

# On Making *The Meaning of Life* An Interview with Hugh Brody

**H**ugh Brody is an anthropologist who has worked for over thirty years with Indigenous peoples in Canada and abroad. His books and films have explored the lived consequences of paternalist federal policies in Inuit, Dunne-za, Innu, and Northwest Coast communities. As early as the mid-1970s, Brody used his writing and his role as policy advisor to dispel notions of northern Indigenous people in Canada as cultureless, vanishing, and consigned to irrelevance in an industrialized society. His most recent book, *The Other Side of Eden* (2001), continues to unmoor familiar dichotomies by depicting agriculture-based societies as nomadic and—in contrast—by presenting Inuit and other northern Indigenous peoples as intimately connected to the land. Rich in local description, oral history, testimony, and life narrative, and inflected by philosophical, linguistic, and political theory, Brody's work defies disciplinary classification while offering some of the most important reflections to date on Indigenous peoples' conceptions of their lands and their struggle to gain sovereignty over those lands.

In 2006, Hugh Brody began filming *The Meaning of Life*, a documentary that examines Kwikwèwelhp Prison in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia. Operated in collaboration with the neighbouring Chehalis First Nation, Kwikwèwelhp (Kwi) is a minimum-security prison that offers programs to Indigenous and non-Indigenous prisoners based on Indigenous spiritual and cultural philosophies. *The Meaning of Life* follows seven men at Kwikwèwelhp who offer their perspectives on this facility's unique operation while also sharing their histories of abuse, violence, and racism. A key figure in the men's lives is "Grandma" Rita Leon, an elder-mentor whose approach is to

separate the crime from the man. By the film's end, some of the men have been successfully discharged from the prison; some have not. *The Meaning of Life* explores the challenging issues accompanying the journey to recovery while also reflecting on the meaning of a life lived in prison.

*The Meaning of Life* is more than a prison ethnography: its exploration of the prison's troubling presence in the colonial histories and current realities of Indigenous people makes the film an important companion to literary criticism of Indigenous prison writing.<sup>1</sup> The stories told by the men resonate with more widely published accounts by Indigenous prisoners, including Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson's *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998), James Tyman's *Inside Out: An Autobiography by a Native Canadian* (1989), and Anthony Apakark Thrasher's *Thrasher . . . Skid Row Eskimo* (1976). Published works of this kind are few, however, and many stories from prison never reach a reading public. In this light, Brody's film plays a vital role in recording and disseminating the oral narratives of individuals whose lives rarely make it to the written page. *The Meaning of Life*, as its very title suggests, inspires reflection on a wide range of philosophical and literary issues alongside its investigation of Kwikwèxwelhp's symbolic power.

**RYMHS:** At a screening of your documentary last fall at Musqueam First Nation, you explained that the film emerged from a study of Indigenous youth "harming themselves." Can you explain the connection between "self-harm" and the prison system that you took as the focus of *The Meaning of Life*? In what ways does Canada's prison system create an environment of self-harm?

**BRODY:** I was doing interviews with Sto:lo youth in the Fraser Valley, centred on how people found meaning in their lives and looking at the causes and nature of self-harm in Aboriginal communities. A young man with whom I spoke about this work was Gabriel George. He told me that one of the most important sources of meaning in his life was his wife's work. She was Angela George of the Chehalis First Nation. At the time, Angela was working as Aboriginal Liaison Officer at the Kwikwèxwelhp minimum-security prison, high in the mountains that are part of Chehalis territory. Gabriel arranged for me to meet Angela, and Angela told me about the prison where she worked. "The place we gather medicines" was the meaning of its name, she said. She also explained that it was a facility at which long-term offenders, often near the end of their sentences, experienced Indigenous culture and ritual as part of a rehabilitation program. She invited me to make a visit.

There are two ways in which self-harm is at issue in the life stories of the men in the film. First, there is the damage people do to themselves when in

prison—often attempted suicide, and often early in their sentence. In telling me about these attempts, inmates took me to the ferocious despair and rage they felt at the start of long sentences. Some of the accounts were filled with extreme levels of self-violence. Some men saw their surviving this violence as a kind of sign from outside themselves: they took meaning from their survival. As one inmate said to me: “If you can’t die, there must be a reason for living.”

The other way self-harm is at issue for these men is in their lives before they came into prison. Especially for the inmates from Aboriginal backgrounds, this self-harm was often linked to abuse they had suffered both at home and in residential schools. Attempted and successful suicide are horribly familiar in these life stories—and given voice in the film by [a prisoner named] Art when he talks with such clear, contained, and terrible feeling about what has happened to his brothers, sisters, and friends. For him, part of the challenge of life is to cope with this accumulation of self-harm and loss. Of course this kind of accumulation is to be found in the stories to be heard in all prisons.

**RYMHS:** While *The Meaning of Life* may have emerged from a study of Indigenous people harming themselves, your documentary is very much about a process of healing. Was this an unexpected shift in the teleology of your project?

**BRODY:** Many of the men who told me their life stories took me to painful and self-destructive experiences. Forces of history—the colonial experience, residential school, violent parents—converged with personal events to create sequences of damage. This damage included self-destruction as well as harm to others. Most of the men had been caught in many forms of violence and had—which as I learned was a distinct pattern—turned this violence onto themselves. So the work involved, and in some sense began with, issues of harm. But the institution was committed to offering healing through the elders who were there and the ceremonies that the neighbouring Chehalis community brought to Kwi. So my focus was both the harm and the healing: they occupied different levels of the story, as it were, and presented different dimensions of the filming. Also, the work I had been doing before filming in Kwi had led me to think about Indigenous culture and heritage as protective and healing in the cases of young people whose lives had been far less destructive. So this was not an unexpected shift in teleology so much as the inherent character of the stories and the direction in which the work was sure to move.

RYMHS: A discourse of healing has become part of the repertoire for discussing Indigenous issues in Canada. Some argue that this focus on healing is a depoliticising gesture that directs attention away from more challenging issues like land, governance, and material redress. (In Craig Womack's words, "America loves Indian culture; America is much less enthusiastic about Indian land title.") Can you identify any problems with how this notion of healing has been used by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities? Perhaps you might also want to address the ways in which prisoners are assailed by therapeutic discourses.

BRODY: This is a vast set of issues: I won't be able to do justice to your question, but I can offer some thoughts in general and some that arise from working in the prison.

The politics of land claims and Aboriginal title have a long and difficult history in Canada. In earlier protests about colonial invasion and settler occupation, the focus is very much on land, not on culture. The Royal Proclamation in the eighteenth century expresses recognition of territory and sovereignty, not "culture." The Nisg'a Petition, in the nineteenth century, focuses on land title, not heritage. Similarly the discourse around the McKenna-McBride Commission in the early 1900s is about land and nothing else. This focus changes with the "new" land claims from the 1960s onwards. The research to support these early claims was centred on mapping the use and occupation of lands, but there begins to be a strong concern with oral culture, Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous law and, of course, language. In part, this shift of emphasis results all too obviously from the kind of destruction of heritage, knowledge, and language that had been caused by direct assault on Indigenous culture. This assault was embodied in the residential school program and more indirectly in the form of Eurocentric/Canadian educational, religious, political, and geographical assimilation. Yet there was another force at work: many people—articulate elders, a new generation of Aboriginal leaders, a new generation of anthropologists—began to give voice to the importance of Indigenous ways of knowing the world. The land base mattered but so did their way of relating to and understanding that base. Hence the new interest, at that time, in ethnohistories and, in particular, ethnohistory to understand and capture (the term is not insignificant, not without at least unconscious irony) what is now referred to as "Indigenous knowledge." In this way, a link was affirmed between land and culture.

The idea of "healing" within the Canadian prison system emerged within a discourse that grew from and expressed this link. The idea of the "Red

Road”<sup>22</sup> that arose in Canadian prisons in the 1970s was radical in its call for recognition for Aboriginal knowledge but also in its endorsement of land claims. In the minds of those who advocated the Red Road healing path, the rights and the culture of First Nations were inseparable; and rights were to lands that had been alienated, resources that were at risk, and the ways of life that these lands and resources had supported.

So is this a shift that allows “America,” in Craig Womack’s observation, to feel less threatened? I am not sure about this. My impression has been that the double preoccupation of modern land and heritage claims has been more challenging to the Canadian body politic and more disturbing to the Canadian public conscience than the land only claims of earlier decades. This said, it was in the 1920s that laws were introduced in Canada to suppress organization of the land movement—though there were laws in the 1880s, of course, to suppress culture. “Red Power” and AIM drew strength and support in the 1960s from outrage and despair about loss of heritage (especially language and knowledge of ritual) as well as loss of land. *Black Elk Speaks* was as much a seminal and mobilizing book as *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee*. But this is a fascinating and important question, deserving a much longer answer.

This said, there is a complication to the process that is very much to do with both Aboriginal history and the nature of prisons. Red Power and AIM had important links to prisons—where leaders were incarcerated. And their apparent or actual willingness to use violence led to confrontations with the police and meant that jails became part of their story. Perhaps there was a way in which the prison became metaphor as well as reality for the radical politics of the Indian Movement at that time—from the early 1960s in the United States, later 1960s in Canada, and still at work today. The Aboriginal inmates at Kwi had their own meetings, set against the background of a nation-wide recognition of the Red Road as a feature of prison politics. But inmates from First Nations families again and again spoke of their *lives* having been in prison, first and foremost because of the residential schools, but more widely than that: as if to be born into a First Nations family, on a reserve, meant that life was somehow begun in a prison and would lead, in a grim and overdetermined way, to prisons of various kinds. The idea of healing is thus tied to images of some kind of profound escape from the prison that, in the minds of many inmates and in the language that is used by many to describe them, is somehow a condition of their lives.

It is not hard to see that there are many problems here. The fatalistic

language is entrapping and establishes a sort of victimhood *ab initio*. There are prisoners who have experienced extremes of abuse and “imprisonment” prior to finding themselves in a real prison; and there can be a real sense of inevitability about this. In the film, Richard is the Aboriginal inmate to whom this could be said to apply; among the non-Aboriginal inmates, both Ralph and Rod led lives where very harsh home lives seemed to flow into life in correctional institutions. And for all three of these, I think there is a huge benefit in thinking for them and with them about “healing”—though both Ralph and Rod would themselves resist the term. For others, and as unquestioned notions about all prisoners, the portrayal of imprisonment as an inevitability and healing as the way forward—if we are limited to that kind of discourse, and the whole set of circumstances is understood on a therapeutic model—loses a lot of reality, the difference and texturing of life that are individual stories. Meanwhile, there is more to be said in favour of therapeutic discourse, with its commitment to understanding causes and linking these to rehabilitation, than there is to be said in support of a rugged, sort-yourself-out-repent-and-get-on-with-it notion. The incoherence of this latter approach and its close ties to extreme enthusiasm about retributive justice became more evident to me with every week I spent listening to the lives of the men in Kwi.

So are prisoners themselves “overdetermined” by therapeutic discourse? Not the ones I knew. Perhaps two of them slipped into therapeutic concepts when talking about their lives or the process they were experiencing at Kwi. All the others wanted to tell their stories and talk about Kwi very much in their own ways. A couple of them did tell me, though, that when it came to parole hearings, it was a good idea to use the language that the parole people liked. Maybe this is a clue to how specific kinds of discourse within the system reach the men.

**RYMHS:** Do you see any problems with the confessional tenor of the film? One can only imagine how frequently these same men have been forced to make similar statements in the course of their lives—to police, to the courts, and to parole workers. Is there a discursive violence, inescapable as it might be, in the way that these men come to explain and understand their crimes—and view their potential for re-entry to society as citizen-subjects? Your film is also a public document. Could the men’s statements influence future parole hearings and Correctional Service Canada (CSC) transfers? In short, how possible is it to separate the discursive framework of the prison from the types of narratives that these men tell?

**BRODY:** This set of questions raises a challenge to the voices of the men in the film and, perhaps, a challenge to the validity of the process itself. My conversations with the men were outside the norms of prison life and perhaps outside the experiences they would have had in their lives away from prison. This is to say that the men were given the chance to speak knowing they were being heard and that what they said had no place in any form of assessment. Therefore, they were able to be “confessional,” though I rather dislike the word: it seems to imply a kind of intimacy that is not quite truth. This open and non-institutional form of interview is very different from—perhaps an opposite to—the statements they have been urged to make within the prison system, and it would seem to me to have very little overlap with the ways men have been forced to tell their stories and explain their crimes. No doubt there are moments of what could be called self-exculpating cliché—observations that men have made over and over again to deal with either their own guilt or the requirement of the system that they show due remorse. But think of Rod, the baker in the film, when he refers to the requirement that he show remorse; or of Les, when he says on camera that his crimes are sexual assault; or of Len who insists on complete frankness that comes across as comedic, yet is so because of the startling directness of his words. I do not claim that the interviews are a sustained truth or have no overlap with the ways men in these kinds of institutions feel obliged to speak. Yet, the men said that the time speaking with me, on camera, for this film was not like any other times they had had while they were incarcerated. I would argue that this difference is an important element in the integrity of the film.

You raise a different kind of concern when you identify the possibility that the men’s statements could influence their futures. Yes, the film is a public document and one that was likely to be seen and perhaps have a role in CSC. All the men in the film are looking at possible day paroles or release of some form. Does this mean that what they say puts them at risk? I think the men may well avoid saying things that could put them at risk of losing parole possibilities. But just about all of them have been inside for a long time, have qualified for minimum security, and are confident that if the truth about them is heard and understood, this should increase their chances of progressing through the system. In short, as Rod says and others imply, they have nothing to lose from speaking openly to me. On the contrary, their sense of the space in which the filming took place was full of confidence. They spoke at great length, with great apparent freedom of thought and

expression, without seeming to be managing their words to fit with any fears of retribution. It may be that there were men in Kwi who chose not to be in the film because they did fear what this kind of exposure might mean—though this was never given to me as a reason.

The men in the film, and many who are long-term prisoners, can easily be underestimated. They are people who have been at the receiving end of many kinds of institutional violence and manipulation. I was struck by the clarity of their thinking and their capacity to have found spaces for themselves in which to be both thoughtful and creative—hence so much remarkable art as well as such engaging interviews. There is a kind of freedom that the men find—that human beings perhaps have to find—whatever their circumstances. I think I was lucky enough to be able to join them in some of those spaces of freedom, and they were able to take advantage of my being there with them. Of course there were many limitations—personal and institutional—but I think that there was a flow of thoughts and memories that had remarkable clarity and honesty. You can sense this as you watch the men talking.

**RYMHS:** One of the criticisms of the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge, a federal women's minimum-security facility in Saskatchewan, is that it eventually morphed into a prison, unable to sustain itself as an alternative space. Has the same happened with Kwikwèxwelhp Prison and, if so, how?

**BRODY:** Kwi began as a prison that has attempted to include some Healing Lodge elements. The balance, or tension, between incarceration and healing is integral to the venture. There is no morphing into one or the other: the basic structure is in place, with it being a prison first and the healing being added on as an idea for or experiment in rehabilitation.

**RYMHS:** What do you see as the limitations, if any, of a facility like Kwikwèxwelhp Prison? (Who can forget Len's statement, "There's always assholes wherever you go"?)

**BRODY:** The limitation grows out of the reality to which my last answer refers. To say a bit more about this, though:

The limitations are invoked and evoked by Len's remark—there are "assholes" in his view because it is a prison, an institution with a tough hierarchy. It is a prison, and must be a prison. These are damaged men, many of whom have committed horrific crimes. There is a rationale for keeping them in a secure facility. At the same time, prison is caught in an idea of—and a political requirement for—retribution. The notion of punishment implies discomfort and some degree of pain, if only psychological. This



is obvious and universal because it is about the meaning of the words: without the pain, there is a sense in which there cannot be justice. So any rehabilitation—albeit with Aboriginal culture as its rehabilitation tool—is set into an environment that has been designed to punish, confine, and limit the basic freedoms of people. If we think of Aboriginal culture’s most important feature as respect (the word that elders always use when talking about their view of the world and cultural values), it is easy to see the difficulty: the prison system is at its heart a refusal to give respect. This is the limitation on a healing approach within a prison.

During the time I was working with the men in Kwi and spending time talking to elders and administrators there, I learned about the periodic swing between more and less preoccupation with security versus less or more commitment to Indigenous culture as healing. This back and forth expresses the inherent tension and contributed to a certain instability in the institution. Whatever the swings might do, however, the fundamental concern, the over-riding priority of CSC was for security. Everyone at Kwi would tell me that, in the end, it was a minimum-security prison. This means a degree of freedom consistent with its status as “a minimum,” and the Chehalis First Nation partnership is built on top of this, not into it. When it came to the breaking of minimum rules, responses were those of all other minimums—as we see in the case of Rod and Darcy toward the end of the film.

**RYMHS:** Prisoners who are eligible for transfer to Kwikwèxwelhp Prison do not have to be Indigenous. In what ways do you see institutions like Kwikwèxwelhp Prison influencing the operation of other correctional institutions in Canada? Is there a potential for cross-pollination, and do you think that potential will be recognized and used?

**BRODY:** There is indeed potential cross-pollination: I am very much hoping that our film will play a part in this. There could be a very strong argument for replicating Kwi across Canada (and indeed in other countries) with a partnership between a prison and a neighbouring Indigenous community. This is not to escape or even seek to upend the element of retribution within justice systems, but it is to offer a model that may give some hope through an Aboriginal notion and practice of respect, and hence potential for re-entry into community.

**RYMHS:** Can you identify any problems with how tradition becomes revived, or redefined, in the prison? How do these models of Indigenous masculinity translate for the men outside the prison?

**BRODY:** “Tradition” is a term that makes me uncomfortable. There are purists

on the subject of First Nations traditions (including two Kwi inmates) who have pointed out to me that the culture in the prisons that is called “Native” or “Indian” is generalized and not authentic as any actual culture. They point out that much that is offered in Canadian prisons as “culture” is taken from the Prairies, especially Cree heritage, and then pieces are added that come from whatever heritage may be of interest to individuals of particular institutions and particular times—with New Age notions built on. Thus the welcome ceremony at Kwi is overseen by Chehalis elders, drawing on Coast Salish traditions, with music that comes in part from the Prairies, with special prayers spoken in Cree, while the background ritual is a sweat lodge ceremonial that is an amalgam of traditions, and many of the inmates talk about healing and spirituality without any real knowledge or experience of their or any other Aboriginal heritage. From these observations comes a dismissal of, or serious doubts about, the specific healing project in Kwi and the notion of the Red Road. This dismissal is to propose that there is a failure of “tradition,” or a diluting, or even a polluting of something that could have been real but is not.

It is true to say that the “tradition” that has been revived or constructed in the prison systems, as part of the healing lodge concept and the idea of the Red Road, is a revival or in part a construction. There is indeed an anthropological critique that can be made of this, an unpacking of what is taking place. But this critique—coming from either inmates or anthropologists (bearing in mind that some inmates are rather good anthropologists)—may be irrelevant to the internal and heuristic validity of this “tradition.” The important questions for the justice system are to the side of, or beyond, the concerns of the purists. What is the force of Aboriginal culture when at work for inmates? How can inmates from Aboriginal backgrounds find a link to and strength from this culture? How can the tradition, as it is defined and given life within an institution, be given respect despite prison regulations? What rituals work? And in the case of Kwi: how can Chehalis heritage be given optimum life inside the prison?

Meanwhile, ideas about heritage, spirituality and ritual are both set inside the Canadian prison system with, as I noted, strong roots in the Cree of the Prairies (they have been the largest and most influential group of Aboriginal inmates in Canada). These ideas are, moreover, dynamic: there are elders coming from each region into the prisons of that region, and they bring with them their ideas of culture. There are also inmates who have especially strong ideas about their particular heritage.

I don't think CSC packages "Indian tradition" so much as follows the lead taken by Aboriginal rights, Red Power, and Red Road thinking. I have long given thought to what "tradition" has come to mean in different Aboriginal contexts. When I first began working on these issues, while living on Edmonton Skid Row in the late 1960s, I became aware of the way part of a widely accepted Indigenous identity was loosely based on the Plains with anything else people wanted to add to make a composite shape. I think this amalgam is a result of the crushing and scattering of Indigenous communities and the way the urban diaspora became the political cultural centre. It is an identity that can give real support to people who need this support—as well as be troublesome to purists and anthropologists who are looking for more precise cultural definitions.

So where does the idea of masculinity fit into this? The difficulty here is that the cult of the male is so strong within the prison system. To be tough, to conceal or control pain, to be without softer emotions—these are ideals that have deep roots in the families and life experiences of a very large proportion of inmates, and which are reinforced by the culture of prison. Not having feelings is the best way to protect oneself from the intense difficulties of life in the prison—as it may well have been long before these men got into prison at all.

Against this kind of social and psychological backdrop, the suggestion that First Nations culture and tradition reinforce or, on the other hand, have any chance of subverting particular notions of masculinity may be far-fetched. Yet there is a kind of respect that men from First Nations backgrounds often are able to show to one another that is very striking. It is a form of ease in dealing with others and often accompanied by a certain openness. And this can mean an antidote to, if not an actual subverting of, the cult of the tough, mean, untouchable male. There is an ease and comfort that many of the Aboriginal inmates seem to feel with one another and, in some striking cases, with other inmates. At least one very tough, non-Aboriginal man said to me several times that he had been affected by this. "They kind of made me vulnerable" was how he put it. And he also spoke of how much difficulty he had with this vulnerability—it brought him back to feelings that he had spent years making sure he did not have. He also said that he was glad to have been made vulnerable; it reminded him of what was possible, what was inside him.

Does this mean that there is a real challenge to the cult of maleness within the prisons? I doubt it, though it may be possible over another decade of

healing and with greater presence of First Nations culture within the system. Does it have implications for men outside the prison? I doubt it, unless they are returning to live in a First Nations community where recovery of heritage has been of great importance.

RYMHS: Can you situate the issues that *The Meaning of Life* examines in relation to some of your work around the globe?

BRODY: I think that the film speaks to, and from, the heartland of my work. The men take us into their life stories, where we find them struggling with the consequences of violence, abuse, and a kind of cumulative loss. There is a recurrent theme in what they say about what has happened to them. For the Aboriginal men, it can be seen as the fall-out from colonial history. For the non-Aboriginal men, the consequences of social or individual breakdown and the culture of poverty. So there is loss of love, safety, family, home, heritage, language and, in due course in these stories, loss of freedom. And the awful disarray that comes with accumulation of loss, including the fallback on violence and thus, in many cases, the committing of terrible crimes.

Just about all my work has dealt with these issues of loss and the way colonial history generates such losses. This is the first time I have entered the story at its darkest edges and heard it from those who have lost the most and caused the worst harm to others. But the story as a whole, the global story as it were, is the same. I came closest to it, I would think, when living on Skid Row in Edmonton in the 1960s, but I was also in a dimension of the story when travelling in remote parts of the Canadian high Arctic. I never found myself outside the realities of colonial or frontier encounters or the inequitable aftermath of “development.” In villages in western India, I for the first time found myself walking in places where there was almost no sign at all of these realities—none of the detritus of some outside and dominant economy and no apparent loss of heritage or land base. Yet I was there because these villages were threatened by a vast development project that was almost certain to displace and perhaps dispossess them.

It may be trite to say that the story is always the same. It isn't. Every people and every person has their own story—the real and crucial work consists in listening to that particular story and understanding what it means.

RYMHS: Can you imagine how your film would have been different if you had focused on a women's prison? In women's prisons that offer similar programs centring on traditional knowledge, how do women participate in and practice this recovery of Indigenous teachings?

BRODY: I don't have the experience or knowledge to answer the second part of this question. But there are institutions in the Prairies, especially in Saskatchewan I believe, where there are healing programs within institutions for women.

I cannot imagine being able to work in a women's prison as I was able to work in Kwi. The one insight I got into how difficult and different it would have been came from an evening I spent in a women's prison, screening *The Meaning of Life* and doing a long Q&A after it. I found a radically different environment.

In Kwi, as in the other prisons where I filmed or have held screenings and discussions, I have again and again been struck by the way the men are restrained and composed. They may have problems keeping focused, and they suffer from obvious attention deficit difficulties, but by and large they keep their thoughts and feelings to themselves. They have strong friendships, with the same two or three always eating their meals together and hanging out in the yards together, but there is a strong, silent quality to these friendships. I did not get any sense of explicit or open sexual attachments, and the one gay man who spoke to me about being gay in prison had much to say about the crude and non-attaching way men would suggest having sex.

Through that one evening in the women's prison, I got a strong impression of a very different way of being. The showing and sharing of emotions were right out in the open, with pairs of women in intense conversations, obvious states of upset and a great deal of physical contact—holding hands, hugging, sitting more or less on one another's laps. Far from holding in feelings, many of the women made a point of showing them—at least in front of and to me. When I spoke to staff and NGO support people who work in women's prisons, they confirmed my impression. Far from sustaining the cool, unfeeling exterior that was a norm in men's prisons, the women inmates to some extent idealized the opposite. To show and share emotions, they said, was how the women made sense of and coped with being incarcerated.

This is something of a mirror-image stereotype, and I am sure it needs much more consideration and analysis. The fascination of filming life stories with women in prison would be to excavate what is at issue here. But a man filming in a women's prison as I filmed in Kwi—being allowed the time to build strong relationships with some of the men and to develop ease around just about all of them: I very much suspect that any such project would encounter significant, and different, challenges.

RYMHS: Can you talk more about Darcy—specifically, the conditions working

against his cultural and spiritual reintegration in prison? He identifies himself as both Métis and gay in the documentary. After the making of the film, he was transferred from Kwikwèxwelhp to a higher-security prison. How do you see Darcy's identification as Métis and gay as contributing to his struggle both inside and outside of the prison? Qwo-Li Driskill argues that "the healing [of] our sexualities as First Nations people is braided with the legacy of historical trauma." Driskill's discussion of the ways in which the erotic is burdened by a history of sexual violence seems illuminating here. Would you agree that Kwikwèxwelhp has implicit barriers to all men finding a place? In what ways might cultural recovery programs be heteronormative in their philosophies and practices?

**BRODY:** To answer this set of questions would be to write a long essay of its own. The puzzle of colonial history and sexuality and related sexual trauma are issues with which I found myself confronted early in my work in Canada. It arose when I was living on Skid Row in Edmonton. Some of the Aboriginal women I knew well there lived as what can be termed part-time sex-workers, with related alcohol and violence problems. I learned from them about compulsive self-abasement and apparent acceptance of abuse that, even then, I began to see as an overlapping of historical and personal forces. Much later in my work, I spoke at length with Aboriginal women about their experiences of sexual violence and again found myself looking at colonial history through very private, individual experience. And this is at the core of any answer I could make to your questions here: the struggle for Indigenous people whose sexuality is not able to find a home, or make itself at home, in the conventional, straight world raises this braiding of personal and historical trauma. But there is a further dimension that your question implies: all sexuality is to some degree shaped by its moment in history. Many people, straight and otherwise, know about complications that seem to come from beyond oneself.

I do not want to go into Darcy's particular story; his right to privacy has to be respected, and his case has again and again been confused by public concerns about his crime and what, in the public mind, constitutes reasonable punishment. But his account of himself in the film, as a man who realizes in prison that he is gay and Métis, is very compelling—not least because I think the viewer of the film gets a strong sense that his readiness to talk about his life in relation to identity and spirituality happens thanks to all that Kwi offers him. (Though there is far more of this in his interviews than found its way into the film.) We also see in the film something of the strength

of his relationship with Grandma Rita Leon: she is giving love and support to him at many levels, which we can see as an immense benefit to him that comes from Kwi. This benefit also centres on his identity as gay and Métis being respected by Grandma. So his healing is helped, we can say, by the way that here, in this particular prison, his identity is not a barrier for him.

Yet this is to leave out the question about how others in the prison saw and related to him, and the way his transfer to higher-security may have been linked to his sexual identity. Overall, my impression at Kwi was that the other men accepted Darcy's sexuality, and of course they had all known other gay men during their many years in prisons. Some were open in a rugged kind of day-to-day expression of disdain for homosexuality, but just about all managed, at the same time, reasonable day-to-day respect for others. I remember one of the older men describing his discomfort at finding himself in a discussion program with sex offenders and thinking how he disliked being among them for long hours each day. Then he added: "Well, they are probably unhappy to be sitting here all day with a murderer." So my view is that sexual identity was not a very major barrier to men finding a place at Kwi. Yet there were allegations at the time of Darcy's transfer, from one or two inmates and at least one prison official, that he had become a target of homophobia within the system. So maybe the nature of the barrier changes along with the swing between Aboriginal healing and implementation of CSC security to which I have referred already.

Darcy, like everyone else in Canadian prisons, encounters colonial history. There are underlying problems of class, race, gender, and sexuality that this history speaks to, and that in profound ways give shape to the history. Male homosexuality causes a particular kind of unease in a place preoccupied with a frontier version of male toughness and so busy celebrating the perfect nuclear family. Then there are the values of individualism and egalitarianism that are so much part of colonial history and that develop against a background of British ideas of class difference and metropolitan control of hinterland. Add to this the different forms of indigeneity at the frontier, with such complex preoccupations with purity, authenticity, degradation, and miscegenation—that troubled potpourri of racial stereotypes and phobias. All of these get exaggerated or brought into sharp relief at colonial frontiers—and thanks to this exaggeration, we can see with special clarity at the edges of our system some of the most important features of the centre.

Thus it is in the prison system: ideas, preoccupations, and distortions that are integral to colonial history are to be found there in high relief. Efforts

are made to address these residues of colonialism by the kind of culturally informed healing project I saw at Kwi. There is an explicit wish on the part of some of those working on these projects to provide a new and intelligent recognition of sexual identity as well as Indigenous identity. Thus there are workshops and programs that focus on what it means to be gay or two-spirited, and much concern to give respect to Aboriginal identities. These efforts resist and perhaps reshape the colonial heritage as it plays out in the prison system. Of course, they cannot uproot the origins and deeper sources of the problems surrounding identity.

However one might see or interpret Darcy's account of his life, many would recognize that kind of collision between the self and the self that society seems to require one to be. There is a particular kind of marginalization that comes from living with that collision. In small town or suburban, parochial, and conservative communities that are so much a part of the social landscape of North America, this kind of marginalized self is all too common. It is often associated with outbursts of anger, alcohol and drug abuse, and various forms and degrees of breakdown. It is therefore often linked to self-destructive behaviour, thus featuring in many inmates' internal lives.

When such men or women get to prison, however, they may well find, perhaps for the first time in their lives, that they are in a community of the marginal. They may also find that their sexual or racial identity is something that they can at last own up to, or even, if they are lucky with the institutions in which they find themselves, be proud of. I think this happened to several of the men in the film, and it may be an important part of what Kwi offers. So there might be a significant way in which a place like Kwi takes down the barriers to men finding out who they are and, through who they are, finding a non-marginalized place within at least this society.

As you suggest in your question, there are "heteronormative" aspects to Indigenous philosophies, and these may mitigate against some of the demarginalizing potential for a healing program in Kwi or in prisons in general. But my experience of Indigenous culture is that it gives less privilege to the macho male than does the white, colonial culture. Yet, there is terrible violence against women in all societies where men feel redundant and have good reasons for thinking that they have nothing much to offer—as is the case, of course, in many Aboriginal communities, especially with hunter-gatherer heritage. So there are links between the erotic and violence in both the minds of the oppressor and the oppressed.



## NOTES

- 1 The writing of Indigenous prisoners remains a neglected area of focus in Canadian literary discussions. Responding to this scant amount of criticism, in *From the Iron House: Imprisonment in First Nations Writing* (2008) I examine the prison's role in Indigenous history with an analysis of prison autobiographies, residential school narratives, prison serials, and collections of prisoners' writing. Similarly, Sam McKegney's *Magic Weapons: Aboriginal Writers Remaking Community after Residential School* (2007) is a book-length study of residential schools narratives that theorizes how Indigenous authors use writing to resist their containment by this institution. McKegney notes the continuities between the residential school and prison (a connection also made by many of the men interviewed in *The Meaning of Life*). Essay-length discussions of *Stolen Life* by Julia Emberley, Manina Jones, and Susanna Egan further contribute to this body of criticism on Indigenous prison narratives. Other salutary examples include Jason Haslam's and Warren Cariou's separate articles on Tyman's prison autobiography, *Inside Out*.
- 2 Invoked in various Indigenous cultural and tribal contexts, the "Red Road" is generally described as a philosophy of living inspired by spiritual teachings and traditions. Joseph Gone observes that the Red Road involves "an ongoing process of self-transformation" (qtd. in Waldram 6). Janice Alison Makokis builds on this formulation by describing the Red Road as a "decolonized transformative process" (47). By returning to ceremony and "the ways of the old people," writes Makokis, "we learn what our role and responsibility is to our people and it is this role that keeps us relationally accountable and on the path of living the "good life," *miyo pimatisiwin*" (47).

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