

Praise for *How We Go Home*

“This edited collection offers deep, experiential dives into law, policy, and life for contemporary Indigenous peoples in what is now the United States and Canada. These conversations and life histories, taken together, tell us a critical story of the effort it takes to live and transform structures that Indigenous peoples inherit and push against in bids for dignity, sovereignty, care, and justice in the twenty-first century.”

—Audra Simpson (Kahnawà:ke Mohawk),
professor of anthropology, Columbia University

“This extraordinary book powerfully conveys both the cruel, ongoing dispossession of the Indigenous peoples of North America and their astounding spiritual wealth and resilience. *How We Go Home* introduces this complex history organically, through riveting and varied first-person stories skillfully woven into a larger tale. All those who seek to create a more just and sustainable way of living should be grateful for the essential wisdom shared in these oral histories.”

—Amy Starecheski, director, Columbia University
Oral History MA Program

“Sara Sinclair’s editorial vision in *How We Go Home: Voices from Indigenous North America* is both radically inclusive and extraordinarily caring. There are so many deep histories here that we need to talk about, that we haven’t been talking enough about. *How We Go Home* requires us to genuinely hear and listen to the stories and the histories that have shaped Indigenous lives across North America. All of these stories resonated with me in an intimate and personal way—it’s at times both comforting and alarming to read about so many diverging life experiences that so often strike parallels with my own. *How We Go Home: Voices from Indigenous North America* is an astounding achievement and a deeply necessary book that creates space for a multiplicity of Indigenous lived experiences.”

—Jordan Abel, author of *Nishga*

“*How We Go Home* is a testament to modern-day Indigenous revitalization, often in the face of the direst of circumstances. Told as firsthand accounts on the frontlines of resistance and resurgence, these life stories

inspire and remind that Indigenous life is all about building a community through the gifts we offer and the stories we tell.”

— Niigaan Sinclair, associate professor, Department of Native Studies at the University of Manitoba and columnist, *Winnipeg Free Press*

“The voices of *How We Go Home* are singing a chorus of love and belonging alongside the heat of resistance, and the sound of Indigenous life joyfully dances off these pages.”

—Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, author of *As We Have Always Done*

“This book will inspire you, it’ll piss you off; it’ll take you on a journey of ugly things and beautiful things and back again. It’s a hell of a read. Keep this one on your shelf and never let it go. Damn right.”

—Simon Moya-Smith (Oglala Lakota and Chicano),
writer, *NBC News THINK*

“*How We Go Home* confirms that we all have stories. These stories teach us history, morality, identity, connection, empathy, understanding, and self-awareness. We hear the stories of our ancestors and they tell us who we are. We hear the stories of our heroes and they tell us what we can be.”

—Honourable Senator Murray Sinclair

“In this continent, oral history began with the creation and retelling of the rich, multilayered, and historical origin stories of Indigenous people whose lives were intricately bound to the land. The destruction and stealing of that land, and the systematic and highly personalized violence targeted against so many Indigenous communities, threatened the very act of storytelling itself. This book took my breath away, and then restored it. It refuses silence. It restores the word—and the field of oral history in unleashing the story of our origins.”

—Mary Marshall Clark, director, Columbia Center for Oral History

“Heartfelt, stunning oratory and painfully revealing, Sinclair has gathered together a collection whose stories inform our history. A must-read.”

—Lee Maracle, Sto:lo poet, novelist, storyteller, and activist

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Transcribers

Maryam Bledsoe, Charles Bowles, Rachel Carle, Julie Chintz, Basil Fraysse, Chris Hart, Molly Hawkins, Kaye Herranen, Mary Kearney-Brown, Ari Kim, Isabelle Lyndon, Josh Manson, Brenna Miller, Margaret O'Hare, Teresa Pangallozzi, Phillip Reid, Mai Serhan, Barbara Sheffels, Madison Wright, Marcella Villaça

Contextual Essay Research and Writing

Rozanne Gooding Silverwood

Additional Research

Carmen Bolt, Eliana Rose Swerdlow, Lael Tate

Curriculum Specialist

Suzanne Methot

Fact-Checking

Reading List Editorial, readinglisteditorial.com

Copyeditor

Brian Baughan

EDITOR'S NOTE

In the beginning of each narrative you will find key details about the interviews and the narrators, including the designations they prefer as Indigenous community members. Self-identity for an Indigenous person is a very personal choice: some narrators use their tribe names, others their nations or bands, and these are sometimes used interchangeably. In some cases, we use more than one entity.

INTRODUCTION

Stories of Return

When I was sixteen years old, I took what was essentially my first trip to Indian Country. I rode the train north across Ontario and on to Winnipeg. Crowds shuffled in and out at stops in small towns along the way. With each stop, more and more blue- and green-eyed passengers departed until almost all eyes remaining were dark brown. Skin became darker too. I looked around at the other Native passengers for signs of recognition. I remember thinking that they saw in my eyes what few people in Toronto ever did—that I was one of them.

Throughout much of North America, Indigenous peoples are so rarely considered, our existence so rarely remembered, that, outside Native circles, someone who looks like me is more likely assumed to be Latinx, or part Asian, or of some other not-immediately-identifiable heritage. This is true in Toronto where I grew up and in New York City where I currently live. But it is different in the prairies, and other places throughout the continent, where the mainstream population is aware that they live among Native people because we make up a larger proportion of residents there.

I realized this for the first time that day as my parents, sisters, and I headed west, on our way to a Sinclair family reunion. My paternal grandpa Elmer and five of his six surviving brothers and sisters were gathering on the grassy banks of Manitoba's Red River for a party. The day of the reunion was clear and sunny, and on a quiet walk with my

grandpa, we visited the graves of his parents and ancestors, ending at the monumental grave of Chief Peguis. Peguis was a Saulteaux chief who arrived in what is now southern Manitoba in the early 1790s. When settlers first arrived at Red River in 1812, Peguis protected them and showed them how to subsist there, providing assistance on numerous occasions when they lacked either food or shelter. Peguis became famous for the care he provided, though he later became disillusioned by the settlers' trespasses on his reserve and other violations of the 1817 treaty he signed with Lord Selkirk.¹

In October 2018, I traveled to another Canadian city, Montreal, where my mother grew up, to attend the Oral History Association's Annual Meeting. One evening, after I participated in a roundtable discussion on working with Indigenous narrators, I had dinner with my parents and a few of my mother's relatives who live in the city.

I don't remember how, but the conversation turned to the state of Canada's Indigenous peoples today. One relative, whom I have only met a handful of times and do not know well, was intent on driving this conversation. He seemed vaguely aware that my father is Indigenous (he's Cree-Ojibwe, Peguis Nation) and opened his line of questioning by asking my dad to quantify his Indigenous blood, unaware that blood quantum is a colonial construct used for the dispossession of title and land. And in this particular setting, it seemed, it was also behind his attempt to separate my dad from "real Indians." He said he didn't understand why First Nations people couldn't assimilate like the rest of Canada's "minorities." He didn't understand why they were not thriving like his wife's relations, my mom's family, Ashkenazi Jews whose ancestors landed in Canada after fleeing Nazi Germany. In his response, my dad referenced Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a component of the Indian Residential Schools

1. On July 18, 1817, a treaty was signed between Lord Selkirk and five chiefs in what is now called the Red River Valley of Manitoba. The Peguis Selkirk Treaty was the first signed in western Canada, preceding the formation of the Dominion of Canada by fifty years.

Settlement Agreement, whose mandate was to inform all Canadians about the physical, emotional, spiritual, and sexual abuse that happened to Indigenous children at the schools and the consequences of that abuse on succeeding generations.² The relative unashamedly acknowledged that he didn't know the TRC had been a national endeavor or much else about it, as he "hadn't really followed it." The evening was difficult mostly because he didn't actually want to learn or listen; he wanted to hear himself raise rhetorical questions, and he didn't intend to create the space for my father, or me, to answer.

To encounter this disinterest and apathy so directly over dinner with my own extended family was upsetting to say the least. And it was yet another reminder that history as it has been taught to most North Americans too often excludes Indigenous peoples, treating them as peripheral to the continent's story.

ORAL HISTORY WORKS

My own desire to make Indigenous history more widely accessible and my belief that *oral* history could provide a great tool toward this aim came about shortly after I moved to New York City to participate in Columbia University's Oral History Master of Arts Program. Shortly after arriving in the city, I went to my first Fry Bread Friday, a monthly gathering in the West Village apartment of Rick Chavolla (Kumeyaay) and his wife, Anna Ortega Chavolla. The couple has worked in educational and social justice circles for decades, and they are mentors and friends to a host of Native American students in the city. The first Fry Bread I attended brought members of the Cree, Crow, Navajo, Akwesasne Mohawk, and Oglala Lakota Nations together in our hosts' living room.³ From reservations and cities across the continent, every-

2. The TRC hosted seven national events throughout the country to promote awareness and public education and received wide coverage by the mainstream press from its launch in 2008 to its official closure in 2015.

3. Navajo fry bread originated during the "Long Walk," when the US government forced Indians living in Arizona to relocate via a three-hundred-mile relocation

one had traveled a long way to achieve their positions as students and faculty at New York University and Columbia University.

The Native students at the Chavollas' get-together were attending university to support larger efforts to restore the self-sufficiency of their tribal communities. However, the historical practice of imposing Native assimilation through North America's settler educational systems made their relationship to schooling complex. Interested in how the legacy of assimilationist education continued to impact beliefs about the value of higher education in Native American communities, and more specifically how it was impacting the experiences of those who attended those institutions, I determined that my oral history thesis would explore the narratives of Native North Americans after they have finished their schooling and returned to their nations and reservation communities to work.

These narrators made modern American tribal history so compelling, so readable, so digestible that I very quickly envisioned editing a book compiled of their first-person narratives after finishing my program. I was familiar with the Voice of Witness series and was particularly interested in pursuing publication with them because of their education program, which brings their books' narratives and the issues portrayed within them into school and university curricula.

Narrator Ashley Hemmers had told me that before she was exposed to the resources that would help her to understand her own tribe's history and the history of colonialism in the United States, she was drawn to books about the Holocaust, available at her school library. The intergenerational trauma in those stories was something she recognized in her own community, and reading about other people's experience of it had helped her begin to understand the way it was playing out at home. Throughout my interviews for this book, that element of Ashley's story remained a central inspiration: I con-

to New Mexico. The government provided rations for the journey, including the ingredients of fry bread: white flour, sugar, and lard. Today the food plays a central role at powwows and other intertribal gatherings.

duct interviews so that I can share these stories, so that other readers might have that “aha” moment when they are able to more deeply understand the conditions of their own lives, and view the current moment in a larger historical framework.

With *Voice of Witness*, the project’s mandate was expanded so that we might include narrators with a greater range of life experiences. We moved away from a specific focus on education and agreed that interviews would investigate the following questions: What is the living legacy of settlement, war, and treaties and of the resulting loss of Indian lands and life? How does this huge loss of land and life affect Indigenous people’s efforts to, in Louise Erdrich’s words, “protect and celebrate [the] core of [their] cultures”?⁴ And finally, given that settler colonialism is ongoing, how does it affect Native lives today, as Indigenous peoples continue to fight with the US and Canadian governments for the resources needed to live?

Voice of Witness’s mandate is “to advance human rights by amplifying the voices of people impacted by injustice.” One important note: to best appreciate the issues underlying the narratives in this book, it is important to understand two things that make Indigenous rights distinct. One, those rights are inherently tied to land, because without access to their traditional territories and resources, Indigenous peoples’ distinct cultures are threatened. And two, whereas most human rights treaties reflect an individualistic view of rights and are designed to guarantee individual rights, for many Indigenous peoples their individual identity is inseparable from the collective to which they belong, so they have an additional interest in the protection of their collective rights as a group.

Of course, in a book of twelve narratives, we knew we could not illuminate every kind of injustice experienced throughout Indigenous continental Canada and the United States. We have not included voices from Mexico in this collection. There are currently

4. Louise Erdrich, “Where I Ought to Be: A Writer’s Sense of Place,” *New York Times*, July 28, 1985.

634 legally recognized First Nations in Canada and 573 recognized tribes in the United States. And in both countries, there are tribes and communities that are not granted this status. The narratives we selected cannot represent the experience of all these individuals; however, we believe they do illuminate the most common themes.

Often, we pursued issues in the context of specific places. In Manitoba, Ervin Chartrand, James Favel, and Althea Guiboche spoke to the legacy of residential schools, intergenerational trauma, and its sometime corollaries poverty, homelessness, and incarceration. On Vancouver Island, British Columbia, interviews with narrators Blaine Wilson and Geraldine Manson about the Tsartlip and Snuneymuxw First Nations focused on the urban encroachment on traditional territories and the impact of environmental destruction on fishing, hunting, and traditional life. In Terrace, a small city in northern British Columbia located on Canada's Highway of Tears, narrator Gladys Radek centered the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (the subject of a recent national inquiry). In the American Southwest—in Fort Mojave and Santa Clara Pueblo—Ashley Hemmers and Marian Naranjo spotlighted the struggles against environmental racism and for the provision of on-reserve services including health care, education, and language and cultural revitalization. In the Dakotas, with Wizipan Little Elk at Rosebud Indian Reservation and Jasilyn Charger at Cheyenne River Indian Reservation, a major thread emerged regarding treaty rights and natural resource extraction. At Six Nations reserve and in New York City, in interviews with Vera Styres and Robert Ornelas, the conversations covered issues including the disproportionate number of Native kids in Canada's foster care system and the emotional and spiritual consequences of being disconnected from one's Indigenous culture.

During the narrative collection process, the emergence and prevalence of two related issues was striking: the legacy of the residential and boarding school systems and the number of narrators, like Manson, Radek, and Charger, who had spent at least a part of their child-

hood in the foster care system. Many believe the foster care system has repeated the calamities of the residential schools, even after their closings. More First Nations children are in the care of Children's Aid Societies today than were forced to attend residential schools when enrollment was at its highest. More than half the kids in the Canadian foster care system are Indigenous and yet they make up only 7.7 percent of the general population.⁵ In the United States, Native kids are placed in care at a rate 2.7 times higher than the rest of the population. This is a heartbreaking continuation of the legacy of removing Indigenous children from their community and culture.⁶

Collectively, the narratives in this book drive home how the long attack on and erasure of Indigenous land has simultaneously been an attack on Indigenous people, their families, and nations. This is the foundational context from which each of the following narratives should be read.

REVERSING INJUSTICE

My impression during each trip to meet with narrators, which intensified with each one, was a kind of awe at the vastness of this continent. The scope of the landscapes: British Columbia's tall dense forests and wide waterways, the flat forever of the Dakotas with its fields of wheat and sunflowers, the long drive through the high-desert Navajo Nation—all of this land I traversed made so plain the immensity of what has been taken from the continent's first people; and the urgency of the ongoing struggles to keep what remains. The land itself, and each nation's way of living with it, sustaining human life upon it, and future possibilities of these ways of being were all interrupted by

5. Cindy Blackstock, "First Nations Child and Family Services: Restoring Peace and Harmony in First Nations Communities" in *Child Welfare: Connecting Research, Policy and Practice*, ed. Kathleen Kufeldt and Brad McKenzie (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2003), 331.

6. National Indian Child Welfare Association, "Disproportionality," 2017, www.nicwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Disproportionality-Table.pdf.

colonialism. The arrival of settlers in North America interrupted Indigenous peoples' many rich and mature cultures and societies, each with its own political, trade, and economic systems.

As this collection went to press, the COVID-19 global pandemic has upended lives around the world. Initially touted as a “great equalizer,” affecting rich and poor alike, the pandemic instead exacerbated existing injustice and inequalities among the world’s most vulnerable populations, including Indigenous North Americans. For historical perspective, during the H1N1 outbreak of 2009, Native Americans died at four times the rate of other populations in the US. In 2020, poverty, overcrowding, and a scarcity of running water on some reserves and reservations have resulted in high rates of infection for COVID-19 for several tribes. Lack of access to care and preexisting health conditions among these populations, including hypertension, lung disease, and diabetes, make those who do get the virus even more vulnerable to illness and death. As of April 23, the Navajo Nation was reporting 1,360 infections and 52 deaths among its population of 170,000 people, a mortality rate of 30 per 100,000. Meanwhile, emergency federal funding for tribal health organizations has been delayed by bureaucracy and an Indigenous community health center in Seattle that requested protective equipment was sent body bags instead. The COVID-19 pandemic reveals the structural inequities and colonial thinking that so often determines Indigenous life in the Americas. Instead of helping Indigenous peoples organize a response, or seeing Indigenous peoples as fellow citizens who deserve help, the government positions Indigenous peoples as expendable.

As with my trip “home” to Manitoba at sixteen, the following narratives are, in many ways, stories of return. Almost without exception, the people whose stories are shared in the following pages are working toward reversing a form of injustice and oppression that has directly impacted their own lives. Althea Guiboche, once homeless with her young children, is today a tireless advocate for Winnipeg’s most vulnerable population. Gladys Radek, a survivor of sexual vio-

lence who lost her niece along Canada's Highway of Tears, became a family advocate for the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Marian Naranjo, herself the subject of a radiation test while in high school, went on to drive Santa Clara Pueblo toward compiling an environmental impact statement on the effects of living near Los Alamos National Laboratory. These are stories about returning to place, revitalizing culture and language, and re-forming traditional support systems.

These are also stories about what we all carry inside and the multiplicity of choices we can each make to recover what has been lost to us, to sustain what we have been given, to continue, to flourish. With patience, perseverance, and bravery, these narrators are working to continue their cultures and to rebuild their nations. Listening to their stories has helped me to recover pieces of mine.

For all my relations . . . *meegwetch*.

Sara Sinclair

May 2020

Brooklyn, New York, Lenape Traditional Land

and Huntsville, Ontario, Canada,

Anishinabewaki and Huron-Wendat Land