

# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LAND AND SELF

---

## BOOK REVIEW

Samantha Krilow

Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Student,  
ENGL 3390

---

*M*aking Love with the Land is a 2022 collection of linked non-fiction essays and memoirs written by the Oji-Cree and Indigiqueer writer Joshua Whitehead. He is widely known for his written work that explores the intersections between sexuality and Indigeneity, most notably in his 2017 poetry collection *Full Metal Indigiqueer* and his 2018 novel *Jonny Appleseed*.

It is difficult to focus on a single narrative or argument within *Making Love with the Land*, as each section explores a different period or event in Whitehead's life with his personal reflections interwoven throughout. The essays are linked through the underlying themes that they share. Whitehead returns to themes such as sexuality, Indigeneity, language, and body sovereignty, mobilizing them in new ways to look at land from a holistic perspective.

The most prominent theme that connects these essays lies in Whitehead's

examination of the relationship between himself and the land. Throughout the text, these two are constantly intersecting, one can only be considered alongside the other. Whitehead explores this connection alongside his reflections on pivotal moments in his life such as breaking up with his long-term partner, coping with an eating disorder, and living through the Covid-19 pandemic. The land accompanies Whitehead throughout these journeys. The land is not just a setting in the background; it is a friend, a teacher, a part of himself.

One essay, called *My Body is a Hinterland*, deftly explores the relationship between self and land. This essay follows Whitehead as he struggles with insomnia and reflects on his late nohkôm (grandmother) who appears to him and his mother as a mahkêsîs (fox), his visit to Gimli with his partner, and his nohtâwiy's (father's) recovery from cancer. During his journey of reflection, he writes 'my belly is a prairie, my belly is the bush, my belly is a wild land, hinterland, ancestral land'<sup>1</sup>. He does not see himself as separate from the land.

Another common theme that is born out of this essay is the connection between body sovereignty and land sovereignty. When someone calls Whitehead a slur, he reflects on this and then compares how he feels afterwards to being a decrepit man-made structure that is polluting the land. He explains that the connection between land and self is so strong that 'I think of the lake as I would myself, I think of Manitoba as I would myself, I think of the world as I

---

<sup>1</sup> Joshua Whitehead, *Making Love with the Land*, (Knopf Canada, 2022), p. 12.

would myself - and rename myself Doomsday.<sup>2</sup>

Whitehead's essay *The Pain Eater* further illustrates the strong relationship between land and self. The land is not just a physical entity. Whitehead has a spiritual connection to the land, when he is in pain, he is 'never alone in this momentous feasting. The land is eating pain too'<sup>3</sup>. When he and his partner eat dinner outside, the land shares the meal with them. The land becomes a character beside him, something to interact with and even learn from.

*Making Love with the Land* teaches the reader that a strong relationship between land and self is healing for both parties. For Indigenous people, such as Whitehead, Canada is a post-apocalyptic world where the sovereignty of both land and bodies have been taken away, forming a strong relationship together in this post-apocalyptic world is not just healing, it is an act of decolonisation. This collection's greatest strength lies in the potential to change every reader's understanding and view on land; Whitehead argues that it simply cannot be viewed as removed from the self or from the Indigenous people who have lived on and taken care of it since time immemorial. It may also pose a challenge to new readers of Indigenous literature. There are many cultural references throughout the collection - such as to rez dogs - that may require a previous understanding of some First Nations and Indigenous history, culture, and contemporary reality.

Additionally, Whitehead employs a bold but welcome use of nehiyawewin in his writing. While he occasionally provides

English translations for these words, often it is up to the reader to use context to understand the meaning. His use of nehiyawewin is particularly evident in his essay *A Geography of Queer Woundings*, where he slowly replaces English words with nehiyawewin syllabics to allow the reader to get accustomed to them.

This may make reading the essays difficult; however, it is a rewarding experience to learn some nehiyawewin syllabics through reading. It is an act of decolonization on Whitehead's part by unapologetically using his traditional language in his writing, and he is not obligated to provide translations. However, there are many nehiyawewin dictionaries online that can easily help the reader understand a nehiyawewin word if they are unsure of the meaning.

*Making Love with the Land* is an important read for anyone wanting to deepen their understanding of both Indigenous holistic perspectives on land and the relationship between land and self. It is an in-depth and comprehensive view of not just land, but Indigeneity, sexuality, body sovereignty, and language through the eyes of an Oji-Cree, Indigiqueer man. The text's beautiful and often abstract prose and memorable stories work together to illustrate an important theme: the relationship between land and self is healing and sacred.

---

<sup>2</sup> Whitehead, *Making Love with the Land*, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Whitehead, *Making Love with the Land*, p. 205.