pauline Johnson, as much through ideological violence as verbal, physical, and sexual assault.

Johnson's literary descendants have come of age in a world ravaged by the loveless hunger of settler colonialism, a patriarchal world where resurgent kinship values and meaningful relationships war with the fragmenting presumptions of ethnic identifications. And it's a struggle still, but not a hopeless one. Residential school violence over generations has had a profound impact on all Indigenous communities in Canada, but those communities and their members are resilient, and, to return to Cariou's words, "not everything is lost." Continuing geographic displacements have frayed the land-based relationships of many Indigenous peoples in Canada and the US, but our peoples are adaptive, and not all bonds have been broken; many of the old traditions and old ways have endured or have been rekindled, the binding ties rewoven. The growing Indigenous populations in major cities across the continent and the growth of urban communities have separated many individuals from their home reserves and reservations, while making possible the creation of other affiliations and opportunities for cultural expression. New technologies, although dangerous and alienating when used to selfish ends, can also make possible a wide range of alliances and exchanges across time and space. And in all of these ways, Indigenous writers have sought to rebuild, reassert, reclaim, and reestablish connections and relationships that return us to ourselves, our lands, and our communities.

Those connections aren't just storied, nor are they simply symbolic; they're also emotional, physical, and embodied. Poetry and other expressive forms bring these various registers of meaning together, in voice and on the page and screen, articulating and at times creating community through invocations of connection. One of the most powerful ways this is happening is through the erotic, the literature of love. What can be a more revolutionary act of affirming our humanity than to show and share love, especially when so many of the dominant perceptions about Indigenous sexuality assume innate and loveless pathology? When we only associate Indigenous bodies in popular culture with pain and suffering, or see sex as something shameful and love as something only "good" people deserve—with goodness being framed within a monotheistic, missionary value system of violence, oppression, and obedience to arbitrary authority—then we are stripped of one of our greatest sources of strength.

Sexuality is our inheritance; it's a vital expression of our humanity, of our capacity to love ourselves and one another, of our abilities to see pleasure outside of pain, of understanding ourselves as being worthy of desire no matter our body shapes or genders or identities. And it's part of how we learn to be human, both in bodily and social understandings, as the Anishinaabe poet, essayist, and publisher Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm writes in her introduction to the revolutionary first collection of Indigenous erotica, *Without Reservation*:

> So what is Indigenous erotica? It's about the loving, sexual, "dirty," outrageous, ribald intimacies of humanity and sexuality that we all crave. It shows us as we are: people who love each other, who fall in love and out of love, who have lovers, who make love, have sex, break hearts, get our own hearts broken, who have beautiful bodies. It's about all of the crazy, poignant, obscene, absurd things we do just to taste, touch, enjoy, and enter another.

Just like all other humans, we're complicated. We yearn for touch, for pleasure, for love. We long for connection, both intimate and imaginative.

Gregory Scofield's poetic meditation *Love Medicine and One Song* is an evocative work for precisely this reason. The love explored in this book is neither the cheap, saccharine Hallmark-card kind of love, nor the melodramatic, self-absorbed, commodified passion of the movies and television. It's the language of longing and loss, hunger and redemption, departure, return, and remembrance. Not all loves last, not all shared passions endure, but in the giving and receiving, love transforms us, and bodies *remember* that we are meant for more than our pain—we are made for pleasure, too.

The book begins with a short account about the Cree tradition of love medicine and its dangers, especially when used in a selfish way, as with a woman who used such medicine on a young man. She eventually abandoned him for another lover, but he was still bound to her and pined away, finally dying from love sickness. Love, like anything good, can be destructive in the wrong hands and with the wrong purpose. In the poems that follow, the speaker is caught up in powerful, painful relationships, and experiences all the aching hunger of love but follows a different path than the man abandoned in the opening account. Rather than fading from love sickness, the speaker opens himself to the world and is thereby transfigured through ceremonies of love-through-others rather than the narcissistic practice of love-as-self. Love of and in the world offers something far more powerful than narrow, self-focused passion, and as readers we follow his journey from singular passion to these greater sensual relationships.

This is nowhere more powerfully rendered than in "He Is," to my mind one of the most erotic poems in the book. The speaker's lover embodies a sensory world of elemental experience, and the moments of ecstasy meld with all things wild and wondrous:

. . . he is
slug slipping between my teeth
and down, beating

moth wings, a flutter
inside my mouth

[. . .]

he is spring bear
ample and lean

his berry tongue quick,
sweet from the feasting.

The animals are both predators and prey—earthworm, caterpillar, slug, moth, snail, spider, watersnake, swamp frog, mouse, grouse, weasel, turtle, mountain lion, spring bear. Some, like the slug, the snake, and even the weasel, are often considered unsavoury creatures in Eurowestern traditions, while holding honoured status in Indigenous relations. Here they express their own full natures, and nothing is out of place: the speaker may become bones cracking in the jaws of a hungry mountain lion, but in this act of consumption he nourishes and is transformed, returning to self to be embraced now by the sweet-tongued spring bear.

Again and again, human experience is rendered through communion with the wild world, both beautiful and wounding: the heady, earthy scent of muskeg bogs at moments of enrapture, trees and hearts that break apart from the cold, chattering geese, skin-shedding snakes, the moon and the stars, and the sounds of ravens, coyotes, and humans in grief and defiance. Cree language is woven through the poems, supporting the speaker's songs and prayers, offering other ways to understand these connections, unravellings, and realignments.

The book ends with "Pêyak-Nikamowin/One Song," in which the speaker calls to his dream lover, "but he is gone / and the reeds are weeping." His song of grief is in Cree, calling to his sweetheart, who in the dream had stood within sight for a moment but is now gone, and there's no answer. Yet he remains, dreaming, on the riverbank, calling out "pekîwêyan nîcimos / nî-mâtoyân, nî-mâtoyân" (come home my sweetheart / I am crying, I am crying) and punctuating the cry with the sung vocables "hey-ya-ho-ho," which shifts his moment of personal grief into a ceremony of mourning. But in that shift we are reminded that the speaker—and now singer—is still alive. The song still echoes in the world. Not unlike Thomas Darko singing his Ofo song into the bayou night, Scofield's speaker sings his grief and longing into a wild world that's already been revealed to be a shared community of concern. If the reeds are weeping in empathy with the speaker, then the speaker is not alone. The love he's experienced is greater than one person, greater even than just the personhood of humanity, and the healing, when it comes, will be shared with all. Even in the final stanza of the book, we are reminded of continuity; there is something beyond longing and loss.

And love makes it possible.

Love, then, becomes the binding cord that links us to the world, and from it come all the other meaningful connections between the ancestors and descendants of generations to come: respect, reciprocity, accountability, commitment, generosity. Connection through relationship. It's not easy; it's messy, and painful, and uncomfortable. It calls us to be better than we are, to be braver than we expected, in a living world that bears the memory of who we were and the vision of who we are meant to be. It asks us to open

ourselves to vulnerability—emotional as well as physical—and to risk the blurring of our boundaries of self in the connection with others. But it requires action. Our humanity isn't what we *are*, but rather what we *enact*—we choose to become human each and every day. Mvskoke poet Joy Harjo reminds us of this process in "It's Raining in Hololulu," along with just what our humanity requires of us in the world: "Rain opens us, like flowers, or earth that has been thirst for more than a season. / . . . / We listen to the breathing beneath our breathing. / This is how the rain became rain, how we became human. / . . . / We will plant songs where there were curses."

This is in part what Indigenous writers offer us: in place of settler colonial curses that disfigure and diminish us, our writers plant songs and stories of joy and sorrow, praise and loss, remembrance and hope, rage and defiance and dedication, old memories and new possibilities, deep roots in rich soil. As evidenced by Harjo's benediction above and the work of many other Indigenous writers, the sharing and the tending of those stories and songs is an act of fierce, formidable, transforming love.

In that planting, we renew the world and one another. It's how we become human. ✣