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Bad Indians: A Reflection by a Grieving Esselen Woman

Melissa Leal

My grandma is dying. They started hospice a week ago. She is ninety-eight years old and has lived a long life. The death of matriarchs brings up all kinds of emotions and hidden treasures and reflections. Her name is Beth (Velma Beth). She is the most kind and patient woman that I have ever known and probably ever will know. She married my grandfather the first weekend that they met each other. My grandpa was interested in more than dancing and my grandma was a good Mormon girl, so they hopped a train and went to Reno to get hitched. I write this with tears in my eyes but also a smirk on my face, because the telling of that story would make us all laugh.

My grandfather, an Esselen man, was not the easiest to get along with. He was a Navy veteran and Pearl Harbor survivor who lived through the Great Depression and, what is obvious to me, a product of generations of trauma. Intergenerational trauma or historical trauma—these are the buzzwords of the last decade. They are real. I do not deny their reality. I understand it and feel it deep in my bones, especially when someone close to me is dying and I start to reflect on their life and my life. I just wish there were a way to describe it that did not feel so clinical. I wish there was a way to describe everything that isn't so clinical or, perhaps, academic. And thus, I digress. But do I?

Deborah Miranda, through her tribal memoir titled *Bad Indians*, made historical trauma less clinical for me. She took on issues such as genocide and intergenerational trauma and made them accessible to everyone. She used poetry and family stories to inform us about the Esselen and Chumash people who have been displaced, forgotten, or both. She stuck a fist in the air and told Kroeber, “*Let ka lai* (We are here).” She

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let the world know that we are still here, despite what was done to us (missionization, militias, being deemed extinct by anthropologists). Yet, we are who we are because of it. And we are amazing and poetic and *loliki* (beautiful).

Bad Indians is a testimony, an act of decolonization by freeing research and writing from colonial influences. It is exactly what Linda Tuhiwai Smith means when she writes about decolonizing methodologies. In fact, no other book made as much of an impact on me as Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies*, until *Bad Indians*.¹ In Smith's book, she proposes twenty-five projects on decolonizing research. These projects appear in Deborah Miranda's memoir, specifically the storytelling project. Linda writes, "Intrinsic in storytelling is a focus on dialogue and conversations amongst ourselves as indigenous peoples, to ourselves and for ourselves."² Miranda writes *Bad Indians* as if it is a journal, a sacred diary to which she gives us all the key. As an Esselen woman, when I read Miranda's diary, I forget that it isn't mine.

So, what does it mean to be a "Bad Indian?" Every person who reads the book will interpret it for themselves. To me, a Bad Indian is an alive Indian. A Bad Indian can also be a person who doesn't fit the mold of what society thinks an Indian looks like or sounds like or is. A Bad Indian is one who is just badass. An Indian who actively remembers and celebrates survival is a Bad Indian. An Indian who names their child with purpose is a Bad Indian. An Indian who reads, revitalizes, and represents is a Bad Indian.

I took too long to write this, and now my grandma has passed. As of this writing, she took her last breath a few hours ago, reuniting with her husband and her fourth child (my father). In eight years, I have lost my father, my mother, my paternal grandfather, and my paternal grandmother. Those eight years feel like eight months. I open the book to page 176 and there Deborah Miranda offers me a poem titled "One for the Road." And I read.

I need a song small enough to fit in my pocket, big enough to wrap around the wide shoulders of my grief, a song with chords raw as cheap rum and a rhythm that beats like magma.

I need a song that forgives me. I need a song that forgives my lack of forgiveness.³

Writing this reflection reminds me of a poem that I wrote, a poem that I hoped would welcome Māori visitors from Aotearoa, a poem that I recited in the presence of Linda Tuhiwai Smith. This poem was my way of expressing how those twenty-five projects are just as much Māori as they are California Indian. I give thanks to Deborah Miranda for opening these gates and giving academics like us permission to write with our hearts, to share testimony even when we are supposed to be "scholarly." I give thanks to her tribal memoir for telling the story of Esselen people. I give thanks to her sister, Louise Miranda-Ramirez, for protecting our ancestors and fighting for our homelands. I give thanks to my grandmother and the ninety-eight years that she lived a life dedicated to her family. And, reminiscent of *Bad Indians*, I share this poem with you.

If I ever am blessed with the gift of childbirth
Of creating life within my life
Through the pain, I will remember my ancestors
I will hear them whisper in my ear
And hear the names of all who came before me
And all who are yet to come
Those that share my blood through blood
And those that share my blood through ceremony

I will name that child Salmon
Kiliwa . . . in my language
In their tongue
What was spoken before we called this place what we call it now

Salmon will be born a survivor
A resilient reminder of resiliency itself
Before they came and saw and named and claimed
We were like the salmon
Connected in ways that we only understood through prayer
Salmon, our brother . . . our sister . . . our existence
Travels back and forth and round and round this island
Returning over and over again

Salmon will give testimony
and tell stories that haven't been heard in hundreds of years.
We will celebrate survival by the water
Next to a mountain
Under the moonlight.
Our songs will indigenize the earth
as we intervene in a process of destruction
We will dance for renewal
And speak to revitalize what may have been asleep
We will come together to make decisions
democratizing as a collective
Networking in an effort to protect our agency

As I was writing these words
and as I read them now,
I envision my great-grandmothers
with tattoos on their chin
And I know that we are related
We are as close in spiritual DNA as we are to kiliwa
The only thing separating us is water
Or rather . . . the water represents a bridge

A fluid that rushes back and forth
Not much different than an umbilical cord
Keeping us both alive
Sharing in the same life force
Men and women and the powerful in between
Gendering us as we were meant to be
Reframing our societies to look and feel like they once did
Negotiating our discovery
Restoring our love for life

NOTES

1. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1999).
2. *Ibid.*, 144.
3. Deborah A. Miranda, *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir* (Berkeley: Heyday, 2013), 176.