

Book Club Kit

Discussion Guide

A Mind Spread Out on the Ground by Alicia Elliott

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Biography

Alicia Elliott is a Tuscarora writer from Six Nations of the Grand River. Her writing has been published by *The Malahat Review*, *Room*, *Grain*, *CBC*, *The Globe and Mail*, and *Maclean's*, among others. She is currently creative nonfiction editor at *The Fiddlehead*, associate nonfiction editor at *Little Fiction | Big Truths*, and a consulting editor with *The New Quarterly*.

Her essay "A Mind Spread Out on the Ground" won Gold at the National Magazine Awards in 2017, another of her essays, "On Seeing and Being Seen: Writing With Empathy" was nominated for a National Magazine Award in 2018. She was the 2017-2018 Geoffrey and Margaret Andrew Fellow at UBC, and was chosen by Tanya Talaga to receive the RBC Taylor Emerging Writer Prize in 2018. Her short story "Unearth" was selected by Roxane Gay to appear in *Best American Short Stories 2018*. Elliott lives in Brantford, Ontario, with her husband and child.

Review by Carleigh Baker

Alicia Elliott's debut is a tour de force; Tuscarora writer's essays infuse personal stories with social analysis and biting wit a la Roxane Gay

April 6, 2019

In a 2017 article in *The Walrus*, culture columnist and author Soraya Roberts said: "The personal essay isn't dead, it's just no longer white." This nail-on-the-head observation came in response to a *New Yorker* essay in which writer Jia Tolentino claimed that "after the Presidential election, many favoured personal-essay subjects - relationships, self-image, intimate struggle - seemed to hit a new low in broader social relevance."

Of course, in the writing world, the arbiters of social relevance have not traditionally been a very diverse group. The idea that the personal is not adequately political ignores the lived experience of racialized peoples. Continued daily existence in the face of genocide, slavery and continuing colonial erasure is, in fact, a political act. Roberts recognizes this, citing the works of Roxane Gay and Samantha Irby for their honesty and vulnerability, but also for their wisdom and sense of humour.

In her debut collection, *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground*, Tuscarora writer Alicia Elliott takes her place among essayists such as Gay and Irby, infusing intimate details of her own life with sociopolitical analysis and biting wit. In Elliott's deft hands, eating chocolate-chip cookies becomes a political act, as the deeply colonial and classist nature of the food pyramid is unravelled. In the essay *34 Grams Per Dose* she writes: "The ways Indigenous peoples deal with our trauma, whether with alcohol or violence or Chips Ahoy! cookies, get pathologized under colonialism. Instead of looking at the horrors Canada has inflicted upon us and linking them to our current health issues, Canada has chosen to blame our biology, as though those very genes they're blaming weren't marked by genocide, too."

In this collection, the particular structure of the personal essay - beginning with the experience of the writer and then weaving in threads of related material - is at its finest. Personal essays explore, they don't prescribe.

And they don't always come to a tidy conclusion, although Elliott has chosen to end most of her essays on a note of hope, or a call to action for readers. At the end of *34 Grams Per Dose* she does both, asking: "if intergenerational trauma can alter DNA, why can't intergenerational love?" It's a gentle call for loving resurgence, which echoes the work of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson.

Elliott asks a lot of questions, some rhetorical, some simply unanswerable as she unpacks the effects of intergenerational trauma. She does this perhaps most notably in the titular essay, which digs deep into the link between colonialism and depression. This essay asks more questions than it answers, which evokes a feeling that will resonate with many readers struggling with mental illness. When considering the Mohawk word that most closely resembles a depressive state, *wake'nikonhra'kwenhtara:'on* (a mind spread out on the ground), she asks: "If we had more terms and definitions backing up our

understanding of depression, would we have been better equipped to deal with it when its effects began tearing our communities apart? Would those who wanted to civilize us have been more open to listening if we'd used their words?" The entire collection is strong, but some standout moments include *Weight*, an essay on teen pregnancy, which Elliott has written in the second person. This startling choice employs the seldom-used point of view to maximum effect, placing the reader in the driver's seat of an experience that is often judged mercilessly by society. She writes: "Whenever you're alone, you place an anxious hand on your belly, feeling for a fluttering heartbeat.

You've heard throwing yourself down the stairs can cause miscarriage. But stairs are in short supply when you live in a trailer on the rez."

Elliott is not afraid to poke the bear, be it in the world of literature or federal politics. In *Not Your Noble Savage*, she turns her gaze on the gatekeepers of the Canadian literary canon, comparing the inherently sexist elements of the Indian Act - in which Indigenous women who married non-Indigenous men lost status while Indigenous men who married non-Indigenous women did not - to the literary community's willingness to uplift the voices of mixed-heritage Indigenous writers such as Thomas King over Pauline Johnson. Elliott writes: "The criticisms lobbed at Native authors are not about style or form or symbolism; they specifically replicate damaging colonial attitudes that Indigenous people have faced since contact."

In a book punctuated with mic-drop observations, this moment is perhaps bested only by Elliott's comparison of Justin Trudeau's campaign promises to Indigenous peoples to a "commitment phobic dude-bro you agreed to 'keep it casual' with ... finally refer[ring] to you as his girlfriend!" And of course, we all know how that turned out. Yes indeed, the personal essay is not the sole domain of white voices any longer, and with writers such as Elliott on the job, we are richer for it.

Source: **Globe and Mail**

[Alicia Elliott's debut is a tour de force; Tuscarora writer's essays infuse personal stories with social analysis and biting wit a la Roxane Gay](#)

Baker, C. (2019, April 6). Alicia Elliott's debut is a tour de force; Tuscarora writer's essays infuse personal stories with social analysis and biting wit a la Roxane Gay. *Globe and Mail*, R12.



Review by Alysha Mohamed

'A Mind Spread Out on the Ground' is a stunning meditation on trauma, decolonization, and love

November 13th, 2020

Tuscarora author Alicia Elliott starts her debut book, *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground*, by comparing depression to colonialism.

The feelings of death, mourning, pain, and loss are present in both experiences; she uses her personal journey with depression, layered with intricate metaphors and poetic musings, as a foil to the present realities of Indigenous communities grappling with the effects of colonization.

Elliott does not hold back in her analysis of colonialism and Eurocentrism. Her writing is raw and hurts to read, likely because it is so unapologetically truthful.

There is no condolence ceremony, she describes, for those “mourning themselves” in the aftermath of colonialism. “There’s no collective condolence ceremony for our people [...] those who need help to see our beauty and hear our songs and speak our language. But maybe, one day,” she writes, “there can be.”

Her opening essay encompasses the heart of the book—a balance between candid personal reflection and analysis of Indigenous history, all linked together through her complex Haudenosaunee identity.

She delves into her personal struggle of being mixed-race, how internalized racism impacted both her childhood and her experience with motherhood, and her experience with de-colonial romantic love.

Elliott uses the essay on recurring head lice to reveal a much deeper analysis of poverty on reservations; similarly, her essay on weight gain reveals a deeper truth about the inability of Indigenous families to afford nutritious food.

Nothing about the essays are simple, which is why her writing is so captivating. Every statement is an interconnected web of race, class, identity, and history that cannot be separated or boiled down to a single theme.

Elliott does not shy away from writing the most complex feelings of shame and resentment, admitting hard truths that most writers would run from.

“As much as it made me sick to admit it, internalized racism had warped me so much that I was actually relieved that my child didn’t look like my father, my aunts, my uncle, my grandmother,” writes Elliott in her essay on being mixed-race.

“Now my kid could, if they chose, deflect the sharp, parasitic legacy of shame and violence they’d inherited and disappear into whiteness.”

Because of her honesty, I felt comfortable addressing my own ignorance, condescension, and bias toward Indigenous communities in Canada. I realized the importance of decolonizing my mind to understand the complex realities of our country; I saw my internalized racism sticking out in the spaces between her writing.

This collection has been called “hard, vital medicine” by Warren Cariou, “a stunning, vital triumph of writing” by David Chariandy, and “fire with warmth, light, rage, and endless transformation” by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson.

When I read it, the book was all of the above. I had the profound experience of being truly seen as a woman of colour—with the knowledge that I am still an outsider to Indigenous culture—as if Elliott had climbed inside my body and felt the ridges of my bones, putting the feelings I could never articulate into writing.

I can only imagine the validating experience of experiencing her words as an Indigenous reader. Elliott presents herself as a flawed, honest, sexual woman who acknowledges and battles her childhood trauma. She refuses to be a simple archetype of Indigenous culture, and this in itself is wildly powerful.

Most importantly, she writes with love. She writes with love for her culture, her community, and her family, regardless of how flawed they are. She writes with love for herself while acknowledging she is the product of intergenerational trauma and colonialism. This idea is vividly encapsulated in her essay *On Seeing and Being Seen*.

“If you can’t write about us with a love for who we are as a people, what we’ve survived, what we’ve accomplished despite all attempts to keep us from doing so,” writes Elliot, “if you can’t look at us as we are and feel your pupils go wide, rendering all stereotypes a sham, a poor copy, a disgrace—then why are you writing about us at all?”

Source: **The Queen’s University Journal**

‘A Mind Spread Out on the Ground’ is a stunning meditation on trauma, decolonization, and love – The Queen’s University Journal

Mohamed, A. (2020, November 13). *‘A Mind Spread Out on the Ground’ is a stunning meditation on trauma, decolonization, and love*. The Queen’s University Journal.

<https://www.queensjournal.ca/a-mind-spread-out-on-the-ground-is-a-stunning-meditation-on-trauma-decolonization-and-love/>



Review by Brian Bethune

Alicia Elliott on the spectacular Indigenous renaissance in Canadian arts

March 27, 2019

It really is the perfect time for Alicia Elliott's *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground* to be published. In what the 31-year-old Tuscarora writer calls the Indigenous renaissance, Indigenous artistry has never had so spectacular a presence across Canada's cultural spectrum. Maliseet composer Jeremy Dutcher took the Polaris Music Prize last year, the third Indigenous winner in five years, while three Indigenous artists have won the annual Sobey Art Award since 2013. Indigenous poets have won the Griffin Prize, one of the richest and most prestigious poetry prizes in the world, three years running. With a constant presence on bestseller lists and among literary prize nominations and wins, Indigenous literature is now as integral to CanLit as the immigrant story. If the current wave of Indigenous cultural prominence recedes anywhere, it won't be in literature. Whatever this says about the country's blind spots in the past, there's never been a brighter spotlight on or a broader audience for incisive Indigenous cultural commentary.

Elliott delivers that commentary in exceptional essays as arresting as her title, which comes from a richly evocative Mohawk phrase for someone in the grip of depression. Assured enough to mock herself on occasion—"I don't have all the answers," she writes, after 200 pages of laying them down with utter assurance, "even if I sometimes imply I do"—Elliott ranges over a wide canvas. She tackles the vexed question of identity, both personal and political, powerfully linking larger questions of Indigenous life—from the residential school legacy to the loss of languages—to the unfolding of her own life. In forthright prose, in a format—a buzzed-about book from a major publisher—that should make it difficult for non-Indigenous Canadians to ignore, she also links past and present, laying out how the colonial legacy still shapes contemporary lives, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. And how real reconciliation is going to require an internal reformation within non-Indigenous Canada.

It's "complicated," Elliott says of her own identity, in her first use of a word that becomes a theme running right through an interview with her. She calls herself Tuscarora, one of the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee (historically known to white Canadians as the Iroquois), whose reserve near Brantford, Ont., is the country's most populous. That's not the federal government's assessment of Elliott's ethnicity. "Haudenosaunee people are matrilineal," she continues. "But the imposition of the Indian Act changed everything. If you were to look at my status card it would say I'm Mohawk because it traces through patrilineal lines and my father is Mohawk. We had to actually do research into what we would be traditionally, which—going through my father's maternal line—is Tuscarora."

Elliott traces herself through her father's maternal lineage because, complicating matters further, her own mother is white. She describes her "white-passing" skin colour as both a lifelong "shield" against casual racial harassment and a childhood "barrier" between her and her darker cousins, making her "both winner and loser, abuser and victim." Also, not having been raised on the reserve, Elliott did not

have Haudenosaunee culture “slowly, carefully poured into her hands” as those cousins did.

“There’s so much misunderstanding about Indigenous identity,” she says. “I look at it as being a citizen of a country. Indigeneity as a racial concept was something created by colonialism, something that we never acknowledged. We had adoptions into our nations that would have been similar to the way immigration works: you have to agree to certain things, to abiding by the Great Law and so forth. For me to say that I am Native means that is my affiliation, my nation, the group I have allegiance to. It doesn’t conflict to say I’m both Native and white-passing, or that I had to come to the culture later in life because of family circumstances. Those are things a lot of people who are Indigenous have to deal with.” Canada’s preferred image of an Indigenous person, she writes, is not “the modern Native girl in a sweatshirt and jeans trying to figure out how she fits in ‘Reconciliation© Canada,’ ” but a stoic full-blooded Indian man decked out in beads and leather.

“Although,” she adds, in what could be a swipe at an unnamed Joseph Boyden, or, to be precise, at Boyden’s fans, “should the genuine artifact be unavailable, Canada will happily accept a handsome, agreeable white dude with tenuous Indigenous ‘roots’ as a substitute.”

If Elliott’s family circumstances brought her to parse identity closely, they also impelled her toward wider connections. Both her parents have engaged in domestic abuse and been arrested on various charges; the criminal justice system “didn’t help them, or our family.” Her mother’s abuse Elliott links to episodes of severe mental illness, eventually diagnosed as bipolar disorder, her father’s to intergenerational trauma—what his father inflicted on him. But the depression that has afflicted all of them, Elliott included, she believes to be as much a cultural phenomenon as a matter of personal history and brain chemistry. “We live in a society that is very much about the individual,” she says, where we are each responsible for pulling ourselves up, or where no one’s responsible when mental illness strikes. “The problem with that is that we don’t think of things such as class or race, even when you’re consistently having to worry about where your next meal is coming from or you know that when you’re looking for an apartment people are going to take one look at you and not want to rent. But those things are there—cultural depression, if you will.”

There are a lot of supposed “individual” choices in Indigenous life that are in fact out of people’s control, Elliott notes. Reading a study on the lingering effects of the Holodomor, the Ukrainian famine deliberately induced by a Soviet government determined to extinguish Ukrainian resistance and identity, she feels her breath catching in her throat. Never before had she seen an account of a non-Indigenous person sharing “my people’s experience of genocide,” especially as the decades roll on. Despite high literacy rates and economic success, Ukraine has the highest percentage among 41 countries surveyed of 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds who drink alcohol at least once a week, and 11-year-olds who smoke at least once a week, as well as the lowest life expectancy in Europe, all familiar pathologies in Canadian Indigenous communities. Starvation and chronic hunger have continuing, epigenetic effects that last for generations, among them substance abuse and elevated rates of diabetes among Indigenous people, rates that many non-Indigenous people blame on “lifestyle choices” or Indigenous biology, Elliott writes.

“My father has diabetes,” she comments, and she looks warily ahead to her own diagnosis.

Unlike in Ukraine, the original crime continues, she writes. Many observers decry an ongoing “cultural genocide” still levied on Indigenous peoples. Elliott has no use for the adjective—it’s just plain genocide that she sees coming from a Canadian state that has not fundamentally changed its attitude, only its tactics. How else to explain an apology for residential schools co-existing with ongoing underfunding of Indigenous children’s education, or widespread anger over the fate of the murdered Tina Fontaine paradoxically combined with silence over the child welfare system that left Fontaine vulnerable in the first place? “Today, the child welfare system abducts Indigenous children at abnormally high rates,” says Elliott. “And it is kind of terrifying to realize the number of Indigenous kids who are currently in the system exceeds the number of kids that were ever involved in residential schools. Yeah, that’s pretty alarming, given the high rates of high school failure and prison time among children from foster care. You know something is at play—it’s not much different from residential schools, just a variation.” Canada carries on as it began, she says, its economic system still “based on Indigenous destruction.”

If there are sparks of hope, one of the brightest lies in the cultural renaissance, in the admiration and respect Canadians are according Indigenous art. Although Elliott believes Indigenous writers are still treated differently in a way that reflects lingering colonial attitudes—“I read a magazine interview with [Griffin Prize winner Billy-Ray] Belcourt in which the interviewer seemed almost offended at the fact Belcourt is very well-educated and uses a lot of big words, when his poetry deals with very complex issues of sexuality, gender and colonialism”—the situation is changing rapidly. “We are moving on from a situation where we had to constantly address who we are, why we matter, constantly explaining things about our culture, things that white writers specifically don’t have to deal with. They can move on to what actually interests me: what do I want to do stylistically, what really cool things that would play with form or time? We have gone from Lee Maracle fighting to get a foot in the door to Joshua Whitehead writing a cyberpunk poetry book. We’re now able to show our creativity and talk about things other than just our identities.”

Respect for artistry is a balm Elliott acknowledges, but it doesn’t come close to countering continuing assaults on Indigenous life. Canada still wants what it has always wanted, the resources on (or beneath) Indigenous land, which means the path to true reconciliation—which requires acceptance of Indigenous sovereignty—can seem permanently impassable. In her last and most provocative essay, which links domestic violence to state-sponsored violence in the same way she sees her own family as the micro reflection of macro Indigenous culture, she asks her readers a series of questions about their true responses to abuse and exploitation. It culminates in questions about what Elliott, borrowing a term from writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, refers to as extractionism, the entrenched idea that the land and its resources are there to be plundered. “What do you want? Are those desires based on extraction? Are they dependent on capitalism or colonialism?”

Elliott's message is clear: For reconciliation to finally arrive, it's non-Indigenous Canada that has to change, to become more like Indigenous Canada, rather than the reverse. Otherwise, the past—not dead at all or even really in the past—will carry on and on and on.

Source: **Maclean's**

Alicia Elliott on the spectacular Indigenous renaissance in Canadian arts

Bethune, B. (2019, March 27). Alicia Elliott on the spectacular Indigenous renaissance in Canadian arts. *Maclean's*. <https://macleans.ca/society/alicia-elliott-on-the-spectacular-indigenous-renaissance-in-canadian-arts/>



Interview by Chelene Knight

Whose Story Is It? In Conversation with Alicia Elliott

May 20, 2017

Our managing editor Chelene Knight spoke with Alicia Elliott about what it's like being an Indigenous writer in the CanLit world, and her thoughts on authenticity when telling an experience that isn't your own.

ROOM: Your essay “On Seeing and Being Seen: The Difference Between Writing With Empathy and Writing With Love” [originally published as “On Seeing and Being Seen: Writing With Empathy” in *Write*] was eye-opening for me on so many levels. When you said “I’d never seen a girl like myself in the books I loved so much,” I was immediately connected. Why do you think it’s important for young girls to see characters that mirror themselves?

Alicia Elliott: I think that it’s a bit of a problem that we have media with which to measure ourselves against. It can be good when we see ourselves reflected back. But when we don’t see ourselves reflected back, it fosters this idea that we are not normal, that we are somehow wrong, that our experiences are not valid and we should be keeping them a secret. I think that when you see yourself reflected back in literature and art there’s recognition that you matter, that your experiences are valid and that you exist. Without that, we have all of these mediated images that essentially erase our existence from the spaces we occupy, the countries we live in and the lives that we lead.

ROOM: I agree. I find that if we are not seeing ourselves, in a way, it’s silencing.

In thinking about the way in which our work is read and judged (in terms of being women of colour) I sometimes feel like I am judged based on “what I am” before my work is judged on its quality or lack thereof. I know from reading your essay that you feel this way as well. Should we have to “hide who we are” just to get an honest opinion of our writing? Can you talk a bit about your experience with this?

Alicia Elliott: I think that all of it is connected in terms of representation because the way that POC, Indigenous people, trans people, or any marginalized people have been kept out of dominant representations in media, literature, art, and all of these things, make it so that people don’t know who we are. They have very narrow ideas of who we are, what we can achieve, of the kinds of things we are interested in, the kind of people that we are, and because of that they carry these opinions when they approach our art. So if someone says to me “why did you make this character Indigenous”—when that isn’t a central part of the story—it says to me they see Indigeneity as a very specific thing. They see it in a very limited way. They question my use of it because it doesn’t adhere to their image which they have crafted and constructed from stereotypes that have been given to them by mainstream media and by Canada. In a sense it’s all kind of connected. It makes you question yourself.

We have to figure out how to navigate our truths around what they want from us. It puts us in an awful situation. I met Leanne Simpson in an emerging Indigenous writers program run through the Banff Centre and she said she writes for Indigenous readers. It was only when she said that that I understood why I was having problems when I was writing. I wasn’t writing for Indigenous readers because the

gatekeepers who are publishing are not Indigenous and I had to make sure this was appealing to them. I had to make sure my version of Indigeneity was palatable to these non-Indigenous editors so I could get my foot in the door. And when you think about it that way it's incredibly alienating. And that's what we have to contend with from any marginalized community.

ROOM: Yeah! It's almost like . . . whose hands do I want my work in? You know those moments where you can change someone's life with your story? I live for those moments.

You referenced Tania Canas's article where she says "Diversity is a white word" and you describe diversity as the literary equivalent of "ethnic" restaurants. I find this spot on. I strongly dislike the idea of checking diversity criteria off a list versus giving people space and making sure this space is sustainable and equitable, but it seems to me the "check-boxing" is what happens in the CanLit world. How can we do better?

Alicia Elliott: CanLit needs to take a good hard look at itself. Who are in the positions [to make] decisions on what gets published and what doesn't get published? What is the criteria? Is it based on the artistic merit of the work itself, or is it based on preconceived notions they have on what particular people from marginalized communities should be saying? This bothers me, especially in regards to what makes CanLit so boring. What makes CanLit so white and middle class? When you are talking about encouraging writers who are white and middle class to make their work more interesting by using other cultures as window dressing to make their stories more spicy—that's fetishism. That's not approaching a culture in a way that shows that you respect it and that you are doing this from a good place. I honestly believe you should be asking yourself "why am I doing this?" And if the answer is "I want to" and you don't have anything more . . . I don't think that's good enough.

To truly change this you need to look at systemic stuff. You need to look at how many POC, Indigenous people, people with different abilities, and LGBT people are in publishing houses. How many are editors? How many are agents? How many can actually take their own lived experiences and treat writers who are from other marginalized communities with the respect and dignity they deserve? Sometimes the best help is to get out of the way and make space.

ROOM: Just getting out of the way. That's very powerful. And that ties into the whole sustainable and equitable portion of that question. How do we make space and keep space? Such an important thing to think about.

Whose story is it? What should writers be asking themselves before putting pen to paper when writing about someone else's experience to make sure it's written in an authentic way?

Alicia Elliott: Before they even think about other cultures, they need to think about themselves. If you are from a marginalized community, you can see the way that systemic oppression works in a way you cannot see when you are directly benefiting from that oppression. Whiteness makes itself invisible. So many feminist intersectional scholars have done important work on that. You need to situate yourself in terms of what privileges you have and where you are coming from. You need to do that before you start thinking about whose story you are going to write. You need to think about your position in relationship

to that community. Once you do that, you can meaningfully start that process of building a relationship with that community.

If you are writing from a cultural experience that is not your own, you need to do your due diligence. In today's age, it is so easy to talk to people over social media. All you have to do is start talking to people, and not just one person. There's no excuse to not build relationships with communities if you are interested in telling those stories.

All of us writers should be trying to tell good stories well. You aren't going to tell good stories well if it's inauthentic. And it's going to be inauthentic if you aren't doing your research and building those relationships. These are important things that you need to do so that someone from that community can come to you and say "thank you." That should be your end goal. Someone saying "oh my god, I know that you aren't writing my experience, but I could recognize myself"—that is the measure of success when you are writing from another perspective. That's what you should be aiming for.

ROOM: That is huge! You should always have a fear of getting it wrong. If you don't initially have that fear, something isn't right!

Alicia Elliott: Oh, yeah!

ROOM: The majority of the big Canadian Literary Prize winners are white. Sorry to be so blunt, but it's true. Have you seen the article on Literistic? What are your thoughts on this?

Alicia Elliott: [laughs] So much of that . . . you can almost draw lines from one thing to another, essentially.

White people have been published at much higher rates, so statistically speaking they are going to have a higher chance of being published. Why? Because their opinions and views are seen as universal because they are white and whiteness is seen as universal and everyone should be trying to achieve this universality, which is whiteness. To me, all of these people being published and winning awards—also by juries who are often white—is just part of the racism of the literary industry. It's a little bit absurd when you think about it: that these places and the people don't have the capacity to see how this is systemic and aren't able to trace it.

It so obvious to people who aren't members of the Canadian elite—who aren't benefiting from this—and it's a mystery to them, I guess. But it's obvious they think that writing about race is niche, not understanding that because they aren't writing about race they are writing about race. It isn't a concern to them. They don't have to write about race because it's not something in their everyday lives. It's not something that's bearing down on them. That's a privilege. If you can't see universalities across experiences regardless of where someone is situated in terms of their intersectionality, then I don't know how to help you!

We've had to read white writers for centuries and we've still been able to connect to their work, so to assume you are emotionally unable to connect with people because you do not share their experiences is absolutely ridiculous. It boggles my mind.

ROOM: It will take a while. These conversations are so important.

When thinking about “the claustrophobic world of CanLit,” what can we do as writers to provide each other the space to breathe?

Alicia Elliott: We are doing that. One of the things that was most apparent to me after the fallout with UBC Accountable, and in the Indigenous community after the Boyden controversies—there is a community of women, of queer writers, of Indigenous writers who are supporting and upholding each other regardless of what the people at the top are saying. Regardless of the publishing houses, regardless of different literary magazines.

We are supporting one another emotionally, which is a big thing that often gets overlooked in terms of the emotional labour of trying to constantly explain our work, explain ourselves, and try and teach people how to appreciate us for who we are as opposed to what they want us to be. This is incredibly difficult, and just being there for one another and upholding one another’s work is so valuable. And it’s reaffirming. Magazines like Room—which give us space and encourage us to be ourselves and speak as we are—are vital. Regardless of whether the industry is willing to change, it’s going to, and we are going to change it.

ROOM: That’s really what it is. Us supporting each other. There’s this emotional weight we are carrying around all the time and knowing that we have someone who is going to listen and share our voices the way we want them shared . . . super important The CanLit world is going to have to change.

Things that shouldn’t get published sometimes get published, opinion or not. What is the ultimate responsibility of the editor?

Alicia Elliott: You need to think about the message you are sending with your publication. If every article is written by a white writer, you need to think about what perspective that brings to your publication. These are the voices that you are giving the opportunities to. These are the versions of stories you are putting out there as “worth publishing.” It is a very heavy burden that editors have on their shoulders in terms of choosing who to publish, choosing what stories to run, and it’s not something that should be taken lightly. It’s a responsibility, and to [handle] that responsibility well you need to be aware of the biases you may hold. You need to be aware of the bias that your writers may hold. [I’m] not necessarily saying that people aren’t allowed to say whatever they want—that’s fine, they can say whatever they want. But when you decide to publish them you are choosing that position over other potential positions on an issue. Are you okay with that?

Stories that are published have a ripple effect and really shape the way that people view the world around them. Not to scare everyone away from being an editor, but this is something you have to contend with at the end of the day. And if you are comfortable with what you have done, then there is no issue. But if you end up not being comfortable because you were too quick to publish something without checking, or you gave voice to people who essentially are hate-mongering, and then people don’t have the time or access to doublecheck those people’s claims, what’s going to happen? What are they going to do? These are the things you need to contend with.

It comes down to examining your values, because your values are going to be reflected in the pages.

ROOM: Exactly.

Source: **Room**

Whose Story Is It? In Conversation with Alicia Elliott

Knight, C. (2017, May 20). *Whose story is it? In conversation with Alicia Elliott*. Room.
<https://roommagazine.com/whose-story-is-it-in-conversation-with-alicia-elliott/>



Interview by Rebecca Salazar

A Mind Spread Out on the Ground: A Conversation with Alicia Elliott

May 9, 2019

Rebecca Salazar: First, congratulations on your debut book! I remember you reading from a drafted chapter when we first met in Banff, and it's such a privilege to get to read the finished collection; your writing moves seamlessly between deeply engaging storytelling, incisive cultural critique, and searing vulnerability. Many of these essays were published before their appearance in the book. How was the process of assembling them into book form?

Alicia Elliott: It was easier when I was writing for me to think about each essay individually and focus on editing it and making it the best it could be on its own. I didn't want there to be a bad essay in the collection. When it came time to think about ordering the essays, my husband Mike pointed out how I had certain themes I kept coming back to, so he really helped me make sure that I wasn't going on about one particular topic for too long. It was a conscious effort to ensure that readers wouldn't be bored. Trying to find the right rhythm between long and short essays was important to me, as well. Even with my longest essay, "Sontag, in Snapshots," I wanted to break it up with quotes so it didn't feel like it was a chore to get through. As I read my book front-to-back for the audiobook, it really struck me how certain essays speak to other essays, and how that rhythm works.

Rebecca Salazar: I have to ask if you have your book launch lipstick or eyeshadow look planned ahead—any hints?

Alicia Elliott: I just had my book launch two days before writing this, so I can definitely answer this question! I was gifted the Natasha Denona Gold Palette by the Doubleday team as a book launch present, so I wore that, and a bright red lipstick from Kat Von D. I woke up from my pre-launch nap much later than I planned, so it didn't look the best, but that's fine. I guess.

Rebecca Salazar: I think I texted you at one point while reading your book to say I was taking notes on your shade-throwing technique. Whether you are calling out how Canadians try to temper discussions of genocide by adding the word "cultural" ("as if that somehow softens its edges and makes it more permissible. More Canadian"); or dragging the tokenistic naming of schools after Indigenous poets ("Pauline Johnson, the local Mohawk poet good enough to name a school after but apparently not good enough to have her work taught within it"); or reading to filth the hypocrisy of certain CanLit figures, you make a strong case for sarcasm as critical praxis. How did you come to find this use of irony so powerful in your writing?

Alicia Elliott: Yes, you did! It made me laugh so hard. I've talked about this a little bit before, but I've noticed that often the most marginalized and oppressed groups of people are also the funniest. It's probably to some extent a coping mechanism. I mean, the traumatizing circumstances a lot of Indigenous people have been and continue to be in aren't very funny, but we can't very well continue on through ongoing genocide without finding the little joys in life. Laughter is medicine in that way, and it came very naturally to my writing, as I think it does to a lot of Indigenous writers' work.

Plus I've always been that eye-rolling teenage girl who throws out remarks like that, so why not embody that in my book?

Rebecca Salazar: So many of these essays illustrate how colonial oppressions—including racism, poverty, sexual violence—are physiological. From hunger, to lice infestation, to depression and suicide, you pay such close attention throughout this collection to how social traumas are literalized in the body, and especially so for Indigenous women. Can you say more about why this physicality was important for you to acknowledge?

Alicia Elliott: I find that it's easy for people to turn away from abstract things like statistics, reports, etc. They don't necessarily know what poverty and colonialism, for example, look like on an individual, day-to-day level. I wanted to make it comprehensible to those people by grounding these big abstract concepts and histories in concrete, personal detail. That often meant rooting these oppressions in the body, because that's usually where we feel these systems of oppression most acutely. It's not just in our minds; racism affects our bodies, our stress levels, our health. It's a totally different, but more accurate way, of looking at oppression than the sorts of conversations we often see happening in the mainstream media.

Rebecca Salazar: Near the end of the title essay, "A mind spread out on the ground," you write that "both depression and colonialism have stolen my language." This essay in particular demonstrates how colonialism suppresses Indigenous languages and then erases the cultural specificity of trauma from institutional understandings of mental illness—leaving entire communities without the words to articulate their suffering or their survival. And yet, you finish that chapter with the assertion that "things that were stolen once can be stolen back." How do you see this reclamation taking place, in your own writing as well as in your communities?

Alicia Elliott: My son recently told me that he wants to go to the same Mohawk program that my sister went to when he graduates high school. When he said that I wanted to cry. He's one of so many young Indigenous people who aren't ashamed of our culture or our languages, the way that our parents were taught to be. They see our culture and languages as something to treasure and cherish. That fills me with so much hope.

I want to eventually go through that program, as well, and hopefully learn Tuscarora before it dies out. (There are very few Tuscarora speakers left.) It's a very intense program, since English is so different from Haudenosaunee languages. Monday to Friday, 9-4. Of course, it's currently dependent on funding from the government, which isn't always there. And since there are more and more of our people wanting to learn, it means there's less money to go around, since the funding hasn't really increased that much. This is why it's so important for Canada to declare Indigenous languages national languages. We would have so much more funding in communities so people like myself and my son could learn without wondering how we're going to eat.

Rebecca Salazar: The way you map out the effects of colonial language suppression makes it feel analogous to the neurological process by which trauma physically shuts down the part of the brain that stitches events into coherent memories—both processes result in a fragmentation of linear narrative. I see this reflected in the structure of your essays in a way that de-pathologizes that fragmentation: your storytelling is associative rather than chronological, moves thematically through space and time, and often, untold fragments of an anecdote told in one essay often appear later on, in another,

unexpectedly expanding the story. Instead of trying to “fix” the non-linear nature of trauma narratives, your collection seems to find creative potential in “a mind spread out on the ground.” Can you speak to how you think about form in CNF writing about trauma?

Alicia Elliott: The nature of writing is to try and make experiences sensible to your readers. That gets difficult when you’re writing about trauma, because there’s so much about trauma that doesn’t make sense. When I start an essay, particularly one about trauma, I’m trying to write towards a truth that I’m not sure exists. Instead of going straight down the obvious, linear path—which I find often leads to a dead end—I try to go through a series of side doors, circling towards this idea of truth and hoping to excavate other truths in the process. That’s what’s so exciting to me about CNF: I never know where I’m going to end up. I never know what I’m going to end up bringing into the fray. It’s a form that welcomes that sort of exploration, though, which I’m thankful for.

Rebecca Salazar: Many of the stories you tell in this collection explicitly challenge what readers expect from stories about racialized and gendered trauma—and how marginalized writers are expected to perform their marginality. Similar to something Hannah Gadsby argues in her comedy special *Nanette*, you write that “the more that we revisit events, the more entrenched they become in our memory,” and thus, that constantly retelling a trauma traps a survivor in reliving it. While Gadsby posits a need to move forward and tell a different story, perhaps by switching to another genre, you advocate for the right to forget: the right to dissociate away from pain or danger, and the right not to owe anyone proof or performance of trauma. Given the power that your collection acknowledges in storytelling as a way to reclaim and heal traumatic histories, why do you think this option also deserves to be advocated for?

Alicia Elliott: I think it’s important to differentiate between personal experiences of trauma and larger traumatic histories. When you’re a survivor of violence, you need to be able to move on. There are many ways to be able to do that, and I’m not interested in pathologizing certain responses to trauma as “good” or “bad.” That puts too much responsibility on the person and not enough on the society that allowed this trauma to happen and left this person to handle it on their own. Things get complicated, of course, if that survivor starts to deal with their trauma by inflicting trauma on others. I don’t feel we, as a society, are at the point where we can have those kinds of nuanced discussions about this yet, though. Not while the criminal justice system exists the way it does.

On a societal level, on the other hand, it’s actually essential that we acknowledge the histories that we don’t want to acknowledge, because those histories are embodied within individuals. They literally cannot be ignored—even on a genetic level, which I look at in my essay, “34 grams per dose.” The only way to heal from those traumas is to first acknowledge them, then start looking at the systems that created them, how those systems operate now, and then start to dismantle them. Again, though, I don’t think we’re there yet. I hope we get there very, very soon.

Rebecca Salazar: Many of your essays transform familiar stories from pop culture, science, or mythology to suggest new possibilities and teachings. “Dark matter” turns the scientific mystery of dark matter into a parable for the unspoken history of white supremacy in Canada, while “On forbidden rooms” interrogates the fairy-tale exoneration of Bluebeard’s cruelty and relates the Catholic parable of St. Thomas’s doubt to the way survivors of sexual violence are doubted and re-violated by demands for proof (the latter is an especially chilling analogy that completely reframes Thomas’ demand to probe Jesus’ wounds in order to “prove” they are real). You’ve written before about how you find storytelling

in everything from wrestling to pseudoscience. What draws you to the stories to interact with in your writing?

Alicia Elliott: It's all very instinctual. Sometimes it's easier to go into something very personal by first going into something that's removed from you, like a fairy tale or a Kanye West album. While interrogating why my mind went to that particular place, I usually find that there's something surprising that connects the two experiences.

Rebecca Salazar: You're going to be part of a panel at this year's AWP titled "Indigenous Fiction: Intersections in the United States & Canada." Your own book crosses and blurs colonial border that separates the two countries; can you say more about the relationship between Indigenous writers on either side of the border?

Alicia Elliott: I'm actually on the way to AWP right now! Like, literally typing this on the plane! Twitter has made it so much easier to find one another than it would have been ten years ago. Still, I don't have as much knowledge of and connection to Indigenous writers living in what's currently called The United States as I'd like, if I'm being honest. The literary industry is much different in the U.S. than it is in Canada, so until very recently with the success of writers like Terese Marie Mailhot, Tommy Orange, Layli Long Soldier, Elissa Washuta and Tommy Pico, there was very much a "there can only be one!" mentality when it came to Native writers. I think that's starting to change now—or at least I hope it is.

In Canada, the market is much smaller, so we kind of have to stick together in a different way than writers in the States do. We are seeing a similar rise in Indigenous talent, though. We're winning all the awards and topping best-seller lists. It's incredible how different the market is now than it was even five years ago.

It's interesting, though, because the two men who took up most of the air in Indigenous lit. in the U.S. (Sherman Alexie) and Canada (Joseph Boyden) have both had monumental falls from grace within the past few years. This has had the perhaps expected side effect of making so much more space for new voices. It's almost like they had to leave the limelight for audiences to realize what they were losing by focusing most of their energy and attention on just those two men. And it can't go back to the way it was before. We won't let it.

Rebecca Salazar: I have lately found myself doubting the way I write about my own trauma—I keep feeling guilt over inflicting representations of it on possible readers, and asking myself for whom I am writing, and why. There is a tenderness in your writing that guides your readers and holds them through the most difficult passages with empathy and humour. How do you build this relationship of care with your possible readers when you are writing? How do you also care for yourself while writing?

Alicia Elliott: Unlike some writers who can't imagine their readers' reactions while they're writing, I write with the audience in the front of my mind. I can't help it. I want to make sure that my readers feel safe inside my work. Doing that consciously shapes my work into what I want it to be, instead of having to later edit my writing so that it doesn't inflict harm.

You can't write about an experience until you're somewhat removed from it. You have to be able to step back enough that you can look at the experience not just as an emotional event, but as something that can be edited and crafted. It's hard to do that before you're ready. I've learned that the hard way while

writing parts of this book. Things I thought I could write about would make me start crying when I re-read it, so I just ended up deleting those parts and working around them. It's important to remember that you don't have to give everything to your reader all the time. You can control how much you give, and when and how you give it.

Rebecca Salazar: You write that seeing yourself represented in the writing of other Indigenous women, especially in Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's stories, "ultimately gave [you] permission to write [your] own." The final essay in this collection, "Extraction mentalities," quite literally grants readers permission to write their own stories—structured as a questionnaire, the essay offers blank lines for the reader to fill in their own part in the story you are telling. And yet, this permission to write requires the reader to admit their own histories of complicity in systems of abuse. If there is a lesson to learn here about the responsibility of writers and storytellers to their communities and kin, how would you sum it up?

Alicia Elliott: I don't like to dictate to people how they should write, but I do like to give side eye to writers who treat their craft as another exercise in extraction: who take stories, use them in whatever way will get them the most money or fame or awards, then move on to the next story without thinking about what the real impact of their writing has been. Because there is an impact. If you aren't consciously crafting your story to have a certain impact, you're leaving your reader to discern your message for you, which can be a very dangerous thing. I sincerely hope that writers really think about their responsibilities and not just about their rights. Not only is it more ethical, it just makes for better writing when you're purposeful in all that you do.

Source: **The Adroit Journal**

A Mind Spread Out on the Ground: A Conversation with Alicia Elliott

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Discussion Questions

1. In the title essay, how does Alicia Elliott liken depression to colonialism? What else does she say about mental health as it relates to her life?
2. Explore the mother-daughter relationship Elliott presents throughout the book. How does the author present her mother's Catholicism alongside her father's Mohawk traditions?
3. In "Half-Breed: A racial biography in five parts," what did her father mean by the phrase "decolonizing the mind"? How does the book suggest we get involved in that process?
4. Elliott takes the title of the essay "The Same Space" from a quote by Leslie Jamison: "The truth is we never occupied the same space. A space isn't the same for a person who has chosen to be there and a person who hasn't." How does she take this line and explore both the concept of space and time?
5. In "Dark Matters," how do racism and white privilege become invisible to certain people?
6. In the essay "34 grams per Dose," she writes, "And if intergenerational trauma can alter DNA, why can't intergenerational love?" What instances of intergenerational love does she mention? What other ways can we create intergenerational love?
7. How were the stories of Indigenous people's experience of violence presented? How did her tone and form impact your experience of these stories?
8. Elliott writes about the importance of stories written by Indigenous authors. Did this book make you reimagine your own preconceived notion of an Indigenous person?
9. "Extraction Mentalities" is a participatory essay. Did any of the questions resonate with you? How would you answer it?

Discussion Themes

Mental Health | White privilege | Family | Homelessness | Violence and sexual assault