

Bones and Stories: On Reclaiming Indigeneity When History is Written by the West

There is a lake in Minnesota called Sandy Lake. Or Big Sandy Lake, depending on who you talk to. I know it best as the place where I used to spend my summers as a kid. A lot of people have cabins there, including, for a time in the 2000's, my grandparents. It's near a town called McGregor, and it's known as a good fishing and recreation lake. There's also a reservation there, a part of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, which Band members refer to as "East Lake." In 1850, three thousand Anishinaabe people were trapped there for a deadly winter in a ploy by the US Government to remove them from their territory. Four hundred died (Smoot). It was either a case of negligence or an outright act of genocide by the US Government, depending, once again, on who you talk to.

The Sandy Lake Tragedy is memorialized in two major ways. First, there is a historical marker on Minnesota Highway 65, near the lake itself. This place of remembering was created by the state of Minnesota in the year 2001 (Native American Minnesota). Second, there is an annual event which Native people have repeated for many years called the Mikwendaagoziwag Memorial and Ceremony at Big Sandy Lake. People canoe and kayak from one end of the lake to the other, all the way to that historical marker, where a feast waits for them. They pass around a "talking stick" to allow people to say a few words about the tragedy (Aitkin Age). I've been to this ceremony before. Grown-ups and little kids alike enjoy the summer day and the food at the end, and the whole affair has an almost cheerful feel, right up until they start talking about the

mass deaths. It's a deeply somber occasion, but the air is light. The name "Mikwendaagoziwag" means "They are remembered" (Aitkin Age).

There is something strikingly indigenous about this act of memorialization. It's not a uniquely indigenous thing to remember tragedy through active participation in some communal event. Memorial runs and charities named after victims are some examples. And if you like, a much older example of active memorialization is the annual observance of the betrayal and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. That the Anishinaabe extend the "memory place" allotted to the Sandy Lake Tragedy all the way across the lake itself, however, through the act of annual observance serves as a reminder that all of the surrounding land—where both Anishinaabe and non-Indians live day-to-day—is historical land.

Indigenous fiction and memorialization have some commonalities which point to uniquely Indigenous conceptualization of the past. Fiction written by Indigenous people is ripe with Native explorations of time and memory. Many indigenous languages and cultures are built around a history-keeping tradition which once hinged entirely on oral lore. The ways that Native peoples interact with and relate to the past are culturally different from the ways that people steeped in Western written-word tradition do, perhaps due to language and perhaps due to the way that oral history shapes cultural prioritization of types of knowledge, and this cultural intimacy with the past informs the way that modern Native people remember, teach, and write about the experiences of their peoples.

I have found that it is impossible to consider the cultural perceptions of indigenous peoples regarding memory places and the passage of time without being forced to regard where I exist in time, and the place I have in it. It's harder to do than it sounds. I like to think of myself as

a passive observer, floating beyond the mechanisms that make the world turn-- merciless gears grinding merciless cogs— apart from good and evil alike and therefore free to speculate at will about each. Such voluntary disassociation is especially convenient in a day and age when the daily news cycle reads like a catalogue of tragedies. It's a reliable fantasy, a useful tool to help allow sleep to come at night when the morning headlines will assuredly be some grotesque new horror—perhaps another massacre death toll, the name of another black child executed by law enforcement, or the Trump Administration's updated grocery list of minorities to target and civil liberties to threaten. In Minnesota, companies push to build pipelines through watersheds and copper sulfide mines around the Boundary Waters. Native people battle environmental devastation alongside the devastation that the opioid crisis has wrought in this region. I'd like to say that we, as academics, cannot afford to disengage from the present for the sake of theoretical inquiry, but I think that the truth is that we more gravely cannot afford to lose composure in the face of fear.

My personal struggle with this project stems from that delicate balance between the safety of purely academic interest—that vantage point of the curious observer—and the necessary danger of empathy. Not only empathy, but of the particular, bone-achey grief one only feels in synchronicity with loved ones who pain over a shared loss.

It is either an inherent problem or the intended effect of memorial sites that they encourage us to separate out the past from the present. There's a historical marker to the Sandy Lake Tragedy on Minnesota Highway 65. We can go to this plaque and read it, and think about all the people that died, and how unfair it is that all those people died. The act of remembering brings us closer to the past, perhaps, because there is some power in knowing the significance of where

you stand. The place is a memory place, a liminal space between history and the present. And when we walk away from these memory places, do we walk away from that proximity to the past as well? By allocating places to remember, do we build ourselves a door to history that we can shut closed, the same way that we can shut closed the cover of a book we no longer want to read? If that is in fact the case, is the desire to compartmentalize the past a wholly Western phenomenon?

Native American authors concern themselves with time very frequently, or at least that's the impression I've gotten from reading Native fiction. Many novels and short stories written by Native authors about Native identity are time-jumping stories, or even time-travel stories, wherein through magical realism or narrative meandering, time moves completely out of linear order. Events and people and places are re-arranged into a different kind of order, one which paints a different picture and holds a different meaning than a story made of the same pieces which moves steadily forward.

It is common practice for us to seek out the originator of a thought, and to find ourselves successful in the search for the original author of a certain philosophy or query—or, at the very least, an author who was first recorded. When we read theory, for instance, we start with Socrates and Plato, those old dead philosophers we credit for the birth of logic in the West. We only know of Socrates through Plato's writings. Socrates himself wasn't a fan of the written word. Many Greeks back in the day were suspicious of using writing to record things. They saw it as a threat to the populace's ability to memorize and recite. The written word stuck around longer than they did, it seems.

Shakespeare wrote his lover a sonnet proclaiming the immortalizing power of the written word: “So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,/ So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.” This proclamation came true, of course. Everyone has read “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”. We have a phrase, “written in stone,” for unchangeable ideas and rules. That speaks, I think, to the permanence of the written word. In Stephen King’s *On Writing* he describes the reader-writer connection as an act of telepathy—through time and across space, one individual may impress an image or idea onto the mind of the other. The written word is not only immortal, but also infallible to an extent—what is written is what is read.

It seems silly to go over all this. Everyone who can read this understands the benefits of literacy, and probably appreciates the criticality of recorded documents as the foundation of all Western historical and scientific knowledge. I don’t need to make an argument for the written word. I also don’t want to make an argument against the written word. As a devout fiction enthusiast and compulsive writer myself, it would be ludicrous to assert that life would be better without it. Medicine, science, entertainment, and engineering are all completely built on the use of writing, as well as other record-keeping methods like videotaping and photography. The need for, and usefulness of, such things is obvious.

I don’t wish to criticize the practices of written record-keeping and hegemonic memorialization—the practices of writing history and marking graves, among other things—but rather to remind readers that this Western system prioritizes certain types of information over others. By choosing what to keep in and what to omit, writers, historians, and scientists create the image impressed across time and space through that telepathic trick, and slowly work together to piece

a specific vision of the world in little immortalized scraps. The way we prioritize information is cultural, and it is not the only way it can be done.

My father describes the Ojibwe language as going into “a big lake with little inlets, bays, rivers.” What he means by this is that single words in Ojibwe tend to contain one or more actions and nouns. For instance, the word “abinoojiinyikaazo” translates to “s/he pretends to be a child.” “Ookwewaade” means “there are maggots on it.” “Madaabiinige” means “s/he carries a canoe down to the lake on his/her shoulders” (*The Ojibwe People’s Dictionary*). Words are altered by their state of being and attribution, and to speak a word in Ojibwe generally means stating a thing is happening in a certain way, rather than simply naming a thing. My father claims that this way of thinking about words and language has bred particular habits in Ojibwe storytellers— those who grew up speaking Ojibwe, he says, are very circular in their storytelling, and their points and premises are unclear until the conclusion of their tales, and they allow themselves to travel down those little inlets and rivers in the stories more willingly than those who grew up speaking English. I grew up listening to my dad’s storytelling. I believe these habits did not die with the last native-speaking grandmother in our family, because he exhibits (perhaps unknowingly) all the symptoms he describes of an Ojibwe-speaking storyteller. For instance, he could not describe the nuances of an Ojibwe story without launching into a long, nostalgic, detailed, seemingly pointless account of listening to his own Ojibwe-speaking grandmother launch into a long, nostalgic, detailed, seemingly pointless account of a girl she got into a fight with at the boarding school. He did her voice and everything. He even did the voices that she did when she told him the story. It was the type of story that you can only tell in that way, concluding in a point that only makes sense when you hear the whole thing. I loved hearing about her in this way, sort of

brought to life, the same way that I love good creative writing. But the function of Ojibwe storytelling is not simply enjoyment and entertainment. It is also education. There is something substantial to a piece of history passed through oral tradition, a piece of history whose manner of telling is exactly as important to the lesson as the content of its narrative, which is simply not prioritized in Western thought traditions.

Popular Native authors like Louise Erdrich and Sherman Alexie have written several stories about Native characters in which the linear progression of time is intentionally disrupted or warped. *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich, an Anishinaabe author, tells the story of a single extended family over the course of several decades. The relationships of members of the Kashpaw family are explored through time-skips and point-of-view switches, following the threads of their lives as they weave through one another. *Future Home of the Living God*, also by Erdrich, is a bizarre dystopian novel about a pregnant young woman who travels to a reservation to meet her biological family for the first time while around her the world's biological evolution speeds in reverse and a totalitarian government takes over. While these novels are very different (one is a family drama and one is a sci-fi dystopian drama), both seem to attack the importance of linear time and break down the divisions between the past and the present. In the latter, this destruction of time is literal:

“Apparently—I mean, nobody knows—our world is running backward. Or forward. Or maybe sideways, in a way as yet ungrasped. I am sure somebody will come up with a name for what is happening, but I cannot imagine how everything around us and everything within us can be fixed. (...) Whatever is actually occurring, there is constant breaking news about how it will be handled—speculation, really, concerning what comes

next—which is why I am writing an account. Historic times! There have always been letters and diaries written in times of tumult and discovered later, and my thought is that I could be writing one of those. And even though I realize that all lexical knowledge may be useless, you’ll have this record.” (*Future Home of the Living God* 3)

In the former novel, time is simply experiential:

“So many things in the world have happened before. But it’s like they never did. Every new thing that happens to a person, it’s a first. To be a son of a father was like that. In that night I felt expansion, as if the world was branching out in shoots and growing faster than the eye could see. I felt smallness, how the earth divided into bits and kept dividing. I felt the stars. I felt them roosting on my shoulders with his hand. (...) I’d heard that this river was the last of an ancient ocean, miles deep, that had once covered the Dakotas and solved all our problems. It was easy to still imagine us beneath them vast unreasonable waves, but the truth is we live on dry land.” (*Love Medicine* 332-333)

In both cases, the author and the narrating protagonists think deeply and frequently on the past and the future; of generations that have come and generations which will come yet. Memory, stories passed from one person to another, and a person’s identity in the current moment are inextricably entwined. I think I’ve found the ‘thesis statement’ of Erdrich’s writing, if such a thing can be said to exist in an author’s body of work, in this passage of *Love Medicine* in which the narrator is stargazing:

“At times the whole sky was ringed in shooting points and puckers of light gathering and falling, pulsing, fading, rhythmical as breathing. All of a piece. As if the sky were a

pattern of nerves and our thought and memories traveled across it. As if the sky were one gigantic memory for us all". (37)

The deconstruction and destruction of linearity is not extremely uncommon in fiction, particularly since the Modernists hit the stage way back in the day, but I do think that Erdrich's relationship to time in her fiction is borne of her Nativeness. Not only is the ancestral language of her (and my) indigenous parents and grandparents particularly cultivable for stories in which the past and the present are happening at the same time, but the cultural trauma of indigenous genocide also breeds, I think, trends in Native authorship toward confronting that history—to air out old wounds, to reclaim the dead, and to remind readers that the past effects the present and the future. *Flight* by Spokane/Cour d'Alene author Sherman Alexie tells the story of a teenaged boy who, after committing mass murder in a bank, is sent hurtling through time into the minds and bodies of several different people throughout history—some Native, others who are not. He witnesses the ways that human beings justify violence, and finds that he can empathize with all of it, including the violence of abandonment his father inflicted upon him by running away. In *Flight*, the protagonist contends with many painful pieces of history at once. In one scene, he finds himself inhabiting the body of a little boy living in a Native settlement during the time of the American Indian Wars. His initial joy at finding he has, for the first time, a family who loves and understands him dissipates as he realizes what will come:

“As my new father leads me through camp, I realize this cannot be Heaven. All these old-time Indians are doomed. They're going to die of disease. And they'll be slaughtered by U.S. Cavalry soldiers. They'll be packed into train cars and shipped off to reservations. And they'll starve in winter camps near iced-over rivers. The children are going to be

kidnapped and sent off to boarding schools. Their hair will be cut short and they will be beaten for speaking their tribal languages. They'll be beaten for dancing and singing the old-time Indian songs. All of them are going to start drinking booze. And their children will drink booze. And their grandchildren and great-grandchildren will drink booze. And one of those great-grandchildren will grow up to be my real father, the one who decided that drinking booze was more important than being my father. The one who abandoned my mother and me. That's what is going to happen to all these old-time Indians. That's what's going to happen to me." (66-67)

The "me" he refers to in the last sentence is simultaneously his original self, the teenager called Zits who travels through time, and the unnamed little Native boy whose life he currently inhabits. The past and the future are happening at once, and the narrator feels helpless to stop the progression of these things. Another Anishinaabe author, Carter Meland of *Stories For A Lost Child*, gives us a book full of several short stories within a long story about a grandfather's writings to his granddaughter, wherein he tries to teach her how to think about being Anishinaabe through many little vignettes and recurring episodic stories. Meland breaks down the barriers between objective truth and metaphorical truth, as well as the barriers between the past, present, and future. Each of these novels has some aspect of time-travel or time-skipping. In *Future Home of the Living God*, time moves backward. In *Flight*, the protagonist's accidental and inexplicable time travel is the central tension of the plot. There is both literal and figurative time travel in *Stories For A Lost Child*, as the stories themselves are a form of time travel, and there is fictional time travel within the stories. The time-skips and perspective-changes in *Love Medicine*

are not literal time travel, but the format is jarring enough to force the reader out of any habitual presumption of linearity.

My favorite series of vignettes within *Stories For A Lost Child* is “Indians in Space,” which addresses the discrepancy between the way Native people and Western people understand the universe. In the “Indians in Space” subplot, two astronauts explore space and record phenomena around a black hole. Their adventures include accidentally time-travelling to when Glacial Lake Agassiz covered a large part of North America. This set of stories takes a sci-fi premise and runs it through a distinctively Native lens, imagining speculative astrophysics using indigenous assumptions about the nature of the universe rather than Western ones. The tribes have their own space program with a familiar name, albeit a different meaning:

“Have you reported this to NASA?”

‘Ours of theirs?’

‘Ours.’ Wayne smiled. *Native American Space Adventuring*. He grinned every time he thought about the name the Native nations had chosen for their space program.” (57)

The two astronauts are excited to be able to take water from Glacial Lake Agassiz back to their NASA, because it’s good medicine and will help their tribes. They experience the strange noise coming from the black hole as Native singing. Meland shows how different Indigenous approaches to knowledge are from Western ones by showing space-travel and time-travel as Indigenous events yielding Indigenous results. In a different story, one character says of the grandfather who, within the fiction, wrote all these short stories, “Sometimes he talks about historical battles and events, but I don’t think what he says is ever a fact. (...) Sometimes I don’t know what he was thinking, your old granddad, but I’d definitely avoid using his stories in any reports

to your history class! Ha-ha” (18). Meland’s novel is a particularly good example of the way that many Indigenous authors view the way Western audiences view Indigenous cultures. All of this time-skipping and time-destructing comes from, I think at least, a place of unrest over the place of Native oral tradition in modern society.

The memorialization of the Sandy Lake Tragedy is a physical endeavor. Some years, it’s windy. One year when I was there, most of the canoes tipped over, and some of them got lost. Some of the men rowing had built their own birch bark canoe, which sunk to the bottom of the lake, unable to be retrieved. The year my sister participated, it was sunny and hot out— a sweaty affair for those who opted to row across the lake in memory of those who died there. She wasn’t about to let a bunch of big burly men patronize her that day, and her canoe was one of the first to reach the shore: Hannah “the Powerhouse” Johnson. She was sore for a week afterwards. This is a kind of memorialization that can make the body sore— so different from a plaque by a highway, or a line of script in a history book. This is a ceremony wherein, like my father’s storytelling and his grandmother’s storytelling, the method of remembering is equally important to the story as the story’s content. It brings history to the present moment. It’s engaging. It disallows its subjects to be passive observers in a stream of distant events. While time-jumping stories are not unique to Native peoples, and active memorialization is not unique to Native peoples, the vivid presentness of the past is a recurring and insistently significant theme in modern Native American storytelling.

This insistence on having a separate, recurring memorial service for a centuries-old tragedy and the insistence by Native fiction authors on deconstructing the linearity of history stem, I believe, from a desire for sovereignty in history-keeping and memorialization.

I took a lot of classes alongside anthropology majors in college. They were not happy when it was pointed out that their goals were at odds with indigenous goals, or that the pursuit of anthropological knowledge could be harmful to native people. For instance, a lot of native people believe that indigenous people were created on this continent and have always been here. The idea that the ancestors of North and South American tribes migrated over the Bering Strait or over the ocean is offensive and simply incorrect according to these oral accounts, and the search for anthropological evidence supporting this theory feels to these native peoples like an aggressive attempt by white academics to disprove and destroy indigenous culture.

I've been around the block enough times to know that I need to include a disclaimer here that I, of course, understand that within Western secular logic it is absurd to argue that an evidence-based theory (a) should be discarded in favor of religious/cultural legends, (b) could be harmful to anyone, since the search for objective truth is an inherently positive and ultimately good goal, (c) ought to be evaluated on the basis of its offensiveness to a particular group of people rather than its scientific merit. To accept such arguments as meritorious creates a foot in the door for any Christian Scientist or Flat Earther to refute proven geological facts about the earth's age and shape, or (more dangerously) for religious advocates of rape and slavery to set up the scaffolding for their own violent practices within the empathic embrace of a Western science based in the protection of feelings rather than the revelation of objective facts. While, as Western scholars, we must embrace the reality which can be proven using our tools and methods, regardless of whether it makes everybody happy, as moral beings we must also examine the uneasiness we feel when we come to a crossroads where human subjects of study become unwilling human objects. Particularly, those of us who exist as indigenous people in Western disciplines must rec-

oncile, if not our duty to our cultures with the inherent Westernness of our studies, the fact that there is much to reconcile and much which seems irreconcilable.

What I'm really talking about here is bones. Literal and metaphorical bones. Colonists have a long history of trying to claim both in the name of dissecting and unraveling their secrets. The Kennewick Man is a perfect example of this practice. There is a wonderfully embarrassing article by the Smithsonian on this subject, written in 2014: "The Kennewick Man Finally Freed to Share His Secrets." If you know anything about the Kennewick Man, you'll be aware how badly such a title has aged, and how blindly arrogant the ensuing article now seems with context. "If it weren't for a harrowing round of panicky last-minute maneuvering worthy of a legal thriller, the remains might have been buried and lost to science forever," writes Douglas Preston of the Smithsonian, who goes on to delineate a tale of brave scientists battling against the fearful and irrational Army Corps of Engineers, who worried, suggests Preston, about the repercussions of angering tribes "that the corps was involved in tense negotiations" with (1). Preston suggests that the Kennewick man may perhaps be Japanese, belonging to an ancient group called the Jōmon: "It, along with other evidence, suggests that the Jōmon or related peoples were the original settlers of the New World" (2). The narrative of this article plants the Army Corps of Engineers firmly in the role of the villain, preventing the scientists from nobly conducting world-changing research, and threatening to give the bones to the local tribes for reburial: "The coalition announced that as soon as the corps turned the skeleton over to them, they would bury it in a secret location where it would never be available to science. The corps made it clear that, after a month-long public comment period, the tribal coalition would receive the bones (...) The corps indicated it had made up its mind. Owsley began telephoning his colleagues. 'I think they're going to

rebury this,' he said, 'and if that happens, there's no going back. It's gone'" (1). Preston is, of course, quite adamant that the Kennewick Man is likely not Native to North America as the tribes baselessly claim he is, citing his lack of "physical features characteristic of Native Americans" (1). While Preston avoids the same aggressive villainization of the tribes that he inflicts upon the corps by gently glossing over Native stakes, motivations, and involvement in this battle, he does manage to paint the tribal advocates of repatriation in this story as suspicious and obstinate at best and thuggish and primitive at worst. Preston reports a tribal spokesman's argument: "The tribes demanded the bones for reburial. 'Scientists have dug up and studied Native Americans for decades,' a spokesman for the Umatilla tribe, Armand Minthorn, wrote in 1996. 'We view this practice as desecration of the body and a violation of our most deeply-held religious beliefs.' The remains, the tribe said, were those of a direct tribal ancestor. 'From our oral histories, we know that our people have been part of this land since the beginning of time. We do not believe that our people migrated here from another continent, as the scientists do'" (1). Preston acknowledges that "the tribes had good reason to be sensitive," you know, because of America's long history of genocide and desecrating Native dead, but drops the subject as fast as he picks it up in favor of reframing this battle as a contest between science and government.

In 2015, DNA tests revealed that the Kennewick Man was Native American after all (Zimmer). Also in 2015, an in-class debate about the Kennewick man became the third-closest I've ever come to getting punched in the face by a classmate. The tribes, it turned out, had been right all along. The bones were returned to the tribal coalition and buried according to their traditions. This victory for indigenous people, achieved only after a decades-long battle and the extensive desecration of sacred human remains, feels empty to me. The bones were returned, but

only on the terms of the colonizers, and only because they'd already gotten what they needed from them. In the long story of Native-Colonizer relations, the fight over the Kennewick Man is just another instance of Western thinkers refusing to respect indigenous claims to indigenous history, indigenous land, indigenous thought, and indigenous bodies (living and dead). While Preston and the girl who almost threw hands with me in Anthro 150 were happy to pass off indigenous conflict with scientists as mere 'sensitivity' based in a traumatic history of theft and desecration, rather than as a valid claim to ancestral remains, works by Native authors can explain the disgust and uneasiness that Native peoples feel at the recurring tendency of colonizers to only care about Indigenous lives when they've already ended violently. Erdrich writes in *Love Medicine* of a man who poses for an artist's portrait. He is surprised to see that she painted him plunging to his death:

"I could not believe it, later, when she showed me the picture. *Plunge of the Brave*, was the title of it. Later on, that picture would become famous. (...) There I was, jumping off a cliff, naked of course, down into a rocky river. Certain death. Remember Custer's saying? The only good Indian is a dead Indian? Well, from my dealings with whites I would add to that quote: 'The only interesting Indian is dead, or dying by falling backwards off a horse.' When I saw the greater world was only interested in my doom, I went home on the back of a train." (120)

The Kennewick Man, an unnamed dead Native man from prehistory, was interesting and important to white scholars in a way that his living descendants were not. Now he has been buried in a secret place, attended to by a mere handful of Native people, and all that is left of him

in this world are the living Native Americans who carry on his history and his legacy, and one feels that this is equal to nothing in the eyes of the anthropologists who wanted his bones.

My grandparents were among those taken from their families and forced to attend Indian Boarding schools where they were encouraged to hate their nativeness. My Grandma lived her whole life in a weird in-between space— between Indianness and whiteness, between pride in her family and shame at not being able to fit into a white world. She's just one of many. Many, many indigenous grandparents had their culture bleached out of them at these Indian Boarding Schools. It makes sense that modern Native Americans are 'sensitive' and 'distrustful' of Western academia. The way that Western scholars think— the documentation, experimentation, the scientific method, the prioritization of certain facts over others— can be hostile and contradictory to Native knowledge and Native ways. The goals of white academia are different than the goals of Native learning. With the way that the academic world is shaped now, I don't think it's possible to be fully present in both systems.

My framework for understanding reality and my goals for learning are Western. The way I was trained to look at knowledge is Western. The way I prioritize information is Western. If I, and other indigenous writers, teachers, and scholars, as well as non-native academics, want to use our Western education to positively impact and uplift Native peoples, we have to understand that Indigenous thought systems cannot work solely within a Western framework. In our academia, the default is to operate within Western logic and Western prioritization, but in order to be culturally intelligent, we must cultivate in ourselves and in our fellows the ability to shed one's Western framework, at least temporarily.

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