"You Can't Be an NDN in Today's World:" Tommy Pico's Queer NDN Epic Poems

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From the Viejas Indian reservation of the Kumeyaay Nation, Tommy Pico, the author of *Nature Poem* (2017) won the 2018 Whiting Award, with the committee calling his book a "contemporary epic." At first glance, calling Pico's poetry epic may seem like an odd choice. Helena González Fernández explains the "classic definition of the epic poem in the West refers to an account of a hero or heroes' past deeds recorded in a setting of both nation and city; in other words of community and public space—both distinctly patriarchal and heterosexual" (15). While the epic in prose form is being rewritten by authors like Madeline Miller, whose novels *Song of Achilles* (2011) and *Circe* (2018) are queer and feminist reinterpretations of the Greek stories, the epic poem is historically masculinist and heteropatriarchal. The literary epic has fallen largely out of fashion for these reasons, but also because tastes (and attention spans) have changed.[1] But how do Pico's queer Kumeyaay poems fit within the epic tradition? Poets.org defines epic as "a long, often book-length, narrative in verse form that retells the heroic journey of a single person or a group of persons. Elements that typically distinguish epics include superhuman deeds, fabulous adventures, highly stylized language, and a blending of lyrical and dramatic traditions." Pico's book-length poems fit these descriptions (they definitely are fabulous adventures), blending internet speak

with the travels of a young, hip queer Kumeyaay man through New York, book tours, relationships, and Kumeyaay history.

Pico's epic poems aren't heterosexual or patriarchal, but queer.[2] Pico's queerness is intersectional not only because he is Kumeyaay but because he works with and supports other Black, Indigenous and people of colour writers, particularly queer folks. In 2008, Pico established Birdsong (a key Kumeyaay concept I will explain shortly) Collective and Micropress in Brooklyn NY to "foster sustained collaboration among artists, musicians and writers" through its own zine. The Collective's mandate was to "share commitments to social movements of feminism, anti-racism, queer positivity, class-consciousness, and DIY cultural production" ("Who We Are"). He is also a member of the queer quartet who produce the podcast *Food for Thot*, hilariously described as stemming from a "discussion about how literary and intellectual spaces rarely allowed for conversations about things typically considered—well, not so intellectual. We loved talking about queer theory, identity politics, and Ta-Nehisi Coates, but also . . .our absolutely filthiest hook-up stories" ("About"), an exhilarating mixture of pop culture and theory reflected in his poetry.

Pico's poems seem to fit more into the queer American poetic tradition, moving from the queer epics of Walt Whitman's (1819–1892) *Leaves of Grass* or Allen Ginsberg's (1926–1977) *Howl*. Though Benjamin Meiners explains the "identification of the intertwining of the sexual and the political in Whitman's work has (rightly) become commonplace" (246), Pico rejects placing himself in this tradition even as he is grudgingly influenced by it: "I didn't read *Leaves of Grass* nor have I read *Howl* for that matter nor have I really read Frank O'Hara. Although, there are people who like to compare me to them all the time." Instead, he makes his own epic tradition rooted in Kumeyaay song traditions and urban Indigeneity and "less Whitman" (Fajardo-Anstine).

Pico also rejects slotting himself too easily into the epic tradition because epics are integral to the founding or originary literary land claims of countries to justify empire. For example, Virgil's *The Aeneid* tells the story of the founding of Rome whereas the "American epic differs from those of the European tradition by being about prospective nation-building, rather than retrospective celebration of the founding of an Empire" (Davies 60). Settler scholar Margery Fee asks how has "the formation of a Canadian literature been complicit in the colonial process of occupying and claiming land" (60), a question equally important for American literature. Although "the literature needed to unify a people and form a national character did not have to be overtly patriotic, but it did have to capture the essence or spirit of the nation" (Davies 4), for Pico the national essence of America is the genocidal erasure of Indigenous peoples.

However, American epics are not always white and heteronormative. In "Songs of Ourselves: Searching for America's Epic Poem," Ed Simon includes Claudia Rankine's 2014 *Citizen: An American Lyric* "as a postmodern epic [that] explores the precise ways that this nation has never treated it citizens equally. . .racism not simply as a problem of policy, but also as a national spiritual malady." Although Pico's tone is lighter that Rankine's, he also deconstructs the founding myths of American exceptionalism, progress, and equality. Kadji Amin, Amber Jamilla Musser and Roy Pé rez situate Pico's first book *IRL* (2016) as "an epic that refuses to posture as high art. . .Length allows *IRL* to activate a queer, Indigenous interpretation of empire by exhaustively sequencing sex, history, gossip, and critique into epic monumentalization" (238). Pico refuses American discourses of empire, instead creating his own queer Indigenous epics:

> America wants its NDNs[3] weary, slumped
> over the broken horse, spear sliding into the dry grass But I'm

> givin U NDN joy NDN laughter NDN freedom My body was built
> for singing (*Junk* 52)

Pico's epics are Indigenous and queer, meaning his poems don't conveniently fit into the western epic tradition; he may make nods to the genre, but he insists that they are queer Kumeyaay epics. Warren Cariou (Métis) stresses the importance of Indigenous poetry as a way to stay rooted in Indigenous existence in a colonized world, giving us another way to understand Pico:

> While poetry is undoubtedly a marginalized genre in mainstream Western society today, I believe it retains the capacity to shake up the divisive mindset that is endemic in our class-inflected and still-colonized world. It can destabilize those edges that keep Aboriginal peoples marginalized in contemporary North American culture, and it can do this by holding different realities side by side: by juxtaposing the received mainstream perception of colonial reality with a perception that is rooted in Aboriginal experience (33)

That is precisely what Pico's poetry is doing, walking the edges between not only settler colonialism and Kumeyaay ways of knowing—encompassing epistemologies, histories, stories, languages, spirituality, legal systems, and artistic practices—but shaking up the epic genre. When asked how he would describe the main theme of his poetry, he stated emphatically "genocide!" ("Tin House").

On the surface, Pico's life story makes him an unusual candidate for writing epics. From the Kumeyaay nation east of San Diego, California, Pico lived in Brooklyn, and is currently based in Los Angeles and New York City. He co-curated the reading series Poets with Attitude, co-hosts the podcasts *Food 4 Thot* and *Scream, Queen*, and is a contributing editor at *Literary Hub* ("About'). He attended Sarah Lawrence College,

intent on returning to his reservation after writing his pre-med thesis on diabetes. However, he felt overwhelmed because he believed that one doctor couldn't make a difference, so he majored in creative writing. He moved to New York City after he graduated, making zines to publish his poetry in before turning to book form. Pico was always creating stories,[4] so it makes sense that he turned to poetry, although epic poetry doesn't seem to be a natural choice. In *IRL*, Pico references epic poetry by wryly appreciating the queerness in Greek poetry: "Srsly / who didn't love the Greek / shit as a kid? / So witchy and swishy" (28). Pico references Thamyris from Homer's *Iliad*, "singing prodigy, glory / of the cithara, lover of / Hyacinth. Can't / you just see him sashay?" (*IRL* 28).[5] Greek poetry has been important for queer men because of its homoeroticism, including Pico.

Pico's poetry quartet–*IRL, Nature Poem* (2017), *Junk* (2018), and *Feed* (2019– redefines whose stories are worthy of such an "exalted" poetic form. The four books make up their own sequence because the reader can finish *Feed* and go "right back into the beginning of *IRL* so that they can be experienced as a cycle" ("83"). He explains "I write book-length poems, and it changes with each book. *IRL* I wanted to compose as if it were the world's longest text message. With *Nature Poem* I thought of each page like a transparency stacked atop each other, to create a sort of topography. *Junk* was organized into ten couplets on a page, each couplet 4.5 inches long to resemble a junk drawer: something made of very distinct objects that creates one, indistinct mass. The idea was you could pick moments out of it, like in a junk drawer, but as you turn the pages if you're not careful you'll lose it. *Feed* is organized at times like a news feed, but also approximates the manicured microclimates of the High Line park in New York where all these differently textured plants are sown to live alongside each other" (Cortez). His books are based on seasons and stages of a relationship: *IRL*

is summer / crush, *Nature Poem* is fall / relationship, *Junk* is winter / breakup, and *Feed* is summer / reconciliation (Brunton).[6]

The poems are written in a deceptively simple, breezy, and humorous style that belies the rigorous thought inspiring them, leaving the reader / listener unprepared for the truths about genocide, Indigenous erasure, and homophobia. His poetry oscillates between the urban (New York, book tour stops) and his memories of the Viejas reservation, carving a space in contemporary American society for a queer NDN.[7] Pico's epics shifts expectations about Indigenous poetry by "creating unsettling juxtapositions, which can have a comic or a dramatic effect—or, most often, some combination of the two." He uses his poetry to destabilize his readers, "lulling them into a false sense of security with jokey lines about Grindr and take-out food, getting them to laugh in recognition until suddenly he's talking about diabetes or the killing of Native Americans and his audience is finding out who can stop laughing the fastest. 'I call it Trojan horsing'" (Moskovitz). The Trojan horse appears in Homer's *Odyssey* and *Virgil's Aeneid* and is an apt metaphor to explain Pico's unsettling poetry.

Kumeyaay people[8] were forcibly moved from their original homelands to make way for Lake Cuyamaca, "taking most of the San Diego river water used by the Kumeyaay. This left them with only a small share from the city's flume" ("How Viejas"). Pico loves to confront his non-Indigenous readers and audiences with the implacable facts of genocide and forced displacement, pronouncing "Absence, as if Kumeyaay just didn't show up, as if slept in, as if there / weren't a government intent on extermination" (*NP* 62). Pico repeatedly returns to this theme; that the genocide of Indigenous peoples is conveniently believed to be some accident, rather than the genocidal policies of boarding schools (residential schools in Canada), allotment, and the imposition of Christianity. He asserts his presence as a queer NDN, daring the

reader / audience / literary establishment to deny that the stories of a queer NDN are of great national importance.

Pico embraces a different kind of epic rooted in Kumeyaay ways of knowing that Pico grew up with.[9] Apache / Chickasaw / Cherokee scholar and writer Erika Wurth underscores that the *Popol Vuh*, the story of the creation of the Maya people, is an epic that is equally important and complex as *The Iliad*. Pico similarly calls his poetry contemporary Kumeyaay epics: "My precedent for writing book-length poems are these Indigenous song cycles called 'bird songs.' Some of my first memories are listening to my father and other people singing them. They're just like epic poems that talk about how people made it into the valley, like travel logs. I feel that structured my thinking... My Kumeyaay name translates to 'bird songs.'" ("On Not"). His epics centre the adventures and musings of a queer Kumeyaay man that both honours his ancestors and his Kumeyaay relatives and his experiences as a queer NDN in urban spaces.

IRL: Musing About Being a Queer NDN

IRL chronicles Pico grappling with being between two worlds, a seemingly well-worn path for Indigenous writers. Struggling to find meaning in settler-colonial United States is part of his journey: "Kill / the Indian, Save the Man–/ Sow a shame so deep it arrives / when I do, it waits for me" (73). Pico's poetry is not only the outward journey of a queer Kumeyaay man, but the inward journey to self-acceptance, one that Pico knows will never really end. Listening to a podcast by astrophysicist Neil DeGrasse Tyson inspires the understanding "that trauma could be passed down / like molecular scar tissue like DNA cavorting with wars / and displacements and your bad dad's bad dad and what / is being indigenous but understanding a plurality of time" ("I See"). Pico's poetry not only reflects his restless mind, but also non-linear shifts in time between his ancestors and living in New York as a queer NDN. He carries his

community on his body; he has the word Kumeyaay tattooed in ornate letters on his hand and Kumeyaay basketry designs on his arms.

Pico makes the epic queer and NDN, but like the Greek epics, Pico also uses a Muse in *IRL*. Calliope is the Muse of Greek epic poetry, but in *IRL* Pico invites his own Muse, a man on whom he has a crush: "Crushing / on Muse. . .Muse crashes into the edges of my nights / isn't crushing / doesn't love me" (1). Pico queers the Muse, who is usually seen as feminine, by making them a queer man. Muse doesn't love Pico because he's "the side piece / Art is Muse's / main squeeze" (29). How can Pico compete with Art and the cultural capital that comes with it, but by stealing all the cultural capital for himself? He berates himself for being sentimental: "Don't fall in love / with Muse, duh! Muse is / embodiment of abstract / concept: Art, dance / astronomy, drama, heroic poetry, security, good/god, edible / underwear, pepperoni pizza, Jim / Beam" (29). Pico demolishes the edifices of Art by beginning his list with art, dance, heroic poetry, or what seems to be secure and acceptable of what Art is, moving to an account of the urban attractions of Jim Beam, pepperoni pizza, and edible underwear. He writes his own heroic poetry, eliminating the conflation between good and god, revelling in both the abstraction of Art and the corporeality of pizza.

Pico is well aware of ancient Greece's homoeroticism, which he updates as a twenty-first century queer urban NDN. He flirts with Muse:

> I'm giving Muse
> the look like *I'm only pre-*
> *tending I don't want*
> *you to kiss me.* I'm
> withholding, in general
> Surely Muse will want
> To kiss me bc I appear

Disinterested in kissing.

This is my technique

lol, so far, so alone (36)

Pico expresses his yearning for Muse with "Surely Muse will want" even as he is "withholding, in general." He wants Muse but is also unable to show the "emotional transparency" (36) needed to engage with Muse. Pico hides behind irony and pretence because "What kind of artless / simpleton says what they / truly feel?" (36). Of course, we know that Pico cares deeply about what Muse thinks; after all, he is crushing on Muse, even as he plays hard to get. Pico is enthralled by Muse: "If Muse ever texted me / I would :-) :-) :-) If / Muse ever texted 'I / want to be with you' / I would have a / minor coronary incident" (10). Muse is a capricious taskmaster who can't be controlled, but instead owns you and leaves you "in a shawl by the fire- / place, rocking alone / again" (30). But Muse is hard to escape even as Pico berates him: "Don't patron- / ize me, tradition / is a cage Conflict constant," a container Pico wants to escape (31).

In its place, Pico creates his own poetic persona, Teebs, a persona he uses to protect himself from settler colonial society and white queer culture. Teebs is "a fuckin' scrappy bitch" ("Epic Poet"): "I feel like Teebs was the original me, and then Tommy was the shy one whom I created in order to survive, to shield myself from anti-gayness. I was shamed into becoming a lesser version of myself. So getting older and getting louder and getting more performative is, I think, my reconnecting with a person before shame touched him" ("Not Waiting"). Teebs enables Pico to be queerer and more performative, a more amped-up version of himself. Pico firmly calls out homophobia for forcing him to hide and shrink into a lesser version of himself. He remembers "I mean I've always been a fairy, you know what I mean? I feel like starting to get bullied or whatever or hatred from people in high school ... I mean that's internalized homophobia and racism and all that kind of stuff" (Naimon). Now he sees the

boundaries between Teebs and himself dissolving, even as he cautions, "Writers / should never be the hero / of their own work / Be a hero IRL or whatever? / But don't *write* to be a hero- / That shit's disgusting" (38). But Teebs demands to be the hero of his own story as he moves through the poem: "Muse is *finally* giving me / what I want" even as his "hard won / sense of self surrenders thru / the sieve of yr attention every time" (64).

Pico is keenly aware of the nature of negotiating between Indigeneity and queerness, using what Dian Million (Tanana Athabaskan) calls felt theory, a "new language for communities to address the real multilayered facets of their histories and concerns by insisting on the inclusion of our lived experience, rich with emotional knowledges, of what pain and grief and hope meant or mean now in our pasts and future" (57). Teebs helps Pico be a queer urban NDN, but Pico also feels the presence of his ancestors "who have your hands with the contours of words bursting from your ends" (*Feed* 65). His ancestors inspire Pico's words with the kinetic force of Kumeyaay traditions. A lot of his poetry chronicles the trials of being Indigenous in the so-called United States, where Indigeneity is often rendered invisible through the vanishing Indian trope because of the vanishing Indian trope. Pico references photographer Edward Curtis' (1868-1952) who staged photos of Indigenous peoples, in which "Indians" are relegated to the past because they must be photographed before they vanish.[10] Pico warns that "Tradition is a cage / like an Edward Curtis pic / of high copper cheekbones – / totemic, fabricated" (*IRL* 25). Pico is rightly suspicious of these images and how they freeze Indigenous peoples in the past. He is a thoroughly modern NDN that is being supported by his ancestors, so there isn't a dichotomy between the two states of being. Pico's "family was queer in structure because a tribal structure is different than a hetero, nuclear family. My mom had three different kids

from three different men. It wasn't that common for somebody to be married to the person that they were having children with at the moment" (Ormundson).

Teebs struggles to find himself while reading a

cross-indigenous
anthropological survey
that claims extra-gendered
identities for a smattering of
tribes including mine, n I
wonder about two-spirit
traditional roles How
it would have sounded coming
from my grandma instead
of white anthropologist
. . .
Whatever Kumeyaay word
for 'they' Catholicism erased
Assimilationist homophobia
(*IRL* 93)

He is keenly aware of how conceptions of gender have been lost, highlighting how homophobia exists in his community because of Spanish colonization that imposed Catholicism. Pico dedicates *IRL* to "the memory of my grandmother, and all the ancestors who persevered through cultural/literal genocide, land & resource theft, myriad oppressions aggressions etc. so I could be some queer poet in Brooklyn who smells his own belly button way too much" (n.p.) His dedication encapsulates his mixture of tragedy and humour, but asserts the presence of Kumeyaay people in contemporary society.

The ending of *IRL* functions in the same way. Pico calls his poetry "a new ceremony" (97), quickly segueing to a karaoke bar, where Teebs is thrilled that James is following him back on Instagram and sends him a "somewhat *risqué* selfie:"

> He responds w/
> a pic of his computer
> screen His phone #
> on it so we
> text n he's like
> *come over* n I'm like
> *do u have A/C* he says
> *Yes* n I just straight up
> drop the mic
> n Leave. (98)

The last line harkens back to his admonishment "It's summer, some- / times, and / Leave. Me. Alone. Muse" (64). Even though he's "In-between / Kumeyaay and Brooklyn– / that it has a word, / even if the word is lost" (106), Teebs know that air conditioning and the promise of sex in a sweltering New York city summer is the most important thing for a queer NDN. Pico's first epic ends a characteristically irreverent note (who can blame Teebs for hooking up with a guy with a/c?), he still brings the end of the poem back to the difficulties of forgetting[11] the Kumeyaay language because of colonization.

***Nature Poem*: Indigenizing the Romantic Epic**

The canonical Romantic poets used the Kantian idea that the sublime "is not in the objects themselves but in our consciousness, which encompasses and transcends objects" (Cantor 399). Rather than *The Iliad* or *The Aeneid*'s celebration of warfare, the

sublime "was not lost on the Romantic poets, who, in effect, used the Kantian sublime to establish themselves as their own heroes, as the locus of greatness in the world" (Cantor 399). The Romantic poets who wrote epics, in this case Lord Byron, "begin[] as part of nature, but now nature becomes part of him; nature is assimilated into human consciousness" (Cantor 398). Although Lord Byron and Pico seem like strange bedfellows (or maybe not), Pico also satirizes the epic as an exalted form as Byron does in *Don Juan* (1819). Part of Pico's critique of the epic poem is echoed by Cantor's use of the word *assimilated* which situates the Romantic subjugation of nature as extractive and colonial. It reminds me of Pico exclamation of "genocide!" as a consistent theme; Pico's "mistrust of the [epic] is double—first because of its political and literary history as a tool of American settler colonialism and second because the lack of relevance to his own lived life is pronounced" (Ali), inspiring him to write his own epics.

Pico attempts to disentangle himself from nature but realizes that binaries between nature / urban are false because they're based in colonizing logics. He envisions a queer Kumeyaay sublime within cities because "he only fucks with the city" (4). He "accepts" nature by the end of the poem, but very much on his terms, mixed with Instagram, popular culture, and the refusal to whitewash genocide. He imagines himself as an ancestor fleeing Spanish and American colonization:

> I scout from the peak
> of our sacred mountain
> I'm dragged from the center
> of town in chains
> I'm old women scattered
> Along the creek
> My little hands squeeze
> My little mouth shut (45)

For Indigenous people, colonization is not an abstract concept, but something felt in the body in Pico's poetry, which is full of food, sex, and the insistence that his body will survive in the face of genocide.

In *Nature Poem*, Pico uses the epic form "as an attempt to understand, confront, and reconcile stereotypical ways in which American Indian people have been described in popular culture" (Tosone), especially as the vanishing Indian. He illuminates how Indigenous peoples are "depicted as being 'noble savages,' [being at] one with nature and all that shit. . .I wanted to write against these stereotypes in part to imbue nuance and humor and humanity back into people from whom it has been stolen from, historically" (Tosone). Except, of course, as the poem progresses, we learn that Pico is connected to nature, even if stereotypes are "dangerous to me because then we become features of the landscape, not human beings, things to be cleared and removed" (Tosone), victims of Manifest Destiny.

Teebs also slyly asks non-Indigenous readers and audiences what kind of nature poem they're expecting. He begins by evoking the Pacific coast: "The stars are dying / like, always, and far away, like what you see looking up is a death knell / from light, right? Light / years. But also close, like the sea stars on the Pacific coast" (1). Pico paints a picture of the stars' reflection on the Pacific Ocean, which seems innocuous, but the opening line surprises the reader who may be expecting a conventional nature poem, certainly not the death knell of stars. Teebs becomes more annoyed:

> When I try to sleep I
>
> I think about orange cliffs, bare of orange stars. Knotted, glut. Waves are clear. Anemones n shit. Sand crabs n shit. Fleas. There are seagulls overhead. Ugh I swore to myself I would never write a nature poem (1)

Pico moves from dying stars to the viscerally down and dirty "Anemones n shit," which can mean shit as in more stuff or actual shit on the beach. Teebs becomes more

exasperated at the supposedly bucolic scene, exemplified by "Ugh I swore to myself I would never write a nature poem." He confesses, "I can't not spill" (1), the double negative of wanting to tell his story while protesting he doesn't. Pico, as Ali suggests, "identifies with what a nature poem *isn't*," particularly terra nullius, landscapes devoid of Indigenous peoples. Teebs asserts his ancestors' presence and his own presence in contemporary American society. Pico confronts the reader with the purpose of his book: "I can't write a nature poem / bc it's fodder for the noble savage / narrative. I wd slap a tree across the face, / I say to my audience" (*NP* 2). Pico is extremely aware of where he places words on the page. Are nature poems fodder for the noble savage narrative or are nature poems also internalized by Indigenous peoples? Besides being feed for animals, fodder also means "inferior or readily available material used to supply a heavy demand" ("Fodder"); the dominant society is still rife with stereotypes about Indigenous peoples that leads to the forced displacement and genocide of Pico's ancestors.

Like *IRL*, *Nature Poem* is his queer NDN bird song, asking us what it means for a queer urban NDN, to reflect on nature in its myriad forms. Unfortunately, urban Indigenous peoples are still seen as inauthentic, negating that "the beauty of culturally inherent resurgence is that it challenges settler colonial dissections of our territories and our bodies into reserve/city or rural/urban dichotomies. . .cities have become sites of tremendous activism and resistance and of artistic, cultural, and linguistic revival and regeneration" (Simpson 173). Pico underscores his "draw to the city is simply that I crave the kind of excitement and motion and possibility that city life offers. Plus I'm pretty freaking gay and I was drawn to a place where a queer relationship was safer and more possible. It's weird 'cos my 15 years in the city, 'nature' has become something obscured and dangerous to me. You won't catch me camping, you can

believe that" (Haparimwi). Despite his protestations, there isn't a dichotomy between living in New York and being Kumeyaay.

But being in the city has its own, humorous challenges. Teebs is at a pizza parlour, bemused at a married man with "a cracked skin summer smile" trying to pick him up, a man who is "talking like I want to hear him / Like he's so comfortable / Like everybody owes him attention." Teebs describes himself as a "weirdo NDN faggot" when the man

> puts his hands on the ribs of my chair asks do I want to go into the
> bathroom with him
> Let's say it doesn't turn me on at all
> Let's say I hate all men bc literally all men are animals—
> This is a kind of nature I would write a poem about (2)

Pico not only deconstructs nature as in the so-called natural world, but the nature of masculinity. "A kind of" confirms that Pico is not thinking of just the natural world, but human nature, especially around sexuality. He calls out the sheer confidence of the man who tries to pick him up, who is secure in his self-delusion that Pico would of course want to have sex with him. Teebs then goes into a tirade about how he doesn't "like boys, men, or guys. . .the musk the swoony wake, the misc / bulges, stupid weight training *Spot me bro*– / I was like *pfffft* I says *yr kind of hard to miss?*" He rails about mainstream articulations of masculinity—"choosing trucks over pink?"—knowing that he doesn't want to / can't fit in because he's a weirdo queer NDN. There are men he does approve of: "Men dancing is fine tho. / Or like maybe men in socks? I dunno" (3). While Teebs knows what he finds objectionable about mainstream masculinity, he is still unsure of what kind of men he does like: the tragicomedy of dating.

Teebs is continually confronted with the presence of being a vanishing Indian in America. A "curious" white guy asks him if "I feel more connected to nature / bc I'm

NDN / asks did I live *like in a regular house*," obliviously asking if Teebs has any "rain / ceremonies" (15). The white guy's questions evoke a whole cavalcade of stereotypes about Indigenous peoples so it's easy for Indigenous readers to share his frustration. Pico is very precise about how he places words on the page, so it's significant that ceremonies has its own line, signifying the sacredness of Kumeyaay traditions. The "conversation" with the white guy carries in a way familiar to BIPOC people: "When I express, frustration, he says *what?* He says *I'm just asking* as if / being earnest absolves him from being fucked up." Teebs bluntly states:

> It does not.
> He says *I can't win with you*
> because he already did
> because he always will
> because he could write a nature
> poem, or anything he wants, he doesn't understand
>
> why I can't write a fucking nature
> poem.

Teebs' interior monologue shows that he knows all too well that the white guy can say whatever he wants about Indigenous people and be seen as correct, that he always will win because he can write about anything he wants. He could write a terrible nature poem and still not be faced with the complications Pico faces when trying to write a nature poem.

Of course, the white guy doesn't know that he will be fodder for Teebs' own nature poem:

> Later when he is fucking
> me I bite him on the cheek draw

blood I reify savage lust (15)

Is "reifying savage lust" something Teebs "simply does, or he chooses to, or is forced by white expectation to perform the role assigned him? That last stanza, by the way, is the single instance where the two men are on an equal plane—a non-verbal, sexual one. As if sex were the one space where equality might figure, where bodies are merely doing what they do—by nature" (Phillips). Sex, of course, is not free of power relationships, but we get the feeling that Teebs is both playing at being a savage Indian and very much in charge of the situation.

Pico states "Because I'm a Native person, there's this stereotype that we're reverent of nature or whatever. I wanted to mess with that, and be like camping is dumb and fuck lakes and grass sucks" ("I Said"). But he wonders

> What if I really do feel connected to the land?
> What if the mountains around the valley where I was born
> What if I see them like faces when I close my eyes
> What if I said hi to them in the mornings and now all their calls go to voicemail
> . . .
> I get so disappointed by stupid NDNs writing their dumb nature poems like grow up faggots
>
> I look this thought full in the face and want to throw myself into traffic (72)

Does Teebs really feel connected to the land or is he performing? He doesn't answer nature's call, but lets it go to his voicemail, a seemingly incongruous statement. Again, the placement of words is key. Teebs is very disappointed by NDNs writing their "stupid nature / poems." Are NDNs writing their own human natures? Is nature stupid? Teebs' plaintive "like grow up (not grown up) faggots" is full of child-like frustration,

undercut by Teebs melodramatically wanting to throw himself into traffic for writing a nature poem.

Then, on the facing page, Teebs challenges us: "Admit it. This is the poem you wanted all along" (73). Pico omits nature from the line to show that Teebs has accepted his fraught relationship with Indigeneity and nature, even though it's "hard to be anything / but a pessimist / when you feel the Earth rotting away on so many home pages" (74). However, Teebs puts aside his grand musings to spend time on his friend Roy's porch, "petting kitties" where there is "lavender in the air." Of course, Pico pulls the rug out from underneath with his last line:

> The air is clear and all across Instagram—peeps are posting pics of
> the sunset

The stars are no longer dying but are captured in stasis. For Pico, nature is mediated, whether by history, technology, particularly by being queer and Kumeyaay.

Another Man's *Junk. . .*

Described on the inner sleeve as a "breakup poem in couplets," *Junk* is inspired by A.R. Ammons' (1929-2001) *Garbage* (1993). Cited as an inspiration numerous times by Pico, Dan Chiasson calls Ammons "the great American poet of daily chores," an analogue precursor to Pico's digital hyperactivity. In 1963, Ammons inserted a roll of adding machine tape into his Underwood typewriter, a laborious process that became *Tape for the Turn of the Year.* His adding-tape epic's "formal properties are ways of managing the rate at which tape-time elapses: when Ammons's lines are long, spanning the width of the tape, he preserves the length and buys more time; when he prints a narrow strip of words, more of the tape. . .is gobbled up. Ammons cannot go too fast, or the poem will end before it has served its purpose" (Chiasson). Pico uses similar strictures to hold his overflowing thoughts and emotions. Ammons' use of

enjambment or the "running-over of a sentence or phrase from one poetic line to the next" ("Enjambment") is echoed by Pico, giving *Junk* a hectic, stream of consciousness tone of "Thoughts // becoming jagged and panicked" (35). Pico notes "Convention says a book shd be // *this* long but I'm only interested in writing as long as you want / to read in one sitting" even as he admits we're "Sitting for longer and / longer but paying less and less attention" (5). Pico's poems are an impossibility, epics in a time of short attention spans and internet brain. Although digitally constrained by envisioning his poem as a Tumblr post, a microblogging site, and by his decision that the couplets could only be 4.5 inches wide, Pico's feeling and thoughts are not so easily contained. He explains that "the book length format became a container of sorts, it became a conduit through which I could express the too muchness and the obsession" (Naimon), creating an unsettling balancing act between excess and control.

Like Ammons, Pico is fascinated in the stuff not considered important. Junk is material that seemingly no longer serves its purpose depending on who is deciding its usefulness. Pico remembers hanging out with his mom at the thrift store on the Kumeyaay Nation where she worked, leading to an appreciation of the discarded, the unloved, the useless. Teebs spends "whole ass afternoons among / the busted watches and raggedy Barbies" eating candy because it "is a simple way 2 make kids behave when you have three jobs" (46). He would also "parade in faded dress and sweaty // plastic pumps" while his "Aunty calmly blinks // 'That's just your way'" (46). Pico, a queer NDN, is seen as disposable in American history and culture: "Junk not immediately useful but I'm still someone I can't stop // lookin at ppl's Junk generally so u can imagine how hard it is / at the gym" (2). Junk is also slang for male genitalia, a very important interest of Teebs'. Jacquelyn Ardam underscores that "Junk also becomes, powerfully, a metaphor for the Native Americans abused and discarded at the hands of white people past and present... The beating heart of *Junk* lies in the

intersection of this junk experience: as food, as sex, as being Other-ed in America" (Ardam). But Pico (and Teebs) is determined to be make space for his own unique story because "Writing is witness—in ink the revelation stays" (2) because Junk is "a way of being at the centre of yr own universe" (31) to tell your own story.

Pico lives in a liminal space, one he makes his own by writing his own stories. Of course, Pico must find writing poems important because he confesses "But the poem is much more hos- / pitable Embrace the pivot & plow" even if "I'll stop writing abt my body's danger / when one of those goes away" (34), which could be quite a while for a queer NDN. His poems are both hospitable and "pitiable," an in-between space that unsettles the non-Indigenous reader. But it also unsettles Pico:

> Whenever I'm back in CA my whole rez asks *Soooooo*
> *what r you doing?* Which means, *what's more important than*
>
> *being here w/ yr family and yr ppl in the valley we've lived in for*
> *thousands of years* Which, heavy I have ppl here too Make
>
> *here* feel like *home* Sucks being a sometimes person Sometimes
> here sometimes there (50–1)

Although Pico feels uncomfortable with his rez's questions, he pushes back because he also has a community in cities, especially with BIPOC and/or queer writers. But he still feels conflicted as a sometimes person, a Junk space of being neither here nor there.

Throughout *Junk*, unwanted objects are "lovingly humanized – 'don't blame the junk for being discarded' – raising an important question. Namely, what happens when the forgotten items are people or entire populations? Dumped by a bored beau, or left

high and dry by American genocide? Or both, as in the case of our queer, freshly single, NDN... protagonist?" (Kenny). Teebs is also junk because he was dumped by his boyfriend:

The operative phrase is "dumped" but the opera-
tive feeling isn't "garbage" bc garbage suggests refusal and I

can be reused I swear (40)

He pleads that he can be reused though it is unclear by whom. The enjambment turns operative into opera, a musical performance of exaggerated emotions like Teebs' own emotional states. Ardam notes "Just as the couple — Teebs and his boyfriend — fails, so do these couplets," even if Pico's couplets don't follow rhyming conventions. Teebs struggles to find meaning in the junk space of romantic rejection, plaintively wondering "I thought the point of seeing each other / was to see each other How is being seen by me a bad thing?" (10).

However, these heightened emotions can keep Teebs safe; he rejoices at having a boyfriend even as he knows the dangers:

Not havin
a bf in so long I forgot how something as mundane as holding
hands makes a target of us You reach yr arm out to rest on my

shoulders and I pulled away I'm not afraid of intimacy
I'm scared of assault I want 2 love in spite of the violence (22)

For Pico, living in occupied America means self-surveillance because he is too NDN (or sometimes not NDN enough) and queer. Pico is telling his story in spite of colonization and homophobia, a Junk space of fear but also beauty. The everyday acts of love

between Teebs and his boyfriend are terrifying for Teebs, who simply wants to love his boyfriend without violence. But Pico is also keenly aware that his queer NDN body isn't wanted in white gay culture: "I hate gay guys so much There's this / idea that only some bodies are worthy of desire and the others // don't even exist" (11).

Teebs is not only discarded by his boyfriend, but also by America, an epic process that he connects with global forces of colonization. Although Pico writes to be the centre of his own universe, his universe includes solidarity and kinship with Black, brown and / or women, trans, and queer folks:

> First things first: get out of bed Another black man shot by
>
> police Another missing woman in Indian country Another trans
> person discovered by the roadside Another mass shooting They
>
> pile like stones and overtake the poem Resist wanting to burn it
> all down (34)

Teebs finds it impossible to function in the face of overwhelming violence that threatens to sink his poem. The repetition of "Another" signals the continuing violence of marginalized peoples is America, the bodies piling up, threatening to stop the poem. Teebs pivots to find comfort and inspiration in plants, a series he will continue in his next book: "Native basket grasses paperwhites mint and irises // elderberry and honeysuckle" (34). However, the list reminds me of a grounding exercise, a way of distracting yourself from distressing feelings, especially for people with anxiety or PTSD, part of being Indigenous in settler colonial societies.[12] When Teebs walks down

the street with his boyfriend, he sees "14th Street but I see a massacre Lenape land" (54).

In *Junk,* Pico lists the stereotypes that Indigenous peoples face like "The Berdache[13] / The Shaman / The Noble Savage / The Indian Problem / The Squaw // The Indian Princess / The Spirit Animal / The Drunk Indian / The Teary-eyed Environmentalist" (48), an epic of colonization that he debunks. He knows that these stereotypes are defined as "Considering something as a gen- // eral quality or characteristic apart from concrete realities, / specific objects, or actual instances" (48) junk ideas of who Indigenous peoples are. Splitting the word general onto two lines breaks apart how false these stereotypes are even as these leftover ideas are still part of the dominant culture or "What goes into the display case vs What goes in the Junk drawer" (39). Indigenous peoples aren't artefacts to be displayed in a museum or destined to be put in a Junk drawer; Pico imagines an alternate space, where he feels "something dark pulling me down, as sure // as I feel the ancestors yanking me up" (29) in spite of settler colonialism.

Junk ends a note of rebirth, like the Kumeyaay tradition of burning a person's possessions when they pass on, "ascending the possessions to heaven" (52).

If part of

Junk is letting go, partly Junk is letting go of you Junk finds a
new boo I am the standard of my mind Smoke pulls back

into the fire and the fire pulls back into the Junk and the Junk
pulls up to the bumper baby We lie quiet in the buff, not touchin (72)

Pico explains "I look at the narrator in *Junk* and I see a person who definitely can imagine a path toward solace, but who is still spinning out and exhausted. He sees the potential for family and for nourishment and for nutrition but doesn't know how to get there yet" (Osmundson). Befitting a narrator who doesn't yet know his own path, the ending is inconclusive. The smoke is going backwards instead of releasing spirit into the air, while inbetweeness pulls up to Teebs' bumper. He is not touching his new boo, even as he realizes "the most subversive move might be to dodge the grip of history altogether, to refuse what has been refused to you, and in doing so, to write yourself in to a new narrative" (Ardam) as a queer NDN.

"I Am the Recipe I Protect:" Feeding Yourself

Feed is the last book in the tetralogy, serving as a summation and a way forward for Teebs, or more accurately Pico, who becomes more himself by realizing that Teebs is no longer useful. Pico can now feed himself by "forging ways of living by recognizing and building communities" (Clark), a world beyond apps and hookups, a community resilient under the weight of history. Pico writes against scarcities of food, communities, and how Indigenous people are seen in American culture. While these concerns are woven throughout the books, Pico has become more mature and accepting of himself as he "Imagine[s] being fed, and feeding. / Imagine getting what you need. / Imagine the fire inside you" (76). Feeding is not only eating, but also sexual, emotional, and spiritual nourishment. Matt Clark suggests "In *Junk*, junk food, junk stuff, genital junk all offered sites of immediate pleasure in spite of the violence of the surrounding world. But these multiple kinds of junk offered subsistence that did not provide sustenance," nourishment that Teebs was not ready to accept.

Pico was commissioned[14] to write *Feed* by New York City's Friends of the High Line, produced in partnership with Poets House in 2018 when he was living in Brooklyn.

The High Line is "a public park built on a 1.45-mile-long elevated rail structure running from Gansevoort St. to 34th St. on Manhattan's West Side" that "was in operation from 1934 to 1980" ("FAQ"). The rail line was shut down because "the train was killing / people. It wasn't exactly a speed demon / AND there was a man on horseback waving red / ahead" so "they lifted it—up the ladder to the roof[15]—raised the train line High / Line, a hanging monument to the appetite of the sky" (38-39). *Feed* reflects the layout of the Highline with its different garden zones.[16] Pico uses plant names to punctuate the different parts of the poem, leading the reader to imagine themselves walking with Pico and sharing a conversation. He believes "There's a sweetness to [*Feed*], a self-acceptance I think, something that has taken the mess of the world and curated it into a garden that looks wild but is actually meticulously ordered" (Cortez).

Feed not only refers to a social media, but also making food and caring for self and community. Colonization is inextricably linked to Pico's lack of cooking skills as he reveals "I don't have a food history / If the dish is, 'subjugate an indigenous population," here's an ingredient / of the roux: alienate us from our traditional ways of / gathering an cooking food" (11). The Working Group on Indigenous Food Sovereignty states instead of the "highly mechanistic, linear food production, distribution, and consumption model applied in the industrialized food system," Indigenous food is "primarily cultivated. . .based on values of interdependency, respect, reciprocity, and ecological sensibility" ("Indigenous Food"). Pico's ancestors were violently displaced from their traditional food sources: they "are just lost, like traditional ways of cooking food that are just lost. And so I wanted to create. I wanted to have almost like a new ceremony. I wanted to have a new language of food to replace something that had been lost. It wasn't lost, it was stolen" (Pashman). He does remember his mother making a Kumeyaay acorn dish "called [shawii]. We would go harvest acorns in the mountains and I'd crack them and crush them into a powdery

meal. You put water into that and you let it set. And then you would put it in the fridge for a little while to make it congeal or something" (Pashman).

As an NDN from the Kumeyaay Indian Nation, Pico is intimately aware of his people's food history. He "highlights the USDA's Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), used by the American government as a form of 'redistribution' to Indigenous communities—a gathering of crumbs from the stolen breadbasket of the San Diego river" (Hawa). The Kumeyaay "moved around what wd be called the San Diego county with / the seasons" until

> the missions. The isolated reservations on stone mountains
> where not even a goat could live
> Then the starvation. . .The powdered milk, worm in the oatmeal, corn syrupy
> canned peaches. Food stripped of its nutrients. Then came the sugar
> blood. The sickness. The glucose meter going up and up (11)

Remember that Pico wanted to write his pre-med thesis on diabetes, and in his poetry he continues to fight against the still prevalent stereotype that Indigenous peoples are predisposed to diabetes, something I've been told myself. Like my ancestors, Pico's ancestors were forcibly removed from their food sovereignty through containment on reservations and the slaughter of food sources like the buffalo.

Pico's growing self-acceptance is echoed by the peripatetic pace of the poem, a leisurely but still fraught stroll with his newly married ex, Leo. Walking with Leo brings a flood of memories that moves between past, present, and future even as he is "committed / to being my own damn romantic / comedy" (2). Although *Feed* is a reconciliation poem in which Pico

is "Reconciling 'nature' with 'the city,' the city's past with the park's future. And I just so happened to be reconciling with an ex with whom I'd had many, many dates at the

park itself" (Grant), Pico is wary of the word and "drives a stake through our reconciliation mythologies" (Wawa):

> Reconcile:
> to cause
> a person
> to accept or be resigned to something not desired (28)

Pico is addressing the difficulties of being friends with an ex. Does he want to be with Leo again? Is Leo reluctant to be friends? But he realizes there is another way of understanding the word: "To win over / to friendliness; cause to be amicable" (28). Triggered by Leo's comment that Teebs slept on a box spring on the floor (he now has Off-brand overstock bought in installments), "*I think we've both moved on lol I didn't want to, it's just. . .*" he wants to grow up even though "sometimes it feels like it's everyone else / around me growing up, and I'm just getting older" (28). Pico's poetry is sly, humorous, a running commentary on being a queer NDN, but is also full of tender confessions from Teebs' hectic mind that announces, "To compose or set- / tle I will not" (28). Teebs fights against stasis, even as he feels lonely on book tours. He needs to "set" in place to grapple with his relationship with Leo during spring, the most changeable of seasons. He reconnects with Leo through a Twitter chain "(brace yourself for some annoying / thoroughly modern love-in-the-time-of-apps bullcrap)" (68), but he finally realizes

> I guess this is a dirge
> to the future I thought we could have
> Not all plants were meant to grow together
> in the same microclimate. Some things go apart instead (69)

He accepts that not all relationships last, highlighting Pico's growth. While *Junk* is post-break up stream of consciousness, *Feed* is a meandering walk with an ex who may be a friend, even after heartache.

Pico realizes he is becoming himself through his various communities. His ancestors surround him as he lives in cities, creating new, primarily queer BIPOC communities. He directly addresses us, daring us to acknowledge our part in the poetry-making process:

> Dear reader,
> We are in a pot
>
> One of us is the vegetables and one of us the water. I can't tell
> who is cooking who (5)

This is not only a nod to the relationship Pico has with readers and listeners, but with his various communities. It is impossible to separate ourselves from others, Pico acknowledges, moving from the "me" of the preceding books to the "we" of *Feed*. While Teebs has interactions with people, he is now having conversation with his friends, and most importantly with Leo, a process that Teebs previously may not have had the maturity or courage to undertake.

Feed is also unusual because Pico addresses the reader directly in his Dear Reader sections, signalling that Pico is becoming himself, although, of course, nothing is ever what it seems in Pico's poetry. He obliquely addressed the reader before—the repetition of "I say to my audience" in *Nature Poem*—but *Feed* forces the reader to admit their voyeuristic complicity:

> Dear reader,
>
> . . .
>
> Hey! Let's make a vinaigrette

Did you know molasses emulsifies the olive
oil and keeps the little
fat
molecules from stumbling
into each other, thus allowing the oil and vinegar
to mix? (2)

Instead of asking us to listen to what he is saying, which can sometimes be taken with a grain of salt because of Teebs' tricky mind, Pico invites us to join him at his table. Remember that *Feed* started as a commissioned podcast, so listeners could walk the High Line beside Pico, a key shift in Pico's work. Pico realizes that he may no longer need Teebs even as his social media presence is still @heyteebs.

Food is an integral part of community building, a tradition that Pico saw when he was a kid because his parents cooked for funerals "all across San Diego. . .because there are so many funerals in Indian country I mean my first memory was being at a funeral, they were busy a lot... They were very, very, very community-minded. They were very much like what's best for me is what's best for us, or what's best for us is what's best for me" (Pashman). *Feed* continues his parents' tradition as he learns to cook with and for other people: "I says to them around the table I says, I don't have food stories. With / you, I say, I'm cooking new ones" (11). Pico also reflects that sense of community with the Birdsong Collective, but also through his support of other BIPOC writers. He is now ready to create communities when he understands and accepts that "I am the recipe I protect" (53).

Pico ends his series of epics with one of his favourite singers, Beyoncé, who inspired him to start writing epics on his thirtieth birthday. Beyoncé sings to her audience "*You* give *me* everything. . .The reciprocity" in her song *XO* (57). Pico

laments his loneliness as he is "mewing / into the void and yes / I'm completely //alone" but then, echoing Beyoncé, he pivots to address his readers:

> Yes, there is utility
> in this loneliness. This is how *I* be *with*
> You, dear reader, on the other
> side of my words on the other side
> Of my worship (78)

His use of "I' shows the shift from Teebs to Pico signalled on the previous page in a playful conversation with his friend Wilkes and with Leo:

> Leo: One time when we were dating—
> Tommy: OKAY, this hang out is officially over this is where you pack
> In your snacks and get the fuck off my roof you bullies (77)

He answers as Tommy, not Teebs, making the "me" on the preceding a direct address to the reader from Pico. Will Clark notes in his *Feed* review "That is perhaps what is most radical about *Feed*: how Pico questions the very existence of his alter ego, Teebs, as a means of creating a culture centered on queer and indigenous people." The last lines of *Feed*—"As their eyes / were watching / Beyoncé" (78) —is not only a reference to Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, particularly the line "They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God" ("Their Eyes"), but harken back to Pico's reciprocity with audience / reader. He explains, "I'm from an Indian reservation in southern California, and I think when I left home I was looking to replace or remake that strong sense of community somehow" (Alexander). He also envisions the reader / audience as community because "a book is a handshake, kind of, or an embrace or something" ("Epic Poet"). He now feeds himself and others with the help of his communities, his books epics of reciprocity.

Conclusion

Pico begins his epic poems lamenting that Muse doesn't love him and concludes by learning to love himself as Tommy. Pico is the hero of his own journey by not only counteracting erasure of Indigenous peoples in America but insisting that his own story is as important as western epics. More importantly, a queer NDN who was bullied in school and still feels unsafe walking down the street holding his boyfriend's hand now demands attention, first through an alter ego, then as himself. Just as Muskogee / Cherokee scholar Craig Womack asserts, Indigenous literature is the tree, not the branch of American literature, that "We *are* the canon" (7), Pico also affirms "basically I'm just like this is the new American rhetoric. This is my form now. I didn't ask for this language. I didn't ask for this canon but now it's mine and watch me wreck the shit out of this house. . .it's mine now" (Naimon). Pico takes one of the most exalted of western genres, fucks with it (in more ways than one), and not only queers the epic but Indigenizes it to reflect contemporary urban Indigenous experiences through creating his new bird songs.

Notes

[1] James Poulos argues that the epic is back in fashion, but in the form of books like the *Harry Potter* series and film and TV series like *Game of Thrones* and, I would add, superhero franchises. These epics are usually in the fantasy genre, with *Game of Thrones* echoing the battles and myth-making properties of Greek epics

[2] Pico refers to himself as queer rather than Two Spirit.

[3] Billy-Ray Belcourt (Driftpile Cree Nation) defines NDN as "internet shorthand used by Indigenous peoples in North America to refer to ourselves. It also sometimes an acronym meaning 'Not Dead Native.'"

[4] Pico remembers "my mother always told me that when she would drive by the bus stop where I was, I was surrounded by my cousins and they were all paying rapt attention to everything that I was saying. And I had a tape recorder when I was little and I would just tell all these stories into it before I could even read or write before I knew what spelling was, before I knew what the dictionary was. I had a little talk show

between my stuffed animals and my barbies and my G.I. Joes, you know what I mean, like I always had that personality and that voice" (Naimon)

[5] Pico mentions Robert Graves (1895-1985), who published *The Greek Myths* in 1955

[6] Brunton is referring to Pico's tweet from his now deleted Twitter. Unfortunately, I didn't take note of the date.

[7] Pico also refers to himself as NDN: https://www.instagram.com/heyteebs/?hl=en

[8] As a Métis person in so-called Canada who usually writes about Cree and Métis authors, artists, and filmmakers, I'm mindful that I'm an outsider to Pico's Kumeyaay ways of knowing. How does an Indigenous Literary Nationalist framework, or using Nation-specific ways of knowing, function when engaging with another Indigenous person's writing? My ancestors moved from Red River Manitoba (now Winnipeg) and Batoche, Saskatchewan, where they supported Métis leader Louis Riel's calls for the Canadian government to respect Métis land from rapidly encroaching settlers. Two of my ancestors, Jérôme Henry and Joseph Vermette, fought alongside renowned Métis war chief Gabriel Dumont; Henry was killed, and Vermette wounded by the Canadian troops trying to quell the Métis resistance in 1885. The Métis fought hard, but were outnumbered by Canadian troops, who used the Gatling gun, a forerunner of the machine gun. While my ancestors are from the Prairies (my Métis mom is from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and my dad from Castelfranco Veneto, Italy), I grew up in the Vancouver suburbs on Tsawwassen territories and have lived in the temperate rainforests on the traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), and səl̓ilw̓ətaʔɬ) (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations colonially known as Vancouver BC for over thirty years.

[9] For examples of Kumeyaay bird songs, see Kumeyaay elder Stan Rodriguez's stories and songs https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkqoUIUN438 and examples of Kumeyaay bird dancing https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T6Iz4xrXK4A

[10] He would give Indigenous peoples costumes to wear instead of the modern clothes they work so they would look more "Indian." Curtis' photos are still popular, published as expensive coffee table books.

[11] Pico remembers "When I was younger I learned Kumeyaay. . .A woman from one of the Kumeyaay villages stayed with us and watched me while my parents were gone. She didn't speak English, and so I learned Spanish and Kumeyaay. I was super young, I didn't know I was learning the language, of course. But later on I didn't have anybody to practice with. There was a legislative push to cleanse American Indian people of their language and culture. The same policies didn't exist in Mexico, and so the language is very much alive there." See

https://www.thestranger.com/slog/2016/07/26/24393711/tommy-picos-irl-is-better-than-the-internet

[12] Thinking in categories is a common technique. See https://www.healthline.com/health/grounding-techniques

[13] Berdache is a derogatory anthropological term used to describe what is now known as Two Spirit / Indigiqueer people.

[14] Pico's reading of the commission is available online: https://www.thehighline.org/blog/2018/04/19/feed-a-garden-soundscape/

[15] Up the ladder to the roof is a reference to the 1970 Supremes song, which included the lines "Go up the ladder to the roof where we can see heaven much better / Go up the ladder to the roof where we can be oh closer to heaven."

[16] https://www.thehighline.org/gardens/garden-zones/

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