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stories, surviving, and what a poem can do? in Deborah Miranda's *Bad Indians*

Cj Jackson

“If we’re going out,” she might’ve thought, “we’re going out with some guts!”

—Deborah A. Miranda

Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir

‘CALIFORNIA’ IS A LIE

Of the multiple stories shared in *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir*, this essay primarily focuses on those that emerge from poetry. As Miranda recounts her years of marriage to her ex-husband and raising her two kids, she shares with us how the stress of caring for sick children, or of being up all night too many nights, sometimes results in screaming about dirty clothes, writings on the walls, and messy playrooms. She calls these moments “explosions,” emphasizing the frustration, bitterness, and even grief that may at times be partnered with motherhood.¹ But it is when she can hold *in* these explosions that she can clean and eat and begin to write again. She explains: “The writing seems to help at first; it’s a relief to capture my daughter’s temper tantrum in a poem, create something whole from the destruction of a day.”² In the chaos of being destroyed by rage and by living, Miranda turns to writing to transform her world into words and her words into another world. It becomes the refuge for her terror, loneliness, and her terrible anger when she can no longer hold them on her own. Poetry becomes a vessel through which one receives a chance to reorder reality.

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Take this first poem, for instance. It's not a coincidence that the first of four sections in *Bad Indians*, "The End of the World: Missionization: 1770–1836," opens not with a narration but a chart (titled "The Genealogy of Violence, Part I") and a poem (titled "Los Pájaros"), which tells the story of "first contact" between California Indians and Spanish missionaries. "Los Pájaros" is written in the form of a pantoum, a poem composed of four-lined stanzas wherein the second and fourth line of each stanza serves as the third and fourth line of the next stanza, often with minimal or no change to the wording and/or punctuation. Its significance as one of the opening pieces to *Bad Indians* after the "Introduction" is emphasized in the first two stanzas of the poem:

Seeing your people come through the fields
we noticed a great flock of birds
of various and beautifully blended colors
such as we had never seen before.

We noticed a great flock of birds
swooping out of the heavens just ahead
such as we had never seen before
as if they came to welcome our newly arrived guests.

We might be tempted to ask, "Who is talking?" as the voice that narrates the poem seems to change throughout each quatrain. We might place the colonizer's voice with the first stanza, since its tone embodies awe in noticing the "great flock of birds / of various and beautifully blended colors" which they "had never seen before," a phrase that stresses wonder and astonishment. These birds are not only new and exciting but, for colonizers, exotic. The reference to "your people" also creates opposition and is antagonistic, elucidating a "you versus us" attitude that perpetuates the settler binary of "us" versus "them," "colonized" versus "colonizer." But that voice quickly becomes detached in the second stanza—the birds' beauty and colors are not mentioned and fail to inspire the same sense of awe of the first stanza, even though "the heavens" are mentioned. The change of ending from "such as we had never seen before" to "as if they came to welcome our newly arrived guests" also alludes to Native peoples performing the role of "hosts" rather than partaking in the awe of a new discovery. The use of "our newly arrived guests" [my emphasis] conveys a Native voice and perspective, but the change is so abrupt we might question whether this voice is ventriloquized, or is breaking through the archive rebelliously to point out how displaced (and unwelcomed) settlers are to the land they conquer. In this moment, we witness a momentary disturbance that unsettles a fixed colonial past.

However the narration is unfolding, the voice changes again in the next stanza into what we might call third person objective. In the third and fourth stanza, the subsequent events of the meeting between the colonizers and the Native peoples is narrated:

Swooping out of the heavens just ahead
six or more soldiers set out together on horseback

as if they came to greet their newly acquired hosts
in the far distant rancherias even many leagues away.

Six or more soldiers set out together on horseback.
Both men and women at sight of them took to their heels
in the far distant rancherias even many leagues away,
fleeing the soldiers, clever as they are at lassoing cows.

Whereas the third stanza tells the story of “six or more soldiers” setting out together “on horseback” to “distant rancherias even many leagues away” without interruption, the fourth stanza breaks our flow by inserting a period at the end of its first line. The affect elicited is immediate dread and anticipation. In addition, the subtle shift from “our newly arrived guests” in the second stanza to “newly acquired hosts” in the third stanza becomes ironic—that disturbance in the aforementioned paragraph is further elucidated *as if* the narrator struggles to regain control over the voice of the poem through appropriation. In doing so, unlike the third stanza, which paints a picture of soldiers emerging from the heavens to “discover” new places and people, the fourth stanza positions us in a space of apprehension. For those of us who know the story of California intimately, the period is foreboding and the scene is violent: men and women fleeing at the sight of Spanish soldiers chasing them. The scene continues:

Both men and women at sight of them took to their heels
but the women were caught with Spanish ropes.
The soldiers, clever as they are at lassoing cows
preyed on the women for their unbridled lust.

The women were caught with Spanish ropes
Indian men defended their wives—
prey for the Spaniards’ unbridled lust—
only to be shot down with bullets.

In many ways, “Los Pájaros” tells the story of the violence of settler contact and missionization in California that schools and institutions refuse to acknowledge or recognize. The poem’s placement in *Bad Indians* is significant because it arrives after Miranda’s introduction, which emphasizes the many untold stories of California. The story of “women caught in Spanish ropes” and men “shot down with bullets” is a historical reality frequently ignored, rendering California Indian histories and ways of knowing illegible to the present while simultaneously occluding the violence Spanish explorers and missionaries committed against California Indian communities.

“Los Pájaros” both counters that narrative and engages in an act of truth-making and truth-unraveling. The past is still the past, but the story changes to emphasize the brutality of Spanish explorers, to illustrate the nonpassivity of “Indian men” who “defended their wives,” and to recognize that the gender-based violence committed against Native women is a result of colonial heteropatriarchy. It is a difficult story to tell, but it must be told; even in that telling, the poem continues to refuse to fetishize that brutality. The em dashes in the sixth stanza create a dramatic pause in breath

that asks us to wait and sit as the two scenes are revealed to us: Indian men defending their wives, and women becoming “prey for the Spaniards’ unbridled lust.” They also intentionally omit and refuse to say more—the dashes disclose only enough for readers to understand the scene. They do not violate the wound further.

In the final stanza of the poem, the narrator’s voice that wavered back and forth in the beginning emerges again:

The Indian men tried to defend their wives
of various and beautifully blended colors
only to be shot down with bullets
seeing your people come through the fields.

First, though, we note the obvious change from “birds / of various and beautifully blended colors” to “wives / of various and beautifully blended colors,” indicating that the poem’s title “Los Pájaros” is in reference to California Indian women, and that the poem itself is an affirmation of their felt experiences. Retelling the story as a poem counters the erasure of collective and individual loss, grief, and gender-based violence. Even more, as the story is told, we realize that the voice of the poem is not that of the colonizer but our own—the reality of the reader is meant to change alongside the narrator. Between each stanza, the reader has been directed to halt their advancement, their reading—to continuously step back and look at the previous stanza, to hear the echoes between one line that signifies one kind of meaning and the other that radically shifts our grasp of its truth. The last line, “seeing your people come through the fields,” demonstrates this effect as the tone shifts dramatically. This antagonistic voice is no longer that of the settlers directed toward the Native peoples, but a Native voice directed toward the colonizers, as the “*your people*” of this line is uttered with deep anger.

Of the many narratives held within *Bad Indians*, “Los Pájaros” marks an opening up of histories: those that are intentionally forgotten and constructed, and are largely invisible, and those that mark the deep cultural roots of resistance of California Indians. Embedded within this story of Spanish colonialism and missionization is a departure from the dominant settler narratives of California Indians as victims and as having “vanished,” moving instead in the direction of narratives of survival and, even more specific, rebellion. Californian Indians have always and continue to rebel against colonial powers. Even in the last quatrain, even as we witness another scene of violence, even as we anticipate what will happen next, that anger belongs to no one but California Indian people. Theirs is a voice that insists on being heard. “Los Pájaros” marks an opening up of these histories, of how our understanding of present-day California came to be. The use of “seeing,” for instance, in the first and last lines of the poem emphasize how colonization is not “over and done with,” as settlers often claim, but persists into the present reality. The fear, dread, and anger embodied within the poem continue to be felt today by multiple California Indian communities. “Los Pájaros” not only retells a story but reorders the reality in which the state of California and the relations between California Indians and settlers were built; the

poem reframes the agency of California Indian peoples and reminds us that, with the work of dispossessed and displaced peoples elsewhere, poetry is not a luxury.³

With this in mind, this essay asks, “What does *Bad Indians* do to how we read poetry? What does it mean to read poetry after genocide?” From the moment Deborah Miranda’s declaration, “California is a story,” is uttered at the beginning of her book, we are alerted to the fact that truth, history, and reality are contested categories of experience. “California is many stories,” Miranda writes—a weighty statement that not only decenters the romanticization of California as a state but also clarifies how stories are the epistemological and ontological foundation to place and people.⁴ The stories included in *Bad Indians* are meant to “create a space where voices can speak after long and often violently imposed silence” and to tell “the antidote to lies.”⁵ These stories refute the singular colonial narrative about the missionization of California, which Miranda rightfully describes as nothing more than an imperialistic and capitalistic system meant to glorify the era of Spanish and Mexican exploitation of California Indian peoples.

The remaining poem discussed in this essay focuses on the potentiality of poems to hold historical memory and felt dispossessions. In the wake of that holding, this essay focuses on how poems not only “kill the lie” told about California and California Indians but how the poetry of *Bad Indians* muscles its way back into reality, into existence.⁶ This essay takes an untraditional approach to poetic analysis by seeking to understand what it means for poetry theory to be a condition in which a theory of poetics and a poetic theory emerges simultaneously, by allowing theory to be the poetry, and poetry to be theory. This essay asks readers to open themselves to the idea of *how* we interpret poetry makes our reading legitimate. This experience decenters the necessity of having a piece of writing “figured out” and offers instead a chance not to read *about* the poem but rather read *with* the poem.

“LIE, LIE, LIE”

“Lies My Ancestors Told for Me” opens the second of the four sections, “Bridges: Post-Secularization: 1836–1900”:

Riddle: when is a lie the truth?
when is the truth a lie?
When a lie saves your life,
that’s truth; when a lie saves the lives
of your children, grandchildren
and five generations forward,
that’s truth in a form so pure
it can’t be anything
but a story.

In a separate part of *Bad Indians*, Miranda includes a newspaper clipping titled “‘Bad’ Indian Goes on Rampages at Santa Ynez,” published in the *Los Angeles Times* on August 3, 1909. The story describes a “bad Indian” who emerges from his house with

a 44-caliber Winchester, followed by his daughter with a six-shooter and his wife, who carries a double-barreled shotgun. A constable and warden order the man to drop his gun, but when the order is ignored, the Indian man is subdued with several hard blows to the head and subsequently arrested. This newspaper clipping is accompanied by another poem, titled “Novena to Bad Indians,” in which the narrator prays to a litany of the defiant:

Indian outlaws, banditos, renegades,
rebels, lazy Indians, sinful Indians

Queens of earth, you women who sold yourselves
for a tortilla, a handful of beans, the dog’s meat;
sons of incorrigible cattle thieves like Juan Nepomuceno
who could no longer find elk or deer or salmon

Oh magnificent Aniceto, who refused to name thieves
of money, chocolate, shoes, string, knives from the presidio—
thirteen years old, you took a flogging in silence

Oh unholy pagans who refused to convert
oh pagans who converted, oh pagans who recanted,
oh converts who survived

The newspaper clipping and the “Novena” poem to contextualize “Lies My Ancestors Told for Me.” In searching through the archives, Deborah Miranda explains that she found the phrase “bad Indians” numerous times in the diaries of priests, soldiers, government officials, and teachers.⁷ To be a “bad Indian”—from the perspective of priests and teachers and the government—was to persist in the act of disobedience—what Sara Ahmed calls the willing to accept willfulness. She writes that the verb “to obey” derives from the Latin word for hearing: to give ear. “To obey,” she says, “is to give your ear to the law.”⁸ A history of disobedience is “a history of willful ears, of ears that block the message of the justice of the law, of ears that hear a right as a wrong. To hear a wrong is to hear wrongly; it is to be willing to be heard as in the wrong.”⁹ A “bad Indian” is disobedient in the sense that their acts of rebellion occur when no other avenues of resistance are available—they were outlaws, they stole, they were troublemakers, refused to convert, refused to narc, sang illegal songs and danced illegal dances. California Indians were/are “bad Indians” as a means for survival and refusal.

When we come back to “Lies My Ancestors Told For Me,” we keep in mind the stakes of that survival, because while the *Los Angeles Times* newspaper clipping and the “Novena” poem illustrate a large-scale mobilization against the state, “Lies My Ancestors Told for Me” focuses on the lies California Indian ancestors told to and for their children and grandchildren. The poem highlights the difficult—and, for some of us, maybe even impossible—decision to choose to disappear, to become erased—all to ensure survival. We are asked to recall the phrase “bad Indians,” as lying is generally seen as wrong or bad. Yet, in these circumstances, lying guarantees staying alive.

In the first nine lines of the poem, we are asked to consider the first sentence of *Bad Indians* again: “California is a story.” The idea that lying and truth are not polar opposites of each other is jarring. This realization demands that we grapple with the idea of walking in one reality that is organically connected to another, but neither are the “true” version of each other; that the lies Spanish explorers and missionaries told is one story and the lies California Indian ancestors told is a story, too. A lie is the truth when it ensures survival, when it becomes another kind of story told. Truth-telling and lying are entangled, enmeshed, mixed up together. In “Lies My Ancestors Told for Me,” Miranda explains that

After the mission broke up,
it was better to lie
like a dog about blood,
say you are Mexican
Mexican Mexican Mexican

These lines could reference Congress, in 1851 and 1852, appropriating and paying out over “one million dollars in bounties to white men who harvest Indian scalps from the California goldfields—scalps taken from men, women, and children by men eager to make easy money.”¹⁰ They could reference the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which required the United States to enfranchise formerly Mexican citizens, including Indigenous people, into the California constitution, which was written to uphold Mexican citizenship and extinguish Indigenous rights. This new state constitution effectively erased Indigenous land ownership created during the secularization of the missions. In either case, “lying” becomes a kind of bodily survival—it secures safety from more scalplings and more killings. “Lying” becomes a disruptor to settler colonialism, which aims to continue its “vanishing Indian” narrative: those who choose to lie about their identities have secured their and their descendants’ place in the future. Yet, on that same note, telling this lie simultaneously dispossesses one from their land unless a Mexican identity is claimed. The line that repeats “Mexican Mexican Mexican” stresses that notion, serving as a reminder that *who* you are and *what* you are is not “Indian”—except that’s the lie. There is a heavy sense of urgency that pervades the poem, conveyed through the repetition of “Mexican,” as well as in the demand to

put it on the birth certificates
put it on the death certificates
tell it to the census takers
tell it to the self-appointed
bounty hunters who appear
at your door looking for
Indians Indians Indians
and when you tell that lie
tell it in Spanish.

Putting “Mexican” on birth certificates and death certificates, saying “Mexican” to the census takers and the self-appointed bounty hunters, parallels that same fear and dread from “Los Pájaro”—that, to borrow from Audra Simpson, you, too, “can be emptied of your familial relations, your relationship to land, your signifying possibility as the ongoing project of Empire transits in Byrd’s parlance, or plows through you.”¹¹ That one is never quite *safe*. Moreover, Stacie S. Denetsosie claims that the repetition of “Mexican Mexican Mexican” represents how, once “the lie is said and repeated enough,” it is “documented, and indigenous erasure, at least in terms of legal and administrative visibility or recognition, is ensured.”¹² Although intended as a form of protection, the consequences of “lying” results in “large swathes of Native populations” who are considered to be unrecognized federally, leaving newer generations with the responsibility of navigating erasure at the political, social, and cultural level.¹³ The last two declarative lines to “tell that lie / tell it in Spanish” further illustrate how “the lie” translates into a loss of language—no longer are the children learning to speak Chumash but instead are speaking Spanish:

Don’t tell them
you still speak Chumash
with their mother. That’s a lie
your descendants will hate you for
but lie anyway,
so they’ll be alive
to complain.

Yet these last two lines of this section of the poem emphasize a central theme of *Bad Indians*. Even as Miranda endeavors to write “about the past”—searching through the omissions of California Indian histories—much of her poetics is focused on writing about a radical present, of understanding how the “now” operates with the “then” and the “not yet.” The poem makes clear that the choices for California Indians after the missions broke was to die bodily or disappear into another identity. But within these same lines, an alternative avenue is teased and maintained throughout the poem. The reference to “still” speaking Chumash indicates that this unnamed “you” still carries on the language and traditions of their community. Similar to “Los Párajos,” this present use of the verb—“*still speak*”—in the poem refuses to represent the ancestors’ choice as a tragedy, as a complete loss. There are layers to this lying. Moments such as this one, where an ancestor continues to embody their culture despite the present threat, are hidden everywhere in the poem, as they call their Mexican children in at dusk

for a bite of acorn mush
and cactus apple;
as grandfathers
slip out at night,
retrieve your dancing clothes
from the hiding place,
drive up unlit roads

to a rancheria in the hills
where clappers and rattles
whisper the truth
and bare Indian feet
beat against the earth
beat beat beat like children begging
to be let back inside;
and as one sings the *alabada*
when the priests can hear;
hum the Deer Song when they can't.
Drag your feet in the dust

The lies are still being told, and the consequences of those lies will result in land dispossession, language loss, loss of medicines and songs and dances, identity, recognition, and more. But the aim of those lies was to “deflect genocide,” and even in the midst of those lies, these ancestors were still practicing their cultures, and those lies eventually became “clues”—

Tell the lies now and maybe later
your descendants will dig
for the truth in libraries,
field notes, museums,
wax cylinder recordings,
newspaper reports of massacres
and relocations, clues you left behind
when you forgot to lie
lie lie lie.

Unlike the seriousness of the repeated “Mexican Mexican Mexican” earlier in the poem, the decision to end with a repeated “lie lie lie” line sounds mocking, as though the ancestors are sharing a private inside joke about their skills in deceiving the “bounty hunters.” In writing about the painting of Maidu artist Frank Day, Mark Minch-de Leon explains that “lying” in a California Indian framework “is understood to be a legitimate way to confront radically incommensurate forms of power” that “threaten further destruction through the forgetting and silencing of the catastrophe, and that carve out institutionalized forms of memorialization based on a discourse of truth.”¹⁴ For the ancestors in this poem to lie and then to continue eating their foods, dancing their dances, and humming their songs while lying, is to enact a kind of disobedience wherein one refuses a particular way of being formed by power. Amidst an impossible decision, the ancestors choose to not be subjected in a manner through which the state establishes its legitimacy—that is the story that carries on.

A FOUND POEM

The poem in question is about a whale:

A lone whale,
with a voice unlike any other,
has been wandering

the Pacific for the past
twelve years,
singing at a frequency

of around 25 hertz. Its calls
do not match those of any
known species of whale,

which usually sing
at frequencies of between
15 and 20 hertz.

We can read the opening stanzas in a number of ways, but the immediate “lone” in that first stanza points us immediately in the direction of grief. The whale is unique with “a voice unlike any other,” but has been wandering alone throughout the Pacific Ocean for the past twelve years. Her calls “do not match those of any / known species of whale,” indicating that she is perhaps the last of her kind. Even more,

The mammal does not follow
migration patterns
of any other species either.

which stresses her solitary state. Toward the end of the poem, we are treated to a similar scene of the whale roaming “the ocean / every autumn and winter” as her calls “deepened slightly / as a result of aging.” To whom does she continue calling? Do her cries (if they are that) go unnoticed and unanswered? We are made to believe that her story is loneliness. Maybe it is. Yet, the iterations of “singing” and “sing” negate that quick conclusion. Grief and singing can coexist. From another angle, all singing is a kind of grief. As the poem continues, those calls that were described as having “deepened slightly / as a result of aging” are further expounded as “recognizable”:

The calls of the whale,
which roams the ocean
every autumn and winter,

have deepened slightly
as a result of aging,
but are still

recognizable.

The poem in question is a story about surviving. The whale continues her migration patterns, and sings and calls, and even if she remains alone in her excursions, her

voice is still known. Everything she does—and is—is different, but familiar still. In the uneasy tendencies to read “wandering” as alone, this poem ends with a note that emphasizes the whale’s position not as lost but still searching, adapting, and singing. The whale refuses to be forgotten, and refuses to forget how to sing. Miranda, in the introductory note to this poem, describes it as a found poem from the article “Strange-Voiced Whale at Large in the Ocean,” published on December 8, 2004. A *found* poem. Not “a poem that was found in the article.” Not “I found a poem in the article.” Just “a found poem”—otherwise known as a poem that is separate and whole, even as it remains connected to the article from which it emerges. A poem that is whole on its own. A poem that has always been whole and will always be whole, even if it never was *found*.

The poem in question is about Ishi, a California Indian Yahi relative of the Deer Creek region, who was taken and studied as a subject of anthropological research at the University of California Anthropological Museum. Ishi was politically sensationalized as the “last wild Indian” in the western United States after members of his tribe were killed as a result of California genocide. The poem, titled “Ishi at Large,” is not merely a mediation about a lone whale but also an attempt to listen for what is unsaid and oversaid about the story of Ishi, detached from the factual and often damaging narrative told of him. In her examinations of the presence of Venus in African slave captivity narratives, Saidiya Hartman writes that the archive is “a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhoea, a few lines about a whore’s life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history.”¹⁵ The archive is a “barracoon,” not “as a holding cell or space of confinement but as an episteme.”¹⁶ The difficulty in writing about “impossible stories,” she says, is creating stories that do not reproduce the same violences of its archival narrative, of not reproducing the same ethnographical capture.

How does one tell a story about Ishi and his life without replicating the structures of ethnographic violence? Elsewhere in *Bad Indians*, Miranda writes that she had been reading about Ishi’s brain, which was “removed from his body against his wishes, and despite promises from his white academic ‘friends’ that his body would be left intact.”¹⁷ His brain was “shipped to the Smithsonian, where it floated around for decades in various storage facilities, ultimately ending up in a steel canister with several other brains, until repatriation activists tracked it down.”¹⁸ She continues:

And I keep looking out the glass windows in front of me, at the blue Philadelphia sky with its majestic, gruff clouds sailing past ponderously as whales, at their own pace and in their own time. Do clouds migrate like whales? Are clouds really sentient beings, brought together into these clusters of moisture, massive communities traveling from one place to another? I imagine the ebb and flow, the gatherings and dispersions, of so many molecules across the face of the earth, and I think about Ishi’s brain floating in a dark stainless steel canister at the Smithsonian, his ashes sealed into a clay Pueblo pot in California, his songs scratched tentatively on the wax cylinders of early twentieth-century technology. Maybe we’re all clouds in one form or another.¹⁹

Counterhistories. Epistemological sabotage. Resurgent narratives. Ethnographic refusal. These phrases describe the work of Deborah Miranda. But the power of *Bad Indians* lies in its skill at what we might clumsily call restorying: a way of retelling stories without abandoning their subjectivities, and without falling into the constraint of rules that determine stories must have a particular “structure,” must be “accurate and unchanged,” and must always, in those retellings, represent some sense of truth. Trinh T. Minh-ha states that there are some (e.g., anthropologists) who believe that in order to appropriate the “‘traditional’ storytellers’ powers and to produce the same effects as theirs, it suffices to ‘look for the structure of their narratives.’”²⁰ In other words, the anthropologist cannot impose their worldview or their interpretations of the story without ruining the effect of the story itself. The structure of the story must be found by the anthropologist, gathered from the storyteller, and then retold in a manner that honors—reproduces—that structure again and again to preserve its “truth.” But “the structure,” Trinh continues, “is not something given, entirely external to the person who structures, but a projection of that person’s way of handling realities, here narratives.”²¹ “Structure” is a colonial repetition into which we are interpolated. Telling a story the way it is “supposed to be told” does not, in fact, preserve its power. It suffocates it.

Retelling stories—or restorying—through poetry embodies Isabel Meadows’ wish to “*hacer cuento otra vez en el mundo*,” to “make an account again in the world” or “make a story again in the world.”²² It is an aim that refuses to settle with making counternarratives to colonial logics, but is further entwined with the difficult task of bringing certain omissions, clues, lies, shards, into the light and reaffirming their relationality to one another. Defining “Ishi at Large” as “a found poem” places him outside the archive, outside the need to “structure,” thus remaining loyal to the “structure” of how his story is narrated. For Miranda to restory Ishi through a story about a whale makes the poem about a whale—about Ishi. A poem about California Indian people’s histories. A poem about loss. Loneliness. Survival. Clouds. Nothing changes the outcome, his life. As the “at large” in the title suggests, Ishi is at once free and on the run at the same time. But entangling the life of the whale with the life of Ishi disorients the reader’s immediate response to “feel sad” about the whale and Ishi’s circumstances. As Hartman explains, her intentions with retelling the story of Venus is not “anything as miraculous as recovering the lives of the enslaved or redeeming the dead, but rather laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible.”²³ Ishi is no longer confined to the past, but neither does the poem tell us what “could have happened.” Instead, we are invited to witness the “full picture” of Ishi singing and surviving.

Author’s note: The title includes the lowercase words *stories* and *surviving* without punctuation and the phrase *what can a poem do?* with a question mark as a means of refusal to grammatically inscribed hierarchies. The deviation from the standard house style of the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* is about resistance to stylistic conventions as being part of the refusal inherent in the works of Deborah Miranda. The choice to use lowercase letters and abandon grammatical practice contends with

the normalization of how one participates in the practice of meaning-making when having to write and publish in the English language. In this way, I hope to elucidate alternative epistemologies for approaching language, particularly when the language in question has historically been weaponized against Native ontologies. This author is moreover influenced by thinkers, most notably Black feminist scholar and activist bell hooks, who radically engage in and play with language as a means to decenter the importance of subjectivity and to shift attention toward the work itself. The title is a political endeavor meant to challenge these standard practices as a part of how capitalism stratifies and commodifies language. In doing so, I seek to question how the concepts of *stories* and *survival* function in relation to the acts of *storying* and *surviving*. Likewise, the question *what can a poem do?* is an inquiry into the potential poetry embodied as a theorizing lens and methodology. The question written in present tense as opposed to the past (i.e., *what a poem does*), asks the reader to anticipate the kinds of desirable potentialities and relations one can produce through the work of poetic composition.

NOTES

1. Deborah A. Miranda, *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir* (Toronto: Heyday, 2013), 114.
2. *Ibid.*, 114.
3. See Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (Tucson: Kore Press, 2000).
4. Miranda, *Bad Indians*, xi.
5. *Ibid.*, xx.
6. *Ibid.*, xx; 120.
7. See Sarah Tschiggfrie, "New Book by W&L's Miranda Gives a Voice to California Indians," *Columns*, February 19, 2013.
8. Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 137.
9. *Ibid.*, 137.
10. Miranda, *Bad Indians*, 45.
11. Audra Simpson, "The State Is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders, and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty," *Theory and Event* 19, no. 4 (2016): 22.
12. Stacie S. Denetsosie, "Redefining Ceremony and the Sacred: Short Stories from the Diné'tah," *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing* (2019): 7.
13. *Ibid.*, 7.
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