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Conversations at the Crossroads: Indigenous and Black Writers Talk

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Edited by Sophie McCall

Abstract: "Conversations at the Crossroads" is an interlogue between Indigenous and Black writers and scholars who gathered at Simon Fraser University on the unceded, ancestral territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil Waututh Nations in Vancouver, British Columbia. The purpose of the gathering was to contest and revitalize those critical frameworks that best reflect the complex and longstanding alliances in Black and Indigenous histories, futures, literatures, and experiences. While dialogues across these diverse communities have been going on for a long time, they have not always been foregrounded adequately in public debates and academic discussions. These conversations demonstrate that the language for conceiving and mobilizing comparative studies has changed—to a large extent because Indigenous and Black scholars and writers have pushed to change it and to challenge the power relationships underpinning academic disciplines. Each of the participants reflects deeply on the limits and opportunities of the available theoretical frameworks to reignite conversations between scholarly fields in general, and across postcolonial studies, Indigenous studies, and Black studies in particular.

Keywords: Indigenous studies, Black studies, postcolonial studies, relationality, intersectional histories, shared histories of resistance

Editor's Note: In the fall of 2018, I was teaching an upper-year undergraduate course, "At the Crossroads: Indigenous and Black Writing in Canada," at Simon Fraser University, which is located on the unceded, ancestral territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil Waututh Nations in Vancouver, British Columbia. The aim of the course was to uncover the shared histories of resistance in the work of Indigenous and Black writers, to reckon with each of our own roles in the ongoing occupation of Indigenous lands, to build alliances across differences, and to practice what settler historian Paige Raibmon calls "transformative listening."[1] As part of the course, Deanna Reder and I co-organized a day-long symposium, inviting some of the most dynamic and thoughtful Indigenous and Black writers and scholars in the city. Each of the writers who agreed to participate reckoned, in very different ways, with intersectional histories and the silences around them. They pushed back against restrictive labels, rejected rigid identity scripts imposed by others, and insisted upon the power of their own embodied, singular, yet collective ways of knowing. A striking feature of the following conversations is how the writers draw attention to the points of connection between Indigenous decolonization and Black social justice movements. At the same time, they warn us not to assume that the problems and solutions that have been offered in these very different debates are transferrable across communities. This is because conversations about place, belonging, and embodiment have unfolded very differently in Black and Indigenous studies to date. Building viable critical frameworks that compare histories of occupation and resistance remains a challenging yet urgent project.

As the following conversations demonstrate, for both Indigenous and Black writers, postcolonial comparative frameworks are a contested site of power and legitimacy. The reason for this ongoing struggle is that postcolonial approaches in the past often have normalized—in ways that linger still—the idea of "writing back" to European philosophies, theories, and politics. These conversations emerge from genuine efforts to build connections across disciplines, histories, and legacies of erasure and appropriation in order to rediscover common ground that has been obscured. These dialogues between Indigenous and Black writers have the potential to benefit postcolonial studies in demonstrating

possibilities for critical discussions around decolonization, cultural identity, and ethically responsible engagements with a politics of difference *without* the explicit mediation of Euro-American thought and cultural references and *beyond* European/other binaries.

The conversations that follow are a collage of excerpts from the gathering. With the consent of the contributors, I have edited these excerpts for clarity and continuity. Many thanks to the participants, to Justine Crawford for videotaping, and to Rachel Taylor (Iñupiaq) for transcribing the conversations.

Sophie McCall (editor) is a settler scholar whose main areas of research and teaching are Indigenous literatures and studies in Canada and contemporary Canadian literature from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. She has published widely on topics such as textualizing oral history, the struggle for Indigenous rights, decolonization, resurgence, and reconciliation.

Conversation #1

David Chariandy teaches contemporary literature, especially Black, Canadian, and Caribbean prose forms, cultural studies, and creative writing. His scholarly criticism has been published widely. His first novel, *Soucouyant*, was nominated for eleven literary awards and prizes, while his second novel, *Brother*, won the 2017 Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize and the City of Toronto Book Award. His latest work of creative nonfiction is *I've Been Meaning to Tell You: A Letter to My Daughter.*

Deanna Reder (Cree-Métis) is an Associate Professor in the Departments of First Nations Studies and English at Simon Fraser University, where she teaches courses in Indigenous popular fiction and Canadian Indigenous literatures, especially autobiography. She is the lead researcher in a collaborative research project entitled *The People and the Text: Indigenous Writing in Northern North America up to 1992.*

Reder: If you went to school in Canada in the 1980s and even the 1990s, you were unlikely to study work by Indigenous authors. If you did, it is likely that your professor was a sessional instructor without the security and influence of a tenured faculty member; I'm thinking

about the early teaching in this field by people like Cree editor Heather Hodgson at the University of Regina or settler scholar Jennifer Kelly at the University of Calgary. Or it might have been because someone such as UBC [University of British Columbia] professor Margery Fee—present here today—who decided mid-career to change the direction of her research to include Indigenous literatures, thereby kickstarting these conversations. Even so, I date the establishment of the field at the turn of the millennium, when the first generation who focused their doctoral work on Indigenous literatures completed their Ph.D.s and began teaching. SFU [Simon Fraser University] is lucky to have Sophie McCall as one of those first. She, alongside Jennifer Andrews and Kristina Fagan Bidwell, completed their Ph.D.s circa 2001 and established the curricula that you are now familiar with. I give this history because I know you are also part of a first generation of scholars in your field. Can you talk a bit about your experiences researching Black Canadian literature in the academy?

Chariandy: I'm so honoured having this conversation with you, Deanna—especially in front of many friends and colleagues. I do think there's a lot of overlap between us regarding the relative newness of our fields. When I was taking undergraduate courses in the late 80s and early 90s, I simply didn't encounter Black Canadian literature on syllabi. The sole exception was an upper year course on "multicultural literature," in which I got to read some short pieces by Austin Clarke and Dionne Brand. Of course, I welcomed this opportunity. But even the instructor of the course pointed out certain pedagogical challenges. Without careful qualification, isolated Black texts could easily face a burden of representation—be hastily imagined by students to speak for "the Black experience" or "the Black aesthetic" writ large. And there just wasn't enough time within courses broadly exploring "multicultural literature," "ethnic literature" or "postcolonial literature" to sufficiently contextualize writers like Clarke and Brand within Black debates and historical legacies both within Canada and beyond.

Things changed for me when I began Ph.D. research on Black Canadian literature in the mid-90s. I was able to draw precious

direction and encouragement [from] newly prominent field specialists such as Rinaldo Walcott. All the same, when I finished my thesis in English on Black Canadian literature in 2002, it was indeed one of the first theses—if not *the* first thesis—explicitly focusing on "Black Canadian literature" so named, although I'd also want to acknowledge at least a couple of antecedents. There was an important dissertation on Caribbean Canadian authors by Michael Bucknor, as well as a body of valuable reviews, essays, and bibliographical sources on Black Canadian authors by individuals such as my supervisor Leslie Sanders. Frankly, I'm really not invested in being a "first," just trying to indicate the newness of Black Canadian writing as a recognized academic field—despite the two-hundred-year legacy of Black writing in Canada, and the four-hundred-year legacy of recorded speech by Black people in Canada. I'd also want to point out that extremely rich and sophisticated conversations about Black Canadian life and culture were all the while happening *outside* of the academy. I'd say that the "soul" of Black Canadian writing remains extra-academic, even if right now I'm following you in speaking about the specific possibilities for reading and studying Black writing within the academy.

I'd also want to mention here that even if I never had the chance to take a course on Black writing at university—never mind Black *Canadian* writing—I did have the great fortune of taking a course in First Nations literature during my first year of my master's. I got to read authors like Pauline Johnson, Beatrice Culleton, Jeannette Armstrong, Tomson Highway, and Maria Campbell. I remember being deeply moved by Campbell's *Halfbreed*—so much so that in grad school I decided to do a short presentation on what I learned were some deeply troubling questions regarding the editing of the book. I remember that the class discussion deteriorated when it was suggested that we didn't know enough about what exactly the editors had taken out. So twenty years later the work that you and Alix Shield did to locate the passage that had been edited out against Campbell's wishes was a much needed scholarly discovery.[2] Also in my master's, I took an amazing course on comparative Indigenous literatures, and was thereby introduced to Indigenous writers based in Australia, New Zealand, and the US. I remember being

utterly floored by N. Scott Momaday's prose—his exquisite care in writing about his Kiowa heritage. His writings inspire me to this day.

I understood, back then, that African American literature was a recognized field in the US academy. I'd also been having a lot of passionate conversations about Black writing with fellow Black students outside of classrooms. And so my early research on Black Canadian literature was primarily influenced by Black cultural debates, academic and otherwise. But those Indigenous literature courses gave me the first palpable sense that it was possible to explore a whole different kind of literary legacy *within* the classroom, that one could assemble or constellate a whole different body of culture and thought. I found that very inspiring.

Reder: Just as you have said that you have been encouraged and inspired by Indigenous people, Indigenous writing in Canada owes a debt to Black thinkers. Métis activist Howard Adams writes, in his 1975 classic, *Prison of Grass*, that the more he became involved in discussions about Civil Rights when he went to Berkeley during the 1960s, "the clearer colonialism became. I was very moved when I heard Malcolm X speak to students about black nationalism. Afterwards I wanted time to think about the beautiful things he had said" (154). Adams credits the ideas articulated by Malcolm X for allowing him to reject his sense of "inferiority and shame and to become proud of my Indian heritage and Native nation" (153).

And this influence spread to the West Coast too. Seabird Island Band member Ray Bobb recognizes the work of Black activists on local organizing: "In 1967, the American Indian Movement (AIM) did not yet exist so the Black movement in the U.S. became the main role model for the group which called itself the Native Alliance for Red Power (NARP). . . . In 1971 former Narpers formalized the Native Study Group" (paras 7, 12). Lee Maracle was a part of and influenced by these communities and conversations, emerging from them as a writer, beginning with her life-story *Bobbi Lee* in 1975, and continuing for over forty years, even to today.

Chariandy: You're illuminating something so important here—what the Caribbean writer Édouard Glissant might call a "poetics of relation,"

the sometimes vital intimacies and sharing among historically disenfranchised peoples. Phanuel Antwi and I were exploring such relations when writing the introduction to our co-edited special issue of the journal *Transition*, which focused on Black Canadian literature. In our introduction, we suggested that so many of the Black Canadian writers we admire appear notably aware of "the entangled logics of colonial violence," or how "the foundational and still profoundly visceral colonizing practices directed towards Indigenous peoples frequently intersect with the long legacies of anti-Black and also anti-Asian prejudice" (24).

I guess this idea of a "poetics of relation" speaks personally to me as a Black writer whose ancestors include not only enslaved people of African descent but also indentured South Asians from the Caribbean. But it's also true, and most relevant here, that the relations between Black and Indigenous peoples are unique and longstanding in the so-called Americas. Each group has survived catastrophic violence and unspeakably bitter dehumanization—everything from genocide to the most craven and merciless practices of appropriation. I believe that Black and Indigenous peoples have a lot to share with one another. I believe that there's a precious and powerful—if also imperfect—legacy of solidarity that ought to be remembered and asserted. I oftentimes feel this legacy in the everyday. Like you, I can in turn think of a lot of Black Canadian writers who have sought to acknowledge Indigenous peoples and social movements: the Black writers in attendance right now but also folks like Dionne Brand, M. NourbeSe Philip, Wayde Compton, Whitney French, and El Jones, to speak of a few. There are also literary critics such as Antwi and Karina Vernon who think, write, and teach concertedly about Black and Indigenous relations. And this very partial shout-out wouldn't be complete without mentioning Indigenous writers like Alicia Elliott, Daniel Heath Justice, Cherie Dimaline, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson who have likewise sought to acknowledge Black struggle. I'm especially struck by Simpson's term "constellations of coresistance," which she relatively recently invoked on a discussion panel with Rinaldo Walcott and Glen Coulthard.

All the same, I believe that effecting these positive relations isn't automatic or easy. For me at least, it requires a lot of deep listening and

careful thought, a lot of ethical self-reflection and humility. Oftentimes, there appear [to be] fundamental differences in what Glissant again might call our "imaginaries"—our cultural inheritances, our paradigmatic historical experiences, our epistemologies and cultural politics, and of course the forms and protocols of our storytelling and art. There's also the fact that in the world, and no less in the academy, we continue to face the old "divide and conquer" tactics of colonialism, which [keep] the disenfranchised isolated by deliberately frustrating forms of interethnic solidarity.

Reder: In Indigenous studies there is an increasing awareness of the need to acknowledge how much we have drawn from Black thinkers—like the influence of Frantz Fanon on Dene professor Glen Coulthard or how the study of Black culture inspired activist and scholar Natalie Knight's reclamation of her Yurok and Diné cultures. And the reminder of the shared if also separate histories of systemic oppression. At the ILSA [Indigenous Literary Studies Association] conference in Regina in May 2018, Métis and Black scholar Jamie Paris talked about coming from Winnipeg's North End; growing up he internalized the unspoken expectation that to be educated was to expunge any intonation of either heritage from his speech. What are the possibilities of using institutional spaces to interrogate these questions of Black and Indigenous writing and experience together?

Chariandy: I'd maybe again suggest that Black Canadian writing has always, necessarily, been extra-institutional in its essence. For decades—indeed, for centuries—Black Canadians have oftentimes had to find extra- or para-institutional support for their writings and study: through community newspapers, small-scale Black publishers, reading and discussion groups, etc. At the same time, I don't want to minimize the role that institutions can play. The fact is that I could never have become a writer and critic without the almost accidental fortune of going to university. I recall Rinaldo Walcott making the case that Black studies should never actually become institutionally accommodated. What I think he means by this is not that the academy ought to be lightly

dismissed, and not that those within it shouldn't insist upon better space and resources, especially for the vulnerable, but that we should always be prepared to work in radical or "unhoused" ways.

Reder: In my undergraduate classes I had been taught that early Canadian writer Susanna Moodie had been an abolitionist, an anti-slavery activist, and that Canada was the welcome destination of people fleeing slavery using the underground railroad. It was only in 2017, at the TransCanadas conference, that Afua Cooper laid out a timeline that demonstrated how there existed a generation of Black immigrants to Canada but that provincial governments made sure to make it unattractive for Black people to stay, crafting a strategy that pushed that exodus of people back to US cities, US contexts. Cooper's history was something I hadn't been taught and didn't learn to integrate into my own teaching until recently. So there's lots of work to do and do immediately. How can we remedy this?

Chariandy: Well I think paying attention to work like Afua's is essential. I recall that she was speaking about the deeper history of the Black prairies, and I've got to recommend that people also take a look at other work on the Black prairies by Karina Vernon and Jade Ferguson. But I'd maybe suggest that one of the most crucial and pressing questions today is *how* we do the work we do. Indeed, I'd say this question of how—a question riveting us to the politics of theory and method in the academy—provides yet another powerful link between Black and Indigenous researchers today. I caught this when reading the truly brilliant work of former students like Jordan Abel [Nisga'a] and Natalie Knight [Yurok Diné].[3] As a member of their supervisory committees, [I confronted] certain discomforting questions [that] kept returning to me—ones that I have wrestled with during my entire academic career. What tools are we supposed to use when conceptualizing our experiences and literatures within the academy? What citational practices and references are we expected to make? What form does our research need to take in order for it to count, or for us to be taken seriously—to be legible and rewardable as scholars within the neoliberal academy? Of

course, the questions themselves reveal the twisted and fatal logic that we all need to recognize and challenge. Jordan and Natalie were writing through and beyond these constraints.

I guess this is why I find Christina Sharpe so inspiring. There's a passage in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* that I keep citing and recommending. It's found in the first chapter of her book, after she has courageously invoked the personal and the familial as a means of both illuminating and developing her complex theory of the afterlife of transatlantic slavery. I can't help but feel, like for so many other Black thinkers, that she is doing work and making a point that is rooted in Black experience and thought and yet holds [a] much broader application:

> The methods most readily available to us sometimes, oftentimes, force us into positions that run counter to what we know. That is, our knowledge . . . is gained from our studies, yes, but also in excess of those studies; it is gained through the kinds of knowledge from and of the everyday, from what Dionne Brand calls "sitting in the room with history." We are expected to discard, discount, disregard, jettison, abandon, and measure those ways of knowing and to enact epistemic violence that we know to be violence against others and ourselves. (12–13)

Sharpe's answer is that "[w]e must become undisciplined. The work we do requires new modes and methods of research and teaching; new ways of entering and leaving the archives of slavery, of undoing the 'racial calculus and . . . political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago' (Hartman 2008, 6) and that live into the present" (13).

Reder: So much of contemporary Indigenous scholarship is critiquing academic methods and the university itself. And I just wonder about how we can make this change at a scholarly level. What have you been thinking?

Chariandy: Well I've got to return to that moment a few years ago, when you gave a plenary paper on a panel at the last TransCanada conference, and I was invited to moderate and respond. Your paper was on

neglected Indigenous writers like Edward Ahenakew and Vera Manuel, whose works, you argued, contain powerful insights but were either not published at all or were published and forgotten—writers whose stories were "told but not heard" by readers lacking the needed awareness of Indigenous struggle and epistemologies. I remember the amazing way you weaved personal history and the legacies of storytelling into your presentation of research; you were at once performing careful archival research and also challenging the methods and theoretical authority of a historically blind and hostile academy. You ended your paper by arguing that "the study and teaching of Indigenous texts continue to require risky moves out of institutionalized and hierarchical disciplinary ways of knowing." And, of course, many academics—particularly the kinds of "high theorists" most easily celebrated in the academy—imagine themselves brilliantly performing "risky moves." But what struck me so powerfully was the fact that you were the lone member on a literary conference panel who had actually elected to mention a literary text. Your "risky move" wasn't simply to challenge the existing theories and methods of the academy; it was also to read and actually take seriously Indigenous literature itself.

I know your paper resonated with me because I also, in having worked on Black Canadian literature, have a particular sense of both the power and fragility of literary legacies and how dominant cultural institutions easily forget those legacies. But I guess the other story here is that I'm a writer of fiction. I want to believe that part of the work we need to do in the academy is to take literature seriously. But I'm also cautious here. I certainly don't for a second think that doing "creative writing" is automatically more freeing and authentic than doing criticism or theory. The world of creative writing has its own pitfalls, its own cynical conventions, its own deeply ingrained biases. But I'd have to say that the practice of writing literature has been essential for me. In your fine words, it's been my own "risky move" out of certain dominant modes and frames of thought and into dialogue with other deeper legacies of thought and culture. In Sharpe's words, it's been my own method for becoming "undisciplined."

Conversation #2

Samantha Nock is a Cree-Métis writer and poet from Treaty 8 territory in northeast British Columbia. Her family originally comes from Ile-a-la-Crosse (Sakitawak), Saskatchewan. She has been published in *GUTS Magazine*, *Shameless Magazine*, *SAD Mag*, *Canadian Art*, and other venues.

Otoniya Juliane Okot Bitek was born to Ugandan exiles in Kenya and so she has no experience being a natural born citizen of any country, whatever that means. She graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree (creative writing) in 1995, an M.A. in English, and a Ph.D. from the Liu Institute for Global Issues at the University of British Columbia in 2019. Her *100 Days* (2016) was nominated for several writing prizes, and it won the 2017 IndieFab Book of the Year Award for poetry and the 2017 Glenna Lushei Prize for African Poetry.

Madeleine Reddon (moderator) is Métis from Treaty 6 territory currently known as Edmonton, Alberta. She is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of English at UBC and recipient of the Joseph-Armand Bombardier doctoral scholarship, part of the Canada Graduate Scholarship awards.

Reddon: To start, I would like to ask about memory. Memory is integral to the poetic voice in both of your poetic practices. How do you see yourself working through the problem of memory in your poetry?

Okot Bitek: My family came to Canada in 1990. When we arrived that spring, we were hearing stories from eastern Canada about the Oka Crisis. There was a group of people who were protecting a territory and suddenly there was the Canadian army. Suddenly there was a shooting, there were headlines. That was one of my earliest memories of coming to Canada. The other strange thing about coming here was [that] this was the first place we had ever been to [where] we didn't know how to say hello, or thank you, or have a conversation in the local language of the place. We understood the idea of English and French as national languages, because we came from a British colony that still names and speaks English as a national language. But there are different languages and peoples within

those colonial borders. It was strange to think that you can have a national language that everyone speaks but with no local language. For the longest time, I used to think, where do people go when they go home for the holidays? Where I grew up, you go to your traditional home. Where are the traditional people of here, and where are their villages?

Later, it occurred to me that rather than taking on a position of blame, to say, "you people don't speak the language of the place you are on," I thought, maybe I should take it upon myself to find out what the languages are and do the work. I haven't gotten very far, to be honest. [Laughter.] I can say "xièxie" in Chinatown when I buy something, and I can say "O si'em'," but I don't think that's from this place. So there [are] a couple of words here and there, but [that] really isn't enough. To make the acknowledgment of being here as acknowledging my presence as uninvited on these lands, it has to mean more than just acknowledging. For me it has to mean that I question what it means for my presence to be here. As a person who writes, who works in language, maybe my work is to present myself in solidarity, to see who has your back and that you have other people's backs. In my own work, I have taken to drawing a literary lineage. Purposefully, these days, as I do my work, I choose Black and Indigenous women writers. Sometimes there are men. [Laughter.] The work of doing histories, lineages, and political citations are purposeful, and that's the way I do my work now.

Nock: I'm constantly grappling with the idea of intergenerational memory: the memories that have been passed down to me through my ancestors, what that means, and the ideas of intergenerational trauma which are a part of those memories that sometimes we don't want. Sometimes it feels like I'm just a body with all of these stories. Maybe my body knows more about the world, and more about being, than I know. I'm still catching up because I'm grappling with everything that has been passed down to me through generations, and everyone that had to live for me to get to where I am now. Or maybe I'm just a writer. [Laughter.]

I recently reread Maria Campbell's book *Halfbreed*. I read it once when I was thirteen, but I wasn't ready for it, because I was thirteen.

[Laughter.] Maria Campbell is from Northern Saskatchewan, where my family's from. Reading her book was like a memory for me, and hearing her story was like listening to my *kokhum*'s stories or my mom's stories. Re-reading it as an adult, I kept thinking: this feels like something I've lived through even though I haven't lived through that specific situation. But that situation led me to be living the life I am now and influenced my family.

Reddon: It sounds like for both of you, part of your practice is working through not knowing—which is very difficult, especially when you're working through a not-knowing that's inherited. It's your mother's, grandmother's, father's, or grandfather's. There's a strangeness in this haunting [and] of living through [that not-knowing]. So where do you see your literary lineages? [Are they] in family? Do you have a community that you work through?

Nock: My writing came to me in a really weird way. My dad's a really wonderful poet. He's also a journeyman heavy-duty mechanic. He writes poems and my aunt illustrates them. He puts them in a photo album and that's his book. That's always been good enough for him. His poetry's beautiful, really inspired from where he's grown up in Northern BC [British Columbia], Treaty 8 territory. Having my dad who lives this duality of a tradesman and a writer has sparked my own imagination as a writer. The act of storytelling, the act of writing from the places you are, is just an inherent part of where I come from. Even if my family members would never say they're writers or storytellers, they're all fantastic storytellers. Just growing up with an integral understanding of the importance of stories has led me to where I am now.

Okot Bitek: When I need sustenance, when I need to find myself, I look for something to read. This is the joy of not being in a discipline, or reading in a discipline, like David [Chariandy] was talking about. It means I can read Jónína Kirton's *page as bone—ink as blood* next to Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*, [two books sitting side by side] on my library shelf. They are telling similar stories. They're speaking about history and

memory through the body. But if you learn about these books in an institution, you're more likely to learn about Kirton's book as Indigenous literature and Gyasi's book as African literature. But if you read both of them, you see how we tell the same stories.

Reddon: What intersectional histories are important to you, and why? Juliane, you mentioned that you didn't really like the term intersectional. So I'd just like to open it up to both writers to talk about some of the words that we've been working through like intersectional, decolonial, or postcolonial. Are these words important in your methodologies, or not? Or are there more important words that you'd like to discuss?

Okot Bitek: I guess one does not "like" a term like intersectionality. There's a certain discomfort for me from the word intersectionality because it suggests that there are some folks who still need to name their many strains and spaces of oppression in order to be seen, recognized, heard. There are those for whom there are no spaces of intersection, and those are the ones who are asking for the explanations. By definition it seems to me that intersectionality is a space of pain. Africans come to the West and then discover they are Black; before they were just people. Learning to be Black instead of being a person, and then learning that I can *only* be a Black person. When someone says "women and children," then I know it's about men. When someone says "women and minorities," I get confused. Am I a woman, or am I a minority? Language is used against people who have many intersections in their identities in order to control and delineate. We are just who we are.

For me, it's important that I'm African, it's important that I'm Black, it's important that I live in Canada, it's important that I live on Indigenous lands, it's important that I'm a woman, and it's important that I'm an Acholi person from northern Uganda. None of these is places of pain, or identities of pain. So if we can begin to think of intersectionality as spaces of strength—because these are the same people who still manage to be here and articulate themselves, despite the fact that they have all these intersections in their identity—then maybe I

might "like" the word a little bit more. Part of the work that I do is to tap into what is being said that is quiet, that is not heard all the time.

Conversation #3

Cecily Nicholson is from rural, small-town Ontario, via Toronto and South Bend; she relocated to the Pacific coast almost two decades ago. On Musqueam-, Squamish-, and Tsleil-Waututh-occupied lands known as Vancouver, she has worked since 2000 in the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood, in recent years as administrator of the artist-run centre and mental health resource Gallery Gachet. She is the author of *Triage*, *From the Poplars*, which won the 2015 Dorothy Livesay Poetry Prize, and *Wayside Sang*, winner of the 2018 Governor General's Award for poetry.

Aisha Sasha John is a poet and choreographer whose most recent collection, *I have to live* (2017), was a finalist for the 2018 Griffin Poetry Prize. Her previous collections include *The Shining Material* (2011) and *THOU* (2014), which was a finalist for both the Trillium Book Award and Relit Award. Aisha's solo performance *the aisha of is* premiered at the Whitney Museum in 2017 and was presented by the MAI (Montréal, arts interculturels) and Toronto's 2018 Summerworks Festival.

David Chariandy moderated this conversation.

Nicholson: I'm really listening carefully to folks in the room today, always listening carefully, to remember where we come from. I come through quite a fracturing of displacement. I come from mixed families, of ward care, foster care, adopted care, foster care again. I have no blood relations that I know now, but I've always had family. My entwined histories with Indigenous presence on this land [are] from my early years through to the present. It is interesting when things that are part of your everyday life become considerations in the realm of academic scholarship or in the arts. I feel both suspicious and excited. But where I feel the real meeting of community and experience in my everyday are just these necessary fronts: in the urban, in defense of land, based in community. These are necessary relations. I'll read a little bit, and maybe talk after. I find it hard to introduce poetry.

a waiting trench the front across the dash
deep open road through the window

on the glass
bokeh crystals of settlement

streaming past mirror side appears larger

after all the lakes hold ashes and fur

long route tapers to a blue-strip august

the walk along here I was a daughter then
along a highway

on the route she shines on
leaning into the path as nettle heavy with rain[4]

This book [*Wayside Sang*] for me is a long poem. I suppose you could understand it as a series of poems or a serial poem. For me it's a long poem. I chose the section that I did because it referred to the ditches, and was part of an ongoing conversation with Métis painter and thinker David Garneau, whose art is on the cover of this book. He has an essay on roadkill and the space of the ditch. The ditch is a disruption, an odd space in-between—in between the roadway and the field, or the roadway and the commercial property. I grew up in a rural, very flat land. The greatest freedom that I had in my youth, which had a lot of violence in it, but the greatest freedom definitely was to move across property lines. And just be rooted and feel renewed by cycles of ecology. Stepping into those ditches may shift your relationship to the spaces around you.

Chariandy: I'm absolutely thrilled and honoured being here with the two of you. I'd like to ask a very broad question. What work do you hope poetry can do in the conversations that we are having, and that we hope to continue to have?

John: [To Nicholson] Thank you for your tears, I see you, I feel you. I was crying earlier when you were talking.

[To Chariandy] What I am reading I actually don't consider a poem because of its context but you can fight with me on that. It's from the last iteration of *the aisha of is*, a multidisciplinary dance show. Every iteration is different. In the last iteration, I am dancing on the floor for eight minutes and then I start talking to myself. Then I wash my face very ceremoniously and I change into this priestess dress: it's a black turtleneck and it's got this red arm-length fringe. You may or may not notice, but I have a scroll with me. I bring a set of stairs from the back of the stage to the centre of the stage. I stand on the stairs, I pop out my scroll, and *prrrrrt!*: it's really long. I read the scroll nonstop for ten minutes. I read and read and read. While I am reading I am moving closer and closer and closer to the ground. Essentially there I am, reading the gospel, but the gospel is my gospel.

I did a reading and a performance at Open Space in Victoria. The curator was the then-interim Indigenous curator Lindsay Delaronde. After my dance, she made space for feedback. This is the same comment I've had from Black women who've seen my work (who I've identified as the longed-for audience for my work): "Wow, you move so freely. It's crazy to see you moving so freely in front of all these white people. How do you do that?" And her [Delaronde's] own comment was, "Yeah, it's really important to see Indigenous bodies moving freely and exercising freedom." And I'm like, yes! For me, dance and poetry are freedom practices, they're decolonial practices. I need it to happen at a level of complete embodiment. My mind, my soul, my body. Writing isn't enough, and dancing isn't enough. I have to do both. So for her to say that—and obviously I'm a displaced African—but for her to frame it like that, "we need to see Indigenous bodies exercising freedom," I was like, thank you.

Nicholson: What does poetry do? What can poetry do when we're in a state of war, maybe? Connect, communicate, lift. But it's just such a baseline.

I'm always interested [in] and trying to be relevant to what people who are directly impacted by violence and oppression think is relevant.

So if being concerned about decolonizing or decolonial practices is the language we want to use, and it has a lineage that makes sense to us, then I'm happy to engage in that. I definitely think through methodologies. In my heart, I actively want to work towards the non-colonial. I can't say that I've ever experienced it, but I dream it. And also to contribute to spaces of the non-colonial that may not involve me. Always collaboration, and always community and sharing. So often at the kitchen table, so often in the spaces that we happen to have together. But because of the pressures of capital, I'm not always so sure what the work of poetry does. I do know it's like a valve for me. If I didn't open it, I would be lost, or something else would happen in a very violent way inside of me. It's never enough. Far beyond the creative practice for me is the work of relationship building, of organizing, of my physical body in the street, when I can [and] if I'm able—and supporting those who can or can't and are not able.

I just want to remind ourselves of where we are. Here, not far from the Downtown Eastside community [in Vancouver, British Columbia], yes, this legacy of horrific violence and misogyny particularly brought upon Indigenous women—not new in the state of Canada. In the everyday it hasn't changed too much in my eighteen years working there. There are great losses in this community; it is a daily thing. [People's lives are] also daily defended by the community, in ways that are brilliant—but [the losses are] ongoing. I've learned so much in this time. As I move away from [the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood], I will spend the rest of my life catching up on grieving. Grieving we know is necessary. That's something, unfortunately, that Black and Indigenous communities share.

Conversation #4: Roundtable Discussion

Karrmen Crey (Stó:lō) is an Assistant Professor of Aboriginal Communication and Media Studies in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University, and a member of Cheam First Nation. Her research examines the rise of Indigenous media in Canada since the early 1990s and the institutions of media culture undergirding its proliferation.

We asked Karrmen to play the role of the discussant for the roundtable discussion.

Crey: I've been hearing from a lot of people that there is a need to move from "talking back" to "talking across." We often find ourselves in the position of having to define our communities and identities. There are often resources and spaces attached to those identities that people need in order to do their work, which has important historical context. Groups in Vancouver in the 1980s and 1990s were trying to "work across" racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual difference through organizational alliances. These alliances were self-defining identity-based groups but [were] in allyship with other groups.[5] I do want to acknowledge that history and lineage here.

When I was an undergraduate in First Nations studies at UBC, I became very aware, as did my research partner, that we were Indigenous students in a largely Chinese Canadian classroom. In thinking about Chinese history in Vancouver, we were wondering how to bring these two frameworks together—Indigenous and Chinese Canadian—and we started to think about where Chinese and Indigenous people were intersecting or overlapping historically.

I had taken a women's studies course in which we read Afua Cooper's *The Hanging of Angelique*. Her methodical work in the archives to construct a history of somebody who would never be written into dominant Canadian history—this meticulous work of reconstructing the history of slavery in Canada and the conditions behind why Angelique was hanged—struck a chord with me. We used this method to think about how to talk about Indigenous-Chinese relationships in Vancouver. We looked at maps, especially demographic maps, to track where populations overlapped in different moments in history. From there, we created a very short video asking questions about this history. We knew there was interaction, we knew there was a historical and geographical relationship, but we didn't yet know how to delve more deeply into this history. Later on other people followed up on those threads to investigate those relationships. In terms of methodology, I often go to that question: How would we study

this overlapping history? The video was one effort at reconstructing silenced histories.

The same questions could be asked when we consider Black and Indigenous relations. What are those overlapping histories? Where were people living? What were those relationships? A lot of that history may be recaptured through oral histories. I'm no expert in this area—I want to add that qualifier. My area of expertise isn't in Black and Indigenous histories in BC, but the topic makes me think of research methodologies, and how we can recapture some of that history.

I think one of the great acts of violence of Western history is the concept of linear time. Everybody here has been talking about history as lived: inheriting genetic memory, inheriting trauma. We can benefit from shifting to think about history as a palimpsest: the idea of the document, the material, that is written on over and over. Mining that palimpsest for traces that we can re-illuminate, the history that the colonial state continues to try to erase. There are still traces of experiences and voices. Conceptually it's important to shift our thinking about how we approach this history. Everybody here, including me, has an affective response to talking about these issues. We are embodied, and these histories are embodied in us. That's a really important framework to understand why we don't just get over [this history]. We don't get past it. We're in it, we're living bodies that inherited from it.

This observation brings me to the point of what I think people have been invoking today, which relates directly to Jodi Byrd and Michael Rothberg's 2011 piece "Between Subalternity and Indigeneity," where they consider how to bring postcolonial studies and Indigenous studies together. They're talking about the skepticism in Indigenous studies around postcolonial theory, because there is no "post" for Native people. But it's also that much postcolonial theory [was] formulated in relation to India and Africa, while people living in regions where the colonizer never left are thinking, how do we talk about settler colonialism when the language of postcolonial theory is inadequate? They consider how [Gayatri Chakravorty] Spivak returned to that question: Can the subaltern speak? That person who is silenced *by* the hegemony cannot be represented *within* that hegemony. Spivak returned to that question later,

saying, it's not so much about not speaking—of course the subaltern speaks. The critical point is listening. If people are speaking and no one's hearing them, what's the difference?

I think the act of listening is the greatest step for overcoming the kinds of partitions that artificially separate us. What I've been observing today are acts of listening, of stepping across, of sharing work that generates empathy. Empathy is a form of communication. That's what I've been getting from the speakers, who have been so generous with their work and sharing their emotions. Our generosity is in our empathy. The act of listening is the basis for meaningful relationships. Relationships bridge artificial and real divides that hold us apart. We define identities in order to make them visible and yet, of course, they overlap. They overlap in our relationships with one another, in our collaborations, and in our partnerships.

Nicholson: Thank you for that. That was really wonderful to hear that broken down, the whole of it.

[There are] two threads that I don't [quite] know how to make connect, but they're important to me about today and this gathering: one is the caution regarding the language of postcoloniality. The "post" has always been a problem. And, second, I appreciate the conversation today regarding "Black" and "Indigenous." It is really critical that we continue to find ways to talk with specificity around the experience of Black community. We understand that there are many ways to think about our connection to diaspora, if that's how we understand it, and the complex racialization that occurs within the nation-state, which we are forced to contend with. In this context, for me, locally, these last almost two decades, "Black" often has been conflated—dangerously so—with the broader category of people of colour. This is not to say that I don't have deep and profound affiliations with other people who are racialized. These kinds of conversations are necessary and they need to be plural. Pointing out the specificity or the need for these conversations, especially in this local [context], is to caution around broad terms—coloured people, people of colour, racialized people—and anything that feeds into an understanding of multiculturalism that erases

specific experiences and oppressions. While we have necessary moments that require solidarity, these moments also have been enacted in ways that erase the function of power and anti-Black racism.

Okot Bitek: For me, people of colour, or panels or organizations or where the term "people of colour" has been used, along with the idea of representing whole groups of people—there is often a language and gender around it to which many other people cannot relate. So for me, I often hear "people of colour," but I don't hear "class." So many of us continue to be left out by [these overly broad] term[s].

Crey: Just as an acknowledgment of the problem of the term "people of colour," within the past little while, the term BIPOC has emerged—Black, Indigenous, people of colour—to demarcate the specificities of Black history and Indigenous history in settler colonial territories. That's a very important triangle to map out because of settlers using enslaved Black people to displace Indigenous people. To this day, Black and Indigenous people are subject to the highest level of police violence compared to other groups. I just wanted to acknowledge that a lot of solidarity groups, a lot of activist groups, are grappling with the problems of "people of colour" for not acknowledging the specific dynamics and histories attached to different identities and racialized people.

Chariandy: I humbly want to echo Cecily's reminder to think specifically about formations and experiences—about blackness and anti-blackness, for instance—rather than succumbing to vaguer language. I do so deeply value coalitional work, particularly among variously racialized and colonized peoples. But I also think that we can only begin to think and act across differences when we adequately recognize our differences.

Reder: I want to go back and thank you so much, Karrmen, about the idea of relationships. Relationships can't happen unless we're together. I know this is a time for discussion and disagreement and more conversations. I am so grateful that we've had this time together.

Notes

1 Raibmon used this term when she presented on the web platform she is designing to supplement Elsie Paul's *Written as I Remember It: Teachings (ʔəms Taʔaw) from the Life of a Sliammon Elder* at a symposium on 19 October 2018 at Simon Fraser University.

2 See Reder and Shield. See also the 2019 edition of Campbell's *Halfbreed* that now includes the original passage that was excised by the editors in 1973.

3 See Abel's "Empty Spaces" and Knight's "little brother" in this special issue.

4 From Nicholson's *Wayside Sang*. Reprinted with permission from the author and publisher.

5 See Gagnon for an overview of this history.

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