

Jules Arita Koostachin. *Unearthing Secrets, Gathering Truths*. Kegedonce Press, 2018. 100 pp. ISBN: 9781928120148.

<https://kegedonce.com/bookstore/item/104-unearthing-secrets-gathering-truths.html>

Jules Arita Koostachin's debut collection of poems, *Unearthing Secrets, Gathering Truths*, is a highly personal and interior journey through themes of remembrance, continuance, trauma, and connection. A project over twenty years in the making, *Unearthing Secrets, Gathering Truths* reveals the author's "extensive knowledge working in Indigenous community" (97). The collection's biography tells the reader that Koostachin was born in Moose Factory Ontario, raised by her Cree-speaking grandparents in Moosonee and her mother, a survivor of the Canadian residential school system. The biography also interestingly reveals how Koostachin—a band member of Attawapiskat First Nation, Moshkekowok territory—has "established herself within the film and television community" throughout Canada and the United States, winning awards in documentary and film work, acting, and directing. Because many of her projects commit to supporting youth and women as well as language and cultural revitalization, Koostachin's "About the Author" reads like a living and public prologue to the very intimate world of her poetry. While this world undoubtedly has shaped the poet's film and acting career, the book builds a poetic environment culled from Cree language and relations.

Four sections with Cree subtitles frame *Unearthing Secrets, Gathering Truths*: Inninewak, Wikwam, Mitewin, and Iskwewak. These subtitles, like many of the Cree words Koostachin uses in her collection, are either directly translated through the glossary she provides or become apparent via context within the poems themselves. In translation, the four sections—"Human Beings," "Home," "Mitewin (which is *not* defined, but my best approximation would be "dream" or "medicine"), and "Cree Womyn"—shape the contours of the very finely outlined community of influences and landscapes from which the author speaks. Whether in English or Cree, however, Koostachin's poetic language implies a gathering effect, a language that is as directional as it is relational. Indigenous languages, as they do, essentially prompt philosophies for living:

KiiWayTeNook

WaPaNo

NaKaPayHaNook

ShaWaNook

NiiPii

IsKoTew

AsKi

Mee'Kwetch

KiChi MaNiTo. (12)

These lines end Koostachin's poem "God and Me" (found in the first section) and gesture for her reader the grounding basis from which she writes against remembrances of a broken family, violence and abuse, and the long histories of colonial and Christian invasion in her community. The elements, gathered as the life-giving forces, grant an accessway "to make new for the truth of [her] identity" (12).

As Koostachin sets out the collection, however, she is eager to provide guidance to her reader and to these acts of unearthing and gathering. The first poem of the collection, "InNiNeWak – The Human Beings of MoshKeKoWok," is cast by a litany of repeated words that will echo and deepen over the course of the book. Visually compelling, "InNiNeWak – The Human Beings of MoshKeKoWok" acts in some ways as a map for the rest of the poems, with "human," "people," and "life" running down the page and emptying out to "Cree / Cries / Call," and finally "human / CRIES / dreaming" at poem's end. Visual and aural rhythms preoccupy this map of *The People*.

This mapping of *The People*, moreover, links the ways they are protected to the ways they are claimed through the land itself. In "Dancing AaTimWak," the speaker says,

dancing AaTimWak
 want us to listen
 the protectors of our people
 protectors of the moss
 swamplands
 joining us with the others...
 we are rooted
 generations before me gather
 all beings speaking the same language...
 I will listen again. (6)

Indicative of the entire collection, where there is a constant and robust fusion of home, land, people, and language, Koostachin leans on these Cree guides to ask: "what is freedom in a colonial world?" (10). The signposts in Koostachin's poems seem to point to the overwhelming relationality to land, "essence / trunks of the trees holding our stories safe," and to the "stories living in our Mothers...IsKweWak side by side with eyes wide open" (14-15).

Some of Koostachin's most interesting poetic lines are found in the details of the land that the speaker describes with the entirety of her senses: "longing for renewal / unraveling my sweet disorder / stench of rotten berries / stings my nostrils" (21). And some of them are found in many of the dream sequences that move in and out of moments within and between poems: "I take *KoKoom's* hand in mine / we walk out the door / so this is sovereignty?", and later, "*KoKoom* and I dream / we enter the passage way / ... entire relations converse / there is no divide" (28; 30). As another type of passageway, dreaming is a powerful conduit for the speaker.

Poems such as "Watch and Watched" and "Light Switch" are some of the most illuminative poems in showing how memory and dream are working with and against each other throughout the speaker's interior journey. Through difficult references to sexual violence, "Watch and Watched" delineates what is hidden not only by the suppression of memory but by the violence of colonial legal systems and the inheritances of broken lifeways. Through actions of transformation, the speaker in this poem dreams in order to understand how to "dream again" and how to

unlock the door
unleash me from his hold
I want to breathe again
I need to take myself back. (35)

In the second half of the collection, the theme of female protection becomes even more refined, turning those "preying eyes" of the "man with eyes like water" to the "healing warmth of *NiiPii*" which pre-empts a healing a song, "releasing her" (40-41). Indigenous femininity and land shape the protection the speaker seeks. This protection is not formed by turning away from the inheritances and experiences of trauma, but rather by acts of being found: "*Maskwa* finds me / digging me out from the sand / infant spirit untangled" (60). Being watched over by generations of women and the Bear clan into which she was born and who will look after her her entire life, the speaker finds her way out of danger. The speaker finds poetry as her mechanism to release the trappings of violence.

While there are instances throughout the collection where Koostachin names her defiance to intergenerational and epigenetic trauma, those hauntings still "visit her children" (68). But time and again, Koostachin's poetry engages the resistance embodied in Cree language, her means to recall the relevance of its philosophies for living, protection, and healing. Through her poetry, it seems, Koostachin determines a less fractured future.

In the final poem of the collection, "Returning to the Tracks," the poet seems closest to understanding what freedom can mean for her, and it is Cree relatives who signal the directions toward that sense of liberation. By the time the reader arrives at the end of *Unearthing Secrets, Gathering Truth*, one may feel she has traveled the pathways with the speaker, tracks lit along the way, telling her she has been accompanied all along toward a home. Fans of Luci Tapahonso, Ofelia Zepeda, Margaret Noodin, and other poets who work with their Indigenous languages may be drawn to Koostachin's debut collection. Others may simply admire a life-long dedication to community—and a poet's documentation of that. *Unearthing Secrets, Gathering Truth* is a welcome addition to the thriving Native poetry scene.

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