Review Essay: Alicia Elliott. *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground*. Anchor Canada, 2020. 223 pp. ISBN: 9780385692403

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"Wake'nikonhra'kwenhtará:'on" is the Kanien'kéha (Mohawk language) phrase that roughly translates to "his mind fell to the ground […]. Literally stretched or sprawled out on the ground. It's all over" (9). Wake'nikonhra'kwenhtará:'on is used to capture and express depression, which is one of the many threads that run through Alicia Elliott's memoir, *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground*. The richness of Kanien'kéha is illustrated in another translation of Wake'nikonhrèn:ton. It also means "the mind is suspended" (9), which is in direct contrast of having a clear head and being in a state of good-mindedness or Kan'nikonhrí:io (Maracle). Finally, the English translation of Elliott's memoir calls attention to the importance of the mind. Of critical and cultural importance to the Haudenosaunee is their Thanksgiving Address, which reiterates minds coming together as one in a prayer of gratitude, humility, recognition, and relationality to others, including animals, land, waters, and plant-based kin. The bringing together of clear, unsuspended minds is an act of daily healing and restoration, which is an overall aim of Elliott's honest and illuminating stories.

The memoir as a genre has increasingly gained momentum by Indigenous literary artists but is not new as a form of storytelling. Elliott's *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground* profoundly resonated with some of my personal, familial, and professional experiences, even though we are from distinct Indigenous Nations, communities, and generations. Elliott's gifts of literary style and form – combined with her humour, wit, and compassionate, poetic disclosures from her life – make for a refreshing and empowering narrative. Compiled from fourteen critically reflective autobiographical essays, *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground* is more than just an intimate sharing of lived experiences. Elliott unflinchingly uncovers why these lived experiences shape so many Indigenous lives in this contemporary Canadian state. While each individual story could be read in isolation, the book's essays are situated semi-chronologically to be read in order.

"A Mind Spread Out on the Ground" is also the title of the first short story which introduces and contextualizes depression: Elliott's, her mother's, and historically among her community. Elliott discloses that she was sixteen when she wrote her first suicide note. By this time in her life, Elliott had witnessed and endured her mother's life-long struggle with depression, which she addresses in the chapter "Crude Collages of My Mother." Elliott's depression and suicidal tendencies were not in isolation. She explains that "[t]hough suicide was quite rare for Onkwehon:we pre-contact, after contact and the subsequent effects of colonialism it has ballooned so much that, as of 2013, suicide and self-inflicted injuries are the leading cause of death for Native people under the age of forty-four" (8). This segues into an apt description of Canada as an abusive father, which foreshadows the final story in the book, "Extraction Mentalities." This first essay closes with an explanation of Wake'nikonhra'kwenhtará:'on and Elliott poetically illustrates how depression is akin to colonialism, as both have robbed her of language, but both can be reversed through ceremony.

The second essay, "Half-Breed: A Racial Biography in Five Parts" is an acute introspective critique on how nature and nurture impacted Elliott's life story. The key points of each of the five parts include: 1) Alcoholism. The scent of alcoholic breath was so redolent of her homelife that she considered it to be genetic (14); 2) Shame for being Indigenous. In grade two, Elliott realized her white skin could be weaponized against Indigeneity and she pretended not to be Native because of her New York classmates' outright disdain for Indigenous peoples; 3) Catholicism vs. Long House teachings. Elliott's parents were ideological and cultural polar opposites, which pitted them against each other when they moved to Six Nations. Her mother defended and minimized the Catholic Church's treatment of Indigenous children, while her father quietly embraced Haudenosaunee life ways; 4) Bullying. In grade eleven, Elliott became the target of lateral violence and bullying, due to her white skin: "That's when it became clear: whiteness meant different things in different contexts. On the rez, Carrie and I could share skin colours and still be perceived entirely different as Native people" (18); 5) Teen pregnancy, internalized racism, and self-hatred. At eighteen, Elliott recalls the day she went into labour. In a shocking but powerful scene, Elliot reflects on how "internalized racism had warped" (20) her to the point of relief that her newborn was pink and "didn't look like my father, my aunts, my uncle, my grandmother" (20). Elliott's father had educated her on the impacts of Indian Act legislation, but as a teen mother, she had not fully embraced what it meant to bear the responsibilities of a Haudenosaunee matriarch until she became a mother. The turmoil

of being both white and Tuscarora manifested into internalized self-hatred. Fortunately, this book is testament to Elliott's ongoing growth and healing: "This is how I can decolonize my mind: by refusing the colonial narratives that try to keep me alienated from my own community. I can raise my kid to love being Haudenosaunee in a way my parents couldn't, in a way my grandparents couldn't. This is my responsibility as a Haudenosaunee woman" (22).

The third essay, "On Seeing and Being Seen" is about Elliott's introduction to Indigenous writers. She reveals the overwhelming love and weight of literary erasure being lifted when she read *Islands of Decolonial Love* by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (23). Elliott shares that she had never been encouraged to hone her talents as a promising writer but was instead dismissed as one. She was indeed told she could publish, not because of her writing but because she is Indigenous. Coupled with her experiences with systemic racism and sexism, Elliott had not been admitted into any MFA programs and did not write for years. Elliott's exposure to reading an Indigenous woman author prompts discussion of the lack of Indigenous presence in publishing. She discusses E. Pauline Johnson (27), contextualizes the historic and political landscape Johnson wrote in, and clearly links the trajectory of literary stereotypes of Indigenous women with a strong critique. She returns to love, and the love she felt as she read Simpson's book, asking non-Indigenous authors, "If you can't write about us with a love for who we are as a people, what we've survived, what we've accomplished despite all attempts to keep us from doing so [...,] why are you writing about us at all?" (30)

"Weight" adopts a reflective, second-person voice as Elliott writes to herself. We learn about the weight of parenthood as Elliott experienced it. She reflects on her high school love with Mike and subsequent teen pregnancy, which leads to an account of having to admit her mother's bipolar disorder during an early pregnancy exam. This traumatic experience jolts Elliott as she realizes "genes could be toxic" (37), which unleashes a torrent of memories on the weight of being parented by a stay-at-home mom who battled depression. Elliott's mother made some difficult decisions for two of her seven children: "one of them chose to live with your grandmother after a custody battle, and another was disabled, with very little control over her muscles, so your mother put her in a home where they could provide round the clock care" (40). Elliott reflects on juggling being a university student and mother, and her guilt of having to leave her child with Mike's mother during the week.

The short essay "The Same Space" is about Indigenous diaspora on Turtle Island, in urban centers and on Indigenous homelands. Elliott captures the reality of generations of Indigenous people who, for a multitude of reasons, have had to leave their home communities for places that have deep Indigenous roots which are usually not well-known. Elliott explains the history of Tkaronto and the Dish With One Spoon treaty that

> was supposed to be treated as one collective dish each nation had to share, hunting an equal but sustainable amount of game. All would eat from that dish together, using a beavertail spoon instead of a knife to ensure there was no accidental bloodshed—which might lead to intentional bloodshed. In this way, it was a space of mutual peace and prosperity. (49)

In perhaps the most powerful and thought-provoking essay "Dark Matters," Elliott creates a dialectic between western scientific discourse about cosmological dark matter and the dark matters of Indigenous history and experiences. In juxtaposed prose, Elliott's brief sections about scientific laws on dark matter alternate with lengthy and articulate reflections about Colten Boushie's murder, racism, and the dark injustice against Indigenous Peoples that continues to pervade Canadian courtrooms. The essay opens with a comparison and critique of the "discovery" of dark matter, which is akin to saying Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island were discovered. Elliott then pivots in the next paragraph to talk about the moment she learned about the Stanley acquittal (54), which resonates with many as we braced for the monumental verdict. I would liken this to the moment the world witnessed the collapse of the Twin Towers on 9/11. The verdict is etched in our collective Indigenous memories, and we know exactly where we were and with whom. Elliot and her family lived in British Columbia during her one-year fellowship and were touring the province when the verdict was announced, prompting them to cancel their tourist plans. Alongside many, they participated in the march in support of Colten Boushie's family (65); such marches were immediately organized because of the overwhelming collective grief over the evidence that Indigenous people and lives do not matter. Elliott succinctly sums it up as "some things don't matter when a white man does them" (55). While framed around the murder of Boushie, this essay is also an apt discussion on poverty, racism and its origins, inequities, and legislation that does not protect Indigenous people. Drawing together her two themes, Elliott ends the chapter with the following: "Racism, for many people, seems to occupy space in

very much the same way as dark matter: it forms the skeleton of our world, yet remains ultimately invisible, undetectable. This is convenient. If nothing is racism, then nothing needs to be done to address it" (70).

"Scratch" is about Elliott's ten-year plus relationship with head lice, with whom she related: "As a poor, mixed-race kid, I was treated like a parasite, too" (72). Her white grandmother (her mother's mom) was disgusted by the lice and did not acknowledge her family's circumstances: they did not have running water, were impoverished, and had insignificant supports. With Elliott's mother's illnesses that spanned schizophrenia, postpartum depression, and manic depression, treating head lice was not a high priority in their home. Elliott's mother was frequently hospitalized, leaving her father to solo parent. Elliott left home at eighteen and lived in a place with running water, which is when she finally got rid of her head lice.

In an essay that connects Elliott's early dependency on food for happiness with poverty's constraints, "34 Grams Per Dose" is an honest analysis of decolonizing diets. The chapter's title alludes to Chips Ahoy! Triple Chocolate Chunk cookies, which are "170 calories per 34 grams" (91). To decolonize centuries of colonialism and capitalism is to confront the near genocide of Indigenous and racialized peoples through governmental policies, where if "racialized people aren't considered human, [then] it's okay for them to have unhealthy bodies. It's okay if they have unhealthy minds (98). Elliott recognizes pre-colonial Indigenous diets are the way forward, but this path is not accessible to all, enabling the continuation of obesity, disease, and death. Elliott remembers how, as a child she did not eat lunch for a year and a half because it was not part of the Canadian school lunch program. Her father had to prioritize their budget to feed only the younger children, as he constantly feared that social workers would apprehend his children. This memory launches a discussion on historical Indian Residential Schools, malnutrition, and starvation policies as well as the ongoing fostering of Indigenous children in violent homes, "as if white abuse could ever be better than Indigenous love" (105). The essay ends with a return to acknowledging the medicine and relationality of Indigenous foods: "Corn, beans and squash were once all my people really needed. They were so essential to our everyday lives that we refer to them as our sisters. [...gifting seeds] was an act of absolute, undiminished intergenerational love" (116).

Elliott's "Boundaries like Bruises" is a love letter of sorts, and an ode to her white husband and their decolonial, antiracist partnership. While reflecting on her parent's dysfunctional love, she embraces those experiences as having taught her to recognize her own strength in setting up boundaries by breaking their cycles. Elliott's love and respect for her husband is returned and reminds her of the teachings of the Two Row Wampum: "One row represents the ship the settlers are steering; the other represents the canoe the Haudenosaunee are steering. Each vessel holds those peoples' culture, language, history and values" (120).

In the essay "On Forbidden Rooms and Intentional Forgetting," Elliot uses the style of a fairy tale to talk about sexual assault. As a survivor, she advocates for her own agency and decision making, which is what her rapist took from her.

A devout Catholic, Elliott's mother now lives in an adult care home in Florida and is the focus of "Crude Collages of My Mother." Elliott's descriptive poetics about her mother are insightful, "she radiated outward. In my mind she is forever tinged by orange light dash a sunset, perhaps, or an open flame" (135). Elliott's mother felt isolated on Six Nations, which manifested into mania that smothered their homelife as depression and chaos. Elliott distinguishes her depression from her mom's. While anticipating a happy ending for this chapter, there was none. It is a solemn and honest recollection of "crude collages," and she has not seen her mom in five years.

"Not Your Noble Savage" adopts a humorous tone to address white expectations of Indigeneity in writing by Indigenous authors. Elliott also asserts a sharp critique of Indigenous literary erasure and white ignorance of Indigenous sovereignty by beginning with a story. She admits she has never learned to dance at a powwow, a place to enact one's Indigeneity and where we are palatable to non-Indigenous spectators and onlookers as "genuine artifacts." In 2006, these same gawkers were incensed by Indigenous land protectors in Caledonia, whom "we could entertain […] every summer and pose in photos with their children, sure, but attempting to assert sovereignty over our lands elicited moral outrage on par with drowning kittens" (152). The common thread in this essay is a recognition that there is a lone, fetishized Indigenous image in the collective consciousness that further expects Indigenous literary arts to recycle that very same image and storyline. When "Noble Savage" checkboxes are not met, Elliott says, "colonial ownership over Indigenous people within the literary community" (153) constitutes literary colonialism. While Indigenous

authors have a centuries-long presence, critics and non-Indigenous literary reviewers have outright ignored, forgotten about, and dismissed their contributions. Elliott zooms in on *Surfacing* (1972), a survey by Margaret Atwood of Canadian Literature. Atwood completely disregarded Indigenous writers because, ostensibly, she could not find any, yet she did write "a chapter that examined non-Native writers' fictive portrayals of Indigenous peoples" (154). Atwood's faux pas resulted in a flippant response: "Why did I overlook Pauline Johnson? Perhaps because, being half-white, she somehow didn't rate as the real thing, even among Natives, although she is undergoing a reclamation today" (qtd. in Elliot, 154). Elliot critiques this excuse and counters it with evidence of sexism in literature. She further educates her readers about Indian Act policies and forces us to confront our own biases on the content of Indigenous stories by Indigenous authors. In closing, Elliott returns to the story and imagery of powwows, joking that esteemed author Eden Robinson should stifle her creative energies to feed the colonial imaginary and policing of Indigenous identities and labels. In all seriousness, proclaims Elliott, she and hundreds of Indigenous authors are no one's Noble Savage.

Elliott's concern for and critique of fetishized images continues in the essay "Sontag, in Snapshots: Reflecting on 'In Plato's Cave' in 2018," which addresses still photographic images of Indigenous people since the advent of the camera. Elliott shares her insecurities of being photographed, punctuated by Indigenous photographic experiences as both subjects and as photographers illuminating a decolonial gaze. Her research on early European male photographers explores their complicity in Indigenous erasure by capturing vanishing Indians. Elliott theorizes about selfies (179) and critiques imperial beauty standards (181). Returning to the style of the memoir, Elliott states that "photographs are family-building exercises" (183) and recalls that her parents denied her memories by withholding an image of a baby named Angelica, Elliott's half-sister (184). This painful discovery prompts her to acknowledge the power of photographic images, which simultaneously acknowledges Sontag's assessment of photography as predatory (189). Elliott ends by positing, "Maybe the reason everything exists to end in a photograph is because this world isn't equipped to offer something more meaningful: for everything to end in respect, acceptance, and acknowledgement" (194).

The memoir ends with a final participatory essay, "Extraction Mentalities." Elliott explicitly shares memories that are violent, visceral, and triggering. She follows up by

providing prompts and asks questions for the reader to fill in blank spaces or not, as "even blank spaces speak volumes" (195). We learn, finally, that her father was very abusive to her sister. In a gentle, yet thoroughly introspective and firm tone, Elliott challenges accepted misinformation about abusers. What is clear is that Elliott endured abuse and trauma and she loves her father. This was the most poignant chapter, as I related to her experiences. Elliott has fond memories of her father as loving and as someone who supported her goals and aspirations of writing, which explains the essay's title (201). Going beyond sharing these experiences, Elliott illuminates (but does not excuse) that her father was a survivor of his father, and how their behaviour were tactics to survive colonialism (203). Her ability to return to these moments as a Haudenosaunee woman and mother create a heartbreaking and empowering conclusion to the book. As part of her healing journey, I interpret this chapter as a monologue for readers to begin their own healing journeys. Just as her own memory extracted bad behaviours and events, her prompts and questions encourage readers to recall similar events and behaviours that they can navigate in a space that is at once beautifully candid and anonymously safe. Elliott concludes "Extraction Mentalities" by carefully examining extraction and dehumanization, which are products of colonialism. Indigenous traditional resource extraction, she says, is "a cornerstone of capitalism, colonialism, and settler colonialism" (213). She then poses the question if readers have ever felt dehumanized. Here Elliott strongly connects the justification of colonialism with the dehumanisation of Indigenous peoples and compares this to the demonization of her father as an abusive man who is surviving colonialism (217).

Elliott has offered a sophisticated collection of memories and experiences, traumatic and joyful. Her writing reflects literary caring and pathos that affords personal growth and healing, communal rejuvenation, and generational wisdom. Our minds may be suspended and "spread out on the ground" but, as she demonstrates, minds are resilient. Coming to peace and having a Good Mind are in reach.

McMaster University

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