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“Writing to Commemorate their Strength”: Kinship and Gender in *Dammed*

LIANNE C. LEDDY

In her 2020 monograph, *Dammed: The Politics of Loss and Survival in Anishinaabe Territory*, Brittany Luby provides a model for Indigenous historical methods that are rooted in her homeland. This review essay foregrounds Luby’s exemplification of kinship, which I am defining in Anishinaabe terms here as her relationships with land, water, beings, and people, all of which are evident in this study. This brings me to my related point, which is how the author’s positionality as a historian makes this a community history that guides readers to see links between the past and Indigenous futures. While Luby’s attention to gender is woven throughout the book, I’ll focus on her examinations of Indigenous men’s labour and of breastmilk and breast health, both powerful examples of loss and resilience in Indigenous communities. Luby’s community connections to this story — she is the daughter of former chief Allan Luby (Ogemah); a descendent of Chief Kawitaskung, a signatory of Treaty 3; and the great-great-granddaughter of Ogimaamaashiik (Matilda Martin) — make this a thoughtful and compelling study.

Though this is a monograph deeply rooted in the discipline of history, I was inspired by how much I was thinking about the future as I read it. From the very beginning, the reader is made to understand that continuity from the past to the future, even when there are colonial interruptions and traumas, is essential to understanding Indigenous histories.¹ For instance, Luby dedicated the book both to her ancestors and to the “many children yet to be born along its banks. May you sing of the future that your ancestors envisioned.”² Her dedication, which is rooted in place, along with the story that follows, ties the water to the Anishinaabek who call it home. To further illustrate my point, I wish also to highlight the words of Chief Lorraine Cobiness from her foreword. As she told Emma Stelter, “We want a future that includes rice and sturgeon.”³ To be sure, these food staples are important in Luby’s homeland, and the sturgeon, in particular, is also seen as kin to which members of her community have responsibilities.⁴ Through the example of the sturgeon, we see that food resources are not only crucial for physical survival, but they are also relations that need to be attended to carefully.

Furthermore, Chief Cobiness's statement links Luby's story to the future of her homeland and waters. Luby's positionality as a scholar with ancestral ties to the community is evident, and, heeding Eve Tuck's call to distance ourselves from damage-centred research about Indigenous communities, Luby has balanced a story of loss with one of Anishinaabe resilience, of facing forward.⁵ Her interview process, informed by the Anishinaabe Custom Council, included sending invitations to the families on the band list. Furthermore, wanting to ensure that interviewees were not overburdened with interview requests to tell such difficult and often traumatic stories, she worked with local historian Cuyler Cotton to overlap their work where possible. This care for her community Elders and Knowledge Keepers is a model for other historians engaging with Indigenous histories, to make sure that they are not overworked or further harmed by the research process. Luby's use of the snowball effect, which also extended to archival and publicly available sources, allowed her to ensure that the proper stories — that is, ones already in the public domain — were told to, as she writes, respect "Elders' concerns about appropriation."⁶ In other words, some of these related stories should be kept in the community rather than published, which means that there are added ethical research considerations when engaging with Indigenous community histories. Luby prioritized these publicly available stories to ensure that boundaries were in place where necessary to protect certain sensitive community knowledge.

Luby's historical methodology incorporated archival research as well, and, while it is not uncommon for records of this time period to be closed to researchers, she was able to access some closed materials because of her family connections. As Luby writes, "My ability to tell this story, to access archival material is the outcome of historical trauma experienced by my paternal ancestors."⁷ Archival materials related to Indigenous peoples, of course, usually arise from colonial records — those tied to churches, traders, explorers, Indian Affairs, or other governmental forces — and so it is not solely the story told in archival documents that is traumatic, but the fact that their very existence is often tied to traumatic colonial processes and interruptions. In this sentence alone, not only do we see the importance of Luby's kinship and community ties to her methodology and perhaps even the reasons for pursuing this study in the first place, but we also feel the weight of responsibility she must have felt to tell this story well and in a way that was accountable and consistent with her positionality.

This emphasis on kinship and responsibility continues throughout the book. Luby documents the example of the clan that took its name from the sturgeon, which Elder Alice Kelly reminded a (Native American and Indigenous Studies Association) NAISA audience of as recently as 2012, thereby indicating intimate kinship between humans and non-humans (or all aspects of Creation).⁸ She also demonstrates how fur trader records indicate that Anishinaabek were independent because of the sturgeon, making them less dependent on the goods and colonial foods brought in for trade. Indeed, settler records noted this independence made the local Anishinaabek “‘sometimes even a little saucy’ during cross-cultural encounters.”⁹ Kin take care of each other through reciprocal relationships and responsibilities, which Luby extends in her local community context to tending to *manitou gitigenan*, the Great Spirit’s Garden. Tending to *manitou gitigenan* responsibly and in a good way has three important tenants: only taking what you need for sustenance, offering tobacco as thanks, and making seasonal offerings of thanks to Creation.¹⁰

Even the recollections of Treaty 3, dating to 1873 and the negotiations that came before, focus on the fish. As Luby writes, “Commissioner Dawson recalled that Crown representatives promised that the Anishinaabeg ‘would forever have the use of their fisheries.’”¹¹ Anishinaabek negotiators were explicit in their insistence that the protection of water and fishing rights were part of the treaty, even demanding fishing gear for Anishinaabe *kwewak* (women). Settler negotiators, who wanted an agreement negotiated quickly, saw this as “extravagant,” and certainly from their perspective, it must have been seen as an inconvenient way to protect a resource-driven Anishinaabe economy. But Luby convincingly argues that there was more to it for Anishinaabe negotiators — namely, the protection of the fish, the river, and, by extension, the homeland of their descendants. It was a treaty entered into to protect kinship relations long into the future. Of course, as readers know, the development of the water for hydroelectricity, coupled with increased settler expansion at Kenora, soon meant that Anishinaabe families could no longer depend on the river as they once had. Human waste and mercury contamination meant people couldn’t fish to support their families, nor could women depend on whitefish to support their children through breastmilk (a point to which I will return). It also meant a decline in the sturgeon population likely due to hypoxia from mill operations, which Luby demonstrates through her incorporation of Elders’ own recollections of their lives in the 1950s.¹² The Treaty clearly

had not succeeded in protecting the kin in the water system as Luby's ancestors had hoped, and this, in turn, had an impact on community members through their close circles of kinship.

We can also see that Luby continues her examination of kinship through the gendered nature of colonial experiences, namely, both wage work and mother work. She provides us with a nuanced view of wage work as adaptive and a form of resistance. Specifically, the people of Dulles 38C could no longer depend on the river directly as they had prior to hydroelectric development, as it had consequences for trapping, growing *manomin* (wild rice), and mobility. In fact, the changing river dynamics led to tragic drownings. Wage work, then, was a way for Anishinaabe men to contribute to their families and secure their futures. Thinking of the diaspora from the reserve community, of which Luby is a part, as being tied to the loss of wage labour instead of solely the change in homeland and waters is something historians must better understand in our examinations of similar encounters with industrialization, extraction, and dispossession. Indigenous communities are not one-dimensional, and on- and off-reserve experiences can vary widely, which Luby examines through her own family's path to Kenora in the conclusion. Here is yet another point that adds nuance to our understandings of Indigenous history: that is, the varied experiences of Indigenous communities and families in deciding where to live, whether this was due to having to find wage work, contending with the heteropatriarchy of the Indian Act, or other adaptive responses to settler incursions.

By seeing wage work as an adaptive strategy to keep communities together (if possible) and integrating oral history to get a fulsome view of Anishinaabe men's experiences, Luby has successfully challenged the dominant narrative of loss or, as she says, "the tendency of scholars to focus on the economic losses of fishers, hunters, and trappers, not on the economic gains of Anishinaabe men."¹³ Again, Luby provides examples of Anishinaabe men relying on their kin networks to find jobs, making clear their agency in using family connections and communication to decide whether or not to engage in waged work. Her nuanced argument that they were motivated to work to benefit the socioeconomic health of the community, literally "labouring to keep the reserve alive," was made possible through her use of oral history. Such an analysis may not have been possible using archival documents alone and was enriched by her personal connections and accountabilities to community Knowledge Keepers.

Luby's examination of Anishinaabe women's experiences is most clearly seen in her examples of women's waged work and that of mother's milk. In the interests of space, I will focus on the latter, as it reminds us of our responsibilities to future generations and the continuity of kinship. As an Anishinaabekwe, a mother, and a historian whose homeland and waters have also borne the brunt of capitalistic and colonial forces, I am keenly aware that our past frames us and our well-being. In the lands now known as Canada, these patterns continue to resonate in our communities and families in the present day. At the same time, we are strong and resilient nations with clear responsibilities to our future and to the protection of those homelands. Luby eloquently shared the teaching that breastmilk is a medicine and demonstrated how Anishinaabe women in her community taught younger girls and women their responsibilities around breast health, always with an eye to their ability to feed their children. We might call this securing food sovereignty.¹⁴

At a time when food insecurity was rampant as a result of poverty and pollution in Luby's community, the ability of Anishinaabe mothers to feed their children was also threatened. Again, Luby has made clear connections for readers about the importance of kinship: just as hydroelectric development diminished Anishinaabe sovereignty over their territory, mercury contamination threatened Anishinaabe bodies and future inhabitants of Treaty 3 homeland. I was reminded of the breastfeeding teaching relayed by Anishinaabekwe thinker Leanne Betamosake Simpson, who learned it from Elder Edna Maniwabii. Simpson writes, "Breastfeeding is the very first treaty. Edna explained to me that breastfeeding is where our children learn about treaties, the relationships they encode and how to maintain good treaty relationships." Simpson connects kinship, relational reciprocity, and treaty-making by stating that breastfeeding

is ultimately about a relationship. Treaties are ultimately about a relationship. One is a relationship based on sharing between a mother and a child and the other based on sharing between two sovereign nations. Breastfeeding benefits both the mother and the child in terms of health and in terms of their relationship to each other. And treaties must benefit both sovereign independent nations to be successful.¹⁵

Here again, we can see why protecting the fish and providing fishing gear to Anishinaabe *kwewak* would have been so important to the

Anishinaabe negotiators of Treaty 3. It was to protect the river and fish, certainly, but it was also to protect the lives of generations of children yet to be born.

Not only was whitefish — a breastmilk production staple and widely accepted breastmilk substitute — in peril, but it had lost its medicinal qualities and, most painfully, was seen as a threat. As Luby writes about changes in the community as a result of pollution, “Unlike their mothers, these children were not taught that whitefish had medicinal qualities; rather, they learned that whitefish could harm them. And, as Anishinaabe women worked to eliminate breastfeeding within their communities, the strict rules for breast care – avoiding the use, for example, of push-up bras and slingshots – declined.”¹⁶ So it was not only the practices that were lost, then, but also the knowledge and the nature of the underlying relationships that changed. I was heartened by the ways in which Luby was attentive, through her own positionality and her use of oral history, to reclaiming this powerful knowledge, even in the context of a larger story of loss.

To that end, I appreciated the ways in which Luby examined the resilience of Anishinaabe mothers; this included defining the use of Carnation milk as an adaptive strategy, or women organizing events to share cautious messages with each other as well as other milk alternatives. Related to this, I also wonder about the impacts of powdered formula in the community, even for those who could afford to purchase it, when safe drinking water may have been compromised. Nevertheless, it is clear that Anishinaabe women, as they always had, shared knowledge and strategies with each other and new generations. Indeed, as a whole, *Dammed* demonstrates the resilience of the Anishinaabek in the face of devastation in Luby’s homeland. I’ll end with the example of the use of Carnation cans to make jingle dresses — our medicine regalia that dates back at least to the Spanish Flu pandemic, according to Anishinaabe historian Brenda Child.¹⁷ As Child explains, the Jingle Dress Dance, connected to healing, is done to “ensure the health and well-being of an individual, their family, or even the broader tribal community.”¹⁸ Although Anishinaabe women could no longer rely on breastmilk as a medicine due to the impacts of hydroelectric development and increased settler presence in their Treaty 3 homeland, *kwewak* nevertheless rolled those Carnation milk cans and lovingly made medicine regalia for their daughters.

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Endnotes

- 1 Susan M. Hill, *The Clay We are Made Of: Haudenosaunee Land Tenure on the Grand River* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017). Hill (Wolf Clan, Mohawk Nation), writing from a Haudenosaunee perspective, emphasizes Haudenosaunee continuity in the face of colonial disruptions.
- 2 Brittany Luby, *Dammed: The Politics of Loss and Survival in Anishinaabe Territory* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), dedication page.
- 3 Luby, *Dammed*, xiv.
- 4 For more on how didactic Anishinaabe stories and traditions can lead to resurgence, see: Basil Johnston, "Is That All There Is? Tribal Literature," *Canadian Literature* 128 (March 1991): 54–62; Basil Johnston, *Ojibwe Heritage* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987); Deborah MacGregor, "Indigenous Women, Water Justice, and Zaagidowin (Love)," *Canadian Woman Studies* 30, no. 2/3 (Summer/Fall 2013): 71–78; Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2011); John Borrows, *Recovering Canada: The Resurgence of Indigenous Law* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Jill Doerfler, Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, and Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, eds., *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World through Stories* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2013); Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark and Kekek Jason Stark, "Nenabozho Goes Fishing: A Sovereignty Story," *Daedalus* 147, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 17–26.
- 5 Eve Tuck, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 409–27.
- 6 Luby, *Dammed*, 176. For more on ethical research with Indigenous communities, see: Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*, December 2018, accessed September 19, 2022, <https://ethics.gc.ca/eng/documents/tcps2-2018-en-interac->

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- 7 Luby, *Dammed*, 178.
- 8 Luby, *Dammed*, 19. For more on Anishinaabe clans, see: Heidi Bohaker, “Reading Anishinaabe Identities: Meaning and Metaphor in Nindoodem Pictographs,” *Ethnohistory* 57, no. 1 (2010): 11–33; Heidi Bohaker, *Doodem and Council Fire: Anishinaabe Governance through Alliance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).
- 9 Luby, *Dammed*, 19.
- 10 Luby, 20.
- 11 Luby, 23.
- 12 Luby, 135–37.
- 13 Luby, 169.
- 14 Jaime Cidro, Tabitha Robin Martens, Lynelle Zahayko, and Herenia P. Lawrence, “First Foods as Indigenous Food Sovereignty: Country Foods and Breastfeeding Practices in a Manitoban First Nations Community,” *Canadian Food Studies* 5, no. 2 (2018): 25–43. See also “Indigenous Breastfeeding, Birth Work, and First Foods,” First Nations Development Institute, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://www.firstnations.org/projects/indigenous-breastfeeding-birth-work-and-first-foods/>.
- 15 Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, 106–7.
- 16 Luby, *Dammed*, 159.
- 17 Brenda J. Child, *Holding Our World Together: Ojibwe Women and the Survival of Community* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 94–95.
- 18 Child, *Holding our World Together*, 95.