BECOMING KIN

An Indigenous Call to Unforgetting the Past and Reimagining Our Future

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FOREWORD

Our present reality is a cacophony of suffering and despair. A virus tears through the most vulnerable among us, taking the elderly and those made precarious by neglect and abandonment. The planet burns as billionaires rake in record profits at the height of a global pandemic. Levels of inequality rise alongside temperatures and sea levels. Life expectancies drop as the death conditions—which have always defined a for-profit global system of plunder—intensify.

Moreover, the cacophony of suffering is met by equally rapturous protest. Tens of millions shouted against the death worlds with an affirmative and simple phrase: Black Lives Matter. Water Protectors quieted the sounds of grinding metal tearing into the earth by attaching themselves to heavy machinery to halt the construction of oil pipelines. Time seems to standstill in these brief moments of rupture.

In these pages, Patty Krawec, an Anishinaabekwe, meditates on those moments of calm, which seem always on the brink of being entirely consumed by a terrible danger. It is the moment a Water Protector locks down pipeline equipment, silencing the guns and money people with a humble prayer, even if for a moment. It is the moment humble people try to make sense of why another brother, sister, mother, relative, river, mountain, and life is needlessly destroyed or stolen.

A world of bad relations—what in Lakota could be called owasicu owe, or "the way of the fat-taker"—is what has brought us to this point. What better symbolizes the cynicism of this mentality than the richest people on this planet trying to escape it in a

billionaire-funded space race? The for-profit system commodified our other-than-human relations. They were made into "nature" or "natural resources" to be boundlessly exploited and consumed. Humanity itself was transformed into a mass of laborers and consumers, working for bosses. Bad relations are making our earth uninhabitable while simultaneously being elevated to the level of the cosmos.

"Grief is the persistence of love," Krawec writes. Indeed. Grief and love are not bound by time and space. In Indigenous worlds, Land Defenders act out of necessity and survival, protecting rivers and landscapes from destruction. They do so out of mourning for a world taken from them through centuries of colonialism. But they also do so out of love and solidarity for life that currently exists and life that has yet to be created on this planet. They are ancestors of the future, motivated by grief as the persistence of love.

Grief is also about remembering, or unforgetting, the future and a history that could have been. We were first colonized when they took away our collective sense of a future. The evidence of that crime lies in church and government lands interred with the remains of Native children, the evidence of a future they tried to snuff out.

As Lakota people, we recognize becoming human is hard. It is marked by terrible suffering and profound beauty, especially in an age of cacophony and chaos. But at the center of making relations is love, ceremony, song, laughter, and crying. The quiet persistence of love. Therefore, Krawec's vision is bold. She takes us on a journey of becoming human by first understanding how we relate to each other, our history, and—hopefully—our collective future.

It begins by listening.

—Nick Estes (Lower Brule Sioux Tribe) is a historian and author of Our History Is the Future, Standing with Standing Rock, *and* Red Nation Rising

NII'KINAAGANAA

We are related. Nii'kinaaganaa.

My friend Josh Manitowabi breaks down this Anishinaabe word like this. *Nii*: "I am" or "my." *Kinaa*: "all of them." *Ganaa*: "relatives, my relatives." The phrase could mean any of these things: I am my relatives, all of them. I am related to everything. All my relations.

From our earliest creation stories, the Anishinaabeg (plural of *Anishinaabe*) understood themselves to be related not only to each other but to all of creation. Our language does not divide into male and female the way European languages do. It divides into animate and inanimate. The world is alive with beings that are other than human, and we are all related, with responsibilities to each other.

This concept of relatedness is by no means unique to the Anishinaabeg. After the Standing Rock pipeline protests, the Lakota phrase mitakuye oyasin became well known outside of Lakota communities. But it came to mean something less than what it means to the Lakota. Many people think it means "all my relations," and it does, but it also means much more than that. It is specific to the Lakota people and their thinking in a way that can't be fully translated. Similarly, nii'kinaaganaa means "we are related"—and also more than that.

For years, I belonged to a mailing list that named itself for the song in the second epigraph. We thought it was a lovely, poetic image

for those of us who felt outside of the traditional church, but then we dug down into the lyrics and discovered Heard wasn't talking about us as a small group of disaffected Christians. He was talking broadly about us as the American church—how the church is a pale shadow of what it could have been, should have been. The dominant church is running wild and unshod over this beautiful earth, with no regard for anyone else. A people who, despite grasping for power, have become ruins and hollow bones. Western Christians have, as they say, lost the plot. Throughout this book, we will trace that loss, that forgetting, and in reclaiming history, we will unforget the things we used to know.

The Americas—the countries of the United States and Canada, Mexico, Brazil, and others on these western continents—have a creation story too. It is an emerging creation story that has the power to determine who Americans are and who we can be.

We need to unforget our histories and the relationships they contain. We need to become kin.

Nii'kinaaganaa.

Language is complicated.

Through my father, I am Ojibwe Anishinaabe. The Ojibwe live mainly around the Great Lakes, in what is now known as Ontario, Manitoba, Minnesota, North Dakota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. The Anishinaabeg are a large group and cover a huge geography, with many subgroups that include the Chippewa, Michi Saagig, Odawa, Saulteaux, Ojibwe, Potawatomi, Nipissing and Algonquin. These aren't interchangeable. We are all Anishinaabe, but there are some linguistic and cultural differences among the groups.

Anishinaabe simply means "the people," and this type of self-naming is common throughout the Americas. We identify ourselves as "the people" and then describe those who are different from us according to our relationship with them. This has had some unfortunate consequences. For example, the Haudenosaunee and the Lakota are societies with whom the Anishinaabe have had historically conflicted relationships. So when the French colonists asked their Anishinaabe allies about other tribal groups, we told them what *we* called them rather than their own names for themselves. *Iroquois* may be more familiar to you than *Haudenosaunee*, *Sioux* more familiar than *Lakota*. But the former terms are French versions of Wendat and Anishinaabe words meaning something like "snakes."

We are all related, but clearly we don't always get along.

The people who are indigenous to the Western Hemisphere have been called so many things. To Columbus and many who came after, we are *Indians*, which is still a legal category in the United States and Canada. We have also been described as *red* in an attempt to fit us into a color-coded racial hierarchy, a designation most commonly associated with a particular slur that, until recently, named a national football team. *Native Americans* and *Native Canadians* tend to be more common. For a brief time in Canada, we were called *Aboriginal*. But the prefix *ab-* actually means "not," so the word means that we aren't original to this place—you can understand why we would object to that. And of course, *Indigenous* is not unique to the Western Hemisphere; there are Indigenous peoples across the globe. In this book, I'll use all these terms for reasons that mostly make sense to me; there are times when a particular term just feels more correct to the context, but that is entirely subjective.

In the United States, people generally talk about Native Americans, Hawai'ians, and Alaska Natives. In Canada, people will

frequently refer to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. The Inuit are a circumpolar people, along with the Sámi of Scandinavia and the Aleut and Yupik of the United States and Russia, as well as many others who live in the Arctic regions. The Métis are a distinct people who emerged after contact in western Canada and the northern United States just as the Lumbee, Comanche, Seminole, and Oji-Cree emerged elsewhere after colonization, distinct cultures tied to land and ancestors. *First Nations* can refer broadly to the original peoples but most often refers to reserve communities and not nations at all. Anishinaabe is a nation; Lac Seul First Nation, where my father, myself, and my children are registered as Indians, is a reserve.

Clear as mud? I hope that this will make more sense as we go along. Each of these terms is correct and wrong, and it is likely that whatever term you use will at some point be corrected by somebody else to a term they think is more appropriate. The best thing to do is thank them for the correction and move on, recognizing that language is complicated. These terms were rarely what we called ourselves and represent colonial ways of thinking about us. And so they will all be wrong in some way.

If there are some who are Indigenous, there are some who are not, and most of those who are not are settlers. *Settlers*: this word is just as fraught as any word for Indigenous peoples is, and it also refers to a collective group. You may be more inclined to think of yourself as American or Canadian. Perhaps being called a "settler" feels aggressive—a suggestion that you do not belong, despite generations of being here. You think of yourself, or perhaps your ancestors, as immigrants. Not settlers. Settlers are not immigrants. Immigrants come to a place and become part of the existing political system. When the colonists arrived in what would become the Americas, there were many political systems already in existence. Ours. And

although the Haudenosaunee system likely inspired or shaped the US system of governance, there has never been a time when those who came to these shores collectively became part of any of our political systems. (Exceptions may include those who became the Métis, the Lumbee, and the Seminole.) Settler is a way of *being* here. Through this book, I hope to offer you another way to be.

Black people are not settlers—not those who are descended from the ones who came in chains, nor those who came afterward—because Blackness envelops them all and holds them distinct from other migrants. There are some words gaining ground to describe Black relationship to this place: arrivants, displanted. I like the term *displanted*, a word coined by an African Canadian human rights lawyer, because it describes the violence of this movement as well as one's ability to put down roots again and again. And of course, Black and Indigenous are not mutually exclusive categories. In many places where colonialism touched down, it is Black people who are Indigenous, and throughout the Americas, many Indigenous people are also Black. We did not only intermarry with Europeans, after all. So when I talk about Black and Indigenous people, know that I am talking about broad, overlapping communities. Discrete categories make for a convenient shorthand, but they rarely do justice to the people involved.

A small note about the Anishinaabe language that is scattered throughout the book: I am not fluent in the Anishinaabe language—far from it—but at times I find it helpful to reflect on particular Anishinaabe words. They prompt me to shift my thinking. The words are pronounced phonetically, and when I use them, I will provide you with a general translation. But I use the Anishinaabe word also to remind you that it means more than that. As with any translation, there is not a simple exchange of one word for another; there

are concepts about place and relationship that go along with these words. I want these words to prompt you to shift your thinking, to root our thinking in the place where they were born, a place the Anishinaabe and many others know as Turtle Island, what is currently known as North America.

As we begin this work—and it will be work—I hope that you have somebody to do it with you. I hope somebody else is reading this alongside you so that you can talk about the things you are learning and being asked to do.

Aambe: let's go.

INTRODUCTION

I wait at the back of the stage, behind the curtains, holding my hand drum and listening to the low buzz of a theater filled with people. My friend Karl stands in the darkness at center stage, waiting for me to start singing and make my way to where he stands. We are providing an opening for the Niagara Performing Arts Center's season preview. It is not a Native event. The center is a public arts venue that showcases a wide range of performers, and the artistic directors include Native artists throughout the regular season. They have asked Karl and me to open this particular night as an acknowledgment that this and future events take place on Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe land.

It is the fall of 2017, 150 years since Canada's confederation, and I've made a ribbon skirt to wear at this event. Ribbon skirts—long cotton skirts embellished with rows of ribbon and sometimes with appliqued designs—are a contemporary innovation of an older style of clothing that we wore before settler contact. The ribbon skirt I've made for this evening is black with wide ribbons in the colors associated with the medicine wheel: red, black, white, and yellow. I have appliqued red maple leaves falling down the front of the skirt until they are covered by ribbons. I like the imagery of Canada being absorbed by Indigenous ideas. Later, during the gathering after the event, a couple of women will come to speak with me. They will comment that the leaves are upside down. A nation in distress flies

their flag upside down, I will tell them. And Canada, like the United States, is a nation in distress.

It occurs to me in that moment, as I wait backstage, how much has changed in my life. Like many Native people born between 1960 and 1980, I grew up in a blizzard of whiteness, surrounded and loved by my maternal German Ukrainian family but without any connection to my paternal Ojibwe family. I had photographs of my father and my Ojibwe kin but no relationship and no idea how to even begin. It wasn't until I was in my midtwenties that I found my father and began taking tentative steps toward the larger Indigenous community, which turned out to have been there all along.

After decades in colonial darkness, I am ready to step into the light.

There is the beat of the drum in that darkened theater and then my voice coming from the back of the stage. I move toward the front, singing each verse louder as the lights come up. When I finish, Karl speaks the words of the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address in Oneida. Then we simply leave the stage. Not explaining the song or our actions or our words is deliberate. We let the audience sit and consider that what feels profoundly alien to them is not alien at all. For one brief moment, they are surrounded by the sounds of this place.

The song that I sing that night had come to me months earlier. I had been driving home from somewhere, running the errands that make up the invisible minutiae of our lives, and listening to news reports about a series of recent suicides in several Anishinaabe communities in northern Ontario. Youths as young as eight and ten years old were taking their own lives. These communities are isolated by design and deliberately underresourced. We describe them as "remote," which begs the question: remote to what? Certainly not

remote to places their ancestors lived, where their families still live. But when you strip away everything that makes living somewhere possible, trading promises of a better life for land, you need to deliver on those promises. So as I drove home from those errands, the normality of my life felt obscene against the loss of these children, who would never become ancestors. And the song came out of me like wailing.

I live in the country, rural Niagara. My daily walk goes through a wetland forest, past fields of hay and soybeans. Much of the year, it is a walk noisy with birds and frogs. While I walked my dogs those months before the event, I sang the song again and again so I would remember it. And somehow this song that had been torn out of me while I drove home in the darkness sounded hopeful. It sounded insistent and powerful. I sang it again as I walked, all four verses, the same notes rising and falling in repetition. The verses carry the sounds of loss but also hope. When Karl asked me if I would sing for this event, I knew the song I would sing.

I am Patty, the daughter of Roy, son of Joe and Lula, who are Ojibwe Anishinaabe from Lac Seul, Ontario. When I say that they are from Lac Seul, Ontario, I am referring to the reserve where Joe was registered as an Indian. They are only from that small place because that is where the Indian agent placed their ancestors back in the late nineteenth century, when Canada was creating reserves. Before that, our families would have traveled, understanding themselves to be from a much larger geography.

My father is fond of saying we are descended from Noah and Moses—and indeed, Moses begat Noah, and Noah begat Joe, who

married Lula. Lula's mother is Sophie, who apparently saved the life of Isaiah, an Irishman who worked for the Hudson's Bay Company trading goods for furs. Sophie is from Cat Lake, Ontario, and Isaiah's parents, Francis and Sarah, were born in Ireland. It is through my father, Roy, that my roots sink deeply into this place that is called Canada or North America or Turtle Island, twisting through Anishinaabe and possibly Cree ancestors back to the beginning. It is through Roy that my roots entwine with those of the Hudson's Bay Company, which employed Isaiah along with so many other Scots and Irish who found their way into Anishinaabe and Cree lineage. We are Ojibwe Anishinaabe, Caribou Clan, who, along with other subgroups of the larger Hoof Clan, have social responsibilities to the broader community.

I am the daughter of Vicki, who is the daughter of Ann and George. Ann is the daughter of Jacob and Margareta; the granddaughter of Dietrich and Anna, Heinrich and Katharina; the great-granddaughter of Benjamin and Helena, of Heinrich and Maria. My grandmother's family tree is known back to 1772: Germans, moved by Catherine the Great into Russia to displace Ukrainians, who created colonies along the Dnieper River that remained self-contained, and well documented, for two hundred years. In Germany, the Schultzes brewed beer. In the Ukraine, they farmed and then manufactured farm implements. Nothing is known of George's parents except that they were probably Ukrainian farmers. And the man we knew as George was actually my grandmother's second husband, who, like many refugees before and since, found safety in another person's name. It is through my mother, Vicki, that my roots travel through farmland to reach across oceans, searching for a home that is both here and there. It is through Vicki that my roots become interwoven with those of migrants and refugees, rooting us here in shallow but sturdy mats of connection.

I am also the daughter of Jack, my mother's second husband, who adopted me. It is through Jack that my roots run parallel with adoptees—Native children who were scooped by child welfare and placed with white families. For although I was raised by my mother and her second husband, adopted by him and always loved, in other ways I shared the disconnection of other Indigenous children raised by a white adoptive parent.*

Today, I live in wine country, and the geography contains glacial remnants. The soil is variable, with red clay in some places and black earth in others. There are places dense with rocks and minerals, and places where it is less rocky. Wines from the same variety of grape will taste different depending on what the roots sink into—what they wrap around and bring to the surface. Humans are like this too. Knowing what our roots sink into—what they wrap around and bring to the surface—helps us understand the tastes and sensations of our present.

"When I say that the land is my ancestor, that is a scientific statement": Dr. Keolu Fox, a Kānaka Maoli genomic researcher, made this comment at a 2020 presentation. The land itself and the conditions of that land, like altitude and climate, impact our genome just as our human ancestors do. My roots reach out to and draw upon the land of many places, connecting me here, where they reach deeply into the land that created my paternal ancestors.

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* The decades between 1960 and 1980 are known colloquially as the time of the Sixties Scoop, when Indigenous children were "scooped" by child welfare workers and placed in white foster homes. The language comes from an interview with a social worker at the time who said that they "just scooped them up." Although I was not taken from my family by child welfare services, my mother's decision to take me south, without maintaining any contact with my Ojibwe family members, had the same social and cultural consequences. I discuss this in more detail in chapter 4.

I tell you who I am so that you will understand the history I am about to share with you. *Becoming Kin* traces the collective history of the United States and Canada, which is also my own history, and yours, but perhaps not one that you are familiar with. My story includes references to Christianity and the Christian scripture and the church, in part because that is the tradition in which I grew up and in part because, whether you are Christian or not, this is also the tradition in which the United States and Canada grew up. The beliefs of those early colonists remain very much a part of our contemporary ideas about how a society ought to function. The Bible is filled with "begats" to remind us that our individual stories are not individual at all.

In this cursory glimpse of my family—which says nothing about my spouse or children, in-laws or outlaws—you can see how my story connects me to places and people. These are relationships I have inherited, relationships with the United States and Canada and the peoples within these borders, relationships with the church, and relationships that stretch across oceans. "History is the story we tell ourselves about how the past explains our present, and the ways we tell it are shaped by contemporary needs," writes poet and activist Aurora Levins Morales, a Jewish Puerto-Rican woman. "All historians have points of view. All of us use some process of selection by which we choose which stories we consider important and interesting . . . storytelling is not neutral."

I will tell you a story, a story of history, in the hopes that it will explain our present and help us weave a new world into being.

Nii'kinaaganaa.

That evening before we go on stage, Karl and I talk about whether Christianity and Indigenous worldviews can ever be reconciled, if

there is any common space. He doesn't think so. Karl is Oneida and part of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Hundreds of years ago, when it became evident that the newcomers were going to stay, he says, the Confederacy made a treaty with the settlers called the Two Row. This is written in the form of a wampum belt made of oblong purple and white beads, with two purple rows on a white background. The agreement was that we would travel together, the Indigenous peoples and the settlers, each in our own boat but on parallel paths in a relationship guided by peace, honesty, and respect.

The principle of noninterference lives at the root of many Indigenous philosophies and is exemplified in treaties like the Two Row: we would live according to our ways, and the newcomers would live according to theirs. Although colonization is clearly a violation of this treaty, the Haudenosaunee people I know remain committed to it and continue to try to live within these principles.

I agree with Karl's analysis of the newcomers and their religion. As a foreign religion and perpetrator of colonization, Christianity is part of the other boat. He sees Christianity as it exists broadly across the Western world—a faith disconnected from land and strangers, ideas imposed by white Europeans who arrived as guests but almost immediately began to act as autocratic hosts.

But as I understand them, the two rows—those of the Indigenous peoples and the settlers—aren't meant to completely isolate us from each other; they are meant to guide our relationship so that we can live together. And what I know of the worldview of the Anishinaabe is not completely inconsistent with what Christianity could be. I see other possibilities: the original instructions of connection, relationship with land and people. The original instructions as recorded in the Bible are frequently disregarded or redefined in service to settler-colonial ideas about how a society ought to be organized. I think Christianity has the potential to liberate, to actually help us

reject those colonial ideas. Throughout the book, I offer Anishinaabe stories and Indigenous knowledge not so that you can claim them as your own but so that they can provide a lens through which you can see your own stories differently. That is part of what I hope to explore in these pages: how we can read these histories differently and find a way to live together in peace, honesty, and respect.

How can we find a way to live in the knowledge that we are all related? How can we become better kin?

All of our creation stories tell of a new people for a new world. But what that new world will look like will depend on what our roots sink into, wrap around, and bring to the surface.

Settlers and newcomers, Black and Indigenous: the history we learn in elementary school is rooted in explorers and settlers. We learn about brave colonists fighting for freedom. We learn about Native people who, despite early Thanksgiving friendship, become dangerous and then mysteriously vanish. The history of slavery is placed comfortably in the past. The American story is one of a war fought to end slavery. The Canadian story about slavery is being the final stop on the Underground Railroad, the place of freedom. We all, settler and newcomer, Black and Indigenous, learn about how these countries were the ones that ended slavery. Somehow in this history, the very people who created the problem are transformed into the ones who saved us.

Together we learn about immigrants and refugees who came here in search of something better and built a great country. The United States and Canada are positioned as communities of safety and refuge for newcomers leaving behind or sublimating their old identities and becoming American or Canadian.

These histories become central truths, and when other histories are told or when somebody makes a racist remark, Americans say with surprise, "That's not who we are!" Your collective memory is filled with stories about cooperation and communities, brave people banding together to defend their home and working together to create something for everyone. Our collective memory is filled with other stories. Other centers.

Sometimes the center is created simply through the act of revolving around it.

What if the things you have been told are *not* who you are? The collective memories of the Black diaspora and Indigenous nations, of Asian laborers and 2SLGBTQIA* people, of Muslims and Jews, and of those who are disabled by a world that is increasingly difficult to navigate are filled with other stories about these same events. Our collective memories contain stories of displacement and disruption, occupation and domination. Even when we try to fit in, when we try to assimilate, we aren't truly accepted.

Activist and academic Angela Davis writes that "our histories never unfold in isolation." These stories—about Western settlement, and Indians who simply vanished, about well-intentioned white folks in the North standing up to slavery—are created and maintained on purpose to protect a particular way of life and a particular social class. Remember: all historians have a point of view, and storytelling is not neutral. These myths are packaged and sold to newcomers and working-class white people so that they will chase promises that

*2SLGBTQIA: Two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual. Most Indigenous societies did not recognize a strict gender binary, being perhaps more comfortable with transitional spaces than European Christians. Binaries create exceptions, and exceptions require names and ever-expanding rainbows and letters to make sure everyone is included.

were never meant for them. The stories are like isolated snapshots of the American dream, with important context cropped out of the image. Isolated stories are told in part so that the whole picture cannot be seen. The creation story we have been taught is incomplete. It is incomplete, but it is not inaccessible, and nothing stays buried forever. These histories are emerging, and the stories are being told. What would happen if you listened? What would happen if you, the churches and countries who settled upon us, listened to our histories and heard the good news that we have for you?

Biskaabiiyang: returning to ourselves.

Colonization has gotten inside our heads. It is more than driving cars and talking on iPhones, more than the food we eat or where we shop. It is how we think. We often put colonialism in the past, dressing it up in sixteenth-century costumes. But as Patrick Wolfe has said, colonialism is a process and not an event. Settler colonialism came to stay in the Americas in the sixteenth century, but it neither started there, nor has it stopped. It cut its teeth on the Crusades, where the rape and violence enacted on Jews and Muslims were the price of Christian freedom. A violence that persists and finds expression in the burnings of mosques and synagogues, shootings, and travel bans. It sharpened its blade on the repeated expulsions of Jewish people from Europe and the reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula, which banished Muslims from Spain. It consolidated its power over women through the fires of the witch burnings. And it arrived on these shores with the authority of the Doctrine of Discovery tucked beneath its arm, settling into our lands and our heads, shaping everything about how we live. It is an ongoing process of destruction and replacement, destroying Indigenous beliefs and lifeways and replacing them with churches and board meetings.

Wendy Makoons Geniusz and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson both write about biskaabiiyang as returning to our own Anishinaabe

way of thinking. When we return to ourselves, we undo the colonialism that has gotten inside our heads.

We can only do this if we are willing to understand our history differently, if we take our stories out of isolation and put them together. We need to revisit the stories we tell ourselves—about how we got here—and see something different, see something that allows us to become relatives again. To put back together what modern ideas about race have torn apart. "Ultimately what we inherit are relationships and our beliefs about them," writes Aurora Levins Morales. "We can't alter the actions of our ancestors, but we can decide what to do with the social relations they left us." In order to understand these relationships, we need to listen to the histories that we were *not* told so that we can begin to remember the things buried beneath the histories we *were*.

In her book *Knowing Otherwise*, Alexis Shotwell describes various forms of knowledge. She notes that as individuals and as communities, we hold knowledge in ways that we can articulate or explain to others and also in ways that are less tangible—knowledge that we can't articulate in the same way. Some things we can identify or describe, and then some things we just *know*. Sometimes we don't have the language for what we're trying to explain, or it doesn't even occur to us that it needs explaining. We just *know*. This unspoken knowledge binds us together, with common courtesy and common sense that are really only common to our particular group. These are things like body memory, such as the way that your hands know how to do things without you thinking through each step. It's also emotional knowledge: the way that certain things make you feel but for which you lack language. There are also unspoken truths: assumptions about how the world works that we all accept.

The trick is to get those assumptions from where they rest inside you or inside our broader society out to a place where you can

articulate them. To move those unspoken things from implicit to explicit so they can be challenged or reconsidered.

Historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz talks about the process of "unforgetting." The divisions between us are only possible because we have forgotten our history, forgotten our creation stories. Forgotten how to articulate the knowledge that is held in unspoken ways. Unforgetting is the process of reclaiming that knowledge—of moving these truths that our society holds silently out to where we can articulate them and examine them. Then we can see if they really are a center worth revolving around, worth the emotional response they engender.

This is a book about Indigenous reality and experience, but I will speak often about Black experience and reality as well—not because it is mine but because it is connected. That connection is one of the things I am working to unforget. In *Beloved,* the masterpiece by Toni Morrison, she describes Paul D's escape from a chain gang, and in that escape, she writes about the Cherokee. In that passage, Morrison remembers the removals and the sickness. She remembers relationship. And I think often about something that Dr. Tiya Miles said about history in a discussion that I once organized. Miles, an African American historian, said there are gaps in our stories: gaps in Black studies where Native people should be and gaps in Native studies where Black people should be. We are not discrete categories of people upon which colonialism acts in different ways; we are a Venn diagram with areas of huge overlap. The gaps Miles refers to are the work of settler colonialism pulling us apart. And so I situate this book in that area of overlap, in that area of relationship rather than in the edges. That is the center I will revolve around and create.

This book, in helping us reclaim our interconnected histories, will take us to a place of becoming good relatives. We are all related, and we will see in the next chapter that all creation stories tell us this. But

what does it mean to be *good* relatives—to not only recognize our kinship but to be *good* kin? Because, for Indigenous peoples, kinship is not simply a matter of being like a brother or sister to somebody. It carries specific responsibilities depending on the kind of relationship we agree upon. An aunt has different responsibilities than a brother. If we are going to be kin, then we must accept that these relationships come with responsibility. In our settler-colonial context, relationships between us are built on a paternalistic foundation: charity and good works, helping the less fortunate. Those who are part of the society that created the problem become the ones who think they can solve it. So we must move from recognizing the *fact* of our relationship to actually existing together in *reciprocal* relationships.

How do we restore relationships and balance to what has been made so precarious? The promises of the white Christian West have failed to materialize, and we are, socially and literally, on a precipice. How do we go from living in isolated silos to becoming good relatives? How does the church stop running wild and unshod and put down roots that reach deeply into the ground? We can draw on everything that our roots have pushed through and around and pulled forward. Rather than cutting off our roots because we are ashamed or afraid of what we will find, we can learn our history. We can reimagine the relationships we have inherited, and we can take up our responsibilities to each other.

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At some point in the distant past, we began to pick things up and take them with us.

At some point, archaic humans not only fashioned tools; they began to carry these tools with them from one place to another. They began to carry decorative objects and things that held memory

of other places and people. They decorated themselves with memory and story. They carried fire and the tools with which they created fire. And around these fires, our long-dead ancestors began to gather together, holding these objects and sharing the stories that were already ancient. Stories tied to feather and stone, tools and ceremonial items that explained who they were and how they were connected to the world around them. They began to carry bundles.

My bundle is a tangible thing. It is a box topped with a blanket that contains stones and pipes, an eagle feather, and a brass cup. It contains the fundamental medicines of the Ojibwe: tobacco and sage, sweetgrass and cedar. It contains matches and a lighter and a small cast-iron pan. These things hold story and memory, responsibility and care. They remind me of people and places, ceremonies and obligations I am only beginning to understand. My bundle is a container that holds knowledge and the responsibilities that I carry with me.

You have a bundle too. Think of what you would gather if you had to flee, the objects that mean the most to you. They aren't just things; you know that. You look at them and see memory and history, connection and relationship. The items in our bundles have ancestors too: they have stories to tell us about the lives they led before they arrived in our hands. These things that are precious to us connect us to relatives and histories, to memories and stories unspoken and relatives we may or may not wish to claim.

When I say return to yourself and pick up your bundle, I am asking you to look at those things with new eyes. Listen to their full history and remember your relationships and obligations.

Biskaabiiyang.

Just as I did that evening years ago with Karl, we are, all of us, together standing in the dark, waiting to hear the heartbeat of a new beginning. Waiting to find our voice and become the people who our ancestors promised we could become.

We've been here before. History is not a clean story of progress, no straight trajectory from barbarism to civilization, ever marching forward. We live in a constant state of tension between equity and inequity, with people or societies holding more or less power in different places and times.

We need to go back to the beginning—or, rather, to a story of new beginnings—in order to start again.

Most cultures have a flood story. Just as a creation story tells us how we began, a flood story can tell us how to rebuild. In the Anishinaabe story, which we will visit in some detail later, Nanaboozhoo, a central figure in Anishinaabe stories, together with the animals rebuilt Turtle Island with a handful of mud gathered from deep below the floodwaters.

In order to return to our original instructions—in order to unforget and pick up that handful of mud—we, too, must travel through the floodwaters. The first part of this book is that journey. We are living during a time of cataclysm and upheaval. We are in a flood event, and we have the potential to create something new. But first we need to swim deep down through the waters of history, and that is hard. The second part of the book, then, is about rebuilding. In the second part, we take our handful of mud and begin to rebuild our relationships with land and with each other and then mobilize those relationships to create something new.

Each chapter ends with a section called "Aambe." *Aambe* is an Anishinaabe word that can mean "Attention!" or "Come on, let's go!" On this journey together, instead of going straight to the point,

we will look at what is in the floodwaters and mud of history. We will see what the flotsam and jetsam can teach us. And at the end of each chapter, there will be something you can do, something tangible to move you forward on this journey we take together.

The Anishinaabe tradition includes a series of prophecies, eight in total, that are identified as a series of fires. *Prophecy* is a fraught term as we often think of it like a psychic foretelling of the future. But it is more of a proclamation: a statement of truth that takes on meaning in particular circumstances. Fires are places of community, where we come together against a gathering dark. But for the Anishinaabe, fire is more than that. Dr. Paulette Steeves talks about *pyro-epistemology*, a term she coined in 2012 to describe the fire-based system of knowledge of the Anishinaabeg. For the Anishinaabe, fire is an environmental technology used to shape the landscape, to cleanse and make space for new growth. In that context, these fires are more than gathering places. They are wildfires—episodes of social and spiritual cleansing, of making room for new beginnings.

One of these fires, or prophecies, speaks of a people who would come from across the water. These people might come with the face of kinship or the face of death. If they come with the face of kinship, the new knowledge that they bring could be joined with ours. But the warnings by which we would know which face they would wear are stark. The prophecy warns of weapons and greed, of poisoned water with fish you can't eat.

The Seventh Fire talks about a new people emerging: people who would retrace their steps and pick up the bundles that were lost. You

may have the objects, but you have forgotten what they mean, or perhaps new histories have been written on top of old ones. Picking up your bundle means looking at these things differently. This prophecy talks about a choice that the light-skinned people would need to make between two roads. One road is lush and green, and the other is black and charred, and walking on it will cut their feet. If the light-skinned race chooses well, the Eighth fire will be lit: a fire of peace, love, and community.

Biskaabiiyang.

I can't help but think about the choices our colonial governments make that have left the land black and charred, choices that cut. I think about the Alberta oil sands and tailing ponds leaking into the waterways. I think about Water Protectors at Standing Rock being hit by water cannons in subzero weather. I wrote much of this book during the pandemic, as political leaders weighed the economy against our lives, and I think of how they tried to decide how many deaths are acceptable to rescue capitalism.

And I also think of the lush, green road: about community gardens and farming collectives and kinship. I think about all the conversations that my friend Kerry and I have had on our podcast with people who are choosing to build community instead of wealth and transforming the places where they live. I think about the weeds that grow along the side of highways and how my son looks at them and sees a green path that ensures the survival of insects. The green path is there. We just need to shift our perspective.

Nii'kinaaganaa.

Aambe

As we prepare to reconsider the history that we have learned, look for Black and Indigenous people. Look for us in your life, on your

bookshelf, in the music you listen to and the movies or television you watch. Look for us on your social media feed. Look for us in the collective nostalgia of your country. Don't try to read too much into our presence or absence. Just notice.

Where are we?

CHAPTER 6

THE LAND: OUR ANCESTOR

We begin with stones. In the Anishinaabe universe, even before the thoughts of Kiche Manidou—the Creator, or Great Mystery—there was what Louise Erdrich calls "a conversation between stones."

When I was in grade 9, my science teacher asked the class if stones were alive. We were learning the seven criteria of life. After reviewing the list, we said that no, stones were not alive. He asked us if we were sure. And so we went over the criteria again and told him yes, we were sure. He said that it might be that stones did things more slowly than we could measure. Could it be that we lacked the ability to see these things in stones? Or could the criteria be wrong? Then he smiled.

I don't think my teacher was suggesting that stones are alive; I think he wanted us to remember that science is the asking of questions and the constant adjustment of what we think we know. Later, in physics, we would learn about how some matter exists as both wave and particle, depending on how you look at it. Perspective matters.

This possibility—of something like a stone being alive—has stayed with me. Ojibwe Anishinaabe author and academic Lawrence Gross would agree with this science teacher. In his book

Anishinaabe Ways of Knowing and Being, he writes about the Anishinaabe language being more suited for quantum physics than English because it understands the dynamic nature of creation, particle and wave. It is a verb-based language, which talks about what things do rather than what they are. We are not human beings; we are *humans being*.

For the Anishinaabeg, stones may be alive. Our word for stone is *asin*. And it is animate. English is a highly adaptive and creolizing language, but it organizes the world into discrete subjects and then describes what those subjects are. So we shouldn't be surprised that our whole society is atomized into separate things. Grammar often divides things into male and female, most obviously in languages like French and Italian, but English, too, is concerned with gender.

Anishinaabemowin, as well as many other languages, is concerned with the action and relationship—whether things are animate or inanimate. That is revealed by the kinds of verbs that are used to describe what is happening. In English, I would say that the man "hit" his dog or that rain "hit" the ground. Same verb. In Anishinaabemowin, we would use different verbs depending on whether or not the thing being hit is animate.

But even being inanimate does not preclude something from having spirit. In his discussion about grammar in Anishinaabemowin, Gross tells an entertaining story about his moccasins (which are inanimate) being able to hit him because inanimate things can still act on animate things. His moccasins can't hit his socks, though, because his socks are also inanimate. How unfair, he says, even if it is grammatically correct.

It is not only the Anishinaabe for whom stones might be alive. The Indigenous people of Australia understand stones to have deep knowledge, holding memory and having spirit. Tyson Yunkaporta, an

Australian writer and carver and member of the Apalech clan, writes about the sentience of rocks in his book *Sand Talk*. He says you can't just pick one up and take it home, because you disturb its spirit, and it will disturb you. There is a shed full of them at Uluru, the massive sandstone monolith formerly known as Ayers Rock, that holds the stones that tourists have sent back. Despite having been told not to take rocks home, some people do, and then many report having bad dreams and bad luck. Some send them back.

I think about my own collection of stones—stones that I have picked up from various vacations and brought home. It's been a while since I've done that. I didn't have any kind of epiphany nor any bad dreams or bad luck. One day, I simply stopped doing it. I can't even say it was a conscious decision. Sometimes we learn to listen to things without realizing it.

The Sámi, an Indigenous people who live in Northern Europe, also talk about living stones. In her book *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics*, Norwegian Hebrew Bible scholar Mari Joerstad introduces us to a text that is filled with other-than-human persons, alive in the way that Gross and Yunkaporta describe and which is somehow missing from churches. She invites us to consider the world that the ancient Hebrew writers lived in as a "world [that] contained sentient, spiritual beings."

This world sounds more like what I hear from Anishinaabe authors and elders than anything I hear in church. Joerstad draws together these things: the sense of the ancient Hebrew with the Indigenous people living in Norway. She writes about Sámi reindeer herder and philosopher Nils Oskal describing the relationship that the Sámi have with *siedi* stones, to which they give gifts of coins or tobacco. Outsiders often mistake this courtesy—this recognition of life and connection—for worship. But it is part of a way of understanding

our place in the world: we are in the midst of sentient beings with whom we are in relationship, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Are the stones alive? Can rocks cry out?

I want us to consider our relationship with land—to think about it beyond squabbling over ownership and rights and to think about responsibilities and reciprocal relationship. To think of ourselves as a part of creation rather than apart from it. What if the land is a being in its own right? That concept is not as foreign as you might think. And what if the land and all that grows from it and on it and in it are sentient beings in their own right? Then we need to make material changes that restore the land to our original agreements. We need to remember that the land belongs to itself, and everyone belongs to the Creator.

Land is our first relationship, and it is the first relationship that we need to restore. We are used to standing on it, planting in it, and marveling at it, but our relationship with it is complicated and colonial. We buy and sell it, extract resources from much of it, and then idealize parts of it.

We can't always go home. The reality is that because of fractured relationships, displacement, forced and unforced migrations, we may not know where home is. My friends who are part of the Black diaspora have talked about the heartbreak of not knowing the places their ancestors called home. Colonialism has disconnected us from land, severed us from that first relationship, often through violence. We need to restore our relationship with the land around us. That means going outside, as my son is prone to remind me. It means noticing and listening.

The first thing that Nanaboozhoo did was name things as he walked through the land. Naming creates relationships, reveals identity. Think about the way that you named children or pets, the care

you took to think about who they were and your hopes for them. Perhaps the name represented other family members, significant places or events, or persistent behavior. Names are rarely given without thought to the one being named and the relationship that exists.

Governments are increasingly restoring Indigenous names to parks and streets, reminding people that these places had an existence before Europeans arrived. In 2015, the US Department of the Interior officially changed the name of Mount McKinley back to Denali, which is what the local Koyukon people had called it for centuries.

So we name the land, claiming relationship to it. And what if the land also claims us?

I reconnected with my father when I was in my late twenties, and shortly after that, he took me home to Sioux Lookout. It was the first time I had been home since leaving as a toddler, and I did not know what to expect. Going home is fraught with hopes and unrealistic expectations, and I had plenty of both and a lot of hours to ruminate on them.

It's a long drive from Niagara Falls to Sioux Lookout; people don't often realize how massive the province of Ontario is. You can start in Ontario, drive for twenty-four hours, and still be in Ontario. The geography changes, and although the highway goes up and down as it travels around Lake Superior, you are mostly going up into the Canadian Shield. There are long stretches empty of people, towns that you blink and miss—and then we were there. But not really there.

When I went home for the first time, there was no road into the reserve, so we stayed at a cabin nearby. My father pointed across the

lake to Frenchman's Head and told me that's where the reserve is. Although there is a road now, in the mid-1990s, the people who lived there got in and out of the community by boat. There are still many reserves scattered throughout northern Canada that are accessible only by boat or plane, ice roads in the winter.

My father took me to Umfreville, a nearby community that had grown up around a lumber mill. That town is one of the ones where my mother had taught, and it is where my father and his family lived. Nobody had lived there for years when we visited it. There are fields of tall grass with a few wooden structures. He pointed at various buildings, telling me what they used to be. Some cousins happened to be in Umfreville that day, although I don't remember why they were there. Perhaps they were berry-picking, because there are a lot of blueberry bushes in northern Ontario. I took out the photo album I brought with me. It held photographs of me as a baby, pictures of my father and uncles, my grandmother, other children. They looked at the pictures and remembered stories, talked about who was still alive and who wasn't. Remembering what they used to be.

On that visit, I met my grandmother, living by then in Sioux Lookout, and it was a bittersweet meeting. All these moments were fraught with hope and unrealistic expectations because, like Umfreville itself, we are not what we used to be. Our lives have moved in different directions, and our shared memories stop at the same place as the photographs that recorded them. There were people who remembered me, people who remembered stories about me, and in the intervening years, they had periodically wondered what had happened to me. This was not a surprise. I had also leafed through the photo album and wondered what had happened to them.

But what was a surprise was the undeniable sensation that the land and water remembered me too. I stood beneath stands of black

spruce and looked across the lake, and it felt so familiar that it ached. I went down to the rocky beach and put my hands in the water, and it remembered me. I cannot tell you how or why I knew that. It was completely unexpected, this sensation of both remembering and being remembered. I can only describe it as electric.

Since that time, I have had other fleeting reminders that the land is alive in ways I am only beginning to understand. I told you that I had stopped collecting stones, and that is mostly true. But this past summer when I went home again, we camped at provincial parks around Lake Superior. At one of them, my husband brought me a stone he had picked up on a beach covered in round stones. When I held it in my hand, it felt like mine. Not mine like a thing that was now in my possession but mine like my children are mine and like my parents are mine. We belonged to each other.

And I thought about the roundness of this granite, the smoothness of it, and the amount of time that must have taken. How patient the stone and the water were. The length of that relationship. Stones are ancient, older than water, older than time. Bones of the earth. They've been through so many worlds, so many floods, and they hold all the memory and knowledge that comes with it. Eternity sits in my hand, and it ties me to home.

Thinking about my experience of going home, I wonder about those who can't return to the lands that would remember them. Migrants like my maternal family who, in fleeing violence, are forever cut off from the land that knew them by the oppressive politics of those who hold power. Or those of the Black diaspora: people forcibly displanted again and again, people who may not even know which land held their ancestors.

But the land is alive, and perhaps the lands that exist in the place we call Africa carried stories of ancestors to its western shore.

Maybe the stories traveled on mycelium networks that stretch for miles underground. Maybe the trees whispered to each other. Maybe memories and knowledge were carried on the dust that blows from the Sahara across the Atlantic. Perhaps the sea, a primeval creature of long memory, accepted the burden of these stories and bore them on waves, gathering them along with the heartbeats and tears of those who did not complete the crossing. In this way, stories wash up on the shore of the land we call North America and are carried inland. The stories are shared in low murmurings, in the whispers of wind on trees and grassland, so that the beings who live here and listen carefully to such stories are able to offer medicine and belonging to those in diaspora.

Native people will tell you: *look for the medicine that shows up.*

I asked my friend Kerry, whose ancestors came across the Middle Passage to the Caribbean and then eventually to Canada, what medicine shows up for her. She said she feels called to the water. The waters of the Great Lakes carried Paddle-to-the-Sea all the way from Nipigon to the Atlantic Ocean. Maybe the waters carry the knowledge of her back to her ancestors.

We can't talk about restoring relationship to land without talking about restoring it to the people from whom it was taken. As a phrase, *Land Back* started with a tweet, which became a hashtag, which became a rallying cry for a movement of land restoration and Indigenous sovereignty. The movement has been in existence for hundreds of years; it's just that we now call it *Land Back.* For as long as colonists and their governments around the world have taken Indigenous land for themselves, we have sought to be restored to it. So

we cannot talk about restoring our relationship to the land without talking about restoring the land to relationship with the people from whom it was taken.

The Karuk people, a tribe in northern California whose name literally means "the ones who fix the world," are provided as a case study in *Salmon and Acorns Feed Our People* by white academic Kari Marie Norgaard. In her book, she details the impact that loss of land has had on the Karuk people and how they are restoring both their landholdings and the ways in which they shape the environment. They work with fire in a kind of pyro-epistemology, like what Paulette Steeves describes, to manage their environment. This protects the waterways, which in turn provides salmon, as all these things are interconnected. Food sovereignty, which is tied to land, is a cycle of relationships, not just access. You drop one stone—say, by building a dam—and the unintended consequences ripple outward.

Settlers and migrants and the forcibly displanted get worried when Native people start talking about Land Back. What about their house? Where will they go? Unable to imagine any scenario other than what settler colonialism unleashed on us, people assume that Land Back means evictions, relocations, and elimination. In some cases, that might be appropriate. People own lakefront vacation homes that crowd Indigenous people out of traditional ricing beds, as documented in the play *Cottagers and Indians* by Drew Hayden Taylor. Luxury hotels and investment properties take up space, while Indigenous people are made homeless in their own territories. But wholesale eviction was never what we intended. Remember, from the earliest treaties, we offered a way to live together in peace, friendship, and respect. And although we are often, and I think reasonably, looking for change in ownership, at its core, Land Back means profoundly changing our relationship with land.

Because the Doctrine of Discovery gave European states the ability to claim whatever land they found, the land we lived on was no longer ours. Reservations aren't generally owned by the tribe that lives on them. The land is owned by the government and "held in reserve" for the specific use of Indigenous people. That is a precarious foundation for a community, as many tribes have experienced. The Wisconsin Menominee found themselves deemed "ready for termination" after achieving some economic success in the lumber industry, and in 1954, they lost their lands and their tribal status. The Menominee were reinstated in 1973, but the economic impact of termination was devastating.

Sometimes Native tribes identify particular places as sacred, perhaps in the hope that it will find some traction with those who are sympathetic to such things. But remember that the early colonists modeled themselves after ancient Israel's conquest of Canaan. Those early Israelites were commanded to "break down [Canaanite] altars and smash their sacred stones." So recognizing that Native places are sacred has never protected them from violence; in fact, it ensured it.

The US National Park system has been displacing Indigenous people for more than one hundred years. Just like governments use the language of safety, conservationists use the language of environmentalism to push aside the original peoples of the places where the parks now exist. In the 1960s, Wisconsin senator Gaylord Nelson attempted to push through legislation that would remove waterfront land from the Bad River and Red Cliff Ojibwe reservations and turn it into a national park, moving the tribes further inland. Postwar prosperity meant family road trips and vacations for the middle class, and that meant increasing the available wilderness for them to travel *to*. Because of the engagement and activism of those tribal members, as well as the coordinated response from at least

thirty other tribes and non-Native community members, this was unsuccessful.

In 2012, the Red Cliff Ojibwe opened Frog Bay Tribal National Park, which includes tribal lands as well as lands that they purchased from a retired professor. David Johnson learned that the tribe wanted to purchase the land he and his wife had bought decades earlier, but the tribe could not afford it. He sold it to them at half of its appraised value, saying that he had "always felt a little embarrassed at owning property that should have been in the tribe's hands all along." People can, and do, donate or sell property to tribal governments. It is one way that tribes are able to increase or restore their land base.

Actually restoring national parks to the Native peoples from whom they were taken is another idea that is gaining some interest in the United States and Canada. In the May 2021 issue of *The Atlantic*, Ojibwe writer David Treuer wrote a piece entitled "Return the National Parks to the Tribes." In it, he describes how the US government displaced the Miwok tribe from the land that would, thirty-nine years later, become Yosemite Park. This story repeats itself across the United States and Canada: Indigenous peoples banished from what conservationists saw as pristine wilderness. These parks were seen by settlers, in the words of David Treuer, as "natural cathedrals: protected landscapes where people could worship the sublime . . . an Eden untouched by humans and devoid of sin." But, he goes on to point out, these places were never untouched. In a reenactment of the fall, the settlers cast out the original people and called it pure. Treuer, and many others, argue that if the US government is to take seriously ideas of conservation and reconciliation, these lands should be placed under the control of the tribes from whom they were taken. He notes that there is precedent for this in Australia and New Zealand, where many significant natural

landmarks are under the control of the Indigenous peoples: Uluru, for example, and almost half of the Northern Territory of Australia. In Canada, the territory of Nunavut was separated from the Northwest Territories in 1993 and is largely administered by the Inuit who make up most of the population.

In New Zealand, the Raupatu Lands component of the Waikato River claim was settled in 1995, and it returned land to the Maori tribe who had originally lived there, including lands that were under existing Crown ownership: the University of Waikato, Te Rapa Airforce Base, the Hamilton Courthouse, and the police station. These lands within the city boundary of Hamilton, New Zealand, are now Maori land. This arrangement has provided the Maori tribe with a tax base from which they can make decisions about development, and it involves them in a partnership with the city where they have real power to influence decisions.

What if the land responds to these claims? If it remembered me, does it remember others?

❋ ❋ ❋

Somehow I made it through high school and college without reading John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. The book is about the migration of Okies, poor tenant farmers who were mostly but not always from Oklahoma. During the Great Depression, they followed Route 66 across the southern United States into California, where there were supposed to be jobs. In this passage, the squatting men are tenant farmers and have been told that they need to move out. The owners want the land, first to exhaust with cotton and then to sell to easterners who want to build houses on it. This passage, in which the bankers and tenant farmers argue over the land, felt so familiar, and

it took my breath away. Steinbeck doesn't use quotation marks to separate speech, so I'll use italics for the words that the bankers say.

You'll have to get off the land. The plows'll go through the dooryard.

And now the squatting men stood up angrily. Grampa took up the land, and he had to kill the Indians and drive them away. And Pa was born here, and he killed weeds and snakes. Then a bad year came and he had to borrow a little money. An' we was born here. There in the door—our children born here. And Pa had to borrow money. The bank owned the land then, but we stayed and we got a little bit of what we raised.

We know that—all that. It's not us, it's the bank. A bank isn't like a man. Or an owner with fifty thousand acres, he isn't like a man either. That's the monster.

Sure, cried the tenant men, but it's our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good, it's still ours. That's what makes it ours—being born on it, working it, dying on it. That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it.

We're sorry. It's not us. It's the monster.

When I heard this passage, I thought about how Steinbeck described relationship to land. These tenant farmers felt the connection—a connection that came through working on it, being born on it, dying for it and on it. Grandpa killed Indians. Pa killed weeds and snakes. They believed that the land was theirs because, like the earliest

settlers, they worked it and drew sustenance from it. And just like the earliest settlers, they killed Indians in order to get it.

It's not us. It's the monster.

It's big brother, and he's hungry.

We're just the wendigo's victims.

In his moving and insightful novel about these tenant farmers, Steinbeck captures the cost of promises America makes and never intends to keep. The promise of land in Oklahoma. The promise of jobs in California. But he does it by vanishing Indigenous people and replacing us with the Joads and others like them. We used to be there, but in Steinbeck's world, we aren't anymore. Our presence is limited to an obstacle Grandpa removed. But surely Osage and Apache ancestors once squatted while colonists told them they had to move. Surely Cherokee ancestors insisted that it was our land, our children were born on it, we got killed on it, died on it. That's what made it ours: relationship, not a paper with numbers on it.

The Grapes of Wrath begins in Salisaw, Oklahoma. Recall that Oklahoma had been part of that vast geography into which the US government deposited all the Indians it didn't want living east of the Mississippi. These plains knew the Cherokee and Choctaw. They had longer memories of the Oceti Sakowin, also called the great Sioux Nation. Before that, this land knew the Wichita and the Caddo people, whose presence goes back at least two thousand years, through the mound builders. It knew the Osage. In *The Indigenous Paleolithic of the Western Hemisphere*, Paulette Steeves tells an Osage story, a fantastical story about giant beasts that had been dismissed as legend . . . until archeologists uncovered mammoth bones exactly where the Osage said they would be.

When I say that the land is my ancestor, that is a scientific statement: I want to reflect again on this claim by Dr. Keolu Fox, a Kānaka Maoli anthropologist and genomic researcher. The land itself and the conditions of that land, like altitude and climate, impact our genome just as our human ancestors do. We are born on it, die on it; we come from it and return to it. The land and the waters, oceans and rivers, are part of us, relatives and ancestors in a very real way. Inuk singer and activist Tanya Tagaq reminds me that the ocean is the mother too.

Stones are also our relatives. Whatever I eat has taken up nutrients from the ground, including minerals, and the land itself becomes part of me. Thunderstorms and rivers become part of me. The land and the waters have absorbed the blood and sweat of generations, watched babies become old men and women and return to them. We are part of each other. Civilizations rise and fall, and the land and the waters continue. They hold memory of us all. Standing before a presence that large and that old—and making one-sided claims of ownership—is an act of extraordinary hubris.

Steinbeck's squatting men are calling on the land itself to witness their plight. They aren't only arguing with the men who represent the owners; they are appealing to the land itself to bear witness to their presence, to their right of ownership. And the land is silent. It does not put up any resistance or offer any comfort. Throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*, the land bears silent witness to the destruction of people and food, and it makes no response. Tractors plow the land, and it offers up only dust. This is, of course, the time of the Dust Bowl: a drought worsened by settlers who tore out the deep-rooted prairie grasses and planted the land with thirsty, shallow-rooted crops like wheat and cotton. In the same way, they tore out the deep-rooted Native peoples and replaced them with newcomers.

During the drought of the 1930s, from Texas to Nebraska and up into the Canadian prairie, high winds blew choking dust across the

region, killing people and livestock, covering fields that refused to produce even weeds and thorns. The land fasted and covered herself in dust.

Our emotions have a physical response. We feel sadness, and our body responds by crying. In the ancient Middle East, drought was often connected with mourning as *the land's* physical response to an emotional state. Just as a Hebrew mourner would fast and pour dust over their head and body, so, too, the land expresses her grief by fasting and covering herself in dust. "Human action has caused desolation and destruction," Mari Joerstad writes. "Further proof of human perfidy is *their inattentiveness to the suffering of other creatures.* The earth is left with no option but to cry directly to YHWH." The land mourns and wastes away not only because of the things that humanity has done but the things it has not done, such as our lack of care for those who suffer. The land has absorbed the blood of that suffering, and it mourns.

We're sorry. It's not us. It's the monster.

In ancient Hebrew texts, the prophets are not simply projecting their own emotions onto the world around them; they are recognizing and describing the emotions of the other-than-human world in which we all live and move and have our being. Land bears the scars and consequences of our foolishness long after we have passed. Land also lives in relationship to its Creator.

When I look at the chaotic weather patterns—at prolonged droughts and then at rain that falls out of sync with the needs of plants and without providing abundance—I know that human industry has had a hand in it. These are the result of things we have done, harms we have not cared about. Yet I cannot help but think that the land and the sea, the waters above and below, are responding as well. I wonder if, in response to our choices, the land itself

is withdrawing in grief. Instead of giving us pathways that are lush and green, it is leaving us with charred landscapes that cut our feet. The writer of Leviticus warned Israel not to defile the land, or it would vomit them out. Anishinaabe ancestors warned us about the Seventh Fire and the path that would result from choices that the light-skinned people would make about how to live. Will that path be lush and green or black with char that cuts our feet? The land has more agency than we realize.

But all our stories contain mercy too. Solomon wrote that it rains on the just and the unjust alike. Eagles fly overhead, searching out those who are living in a good way. We can still listen to the stones that will surely cry out.

Do I really believe this?

"There was a time when I wondered—do I really believe all of this?" writes novelist Louise Erdrich. "I'm half German. Rational! Does this make any sense? After a while such questions stopped mattering. Believing or not believing, it was all the same. I found myself compelled to behave toward the world as if it contained sentient spiritual beings."

I don't know if the land is alive, not in the way that I know my dogs are alive. But it might be. And I've stopped bringing home rocks that don't belong to me.

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We need a reconfigured relationship, one that is reciprocal and recognizes the limits and hubris of ownership, the limits of a colonial way of living that destroys in order to replace. When the colonists originally came to the land they eventually called America, they saw themselves as latter-day Abrahams, as Israelites coming to a

new Promised Land. But these are two very different ways of entering the land, and the colonists missed a key point about the early Hebrews.

First, Abraham did not enter as a conqueror; he entered as a supplicant, as a guest. Abraham lived among the people of Canaan, and when God said he would destroy the city of Sodom, Abraham argued with him, pleading for justice. Second, as Willie James Jennings writes, when the Hebrews returned to the Promised Land after centuries in Egypt, it was God who asserted sovereignty over the land, not the people. They developed a relationship with it, but the land itself belonged to God. These colonizing Christians took the conquest of Canaan as their model but not the form of land ownership that was instituted immediately afterward.

The practice of jubilee—restoring land to the original families—asserts both the temporary nature of our ownership and the enduring nature of the Creator's sovereignty. Our connection to the land is in our relationship with it, not our ownership of it. When we make it a thing that we can buy and sell, we not only sever our relationship with it; we sever it from its relationship with the Creator. That is something we should all take seriously.

Restored relationship is always a possibility, and exile is not forever. The Year of Jubilee is long past, and it is time to restore the land to the original people. In the United States and Canada, institutions are beginning to talk about improving relationships between institutions and Indigenous peoples. They call it "decolonizing." Churches, colleges, and settler organizations are beginning to recognize the colonial history of these countries and are trying to improve their relationships with Indigenous peoples. But *decolonizing* is not another word for anti-racism or anti-oppression; it is not just another way of saying *diversity* and *inclusion*. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang remind us, decolonization is not a metaphor. We could be the most anti-racist society on earth, but as long as America relies on stolen land and the displacement of Indigenous people, it will remain a colonial state.

Decolonizing means returning the land to the people from whom it was taken.

As a thought experiment, I want you to think about what would happen if churches and businesses returned their land to the Indigenous people from whom it was taken. They would run the risk of eviction, that's true. But how would it change their behavior now that they are motivated to avoid eviction? How would churches act toward Indigenous peoples to ensure that their yearly lease gets renewed? What practices would businesses put into place to keep their place? How would that change in ownership change priorities? What ripples would that have in the broader community?

We must listen to the stones and what they might be telling us. We must listen to and acknowledge the land's grief. At the very least, we must stop participating in policies and practices that enact or entrench further displacement.

In *Salmon and Acorns Feed Our People*, Norgaard notes that early racial theorists included land in their analysis of how racism was developed and maintained. Theorists like W. E. B. Du Bois wrote about the importance of land in discussions about wealth and poverty. Contemporary theorists see inequity as lack of access to social resources. They talk about racism in our social structures rather than also analyzing land ownership itself. And that is interesting to me because by disconnecting inequity from access to land, any social justice action that we take reinforces settler colonialism. We're simply making settler colonialism fairer and more just, which means that our movements are built on Indigenous erasure.

Indigenous peoples often speak of belonging to the land. We say that the land owns us. It was into this kind of relationship that God invited the Israelites, and it was into this kind of relationship that the Haudenosaunee invited the Dutch when they made the Two Row Wampum treaty. The Year of Jubilee was more than an economic reset to prevent the accumulation of wealth; it restored each family's relationship to the land of their forebears and reminded the people that they did not own the fields that they purchased.

The land mourns, but it also responds with joy. The same prophets who describe a land fasting and covering herself with dust in response to human wrongdoing and harm also describe beautiful scenes of rejoicing and jubilation upon the return of the people. "The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom," the prophet Isaiah says.

Remember the two paths of the Seventh Fire—one parched and blackened and the other green and lush. How we prepare now will determine what comes next: either a healing fire that brings wild strawberries and lush pathways or a charred landscape that cuts our feet. For Indigenous people, that means holding on to the knowledge of our ancestors. For the light-skinned people, that means making the right choices about how to live.

These governments that make decisions? They are your model, not ours. This economic system we live under? This is your model, not ours. The Doctrine of Discovery that declared our lands were empty? That is your framework, not ours. You have choices to make.

Aambe

It's one thing to consider our relationship with the land—our kinship to it—as individuals. We read books like Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, which is a lovely book and one you should definitely read. Reading books in solitude may alter our individual relationship with the world around us. But like our histories, our lives do not unfold in isolation. We exist collectively: as neighbors and community groups, as workplaces and sports teams, as book groups and families. We exist in overlapping relationships with faith communities and cultural groups: places and people with whom we have reciprocal relationship and with whom we can act together.

Seeding Sovereignty is an Indigenous-led collective that invests in Indigenous people and communities. Check out their website (seedingsovereignty.org) and the work that they are doing. Find other Indigenous-led organizations that may be doing work in your community.

How can you, as an individual and as part of a group, support one of these organizations? How can you join with them to do the things that need to be done?