DAVID HUEBERT

“SOME POEMS ARE MEDICINE”: AN INTERVIEW WITH SHALAN JOUDRY

SHALAN JOUDRY IS A MOTHER, oral storyteller, poet, and ecologist from the traditional district of Kespukwitk (Southwest Nova Scotia). Joudry lives with her family in her community of L’sitkuk (Bear River First Nation), where she has worked seasonally as a cultural interpreter and ecologist while dedicating much of her time to artistic projects and events. Of both Mi’kmaw and European ancestry, joudry weaves Indigenous worldviews into her ecological work and her writing. Drawing on her background in theatre, she also brings Mi’kmaw stories to a new generation of listeners by touring her unique modern storytelling and recounting personally crafted narratives that follow Mi’kmaw storying custom.

Her first collection of poetry, *Generations Re-merging* (2014), was described as an exploration of “the complex tangle of intergenerational relationships and cultural issues encountered by a Mi’kmaw woman in the modern context, ‘where every moment / is the loss of something.’” Vivid and visceral, lyrical and wise, these poems took ecology and non-human life as both form and subject. Moving between many modes—from profound maternal openness (“i want my children to smell of forest”) to the fiercely ecological (“i want to walk like a storm with large teeth”)—joudry deployed English and Mi’kmaw words to animate a poetics of trauma, reverence, resilience, and love, firmly rooted in the land and culture of Mi’kma’ki. According to Shannon Webb-Campbell, this collection introduced “a specific vernacular that embraces life, loss and love, endurance and beauty, social and ecological shifts.”

Joudry also earned a Master of Environmental Studies degree from Dalhousie University in 2016. Her master’s thesis, “Puktewei: Learning from Fire in Mi’kma’ki,” examined Indigenous ways of learning by comparing contemporary approaches to fire, ecology, and history to the Mi’kmaw

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relationship with fire (puktew). For this project she gathered information from Elders in three cultural districts in Nova Scotia, and these Elders described their physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual relationships with fire. Joudry's project thus examined how these cultures developed unique fire regimes, which clearly demonstrated the value of Indigenous ways of knowing.

With support from Arts Nova Scotia and Two Planks and a Passion Theatre, joudry's first full-length play, *Elapultiek (We Are Looking Towards)*, debuted in 2018 with joudry playing the role of the young Mi'kmaw drum singer Natawintoq (Mi'kmaw for "she sings"). The play focuses on a conflict between Natawintoq and an aging Euro-Nova-Scotian biologist named Bill, who are both concerned about the endangered kaktukopnji'k (chimney swifts) but have different approaches to conservation, as Natawintoq relies on her oral traditions and ceremonies and Bill relies on objectivity and scientific data. *Elapultiek* thus dramatizes an encounter between L'nu/Mi'kmaw and Western worldviews, and the daily encounters between these characters serve to demonstrate the challenges and rewards of developing cross-cultural relationships. *NS reviews* called the play "illuminating and warming," and *49th Shelf* noted joudry's deft mediation "between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds."

The following interview was conducted over email in the summer of 2020.

David Huebert: Congratulations on your a new poetry collection, *Waking Ground*, which is coming out this fall! How would you characterize your growth or change as a poet between your two collections?

Shalan joudry: My first collection included early writing and earlier life experiences i wished to share, and this collection is very much a response to the discussions i've had with various people after the Truth and (Re)conciliation Commission (TRC) came out and treaty education was gaining more ears. Those conversations made their way into poetic form. I speak about our ancestral history here in Mi'kma'ki, the relationship to language and land, various personal transgenerational stories, politics, and finding identity and healing from the land itself. Some poems are medicine for me and, i hope, readers as well, yet i'm asking people to listen in a broader and deeper sense in order to do the work that is required for collective healing.

Huebert: I'm glad you brought up the TRC. The idea of reconciliation is something we'll come back to, as it is also an important context for your play *Elapultiek*. Why "(re)conciliation"? What do those parentheses mean to you? Are you skeptical of reconciliation?

Joudry: I was fortunate to hear visual artist David Garneau speak after the TRC came out and was all abuzz in meetings and conversations. David was quick to point out that the word "reconciliation" implies that there was once a unity and now we have to reunite. In the deliberate assault against Indigenous peoples and nations in the making of Canada, many Indigenous peoples state that there was never a unity to begin with, and in that way we are looking to *create* unity or conciliation.

Huebert: I sense that this awakening to conciliation is in fact embedded in the compelling central metaphor of your new poetry collection: "waking ground." Is this concept also more than a metaphor? What does it mean to you to dwell "among the waking ground"? How is the ground "waking"?

Joudry: In my poetry i do weave the literal and the metaphorical. The land provides us with both. It teaches us in the same way that ecosystems grow better as diverse complex systems rather than monocultures. It is both literal and metaphorical for us as humans to be guided by that natural truth. The ground beneath us stirs and quakes, like any living thing. Here in Mi'kma'ki we watch the land "awaken" after winter's slumber. I have also watched a landscape seem quiet after hardships and seen that after a long while even small things can bloom from the soil, teaching us that even in seeming stillness healing and growth are underway. Those images were vital in my new collection. I have watched our country stir and quake, wrestling with its past as well as struggling still today in finding the long road to conciliation on many fronts. I have known small miracles of growth in individuals and groups, shifting in ways that i couldn't have predicted. Supported resiliency and slow healing of people, not only the land, inspires me. It is my hope that our country is awakening in the most positive of ways and that i get to bear witness to this awakening as an ecologist, mother, and artist.

Huebert: How would you characterize your development as an ecologist, poet, playwright, and storyteller? How do these roles mix and mingle?

Joudry: From a verb-based worldview (L'nu/Mi'kmaw language and culture), i would actually say that i study ecosystems and that i write and tell stories in order to teach or convey what i have learned. I actually see them not necessarily as different "roles" but rather as different actions or projects that i take on each year. If one day i have a certain feeling that seems quite striking (like grief that feels like carrying bones or the memory of kneeling in the middle of a sweetgrass patch), then i write it as a poem. If one day i am wondering if there are fewer grey jays locally than ten years ago, then i write it as a research proposal for a species at risk study. If i wonder about how to use my cultural storytelling technique to summarize a teaching, then i create it as a short oral story. Maybe ten years from now i will make different things.

Huebert: Even within your poetry, there are many ways of knowing and seeking the natural world. The wild has many modes, forms, and bodies in *Generations Re-merging*—from the tenderness of "Where Wild Things Blow" to the ferocity of "A Call to Action" ("i want to call out the wild in me"). How do you work the wild into your poetry? Does wildness connect to your lineation or the way you work with form?

Joudry: The "wild" is my muse. "I" don't work it in; rather, it's what helps me to create by breathing life into all that i do. From a young age i would sit on a rock outdoors and both become part of nature and hear its stories and poetry. I suppose being raised by a mother who read Clarissa Pinkola Estés' *Women Who Run with the Wolves* (1989) was some inspiration through my life as well. In my small community of L'sitkuk (where i was not raised but have worked and lived for 14 years), many people's livelihoods rely on the outdoor culture as well as hunting, fishing, and other forms of recreation. Being a part of nature makes us feel alive in a way that nothing else can. The awe of ecosystems brought me to study ecology, and researching the land brought me closer to my Indigenousness. Both of those—love of nature and my L'nu/Mi'kmaw lineage (L'nu is actually the Mi'kmaw word that means a native person and is interchangeable with "Mi'kmaw")—inspire me to find more movement and flux in my writing. One of the reasons i love poetry is because i can be more fluid with the phrasing and lines. I enjoy writing without punctuation to help with imitating the flow of water and the moments that come and go while sitting on a riverbank. That kind of sensation

is what triggered "Where Wild Things Blow." In "A Call to Action," calling out the wild is a much more active realization that we *need* to reconnect with nature, as there is a special power there that can only be found by remembering ourselves as parts of nature. That poem came from my worry that too many humans might become too complacent to respond to ecological degradation.

Huebert: While the wild is often tranquil in your work, I feel that sometimes it's also more politicized. For example, the poems in *Generations Remerging* often show that we can't think seriously about ecology and non-human life in Mi'kma'ki or across Turtle Island without acknowledging land theft, cultural genocide, and settler-colonial attempts to eradicate Indigenous cultures. Is this a message you feel compelled to explore and impart, and do you think people are listening to this message?

Joudry: It is a message i'm telling. It has been very clear from various public responses to Indigenous concerns over the years that many people in Canada have not learned enough about our history, such as what the Indian Act was about or why it was created, what the treaties were supposed to be, and why we have separate laws as Mi'kmaq here in Nova Scotia. I remember giving a talk at a middle school about 15 years ago, and a student asked why "natives get to fish whenever they want." I took a breath, paused, and then drew on the board a story of pre-European colonization here, then in the middle of war, and finally what the Peace and Friendship Treaties were supposed to be about—agreeing to govern their own people separately until the infinite future, to coexist without continued bloodshed (as well as not creating more British settlements without Mi'kmaq permission). Those treaties have been broken, but they are still legally binding and have been upheld in the Supreme Court. I told the class the concept that we, as Mi'kmaq, have the right to make our own laws about hunting and fishing. I told the class that without knowing the history, and with the Mi'kmaq being oppressed for so long, people have forgotten that we actually didn't create Canada together. The room was quiet. Some of the teachers later told me in private that they hadn't actually known much about the treaties. Since the TRC, the Nova Scotia Department of Education has been working to create curriculum that addresses the history of the residential school system as well as treaty education.

I want to say something else for a moment. It is intellectually and emotionally traumatizing to learn about what has happened here culturally and ecologically. Exposing new generations of people to this pain has the potential to cause new strife, but that is not my intention. I have faith that we can actually live up to the spirit and intent of those treaties, but we cannot create a shared society if one group of descendants, with more political power, remains ignorant of history and injustice. This is what the TRC is calling for: first comes truth. In any dispute, you must first be able to tell the story of what happened, and only then can we (re)concile. We're in a very vulnerable time right now—that is, the time of truth-telling and sharing—and i do believe that many more people are listening than ever before.

Huebert: What's the next step after gaining this awareness?

Joudry: If we are to have a shared world, then we will also need to allow for change, and sometimes even large shifts, in how we run things as a society by allowing for L'nu/Mi'kmaw ways of being and doing. One of my passions is to highlight the need to help us reclaim our L'nu/Mi'kmaw language. It was the first language of this landscape, but it was almost wiped out through the residential school system in Nova Scotia, along with other oppressive forces of colonization. Our language is one of the ways in which we see the world through a L'nu/Mi'kmaw lens. (I would say that relationship to land is another strong one as well as other cultural practices or philosophies.) As it was the European-Canadian governments and institutions that decimated our language and culture, we need strong, effective supports for language reclamation. It is not enough to ask our communities to apply for small project funds to hold a language class or write a book or two. We need a massive campaign to work in the opposite direction of language loss, and we need it now. I also believe that we need others, non-Mi'kmaq, to learn our language and speak it with us so that we can practice it and so that our children will hear it around them. This will keep it a living and working language.

This cultural devastation has also been paralleled by ecological devastation. I realize that for some people it is difficult to understand or believe an ecological crisis is upon us: there are still more trees left, there are still rivers flowing, we can still go outside to breathe the air, and so on. Yet many of us who are paying close attention—the guardians and researchers—have learned the language of the land, and we understand that our current rates

and methods of resource extraction are not sustainable. I understand how disruptive it is for governments and companies to change. We have a world based on consumer economics and extraction culture, not on well-being or the future of humans and other species. We live and plan for now, even if our actions will be felt rippled through many generations to come. I can get quite grim, but my Indigenous Elders give me hope, as they remind me about what gifts we can give the Earth by deciding to be part of the ecosystems instead and to live by rules of reciprocity. One of my own answers is to put my head and hands as close to the ground as possible. I want to make sure that my children know the names of plants, that we immerse ourselves in nature, and that we learn the L'nu/Mi'kmaw language.

Huebert: Your striking poem "Raising Forests," from your new collection, also ends with the suggestion of a more spiritual path to conservation: "we shall tend to the forests like prophets / we will tell them to wilder in old growth / and watch it come to be." What might this tending look like?

Joudry: It is perhaps an Indigenous teaching that the Earth knows best how she needs to heal. I have worked with many conservation biologists who have been trained to take a much more active management role. As in modern medicine, sometimes those techniques are required in the "emergency room" of ecosystems or species. However, when we can, we should give the land what it needs to heal itself. I had the beautiful opportunity to walk through a healthy old Hemlock forest, and it was a sacred thing to feel. I get quite emotional when i drive past a fresh clear-cut, and i remind myself that it is possible that this very land *can* regrow in a forest's lifetime into old growth. But i, myself, will never see that come to be. Therefore, what i remind people is that we have to plan past our own lives, and that is a very humbling (and complex) thing to do. You have to be very giving and, much like how we tend to our children, lovingly make decisions that are about them instead of us. We need to extend that same kind of loving, knowing, and planning past our own lifetimes. Our ancestors lived to survive, but they also considered the lives of future generations. An example of that is when they verbally negotiated treaties. Now it's our turn and responsibility to think generations into the future. It takes a lot of spiritual connection or stillness to be able to dream up your descendants. You cannot necessarily do that while working, checking e-mails, and doing household chores. We need

to slow down and sit by the ocean or forest to really *hear*.

Huebert: It seems to me that part of what you're talking about is developing an emotional connection to the land—teaching others to empathize with plants, trees, and ecosystems. Is the increased attunement to emotion—the expression of a "kind of loving" for non-human life—an example of what poetry offers to activism?

Joudry: In our L'nu culture we talk about the four parts of the self—not just our bodies and minds but also our emotion and spirit. Mainstream science has been very purposeful in removing emotion and spirit from intellectual study. I do believe that for some research that separation was probably helpful. In our L'nu culture, emotion and a deeper sense of connectedness (which we call spiritual) are part of how we live and relate to the world. Without engaging those parts of us, we do not "learn" as fully as possible. Perhaps that lack of emotion from previous educational instruction, particularly in the sciences, like the study of biology, has left us with the notion that non-human life isn't as valuable. When we connect emotionally, we are more apt to make different decisions about our shared landscape. The arts are a domain where emotion is or can be central to the work, and so i hope that we as writers can help bridge the gaps in education and bring us closer to a deep understanding of nature. Whatever the positive lessons and visions that we have, i believe that the arts can reach people in a meaningful and powerful way. I am using poetry to call for growth, yes. I am also using it as medicine for me, showing my own vulnerability in a way that can encourage others to share and heal together.

Huebert: The penultimate line of your poem "Regrowing"—"to have grown up in a known land / cycled through to something else"—also calls us back to a line from "Fabric of the Land"—"how can something known become unknown." What is the relationship in your art and life between loving and knowing the land? Does "knowing" mean something different from a Mi'kmaw lens than it does from a Western/settler lens?

Joudry: In the L'nu/Mi'kmaw worldview, "knowledge" is not a noun but rather a verb. The English word "knowing" helps to bridge that cultural divide. The word "know" in English has an arrogant connotation or nuance,

especially in an academic context, but i have been taught by Indigenous Elders that humility is very important in life. As humans, we need the Earth and all the other species as well as community. That is very humbling. When we remember and live by the teaching to be humble, then perhaps we are more attuned and ready to listen to others. I like using the English word "knowing" instead not only because it's a verb but also because it is a bit more open. For me, "knowing" is about relationships or a deepening of relationships. When i asked how things had become unknown in "Fabric of the Land," i was referring to relationships being broken—that is, relationships with the land, ways of living, our language, and so on. When i referred to the "known land" again in "Regrowing," it was about having had interwoven relationships in the forest. I like your word "loving." Yes, maybe it is about loving the land, too. It goes back to the teaching about emotions i discussed earlier. As you deepen your relationships (and therefore understandings) with things, you eventually engage with your heart, even if you don't mean to. It's a natural part of "knowing." In this way, we could say that you come to love. And deepest still, as Elder Murdena Marshall said, "knowing" becomes a spiritual and intuitive connection.

Huebert: Both Bill and Natawintoq are engaged in knowing and loving the land in your play *Elapultiek (We Are Looking Towards)*, but they have different ways of addressing the issues of habitat loss and threatened species. The dialogue-based theatrical production seems to be the perfect form in which to dramatize and shed new light on these all-too-familiar conversations. Was drama always the natural form for this subject?

Joudry: It was! I had stood in downtown Bear River for three or four chimney swift count seasons with a retired non-Mi'kmaw biology teacher (who is not like Bill in the play). One day, after we were chatting about our personal lives, knowing how much we enjoyed growing a friendship, i thought this would make a wonderful backdrop to a play. Theatre was the first creative form that i envisioned for sharing the conversations i had been having over the years with some European-Canadians and some mainstream biologists. I thought of a play because there needed to be two voices, not like in my oral storytelling (where it's only me), and there was also more plot to roll out. I was lucky enough that many months later Two Planks and a Passion asked me if i had any suggestions for a play. The timing was perfect.

Huebert: In the play those conversations become a kind of reconciliation—what you referred to earlier as "the work that is required for collective healing." That work doesn't come easily, as Bill keeps insisting that "stories aren't science," but Natawintoq ultimately convinces him by recounting a traditional Mi'kmaw night sky story, "Muin and the Seven Bird Hunters," which has been cared for and passed on by Lillian and Murdena Marshall, among others. It turns out that stories are science, in a sense, as they are a way of remembering: "Our stories are about natural patterns told in a holistic way." Has Western science lost its awareness of stories? Can stories soften science by helping it to listen again?

Joudry: I think this question involves some of the cultural differences between oral and written stories. In our multi-generational L'nu/Mi'kmaw culture, information (such as observational data and analysis) is transferred through oral storytelling and direct teaching. These personal ways of communicating and learning are a cultural choice. Our ancestors had birchbark and inks like dyes, but it seems that they used them for messages and stories only sparingly. Perhaps it was thought that by removing the messages from the speaker you would lose the nuance. Damage to the artifact during travel or storage might also incorrectly modify its meaning. One aspect of oral stories in Indigenous cultures is the verbal storage of information, and some oral stories are so well-crafted, cared-for, and carved that as they were passed from teller to teller the transmission was done over years—not simply once. Storytelling also has other purposes besides information transmission, as it can be a method of connecting to people or land, a shared group activity, or a ceremony.

On the other hand, in European cultures the ancestors chose to mark the data and lessons to store physically. It was understood that this was a way to preserve what the observers found themselves in their own voice. I believe that the European scientific method stems from this written culture, as "truth" was based on what was found previously and possibly re-proven later. Ironically, that is exactly what our carefully crafted transgenerational stories are like. From an oral culture perspective, the possibility that someone can falsify their notes and marks, writing fiction in place of fact, feels dangerous. This was the case even in our treaty relationships: our ancestors made verbal agreements about the Peace and Friendship Treaties, symbolizing them in wampum belts, but the new settlers wrote their versions dif-

ferently on their papers, distorting what was said in person. There has been much distrust on both sides of the discussion of which kind of story is more truthful. In European scientific ideology, personal stories do not have the rigour necessary to be called science. In L'nu/Mi'kmaw science, reading and conducting experiments in a lab is not considered rigorous because it is not direct enough to engage the layers of knowing. (We can see gifts in both ways of knowing, and that is why i try to use them both.)

In the play, Bill represents the view that a L'nu/Mi'kmaw story is only made for entertainment. Natawintoq is able to demonstrate that stories are also carriers of information, much like scientific accounts of repeated experiments. I really do think that seeing stories as information holders will help mainstream science to find ways of storing and transferring lessons. For example, mainstream scientists often attempt to reach out to the public through magazines or documentaries, which are part of storytelling culture. I think we need more storytelling, even among scientists themselves.

Huebert: The concept of etuaptmumk (two-eyed seeing) is also central to *Elapultiek*. In your endnotes to the published play, you drew on Elder Albert Marshall to define etuaptmumk as the practice of regarding a subject from both "a mainstream ecological lens" and "a cultural Mi'kmaw lens for the benefit of all." If the play is largely about reconciliation, then does it call on settler-descended people to learn how to see with two eyes in order to educate themselves about Mi'kmaw culture?

Joudry: Yes, in the play, as in my life, i call on all people living in Mi'kma'ki to learn more about L'nu/Mi'kmaw culture and history so that the burden of walking two worlds in our homelands does not rest only with those of us who are Indigenous. The kind of balance that it will require is different for each person and situation. We are not asking all people here to practice our identity; however, if we are to have a shared society upon a land that was agreed to be shared between sovereign nations, then i believe that we must have more L'nu ways of knowing, doing, and being within these communities. If not, then we are continuing to force Indigenous peoples to assimilate.

Huebert: I think that call for learning is very clear in the play, and this idea of sharing "the burden of walking two worlds" is crucial. At times, both Bill

and Natawintoq despair, but the play ends optimistically with a softening of Bill's Western worldview, the unexpected resurgence of the chimney swift population, and Bill's work to return stolen land to Natawintoq's community. Did you wrestle with how the play should end, or did you always have this in mind? Why does Bill, as a character, deserve his reversal?

Joudry: In the workshopping of the script i spoke about this with the other actor and director. I wanted the growth to be earned through many steps in a long process. In a few scenes Natawintoq manages to help Bill understand a bit more. Even though the debate about land isn't conclusive, throughout the play she helps to give Bill much to think about. The beginning of the community meeting scene offers them a moment where they might be able to act as a team. However, Bill is a front-row witness to the racism that leaps out of the shadows. After watching Natawintoq describe all of the grief and work she carries, Bill's own exhaustion moves him to consider a deeper relationship with his "work" and with this young woman. By the end of the play, he's just beginning to understand the layers of her reality as a young Indigenous woman. He has to realize that his need for the land isn't as strong as the need for justice overall. As a storyteller, i was hoping that the audience would share that desire to let down their guards, agree to be friends, and help lift each other up. Even if you don't understand the other's methodology, you needn't discredit the other's ways of knowing and living. It isn't only Bill who softens by the end; i made sure to leave clues that so, too, does Natawintoq. It is a story about the building of trust and the work of deep listening, which is what i'm hoping for in fellow Canadians.

Huebert: Your creative work is clearly informed by your engagement with Mi'kmaw language and ways of knowing. You're also about to start a Ph.D. at Dalhousie University, where you'll be researching Mi'kmaw language as it relates to land and ecology. Can you say a little more about your future research? What are some of the key terms and linguistic concepts you will be exploring?

Joudry: In my Interdisciplinary Ph.D. research i plan to study how our Mi'kmaw language was used to name plants, animals, and places as well as other philosophical concepts or linguistic clues that are understood in our language, as it demonstrates a unique worldview about nature and our

place within it. I feel that learning my native language will also help me to see ecological conservation from a Mi'kmaw lens and guide me in my two-eyed seeing practice. Honestly, i am hoping that studying the language will bring me closer to the land and help me feel more rooted in this place. I very much want to be part of the effort to reclaim our language. It sounds like an impossible feat in a region with so few fluent speakers, but i am hopeful.

Huebert: Any last thoughts or final words?

Joudry: We are faced with many challenges in today's world. There are so many issues that need our immediate attention, such as Black Lives Matter, the health and voices of LGBTQ2IA+, slowing the over-harvesting of forests, protecting our waters, and many more. There are so many calls for action and aspects of our societies that need to be created anew. We should remember that it was also this way for earlier generations. When i consider what my L'nu ancestors lost and stood up for, i am reminded of the incredible resiliency of people. Our language is not dead. Our L'nu culture is not lost. Our people are still here against all odds. Let that be the inspiration for all of us in Canada and around the world. I do hope that everyone takes part in questioning their history and privilege, listening to the needs and voices of others who have been systematically oppressed and harmed, and helping in absolutely changing the systems that oppress. Let's all take steps in our lives to be part of the rebuilding work as we aim to live in a place that is inclusive and healthy for all.