



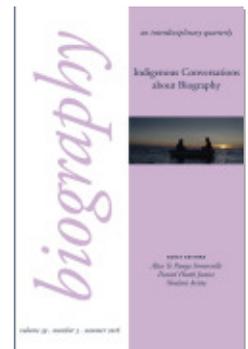
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Feeling, Disrupting

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FEELING, DISRUPTING

JOSEPH M. PIERCE

A response to Shino Konishi, “Making Connections and Attachments: Writing the Lives of Two Nineteenth-Century Aboriginal Men.” *Biography* 39.3 (Summer 2016): 410–428

Does that sound odd? Does that sound at all? Does that voice still echo? What *feeling* can we have toward a subject who starts to disrupt, to make waves, in the field of Indigenous history? What is the content of those waves, ripples of difference, untimeliness, individuality? Shino Konishi asks us to feel along with her this pull toward disruption. Toward the fleeting hunch that there is more to a life than the calcified tropes of colonial representation that serve to justify the continued caricaturization of Indigenous peoples (men in particular) as villains, drunkards, rebels, or traitors. Or else as ahistorical, flattened by the weight of the colonial archive. How to relate to what we have not lived, to what our communities cannot say, or to what we cannot know? How to relate based on the hunch, the feeling of complicity or admiration or fear that we might have toward a particular life, dispersed in time, sutured together, but always incomplete? How to tell stories of survival—with all the messiness that that entails—rather than the sanitized narrativity of the colonial tropic imaginary? What do we miss, what becomes impoverished, when we hide behind “objectivity”?

Konishi reminds us of the richness of walking along with historical subjects whose lives, whose voices, are forever inflected by the colonial administration of sounds, bodies, lands, epistemologies. She reminds us that in order to participate in a more ethical relationship with these subjects, we must actually participate. That is, we must not excise our own bodies, our own affective connections, from the way we relate and yearn alongside, or even in spite of, what the historical record can reveal. I love how Konishi describes

her interest in Gogy and Bungin, two subjects only intermittently apparent in the historical archive, flashes of light that unsettle the colonial penumbra. She feels “drawn” to them, “connected,” “attached,” hailed by the shared experience of racism and dismissiveness. By the shared precedent of Indigenous dispossession and perseverance. But also by their complications. I love this approach because the contradictory impulse of attachment, its inexplicability, is something I also wrestle with. This is something many of us know first hand. As a citizen of the Cherokee Nation—but also as the son of a Native adoptee—my own relationship with those archival figures, names and CDIB numbers, genealogy charts, allotment maps, and court records, amounts to one of the few ways I am able to relate as kin to my own Cherokee family.¹ It is certainly not the only way, and I have over time been able to forge personal relationships with my Cherokee family, to relate. But it is also part of the history of Native dispossession and removal, forced acculturation and racism. It is part of the forced archivization of Native people. To be reduced to parchment, scribbles of a colonial official intent on documenting Native peoples into oblivion. As oblivion.

This is what Konishi’s method gestures toward, what it opens up as possibility. It is through the possibility of a trans*historical method that the archive can begin to exist as more than a simple record of transactions of the slow death of Native life writing. Recent work in Trans* Studies—and here I’m thinking specifically of Jack Halberstam’s 2017 text, *Trans* A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*—has proposed a more expansive sense of kinship that we could have, that we strive to have, in the context of the continued normalization of bodies, relations, and temporalities. The trans*historical in this sense is not only about, or limited to, trans-identified subjects—not identity—but it unfolds as a method of disruption, of questioning the recalcitrance of normative bodies and relations by harnessing the unpredictable power of the asterisk—its functionality as grapheme. A diacritical form of resistance. Of reach. My feeling here is that Native studies and Trans* Studies can nurture each other. My sense, my hunch, is that these very distinct methodologies are not actually that far apart. That they seek similar forms of disruption. Similar disruption of form. If we can imagine that the historical record allows for an expanded sense of affiliation—or as Konishi puts it, “kinship is not the only means through which biographers can connect to their subjects” (413)—then we can also imagine that the trans* of history allows for relationality across time, across disciplines, across bodies and archives. The transversal here becomes not simply a way of imagining crossways, not simply a spatial metaphor, but a method of situating the self as implicated in the long history of Native belonging. It is belonging and becoming. Relating

to and with. Relating as a self implicated in the production of new imaginaries of Native life. It is not simply to “*set the record straight*” (413), as Konishi points out, but to trans* the method of recording history. It is not even a decolonial method, but a trans*colonial identification with, as, through, and against the very premise of the self as historically “objective.”² It may not seem obvious, not a natural connection, but I want to insist on the possibility of a trans*historical approach to kinship, to history, to Native bio-writing. What Konishi’s text makes me feel is that the sense, the hunch of belonging, of being, of loving, of transcending, is not limited to the strictures of the colonial record. What she points out, and what I appreciate about this essay, is that it gestures toward a form of queer kinship, or perhaps more specifically, trans*kinship, across, through, between, among, those with whom we identify, with whom we are attached, that is not simply a question of blood, or even of archive, but rather, and more suggestively, of proximity and affinity, touch, breath, dream.

What if we breathe together as queerly connected, as trans*historical kin? And these are not equivalent. But they are promising. They promise a sense of attachment, affiliation, desire, that is not simply as subject-object of study, but of a self implicated, entrenched, in the process of risking the self as classifiable, as material. It is at the risk of the self becoming undone by the very process of imagining the self as implicated in the work of the archive as revolutionary. It is in queering the archive that the self becomes what it never imagined that it could be. What it might have become. What it always knew. It is as a trans*historical historian that the work of method loosens, unravels, to reveal the promise of becoming rather than recording. When we begin to become as, with, through, we start to lose a part of ourselves and move toward the feeling of mutuality that would otherwise be precluded from “objectivity.” Fuck objectivity. Let us dissolve into particles of historical unbecoming only to queerly reconstitute ourselves as trans*historical. The self as implicated in the other. The thrill of undoing the self. The self as destined, inevitably, for collectivization rather than the numbness of individuality.

And let us think of this in terms not only of method, but also of embodied practice. I love this essay because it reminds me of the potential that we all have to live through and with those with whom we identify, who claim us, and yet, whom we may never know. This is the opportunity that we must take. To belong as—complicated, incomplete, divergent—and to also implicate ourselves in the process of inhabiting the unknown and the unknowable. We may not know what to ask or how to ask it, but we should be able to open ourselves to the possibility of relating, sensing, with and as that which we approach as part of us. The “us” in this scenario grows. An expansive us

that navigates temporality and historiography without demanding objectivity, without insisting on linear, genealogical belonging. An us that wrestles individuality from the shackles of colonial history and moves it toward the horizon of an embodied we. An us that relates. An us that sings. An us that listens. An us that remembers. An us that feels, disrupts.

NOTES

1. For more information, see my pieces “In Search of an Authentic Indian” and “The Fence.”
2. For the “trans-colonial,” see Yecid Calderón/Pinina Flandes 41.

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