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Feeding Ourselves with Stories and the Gift of Having a Body: A Conversation with Deborah A. Miranda

René Dietrich

Guest Editor's Note: This conversation with Deborah Miranda, which focuses on two of her books, took place shortly after the publication of *Raised by Humans* in June, 2015, in Mainz, Germany. I would like to thank Alana Zanardo Mazur for preparing the transcript on which this version is based.

René Dietrich (RD): Deborah, I want to start by talking about your memoir *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir* (Berkeley: Heyday, 2013). On the one hand, you have the subtitle "A Tribal Memoir," and on the other hand, it is also described as a mixed-genre piece of writing. I was wondering, then, how do you see a connection between these terms, or also a specific affinity between Native writing and the idea of a mixed genre?

Deborah Miranda (DM): For a long time, the title was "The Light from Carrisa Plains," which is the piece about my grandfather, because I thought the book would be about my grandfather. When I decided that it was going to be *Bad Indians*, I knew that I needed a subtitle to play with that title. I was thinking, and I feel this very deeply, that this is a collaborative text; that I did not write this book by myself. So, I thought, "how can I acknowledge that this is a text created by a long and a very complex series

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of storytellers who all contributed different things at different times?” Putting in the term “tribal memoir” would help indicate that this was a mosaic of stories. That it was indeed partly about me, partly about my life, but also a way of saying, “I am a part of a vast, very intricate network of history, and people, and trauma, and survival.” For me that is a little hyperlink and if I click on it, it just opens up and helps reveal all the different authors that are part of this text.

RD: What struck me about your book in relation to previous Native life-writing texts—such as Linda Hogan’s *The Woman Who Watches over the World*, subtitled *A Native Memoir*, N. Scott Momaday’s *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and *The Names*, or Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller*—is that all of these texts create personal and tribal histories out of a tapestry of stories and different registers. Your work taps into this tradition, but also innovates it and makes something anew from it—takes it to a place where that collaboration or that mosaic has a different implication, and a specific implication, for Californian Indigenous peoples.

DM: Thinking about the layers of experiences, I think the word *palimpsest* really brings that out, that some things from the past rise up through and are still very present. There are so many different layers and so many different ways of accessing those experiences—many of which are not mine. Trying to find ways to inhabit those experiences so that I can articulate them for other people surprised me. I wasn’t expecting this book to take that turn—to get into the personas of my ancestors. I never would have thought that; it would have seemed very presumptuous to me [*laughs*].

RD: It would have seemed like taking on, or adapting that voice?

DM: Right, I wouldn’t have thought of doing that. I think it came from the intensity of the research, and the fact that for most of the research I was living alone in a very small studio in LA away from everybody in my immediate knowledge. I had a sister in San José, a couple of cousins around, but mostly I stayed in this very small apartment living with this material day and night. Being a poet who already has formed porous boundaries between different experiences—when I started to feel the need to write, it wasn’t a very conscious need; I just wrote what came out. And what came out often-times was written in the voice of a named ancestor, or an anonymous ancestor.

RD: Was there ever a moment in your research and during the writing process that the book emerged in the way it is, when you figured out it would be this composition of fragments and mosaic and mixed genre, all pertaining to the history that was being told? Or were there rather little moments that led up to that?

DM: I think I resisted the fragmentation and the mosaic quality of the book for months. I kept trying to write a more scholarly book based around historical context of my grandfather’s tape recordings. Ah, “this is when he talks about this, this is what he is referring to.” He talked about a man named Davy Jacks that he knew, and that his father knew, and who bought a lot of land, and pushed the Indians off. So, I would research that and realized that Davy Jacks turned out to be a very famous Scottish

man who lived in California and did indeed buy up a lot of land, and then lost it all. My grandfather was gloating, and he says, “yeah, he kicked all the Indians off and then somebody else came along and kicked him off” [*laughs*]. I really thought I was going to write a more academic work, but I became caught up in the fact that these were voices that nobody had heard. The research that I was doing brought up stories; I think initially the stories captured me. Then the realization that these voices were trapped in the archive. And I felt, I want to say a “calling” or a deep response that there were ways, as a poet and as a writer, I could give these voices a place in the contemporary world. So, that writing for me was really necessary. I would write these stories out and then think to myself, “well that’s really good, but that’s not the book I’m going to write.”

Oftentimes, when I’m writing an academic work, I will work on an academic article or essay and then go off and write a poem about it and then come back. But instead, I was writing poems and essays and short stories, and there was no academic writing—I couldn’t get into that space. . . . There was a moment when I was really struggling with the structure of the book—because I thought I was supposed to be writing this book that would get me tenure, and was really resisting the work’s creative side.

So, one night—my studio has this big, big blank wall—I started putting up all of the pieces I had written, pieces of paper, and all of the pieces I wanted to write, all the stories that interested me. And I put them out in this big radius with the project in the middle, and I looked at it and I thought “none of these things can be done in an academic voice. These are people’s voices that need to be heard and I’m not in charge of it. They’re telling me what they want to tell me, I’m not the boss of this book” [*laughs*]. And I was thinking, “nobody will publish this. Nobody in their right mind would publish a mixed-genre book with so many photographs that need permissions, so many documents that need permissions, so many graphics”—and then, “ah, okay, but the book needs to be written. So I will do it and figure out the publication part later.” That was very scary, at that point in my career. But I went with it. And I am really glad I did. I think that was the right decision to make.

RD: And I think we can also read part of that courage in the book itself, in the writing, and in the stories that it brings up, a courage to test these histories, probe these histories and go to all these painful places, but also the courage to bring them to light. And maybe this is not unlike the courage in that moment in your life to create this book, this space for dialogue, not knowing how it will find a place in the world. But it did in this amazing way, which also speaks to the necessity of these stories and to audiences increasingly ready for these stories.

DM: Yes. And that was part of the importance—part of that confidence, I guess—or part of what convinced me that I could do this, and that it was necessary being in California while I wrote it. I was going to a lot of California Indian gatherings, I went to the California Storytelling Conference in Palm Springs with Georgiana Sanchez, who is a Chumash poet and writer. And it was that generosity of spirit, and to spend a whole weekend with storytellers—there were Bird Singers there, crafts people making clamshell jewelry. Soaking that up and realizing nobody is telling this story—and feeling welcomed into a community. Then, I went up to the Sherman Indian School

at Riverside, and I got the same feeling from the people there that they have all this material and it wasn't out in the world. I looked through their student enrollment books and I found Leslie Silko's relatives, there they were. My dad always said that some of his relatives had gone to that school. I wasn't able to make that connection, but I felt it. And I went to the Breath of Life conference at UC Berkeley and read some of the material to them; it was toward the end of my sabbatical. I was quaking in my boots and thinking, "ok, this is a real test, if these Indians think I am nuts, I've spent the whole year writing things nobody likes." But, it really resonated for them. At that point I had written the "Novena to Bad Indians," and they just really got it. And I thought, "okay, I am speaking the right language" [laughs]. So, being there, being on many different California Indian homelands, testing out the writing; that issue of place really came in to help me and say, "you have a right to stand on your homeland and seek your stories." And boy, that was worth everything.

RD: One of the parts in the book that makes it so powerful and poignant is the way it creates dialogue across the generations that move into the past, but also into a projected future. I am thinking of the dialogue with Victor, for example, and Vicenta, and also with Isabel Meadows as this figure [who was] bringing all these stories together and telling them to J. P. Harrington, who takes everything on and works it into his writing or his recording. It does make these ancestors speak, but at the same time you speak back to them in a way that creates this dialogue with people on various levels, including mediators, people who suffered through these histories, or people who played an inadvertent role in preserving the stories, but at the same time contributed to eliminating the Esselen's status as a tribe.

DM: I like that idea of conversation and of dialogue. At a certain point in the organization of the book, I had it divided into the four stages which is semi-linear, even though within the linear narrative, stories talk back to stories in the beginning, and back and forth. And a colleague of mine, at Washington and Lee, Chris Gavalier, whom I admire as a writer, offered to read it and gave me some feedback. And his suggestion was that I eliminate those four areas and interweave the stories so that it was totally nonlinear—which is really funny: here's a conventional Euro-American telling the Indian, "get more nonlinear!" I was really taken with that idea, but my overall concern was that I wanted this book to also be accessible to people who weren't used to thinking in that nonlinear way. I knew that it already had so much material that was unfamiliar to people. It had the different voices that were coming out, and the different historical facts that were just hard for people to accept—and not something that they had previous knowledge of. So I really thought, "I need to have some linear quality to this book." At least . . . the pretense of a linear quality, for the sake of making it accessible. But then I also realized, "yeah, parts of the book do have precontact voices, but there is no precontact section." So, it is nonlinear in the way that that conversation goes back and forth and that's what really helps create that sort of layering, the voices speaking through. And I thought about the other way of thinking about Native ways of thinking; there is this idea that it's not linear, and there's also this idea of thinking about a spiral, about time as a spiral, and that if I am on this part of the spiral, and

somebody else is a hundred years down the road and they're on this part of the spiral, we can actually be very close, that contact can happen. So, I thought to myself, "no, I think this book is more of a spiral." And that's different from being nonlinear.

RD: The book opens with the graphic "A Genealogy of Violence" and ends with another form of genealogy—the ancestry chart where you are embedded in this network of relatives and relations. And although we've gotten to know some of the damaging histories that have been passed on, there's also a lot of enrichment and continuity through these generations. And I was wondering about two things. One is how these two genealogies tie in with that ever-present sense of seeing what you call "the blessing and the genocide" both in the same moment and how you cannot really keep those things apart anymore in the present context, looking back at the history of colonization and living under ongoing conditions of settler colonialism.

And the other thing that I was wondering about is seeing the genealogies in relation to Momaday's notion of blood memory as an imaginative continuity that creates these ties across generations that can help form a Native sense of identity. Your book works with that tradition. But, at the same time, it shows that there is also something inherited through colonization—if we want to call it blood memory—which is akin to embodied memories that signify unresolved trauma that is acted out. So I was wondering, how [does] this make blood memory more complicated and poignant and take it closer to issues of colonization?

DM: I think when I was constructing the book and writing the pieces, I was very concerned with the aftereffects of long-term trauma. And the thread that I didn't realize I was working on until I got to the end—and actually until my father passed away, which was during the writing, towards the end of the book—was that part of what I was doing was trying to do what I had done all my life, which was trying to understand the two sides of my father: the one of a loving, creative, artistic, and very sensuous man, who could be very much in touch with the earth and with foods and with storytelling and things like that; and how he could turn on a dime and become what my little brother used to call a "meaniac." He used to say, "why is dad such a meaniac?" And he was probably not more than four years old when he said that [*laughs*]. So, it was a slip of the tongue for him, but it was very apropos.

Trying to figure out how did my father become this person because through experiencing my little brother, whom I didn't meet until he was three, and then having my own son—I saw that these men are so alike: my father looks like my little brother, who looks like my son; there is this amazing genetic likeness that comes through. And loving my little brother, and loving my son so much, and thinking to myself, "oh, my dad was a little boy like this once, he was lovable, he was gentle, and he was vulnerable." And so, trying to come to terms with the darker sides of my father and knowing that, yes, he was an alcoholic, and alcohol affected him in a particular way—some people are very happy drunks; he was very angry when he got to drinking—but knowing that there was more to it than that. And through my research beginning to understand how it is that an entire people can be changed by trauma. And then they have children who are born into this trauma and experience a new trauma.

First, there are the Spaniards, and then there are the Mexicans, and then there are the Americans, and then there is horrible racism and poverty. Realizing that there is just no letup, you know, generation after generation. Coming upon the . . . theory of historical trauma helped open that up for me. . . . Once I understood it, I wanted to explain it to other people. And I wanted to explain it to other California Indians, because I think we carry a lot of shame for our past, starting with the whole story that the rest of the world hears which is California Indians just fell on their knees when the priests arrived and we didn't resist, and we didn't fight back. I wanted to counter that story and say, "no, look, here are all the stories of resistance that you haven't heard about." We should be very proud of our ancestors. And we should also be very proud of the ones who survived.

There is . . . [also] "a way in which we inherit," just like you inherit all the privilege, if you come from a family that hasn't experienced trauma, that's a great privilege to inherit and we have that, precontact [*laughs*]. But you also can't help what you inherit when it comes to trauma. You can try to deal with it, rather than ignore it or accept it as the norm. But, there are ways in which once we're conscious of it, we can say, "oh it happened because of this, and now we don't have that, or now we can make some actions that help us address those issues; we don't have to endure the inheritance of that trauma and we don't have to pass it on. . . ." And I think to myself, "have I in some way passed on my own trauma?" Well, of course I have. The ways in which I parented came down to me from my parents and I tried very hard to make conscious changes, but now that my children are grown, I can look back and say, "oh, no, I didn't do that, did I? Oh, I did that, didn't I? [*laughs*] That wasn't so nice."

But, I wanted very much to open up that conversation for California Indians and to point out the exact ways in which we were traumatized. I didn't want to say "victimized"; I didn't want to say, "oh, it's okay to be alcoholic, oh, it's okay to be diabetic, oh, it's okay to have difficulties." I didn't necessarily want to say that. I wanted to say, "there is a reason why this is happening." And now that we know the reason, it's like some little switch clicks in your brain and you say, "oh, I understand that now." And then you can go on and try to make conscious changes in your life. That became really important to me, passing on that personal revelation that happened for me, to the whole community. . . . from what I have heard from other Native people, other California Indian people, it has turned on a lot of switches.

RD: There is also this fine line between resisting victimization and making everyone responsible for their own problems because of the way they are and saying "don't see yourselves as victims," while not acknowledging how these conditions of livelihood and, maybe, unhealthy forms of behavior, are also effects of impositions of forms of settler-colonial violence that are ongoing and systemic.

DM: And sometimes they are very well disguised. I've had other California Indian people say to me, "you know, in our family, we don't have any of those problems. We don't have any alcoholism, our children graduate from high school and go on to college." And . . . I'm very happy that there are people who have not felt some of those traumas. And I often say to them, "where in your family is the strength coming

from, what survived that allowed you to sidestep what so many of us had to do?" And oftentimes, they say "the church," which is very interesting. There are a lot of Catholic California Indians, some of us practicing, some of us not practicing. But a lot of people took strength from the church and followed that path through many generations.

And in many ways, it worked for them in terms of avoiding some of those pitfalls. And in other ways I want to say to them, "what has happened now is that that has come to the surface." There is a tension about being Catholic and about being California Indian. And it's come to the surface now with Junipero Serra's canonization. . . . there are Catholic Indians who are very pro-Serra's canonization. And what they are having to deal with now is the question "can I be a proud Indian, and can I be a proud Catholic?" Because there are a lot of California Indians who were very anti-canonization. And I see . . . this moment in time [has the] potential for a lot of division. And I hate that, that split. But, at the same time, I can recognize that these were families who at a certain point in time made that sort of adaptation and they were able to say, "I am both Indian and Catholic," and it gave them a certain structure to their lives that maybe other California Indian families didn't have.

I am really interested in bridging that divide and saying, "we don't have to be two different factions." But it definitely has happened that people have said to me—actually 90 percent of the readers who come to me after a reading say, "Oh, that was our story, you just told our story." But there is always a small percentage of people who say, "We didn't have that experience;" and then I always want to say, "How much about your family do you really know? [laughs] How far back have you gone?" It was a kind of terrorism and we all lived it. And [suggest to them that] "maybe there are other ways in which it has been expressed in your family that you are not seeing."

RD: We've talked about the mosaic as a compositional form and also regarding personal stories and histories. But there's also this larger question of Indigenous peoplehood, the idea that there is a way to claim that without despairing over the fact that the government doesn't recognize something that isn't authentic in their parlance of continuity and distinctness and wholeness—that there's a[nother] version of Indigenous peoplehood that comes out of acknowledging fragmentation and building mosaics . . . not creating separate wholes that then fail to connect. Do you see these debates as part of that dynamic?

DM: I think they are definitely connected. Like many tribes in North America, the Esselen Nation—or should I say the Esselen people—have several factions and none of them like each other [laughs]. And my personal feeling has always been, "there are so few of us left, why can we not find a way to be more united?" And I feel that way on a tribal level, but also on a Native American level. I think we have been very well-trained by the colonizer to tear ourselves apart. And so [in my piece titled] "A California Indian in the Philadelphia Airport," I was returning from California and I had experienced some of those rifts among some of the Esselen people. My sister is the chair of the Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen Nation branch, and [I was] experiencing some of her frustration at trying to do the federal recognition work, do the language work that she is so good at—she should just build that study to fill her whole life, she

is such a jewel—and do the day-to-day tribal work and enrollment work and dealing with members who have issues and all of that stuff.

And so I was very aware of all the tensions and how difficult it is to accomplish anything. And my own work is trying to bring those stories in and sort of educate people in a different way. And in some ways, I was teetering right on the edge of feeling desperate, thinking, “this is our last chance; if we don’t get it together now, we’re going to be swept aside and we really will disappear.” And that was a despair. That was really from my darkest-self kind of thinking: “we just can’t get it together, what’s going to happen to us if we don’t?” And feeling very sad about it. And thinking to myself, “what has always allowed us to endure?” And part of it is just gutting it out, right? And part of it is just story; that we feed ourselves with stories from the past and that was something my father was very good at—storytelling, not just about the family stories, but telling a good story. And storytelling has the ability to have you create your own reality, your own identity. And so in that moment I’m thinking to myself, “sometimes you have to make up a story that will allow you to survive.”

And that’s why I came up with this idea of being “differently Indian.” You know, I’m not your stereotypical Plains Indian, for sure [*laughs*]. And I’m not even your stereotypical California Indian, if anybody even knows what that is. We’re Indians who are remnants, but we desperately want that, deeply feel that connection to our ancestry. And so, if we’re going to celebrate that, we’re going to have to adapt, we’re going to have to make new stories, and allow ourselves to make new stories. Because a lot of times people get caught up in thinking, “oh well, if I’m Indian, then, I have to learn how to do this, and I have to learn how to do this.” So, what I would like to do is being able to reach out to those other factions and say, “we’re telling different versions of the same story, can we not learn how to allow those other, those different stories to coexist?” And then, that larger Native audience saying, “we’re not all the same kind of Indian, and we have different stories of colonization, but at the root of it all, we’re indigenous to this place, and that’s what brings us together.”

So, [“A California Indian in the Philadelphia Airport”] was an odd piece [*laughs*] and it felt a little risky to write; to admit, “hey, I’m from a tribe that’s having some tribal issues.” But when I talk to other Indians, tribal politics is the last thing anybody ever wants to do, right? And maybe, that is as old as being tribal itself [*laughs*].

RD: It’s also interesting to consider that sort of expectation from outsiders, “if they’re all Indians, why don’t they get along, and why do they have governments that are corrupt?” Look at non-Native governments all over the world, why are they allowed to do that, but Native peoples are held to a higher standard in that regard and if they don’t fulfill that, they just fall under the category, well, they can’t govern themselves.

DM: Look at governments all over the world, they are just as inept as tribal governments [*laughs*]. And probably because we, for so long, have been taught to model our government, our governing systems, after Euro-American systems. And that’s definitely one thing that’s been imposed on us: “you have to have a tribal constitution, you have to have officers, you have to have this and that.” There probably were other ways of doing that precontact. Would they work now? I doubt it. The way we have become

Americanized, I seriously doubt that we could go back to having inherited tribal heads, or people chosen from classes within Esselen society, and I seriously doubt we would want to go back to that either. But, there are ways in which I really believe that it is possible to adapt and take a little of this, a little of that, which is what our ancestors would have done; they would have changed as things changed. So I'm still in that place, not knowing whether we are actually going to survive as a tribal entity because we are so small and there is so few of us and we are so fractionated—which is a new word I've learned, I didn't even know there was one—that, twenty, thirty years from now, will there be an Esselen Nation? I don't know.

But, I do know that these ancestors were alive and that they deserve to have their stories told and that, as I've said, I really believe that Isabel Meadows held all those stories for so long—she held them in her body—and when she met Harrington, she saw the opportunity to pass them on to somebody who could preserve them. Because she spoke very poignantly about watching people around her disappear and fall into deep depression and dysfunction. And she knew that she couldn't really count on anybody to pass all of these stories on. Some of the stories probably still exist in her family, in the Meadows family. She didn't have children, but she had nieces and nephews. And I think her great-nephew, Steven Meadows, has published a book of poetry. So, some of those stories probably do exist, but she had at the time, by the time she was eighty-five, she had so much material, and nowhere to put it. I think she actually looked at Harrington and saw an opportunity, not to be used by Harrington—this is where I think she was so smart—but for her to use Harrington [*laughs*]. It was a mutual admiration society, I think. And that might have been part of what convinced her to move to Washington, DC with him because she moved to DC for five years, and lived with him, and continued to provide him with material, and she died there. I think she was buried in Monterey or Carmel, but she never went home again, alive. That was a big sacrifice on her part. So, yeah, she left those stories there. We have to take them back. I think we have a responsibility.

RD: The stories are one vital part in the book about survival, but beyond that, I think, is a transformation and a form of liberation that come from making story in the world . . . similar to that [theme, I found that in the book] the power of love and the erotic tied back to an Indigenous sense and Indigenous worldviews, and I was wondering . . . if you see that [as] connected?

DM: [W]hen I envision myself at the end of the book, I almost see all of these roots, connected, going back. And I'm hoping that people can follow that. And I don't mean to say that I am an accurate representation of the twentieth-/twentieth-first-century Esselen person. But, there are many ways in which I have had a life that makes complete sense when you look at where my father's family came from. And I think my sensitivity to life in general is not unusual. I think that my father definitively had it; he could walk into a store and pick out the perfect dress, the perfect outfit for me. I am totally not fashion-conscious, I don't have that gift. But he had this artist's eye. And when I saw my little brother as a young child, and as a young man, and I saw him moving through that evolution of being completely vulnerable and open to beauty and

to tenderness, I realized we all started out that way. My father was that way and parts of that survived. I think, for me, it survived because, in part, I became a poet, so I've found an outlet for it. I've found a place that was acceptable for that to exist. So in that sense I have the ability to articulate some of the things that have happened to us as a people and that have happened to me as human being. And one of those things was realizing the gift of having a body.

As I've written specifically elsewhere, in the "Gendercide of the Joya" and in "Saying the Padre Had Grabbed Her," the joy in the erotic of the body, of enjoying the body, and enjoying the world, and the way that the body is our connection to our place, to our Earth, and to our homeland—that was really beaten out of us by colonization and then by the historical trauma that followed. One of the things I hoped to point people towards in my own experience is that—that can happen to you, and you can survive it. You can recoup that joy in being alive and being in the body. And I think, maybe, that is one of the most difficult things that Native people face right now. Especially landless Indians as the Esselen are. If we want to go visit our homelands, we have to get permission from somebody, or go to a state park, which is not our land—it is our land, but it is not our land. I remember my sister having an "in" at the Monterey, one of the sea research areas, so we were able to go to this particular bay when our father died, and do a ceremony, but only because she had an "in" with the people there. Otherwise, it was a beach that was only accessible to employees of that station and nobody else—so how ironic is that?

But, it is difficult. And as I get older, I realize how much more difficult it is to maintain that joy in the body, because not only do bodies deteriorate, but, we still—even if we are completely happy, you have that inheritance. So, last year, I was diagnosed with diabetes. And that is what our father died of. And my sister was diagnosed a couple of years ago with glaucoma; that's what our father had. It's not that disease didn't exist precontact, but there are ways in which colonization affects you down at the genetic level. There is a whole new way of thinking about that in epigenetics, in which the genes don't actually change, but the ways in which the genes respond to certain things change, definitely. And that is where people now are taking that Momaday idea of blood memory and saying, "guess what, it really does exist." You have this predisposition not just because of genetics, but because your grandmother experienced this trauma.

So, it's a challenge. It's a real challenge. And if you don't—and I'm very much thinking of Audre Lorde's uses of the erotic—if you don't have a sense of the erotic, and a sense of your right to the erotic, when you are faced with genetic material that has come through trauma and your body starts breaking down, it's very difficult to maintain a sense of value and worth. So, the next big challenge for me is saying, "I've inherited a truckload of trauma [*laughs*] and it's expressing itself right now," and "wow, how do I get a hold of that and deal with that?" In the book itself, I was hoping to provide a sense of what people have referred to with the words *survivance* and *thrivance*, and that is one of the things that I wanted to say. Truthfully, realistically, and metaphorically, we can find our way home and in that journey, both we and home will have changed. But, there is still a relationship there that is very nurturing.

RD: [N]ow you are—not returning, but moving forward with writing poetry again—with a new volume, *Raised by Humans*. I was wondering whether that writing experience has changed in any way your approach to the—I wouldn't say smaller—form, but these more distinct units of poetry. Or do you also look at the way that the poems in the new volume relate to each other differently? So, has this new engagement with this form changed your work, as you're moving forward?

DM: I think my work has changed and I can see two main reasons. One of them is I worked through a lot in this book [*Bad Indians*] about how I came to be who I am. And so, when I write poetry now, it is almost like I can bypass a lot of the complications and go straight to the heart of what I want to write about. And what I write is much more condensed and much more based on imagery, and not as talky as *Bad Indians* [laughs]. In *Raised by Humans*, things are much more compact.

RD: The succession of the books is [really striking] when I look at the titles: in *Bad Indians*, there is this reappropriation of the term and also complication of its history on various levels. And then, in *Raised by Humans*, connected to the title poem, there's a sense of reversal, as in “raised by wolves,” but also a sense of complicating the idea of what “human” means . . . it can be the quality that can alienate yourself from yourself and from others—that it is also “human” when histories of self-alienation can make one unable to deal with trauma and instead pass it on, so that as a child of parents [who are] dealing with that, your own nature might not be acknowledged or reciprocated.

DM: I [first] wrote “Raised by Humans” and then the other poems came along. And I think I was feeling a sense of separation that human beings have become—I know that is passive and I know we have done that to ourselves a lot of the times, but for the sake of argument—we have become separated from kindness, and compassion, and connectiveness to a cyclic existence that works with the world, rather than constantly trying to work against the natural world. And so, in that sense, for me, the word “humans” in that title, in the book, and in the poem means “humans who have lost their humanity”; either we had it beaten out of us or we are no longer resisting cruelty. And in the poem, which is specific about the absence, I do not mention my father, but his absence is in the poem, and then my mother's continued absences, and then, even when she is present, the neglect of a child. There is that sense of being raised by humans as opposed to being raised by wolves, you know, I would rather have been raised by the wolves [laughs]—wolves have a much better sense of family and pack and responsibility, not necessarily those sorts of humanistic qualities of compassion, but a sense of family.

And one of the things in my personal family that has been missing is that sense of family and responsibility. Some of it came from my father and his historic experience. And the other thing that I am exploring now is how my mother comes from the family of settlers. Yeoman is very English, that was her maiden name, and then Gano was French. And they worked their way from New York all the way across the country, over five or six generations. There—this is a weird thing, but—there is a lot of settler

trauma, you know [*laughs*]. The people who did that, yes, they were traumatizing the Indigenous people, but they did not often have a great time. And so, I am thinking to that; that is a whole other story that we haven't thought about. But it definitely comes out of my mom's side of the family. Lots and lots of trauma going way back and lots of movement, which is an American story.

RD: That's also the other thing that maybe hasn't been acknowledged as much, in making settler colonialism invisible in the history of colonization and turning it into a triumphant narrative. People were placed in a historical context, both as settlers, and as Native peoples in a way that was damaging to both sides in very different, unequal ways. But this had to be eradicated to create a narrative of victory for the nation's independence—with, of course, one side [having been] without any sense of privilege and instead having been violently dispossessed. I know this is a whole different project, but it's fascinating how there isn't a way to address the inconsistencies and tensions of settler communities, and to talk about them as *settlers*, and not just as different population groups.

DM: And not seeing it as black and white. That is what being mixed-blood does to your perspective; it is that I can look back—since my mother did the genealogy for her side of the family as well. One of your students was asking me, “don't you ever—how do you feel about that, will you ever write about it?” “Oh, I think about it all the time.” I think about the fact that when my grandfather was three, his mother, who had gotten married at sixteen to a much older man, deserted the family and ran away with the town doctor. There is something going on there when a sixteen-year-old, wife of a very—what I have heard of, authoritarian husband—runs away, and runs away from Nebraska to Montana, that's a ways. And leaves behind the three-year-old son and the five-year-old daughter. Okay, there is some trauma there [*laughs*]. So, it is impossible for me to split myself in half and say, “oh yeah, the white side of my family, settler-colonial mentality, cruel, evil.” No, they were human beings, sometimes in a very bad place, and definitely not thinking about conquering, they were thinking about surviving. So, it is very complex, it is a very, in many ways, mind-boggling place to be.

RD: [A student] asked me, “but is a person only defined by being Native?” And I replied, “well, yes, but at the same time you need to think of colonialism as a condition that affects everything.” And taking that up, thinking about how this affects people who became settlers and settler subjects of a nation-state, who threw themselves into a situation they didn't anticipate or thought much about—but then, of course, they dealt with it differently in many ways. But these individuals' life stories which are also used for the purpose of national narration—I think that is a whole different chapter to uncover.

DM: Absolutely, there is a whole field of settler trauma out there, about the traumas of being in a community which prides itself and privileges people who do the settling, there is all of that, and a much deeper story. So, who knows, maybe someday I want to write about my mom's side more. I've written much about my mother, but I haven't published a lot. But, yeah, that is a good story [*laughs*]. I think in [*Raised by Humans*],

there are stories that speak specifically to being Indian and being California Indian, and there are stories that speak specifically to simply being human.

RD: I was also fascinated by the way that the book is structured; it reminded me a bit of *Bad Indians*. How you start with the “Alphabet of Lies” and move toward “Decolonizing the Alphabet” in *Raised by Humans* is similar to the “Genealogy of Violence” and the “Ancestry Chart” in the earlier book. The first poem is such an attack on all of these lies, how they have corroded relations and produced their own form of savagery, if you can call it that. And with the other, “Decolonizing the Alphabet,” it shows how something like this can be turned against the one who brought this on. I was thinking also of Joy Harjo’s term “reinventing the enemy’s language,” but I think it pushes that idea further by decolonizing these very structures of imposed literacy, not just with the purpose of reinvention, but toward liberation or transformation.

DM: I love that phrase from Harjo and Byrd’s anthology, “reinventing the enemy’s language.” I quote it to my students all the time: “How do you write an Indigenous story in a non-Indigenous language? And how do you translate that experience for non-Indigenous people?” And I [thought] “boy, we are taught so early on that ‘I’ is for ‘Indian’” and the alphabet itself and literacy became such a tool against Native identity.

And Isabel Meadows, it is interesting [that] her father was a white man; she herself was mixed. Her mother was Native from Carmel and her father was this Englishman who jumped a whaler ship and ended up in Carmel. Interestingly enough, he built and funded a school on his land in Carmel, and yet I don’t think that he sent his own children, or at least he gave them a choice because none of them could read or write. And I’ve always wondered what hand her mother had in that—you know, was it just not important to the family, or did Isabel resist it? For whatever reason, she did not learn to read and write. And perhaps as a direct result from that, she was able to maintain that precontact talent of retaining stories, a very large repository of stories, which we have forgotten how to do, right? Our brains work in a completely different way now that we are literate [*laughs*].

But yeah, I definitely was thinking of how the alphabet had been very officiously imposed on us and for specific purposes, not so that we could become scholars, but so that we could follow directions [*laughs*]. That’s a whole different kind of literacy. And how we stole that or repurposed it to make it work for us. And particularly, I think, the Native experience with literacy was much different than the African American experience, which saw it as freedom, and learning to read was something you did under cover of darkness and secrecy, and made you very dangerous. And for Native Americans, no, literacy didn’t make us dangerous. It made us employable. And we were never meant to write poetry or any more highly analytic kind of writing.

So that is where I see Native writers going; appropriating all of these things that were made to shackle us, and saying, “ha, ha, now we know how to do this, you never should have taught us how to read because now we know how to write resistance.” And so, I had a lot of fun actually—strangely enough, I had a lot of fun with both of these poems. Thinking about the ways in which literacy and the alphabet were used to confine us and to separate us from our historical cultural knowledge, and the ways

in which now we take that knowledge of literacy and go into the archives and reclaim who we are; use it to reinvent ourselves, basically. I don't know, I am fascinated by the alphabet. I almost wanted to call this book something like the *Alphabet of Lies* but I thought people would be disappointed because it wouldn't be a book of alphabets [*laughs*]. That is a whole other idea or concept.

RD: One poem that stood out to me was "Indian Country," which is dedicated to "John T. Williams, and all Indians living on the street." It takes up this situation of many homeless Indigenous people, and the shooting of John Williams, unprovoked in Seattle by a police officer. There's also this image "I'm feeding the meter / of Colonization, / paying the rent on a parking space we should own," which is so poignant and powerful. Also, calling this poem "Indian Country" challenges received notions of what Indian country is and how the term can also apply to this urban situation, or rather what these situations can tell us if they are put into the context of "Indian country." It opens this very different side of engaging settler-state violence on that level, and the grief that it produces.

DM: That was definitely a poem that was hard to write. Because I am saying in the poem, "it's so difficult to be a privileged Native person who can walk down First Avenue in Seattle and go home at night. And walk past all of these relatives who can't." And in a way, it feels like you don't want to tell that story, you don't want to write that poem because you don't want to even for a second have people think that you are taking advantage of them, exploiting them for your own poetic purposes. But, like you have said, this event—and I think that makes me feel like this poem for me is even more important now—this event is invisible to so many people. And I don't want to get into anything even resembling "oppression Olympics"—who is more oppressed—but, I do want to say that violence against Native people in North America is for the most part invisible. And we are seeing—I don't think we are seeing a rise in violence against black people in the United States, I think we are seeing a rise in peoples' awareness and unwillingness to put up with violence against black bodies. It's always been there. But, we are in the age of the internet, you can't hide a whole lot of stuff anymore, you know, with phone cameras and the internet, and if we had had this a hundred years ago, this violence against Native bodies would be much more documented, too.

But, the reason, the calling to write this, was partly because I didn't want the story to go forgotten. And partially because John T. Williams, or "J. T.," was really a fixture in Seattle, and many, many people knew him, both Native and non-Native. . . . I think that part of the positive response that came from this shooting was because he had such a day-to-day contact to people, he wasn't invisible, he wasn't just some Indian, he was, "yeah, I know J. T., he is down there." And one day, on a very important day in my life, he stopped and asked me if he could give me a blessing. And I took it. I said "yes." And there was a certain kind of connection there in which he did not present himself at all as a homeless person or a person who was begging. He had something to offer me which was a gift, and I wanted in some way to record that—that he was a man with talent, he was a man who had things to give the world. Yes, technically he was in poverty, and yet in other ways he was not poverty-stricken at all. He had an immense

energy and immense talent. And I wanted to record what [a] loss that was, not just another drunk Indian killed on the street. No, this was an artist, who we have lost. And we are the ones who are suffering from that.

And so that was important to record and there was also—it happens not too long after my dad passed away. And it reminded how close we can be to being on the streets, how close we can be to being homeless. And you know, I spent a large part of my life running away from being Indian; I got married to a much older white man when I was nineteen and tried my damndest to fit into his family because that was safety and security, what I thought was normal. So, that last line here, the last couple of lines: “Remember I can’t ever run away / from this love,” there is no way I can run away from being Indian or from loving my Indian relatives, no matter how difficult a life they have, or from—I can’t run away from the gifts that they offer. That was a difficult poem.

RD: In a way, can we also see that as a responsibility, to work on that offer as a form of response—in a sense of responding, but also in a sense of taking responsibility for that situation in the form of writing, of writing the poem, in the form of your work. Also, I find there is something of taking responsibility for this community in these difficult histories and situations of struggle in various forms under conditions of colonialism and in moving towards a futurity that is uncertain, but maybe also has potential in that uncertainty. So, I guess I was also wondering, how you—I mean, this is a large question and we have talked already quite a bit about your work—but I was also wondering how you see the role of a Native author, or the potential of Native writing in this particular moment, or in the sense of an activist or political potential?

DM: Well, being both human [*laughs*] and a mixed-blood person raised in the twentieth century, I think that I have goals that are for myself as a writer, and goals for myself as a Native person. And I would say, in the last ten years, I have been moving further away from sort of personal goals and becoming much more concerned with what my responsibilities are. And that might be partly getting older and being less concerned with my own security, getting into the academy, getting tenure, getting promoted, I’ve done all that. And writing *Bad Indians* really woke me up to what I could do for my community as a writer.

My sister Louise . . . said to me once: “I want to know everything you do, I want to know every paper you write, I want to know every conference you go to; that goes into . . . our recognition file. Every time you get advertised as an Esselen author, or as an Esselen scholar, that gives us as a tribe more authority.” And I realized, “oh, I have a job to do that goes way beyond establishing myself as an academic.” And she said that when I was writing *Bad Indians*, so the combination of those two things woke me up. . . . And so, as I have gotten older, I have started to focus more on that, how is this going to help the community, how is it going to help my tribe, specifically, but also the larger California Indian community, which has been so welcoming to me, and so supportive. I am constantly amazed by that because I have not been raised in California. I left when I was five, and I have never lived there again for longer than ten months. And yet, they treat me as family, and I go back and people say, “oh, I am your

cousin on your Chumash side. And let me take you here and let me show you this and let me tell you this story.” They are not telling me just because they are nice people, they are telling me because they recognize me as somebody with a voice that sometimes gets listened to. So, I am definitely moving into a space in which I see myself as a writer for a community that has many, many untold stories and I have the privilege of being able to make some of those stories, to put them in places where they might be heard. And so, it is very humbling. It is also extremely—it’s an honor to realize that people are trusting me with stories.

And there is a lot of fear sometimes on my part that I am not doing it correctly, or that I am not doing it respectfully. And there are moments when I say, “I know that some people are going to feel that this story has elements that shouldn’t be talked about, but in my judgment it needs to be spoken about. So, there are those moments—and there are stories I do not tell. There are stories where I make that judgment call and I say, “that’s not a story I should tell.” But, yeah, it’s a different space than I was in twenty years ago when I was so desperate to tell my own story and to establish myself as a writer. I think I can say, part of that is aging and part of that is the luck of having been teaching at a really well-endowed university that has allowed me to do all the research that I needed to do to get to this point. So, that’s where I am right now. And a lot of it is luck.

RD: It seems like a good place to be and to continue the work, and I am definitely looking forward to all of the projects that you are working on. Thank you so much for this conversation.

DM: No, thank *you*. I probably couldn’t have imagined in my wildest dreams ever sitting here and talking to you at this university; part of me is still amazed.