

## **The Henceforward Episode 17**

### **Futurities ft Alicia Elliot**

**[0:00:00]**

Eve: Aang aang. This is Eve Tuck, and this is The Henceforward, a podcast about connections between Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island. Here we come to the table to discuss settler colonialism and anti-blackness, but more to imagine shared futures and the practices of theory and care that it will take to get there, to get elsewhere.

Sandi: Welcome to the Kitchen Table where Indigenous folks and Black folks come to meet to discuss some very serious topic. I'm Sandi Wemigwase.

Sandy: I am Sandy Hudson.

Jade: I'm Jade Nixon.

Cornel: I'm Cornel Grey.

Michelle: I'm Michelle Forde.

Megan: And I'm Megan Scribe.

Eve: Many of us at the table got to hear from Robin D. G. Kelley, who came to do a talk here at United Church in Toronto. We got to hear about his analysis of what has been lost along the way and the kinds of political rhetoric of the left. One of the things, he was looking at Dr. King's speech that was an argument against the war in Vietnam and commemorating the 50th anniversary of that speech. He was talking about one of the things that the argument of the left, the multiple lefts, has lost along the way. It's an argument against militarism.

The second thing that he says has been lost along the way is the capacity to imagine the future. So I think our opportunity now is to think about different ways that you and your own work and you in the different communities that you have, relationship and connection to our thinking about the future. How are you actively trying to imagine a future that exists and existed long before the kinds of structuring of settler colonialism and anti-blackness that we experience today?

Megan: I had the opportunity to hear Dionne Brand speak this past fall at Ryerson. She said some things that really stuck with me. One of those things was when she said we're building a world that we ourselves will not inhabit. And I come back to that often. I think you were there, right? I think it's a reminder of the different structures of oppression that we're working through. But also, you're keeping in mind that we're working through it and we're not stuck in it.

Sandy: Yeah. I think for the detractors, Megan, who were all often like, “What do you want? What does it look like?”

Eve: What are we supposed to do now?

Sandy: What’s the end goal? As though we're supposed to just know that and just know what it looks like. Who cares? We just know it's not going to look like this. So let's change it.

I thought like, “I deeply want to live in that world obviously.” But when she said that, I was like, “Yeah.” It's like it’s a beautiful but really sad thought because it's like we're doing these things to create a better world that we may never see. And I really want to be living in that world. But it's like a processed world. It's not like an end world. There's no political, economic or any other type of system that just ends. That's has never been the case, all with human history that I know of.

And I think every time that we are refusing something, we're also imagining that it could be different. And that is future work.

Michelle: Just to pick up on what you said, Sandy, about the question being posed, “What do you want now?” I think even the way in which that question is put forth, it’s disingenuous because there's an assumption that we're using these binaries of problem solution. It's not always that simple. And it really just reinforces that you're not coming to this collaboratively and collectively in place of looking at building something if you are expecting that there's one way of doing that and that we have to be coming forth with that way upon your demands.

So I think, really, we have to re-envision what our plans are and whether or not we even have to direct energy towards answering those questions when they come forward to us. Personally, I think it's external and it's a waste of our very precious energy. I don't feel a call to action to answer the questions of the colonizers. Necessarily, I think we have our own processes to work through.

**[0:05:34]**

Cornel: Professor Kelley also talked a little bit about the idea of utopia. Sometimes, when people talk about utopia, it's like, “Well, you're being a little bit too idealistic. It's not going to happen because people are flawed,” and all these other questions. But I think there's something useful in dreaming or imagining something better.

I agree with Sandy. It's not like a kind of end, fixed points. It's a world-in-progress, of course. And I think those who are comfortable with doing away with the idea of a utopia or a different kind of world are negating the experiences of people who can't live freely in the world we are now.

Millions of people right now, for whatever reason, are unable to fully live their lives. I mean if we're comfortable with the way things are, then that's not really accounting for these folks. I mean whether or not we are Black or Indigenous or people of color generally speaking. So I think the product of imagining something else is vital to our collective existence, I would think.

Sandy: I also think it's just such a necessary -- almost like healing practice for Black and Indigenous communities especially. We're not supposed to be here. And to be able to -- we're not supposed to be here. The white settlers created a world in which we are not meant to survive. And to be the ones who are envisioning that, a future in which we can exist and that is we took -- we shouldn't be able to dream utopia in a place like that, but we are often the ones who are doing that. And it's the white settler people who we're like, "You can't do that," when really, with all that power, it's just like -- I feel like it's such a healing thing to make sure that that practice can continue and that we encourage that kind of utopia.

Like Professor Kelly was saying last night, I thought that was like -- I'm glad that that was brought up for this discussion because I thought that really spoke to me when he brought that up.

Cornel: I don't know if anyone else has had this experience, but sometimes, in my classes, the topic of indifferent Indigenous sovereignty comes up. Sometimes, the white students in the class are uncomfortable talking or engaging with the question of decolonization or Indigenous free trade. It's because they feel somehow -- and I guess in their mind, they feel that there isn't a space for them in this different kind of world. We have to, I don't know, go somewhere else. Or they imagine decolonization as current hierarchies being flipped.

It's a little hard to explain that isn't the model that we're working with here. I mean maybe this has to do with the way that we've been conditioned socially and politically to think that we have to adhere to certain kinds of models in how we relate to each other.

I've only been engaging in these discussions for the past year or two. But my understanding is that when we speak about decolonization, there is a space for all of us in that kind of world, but it's just that we're trying to imagine different ways of organizing relations and so forth. But I guess for some people, they feel very much threatened by their own kind of comfort and the power that they have or their claims like place and space and so on.

**[0:10:18]**

Megan: I hear what you're saying Cornel. And it reminds me of Dian Million, her 2013 book where she talks about how even this notion of nation state isn't -- it's a term that Indigenous peoples use. But it's not necessarily like -- it doesn't mean the same thing as how western states use it. So when we're thinking about Indigenous

nationhood, we don't even conceptualize it the way it's currently being enacted in these settler states.

What Cree or Anishinaabe diplomacy could look like in the future, we're just beginning to imagine it right now. But doing the flip flop is certainly nothing that I've heard from any Indigenous or Black scholars.

Sandy: I only ever hear it from white folks.

Michelle: It's the same discussion that often comes up when you look at feminism and the different ways in which we can envision a new world that allows for space for all. That question comes up, "Well, what does that mean? Is that matriarchal rule?" It's the same process that I find really strange.

Megan: I mean if I was imagining an alternate reality, an alternate now where, as a Cree person, I came to these shared territories and I would have to, I don't know, get some sort of Anishinaabe or Haudenosaunee citizenship, how much cooler would it be to live under those terms? And how beautiful would the space look if that were the case? Maybe I wouldn't miss home so much. I don't know. It's neat to think about alternate nows. Yeah.

Sandi: One of the things that I was thinking about a long time ago when Sandy was talking, when you were talking about what do we imagine for the future and then if you wish you could be in the future that you're building, right, for other people, I was reflecting on the fact that we are the future that our ancestors imagined, right?

We are in this future part right now. They're in the spot where they probably would love to be in a Ph. D. program, right? They would love to be a part of these institutions because of the change that they imagined the scene. And the fact that we're here and we're in these parts where we get to be scholars and spread what we think are awesome ideas, I think it's really important to acknowledge and to realize that we are their futures, right, so that it's not necessarily something where we're not coming from a bad place. We're coming from a place of hope. Then that's what we're continuing in the cycle is this hope for new futures for the people who come after us.

Megan: Well, I just want to build on both of the Sandies to say that, Sandy, you're right that we're living in a world in which we're not wanted to live well. And sometimes, I think about my own family and I reflect.

My parents, my grandparents, great grandparents, they weren't extraordinary people. They weren't famous or great leaders or necessarily great thinkers. I don't come from a famous line in any way. They're ordinary people in all other respects. So it astounds me that my family, just ordinary Cree people, survived this tremendous violence. It's flooring when you think about it that somehow I arrived here.

**[End of Kitchen Table Talk]**

Erin: This episode of The Henceforward explores Black and Indigenous futurities. How do Black and Indigenous people now imagine alternative futurities? And what approaches do they find most useful? Here at this threshold, an important intellectual and emotional energy is gathering contributors to the dialogue, cognizant always of past and present oppressions while also creating visions of life that is otherwise.

**[0:15:12]**

At the University of Toronto this February, a panel of Black scholars, writers, activists and artists spoke about Afro-futurisms and Black futurities. The panelists considered how one cultivates proud, familial, religious and intellectual traditions that have African and Caribbean roots, bringing these vibrantly into the present. The facilitator, U of Toronto Professor Rinaldo Walcott, urged his colleagues to honor the agency and resilience of enslaved peoples to the very process of conceiving future freedoms.

In conjunction with the Jaime Black Artist Residency this March, several Indigenous creators and activists met to discuss Indigenous futurities. Monique Mojica, Kuna and Rappahannock, actor and playwright, spoke about what it means for Indigenous people to be creating art about and for Indigenous people and how within her own practices, the land becomes not just a grounding point but a character in itself. In both contexts, the panelists considered how to build on and respect ancestral knowledge and legacies of resistance while imagining new possibilities, new relationships within communities and with the land.

I'm Erin Soros, a white settler living on Toronto Purchase territory. I'll be speaking with Alicia Elliott about her work, her inspirations and her own visions of possibility. Alicia Elliott's status card says she's Lower Mohawk, but according to Haudenosaunee law, she's actually Tuscarora. Her writing has been published by The Malahat Review, The New Quarterly, CBC, Maisonneuve, and is forthcoming in Grain. She's currently working on a book of short fiction from what she describes as her shoddy apartment in Brantford, Ontario.

Alicia: It's an exciting medium. There's like so much that you can do with it. There's so much that you can say. There's so many different places that you can draw knowledge from. You don't necessarily have to worry about academic citations and stuff like that. You know what I mean? So that's why I like creative non-fiction.

Erin: Yeah. You were speaking as well earlier that it's not a linear form. You don't necessarily -- that's my word, but you don't need to be making an argument or setting out something in clear, cut and dry terms. You can explore tensions.

Alicia: Oh, yeah, for sure. There is so much that you can do with it in terms of not having like A to B, but it's being stuck in that messy zone in between trying to figure out, "If you say this, what does that mean for this?" or, "I would like to say this, but I can't say this because of this."

I think in my creative nonfiction that I've worked on, a lot of it is me dealing with not having answers, easy answers. So that is, I think, the best place for me to express that in terms of my own personal stories. And I feel like, too, something that I'm dealing with in terms of thinking back -- because I never really got a chance to know my paternal grandmother. She was an Indigenous woman who -- she decided to move away from Six Nations where she lived so that her kids wouldn't have to go to residential schools. I would have loved to have been able to talk with her about those things, but I never got a chance to because she passed away when I was young.

My paternal grandfather, who was originally a Mohawk language speaker, he was murdered before I was even born. So having that lost connection, for me, I'm trying to, I think, think about that and think about how I'm situated in a very specific place because of things that have happened to generations before me and how that has come together to inform who I am and where I'm situated in history.

When I'm dealing with things about myself personally and the life that I have, it's easier for me in terms of creative nonfiction to think about how generations' past informed me as a person. Then in one of my pieces, it's about me becoming a mother. As a Haudenosaunee woman, you're supposed to be constantly thinking not only in terms of seven generations' past but seven generations into the future, so me trying to figure out how my decisions are impacted by the decisions that came before me and how those inform the decisions of the future, I suppose.

**[0:20:39]**

I guess in creative nonfiction, it's easy -- that kind of thinking is very messy. There are no easy answers. There's nothing that you can just say, "This is how it is." So I think that with creative nonfiction, that's what appeals to me about it. It's that you can explore things and not know exactly what it means or what it's going to mean. But I think that maybe that vulnerability is in everyone. So perhaps that is part of what appeals to people when they read creative nonfiction regardless of background. I think everyone has that messiness in them. And seeing it on the page, it can sometimes be startling in a very good way.

Erin: I think you're also respecting and reteaching knowledges through the nonfiction. For example, you go back and find a Mohawk word. I think it was through your sister's learning of words for reactive depression.

Alicia: Yes. Yeah.

Erin: You used that so it's like the essay becomes a translation of a term. And yet it's woven so intimately through story. It's not a book. It's not a book with a word in it. It's not a dictionary or it's not a lesson on a word. It's an embodied word. Does that make sense?

Alicia: Yeah. I think so. I know that for me -- because the language was lost in my family for a generation. Then my sister now is just starting to bring it back. I feel like it's very important to try to incorporate that in as much as I can because part of being an Indigenous person whose culture has been, in effect, stolen in a lot of ways, a part of that is going to be the relearning of that culture. And trying to bring it back, it's also going to mean that you're teaching it to your children and trying to engage with it in meaningful ways.

So I'm very conscientious of the fact that not everyone who is even from my territory knows Mohawk. If I'm writing for those people as well, I need to be conscientious of how they don't even have the privilege of knowing that and having that cultural knowledge. So to make sure that they understand where I am and stuff like that, that I need to define it and bring it through and in that way, validate their experience, which is also my experience of trying to recapture what was lost.

Erin: It seems that way in the writing that it's like I was thinking of the relationship between loss but also emergence in both the fiction and the nonfiction, that there is so much loss, loss of -- there's loss through death. There's loss through loss of kinship. There's loss of language. But there's this beautiful strength emerging even as it's articulated as moments of loss, that there's that tension as well like these moments of something being powerfully presented as knowledge.

Alicia: I feel like that's just me trying to write in a way that I experienced my community because, obviously, when you go through however many hundred years of genocide and repression, there's a lot that you have to take on emotionally. There's a lot of trauma. There's a lot of pain and anger.

But if you go through Six Nations, we laugh. You know what I mean? We're so joyful. When I get together with my family, we're constantly laughing and stuff like that. You know what I mean? And that's what has carried us forward and made it so that we can still be like, "Well, yeah. Canada has really messed us up, but we're still going to be okay. And maybe things will get better because we're going to try and make them better as best as we can."

**[0:25:29]**

So I think that that is why I -- my philosophy with my writing is to create a space of healing and without necessarily sugarcoating things because there obviously is a lot of loss. And I don't want to make it seem like, "Oh, everything is fine," when it's obviously not. But part of -- for me personally, writing, primarily, I want my writing to be meaningful to other Indigenous people. To do that, I don't think you

can just retraumatize people. You have to be aware of what the effect of your writing is. So at the end, you should offer hope.

And that's something that Lee Maracle has said numerous times as well. It's like there should be some hope at the end of it. That's part of our literature. That's part of our tradition. And she's Sto:lo and I'm Haudenosaunee but she was married to a Haudenosaunee person. So there's stuff that goes on there.

I feel like -- especially because we all have a shared experience of colonialism, that's how we move forward. We move forward with laughter. We move forward with hope. We move forward with something that gives us a spark, that says, "It's not all over," that it's continuing and it's going to get brighter, I guess.

Erin: I think that's counter to a lot of the way that when you see an immediate Indigenous, it's like the cliché, "If it bleeds, it leads." It's like it's that you don't hear about the humor, the intimacy, the strength, the kinship, all the things you're articulating. So it's like parallel tracks that it's just so shocking to see how that resilience isn't mirrored in the common -- and I think that's what's so beautiful in your literature and another authors.

I was thinking of this one of your stories that's written. It's in emails, and it's written directly. Even though it's about loss, it's still about this intimacy and this direct address and reaching out and, yeah, honoring someone.

Alicia: Yeah. For that piece, that came from -- and I'm not a two-spirited person. I tried to come to that piece very tentatively because I didn't want to be another person who was just speaking over two-spirited voices. We have incredible two-spirited artists who are perfectly capable and beautifully articulating their own experiences. I didn't want to do that for them.

But at the same time, when I wrote that piece, it was when I believe the RCMP released their report about missing and murdered Indigenous women. It was the first one that they released. I went through the report. It was a very short report, which I was surprised by. But they didn't mention anything about any trans women, any two-spirited people at all in their report.

There was, I think, one reference I remember where -- I can't recall the exact wording but it was something to the effect of like breaking things down into statistics and saying like, "This percentage of women... This percentage of..." I think there was something along the lines of other or something like that. When I read that, it made me feel ill because so often, in mainstream society as well, LGBTQ people, the two-spirited people are pushed to the margins even though they're much higher rates of victimization and violence than other people. So to me, that really upset me.

[0:30:14]



I guess that was the spark of that story. I was thinking a lot about how one would feel in terms of having numerous things you're contending with when you don't know where a person is and what that could mean. The relationship between the two sisters in that, well, she perceived her sister as a brother at that point because we're in a Western society. That makes the gender binary very clear.

But I felt I wanted it to be very tender. And I wanted it to be showing the way that we joke, the way that we look out for one another and also the ways that we're in pain because the mother in that story, she's in a lot of pain because she lost her husband in a very violent way. She knows that she can't get justice even though she's tried and how that – that knowing that you're stuck in the system that's never going to serve you and has not been created to serve you ever, how that essentially can hurt people to the point where they hurt people without meaning to.

I guess that that was what we deal with in our community as well. You know what I mean? There's a lot of traditions that -- people who believe they're traditional. And that means upholding things like sexism, upholding things like transphobia, upholding things like homophobia, when that was not necessarily our way. But because of Christianity, because of colonialism and the way that that has impacted our ways of viewing ourselves, now, we have to go through and it's our responsibility to our two-spirited brothers and sisters to do that hard work.

So that's why I wanted to. That's what I wanted to explore in that story. And it's what that looks like in terms of even just acknowledging that she is a she. It is something that is powerful when someone is dead set against doing that because of the effects of colonialism, because the effects of trauma and pain and not wanting to acknowledge that something that you did had effects that you regret now, I guess. I don't know.

Erin: Yeah. I thought the main character, her care for this sister but also her care and understanding of the mothers, she actually softens her mother and the mother breaks down at one point. But it's through care and it's thought care in deep complexity. I thought that was so beautifully done.

Alicia: Oh, thank you. Yeah. It was a difficult thing to write in that way because you need to make sure that you are doing it in a way that's respectful but also, I think, true to the tenderness that would be necessary to heal. Because you can be angry and all of us are angry. There's so many reasons to be angry, everyone, in terms of injustice, in terms of so many things.

But at the end of the day, anger does serve a purpose but it's not ever going to be what's going to create lasting change. What's going to create lasting change? It's tenderness. It's love. It's being willing to acknowledge the humanity of the person that is sometimes hurting you and forgive them and say like, "Let's move forward together." And that sometimes will be enough to make that person realize what

they're doing, at least in my fictional story -- hopefully, in real life -- and stop, I guess, and come back around to the way that they should be. In my territory, that's like thinking with a good mind, so coming back to that place of a good mind essentially.

**[0:35:07]**

Erin: Yeah. No, it felt like that movement was really evident in that piece. Can you articulate as well, you were talking about healing in relationship to one of your goals as a writer? Can you speak about that again?

Alicia: Yeah. I think that it's very difficult when -- I was actually talking with some people last night about a novel that was written. It was very, very violent and it had a lot of continual sexual assault in the novel. To me -- it didn't necessarily come to a redemptive place for that person. It didn't come to a place of healing for that person who was experiencing all of this in the novel.

I was speaking with a non-Indigenous man and an Indigenous woman about this. Even the white man was like, "I just don't see what the purpose was of all of this violence. It just seems like it was shoving it in our faces." As an Indigenous woman who has seen so much violence in my family and my community, violence in wider Canadian society, in the world -- you know what I mean? -- it's constant. Sometimes, you need a moment to breathe. You need a moment to see what's good about the world, see what's good about people.

Without being too naive about it, I do think that it's my responsibility because I do write about violence. I don't like to write violence to revel in it, but it is something that happens. So it's something that I write about, but I don't -- when I write about it, it's not something I enjoy writing. And I think that that, you can always tell when a writer is writing violence and they are enjoying writing the violence as opposed to writing because they have to write it and they're writing it carefully and they're writing it in bearing in mind that they potentially could be revictimizing victims who are coming to their work.

For me personally, obviously, I embrace all readers of my work, but I constantly have in the center of my mind Indigenous people as my audience. Since so many of them have experienced violence, I don't want to be retraumatizing them. I don't want them to be picking up my work and coming to it and being like, "Okay. This is how terrible it is for us," and then when it comes to the end, that's what they take away, what they already know as opposed to, "Yes. It's terrible. It has been, but this is what we have. This is our strength that we have. This is what hope we have for the future. This is what we can do to be there for one another."

So in that way, I want my writing to be healing. I don't want my writing to be traumatic. I don't want my writing to be victimizing. I want it to be healing and encouraging that -- in general, to be restorative in that way as opposed to

destructive. That's just what's important to me in writing. I mean I can't speak for anybody else.

Erin: Yeah. My sense as well in terms of listening to dialogues and reading is just that attention to Indigenous communities, to one's responsibility, both to the story like even how you were speaking about how you wouldn't -- I was interested in that choice that you didn't speak as a trans person. You spoke as somebody in relationship, the character. Even in fiction, you're thinking about your positionality. You're thinking very ethically about the story, that it's not just writing. It's not just, "My story, my right." But you're thinking about your story in relationship to how people will read it, how they'll be affected by it.

I think that's -- did you find that attention -- intention to some of the conventional training in writing? Because I didn't hear that and MFA I didn't hear that kind of consideration.

**[0:40:07]**

Alicia: Well, maybe that's a good thing that I've never been through an MFA program.

Erin: Yeah.

Alicia: It's interesting because I feel like especially when you're from an Indigenous community, you're very aware of the responsibility you have to that community. These are the people who I'm going to have to come home to. Basically, they're going to be like, "Why did you do this?" And I don't want to hurt them.

It's very difficult for me because I think that -- not necessarily to talk about this but I think there is a school of thought that when you're a writer, the world is like your -- you can just steal whatever you want and because the story is what is important. I don't buy into that because I am a thinking person and I make choices consciously. You know what I mean? So the idea that like, "Oh, the story chose me," or, "I have to write the story," you don't have to write any story. It's not some magical force that comes to you. You are thinking. You are developing this. And it is your responsibility to do so in a way that is ethical so that there is less likely of a chance that someone will read your work and say, "You hurt me."

When you come to writing with a sense of responsibility, that's something that you center when you're writing, I think, as opposed to writers who are people who are very offended when someone comes to them and says, "You definitely depicted us wrong here. You gave a very sexist, racist, homophobic depiction of whatever in your work." When people's first reaction is automatic defense, that's something that doesn't compute for me because if someone were to say that to me, I would be horrified. I would be appalled at my own shortcomings. So I would want to immediately apologize. I would want to figure out how I can do better so that this doesn't happen again.

But that's not the prevailing ideology. And that's where when we have conversations about cultural appropriation and people are so blasé about it and like, “Well, why does it matter?” you're choosing to be an asshole essentially. When you do that, you're making that conscious choice.

It just doesn't make sense to me. So I think that as writers, we should be ethical. As writers, we should be conscientious of the readers. I totally get you have to write the story. You shouldn't be thinking necessarily about what criticisms you're going to get to an extent. But I do think that when you're writing, especially people from perspectives that you don't come from, that you should be constantly questioning like, “What is this response going to be? And am I feeding into these stereotypes?”

You need to be constantly considering what stereotypes you still have in your head that you haven't worked out yet because everyone has them. We're in a society that ensures that we have them. So to just be like, “Oh, well, I'm not racist,” well, you're lying to yourself. You haven't done enough work to figure out how that affects your life and how that affects how you interact with people and how that affects how you empathize with people. That's your shortfalling. But it's not good enough for me to just say, “Well, that's the story.”

In terms of who should be telling the story, is it your story to tell? Can you tell it ethically? Because the thing, too, is I don't want to make it seem like, “Just stay in your lane,” necessarily, but because there are people who do write with a lot of integrity about races that aren't their own, it happens all the time. But I think that those people were very conscious of their responsibility. And you can see that in the writing.

**[0:45:12]**

What I like to say is that you should be writing with love, not just with empathy but you should be writing with love. So if you love your characters and you love that they came from this community or they came from this background and they find strength in it, then it's so much different than like -- I wrote with empathy because the thing is that empathy has limits, especially when you are someone who has been conditioned socially to only have so much empathy for certain people from different genders, different sexual orientations and races.

That has limits. But love is something that is much deeper and more complex. I think that that's what you should be bringing to a work for it to be meaningful anyways. It should be complex. It should be something that -- I'm not saying you have to write perfect characters, but I'm saying that you should love that character so that you are going to do them justice. You can always tell, I think, when you're reading something and you know that that author loved those characters.

In Robinson's new book, *Son of a Trickster*, the main character of that book, you could tell she loved him and he's so precious. Oh my god, I love him too. It's hard not to. So I don't know. I just think it's important to come from a place of love and not just empathy because I don't feel like that is taking it far enough clearly. Because people do think they're writing with empathy but they're writing very problematic things.

Erin: Yeah. I think also love involves you more, like puts you on the page but makes you vulnerable in a different way from empathy. It can be more like I feel for someone, but I'm not as involved, whereas there's risk in love.

Alivia: Yes. Yeah. Absolutely.

Erin: I was wondering how because you take such emotional risks in your work. There's a lot of vulnerability in your work. Yeah, as I said before, there's a strength on the page and it's not simplistic. It's this texture of experiences and emotions. But I was curious how you, as a writer, make choices personally about what to share about your own experiences. Have you reckoned with that or has it changed over time?

Alicia: I think that when you write creative nonfiction, it's something you think about a lot. Should I be sharing this? I did do a creative undergrad. There was a teacher that I had who I'll never forget, who basically was like, "Well, you're a writer. You're going to betray everyone anyways," which is one way of looking at it. I don't necessarily agree with that. But I mean I can understand what he meant by that because I think that all -- there's a difference, I guess, I suppose, between sharing very specific details from your own life and sharing very specific emotions that you have experienced.

In terms of fiction, even though I haven't experienced pretty much anything that I've written about, it comes from a place where I'm basically taking from my life, those emotions that I felt and trying to express them on the page. That's one thing. But then when you're talking about creative nonfiction and taking things from your own life that have been very painful or have been -- even good memories. When you're sharing them with people, it's always a little bit scary.

But I think that in that regard, I think it's hard because especially in my stuff, I've talked about my family and things in that regard. That's something that you have to do, personally. My mother has bipolar disorder and I talked about that in my one creative nonfiction piece. It's something that has deeply impacted my life and the way that I interact with people, the way that I consider my own mental health.

**[0:50:17]**

So even though that is something from her life, that's also something that's from my life. I think that when it comes to dealing with your family, sometimes, it's better not to share these kinds of things because when you are very honest about things,

like how someone has impacted you -- you don't want to hurt them. That's where I think writing from a place of love is always important because I don't want to make it seem like I don't -- that's one thing that I always worry about when I'm writing a creative nonfiction piece, as if someone that I love is going to come out the other end looking badly.

But I think that what I try to do is show how much I deeply care about the people in the writing. So it's not as much about them as it is about how it's impacted me. And it's not about necessarily their feelings but it's about how I've interacted with these experiences and how that has emotionally affected me. And me reckoning with that now because there are certain times -- I feel like there's times where you can't write about an experience, when it's too soon and it's too fresh and you don't have that perspective. But then there does come to be a point where you can write about it. And I feel like it's just something you have to instinctively feel out.

I wrote a creative nonfiction piece, as I mentioned, about my experience as a young, pregnant teen and being a mother and dwelling on my own mother and trying to figure out what that meant to me. But I wouldn't have been able to write it until exactly when I wrote it because I knew that I came out the other end, I think.

So I was able to reflect on it in a way that came from a place of more understanding where I'm able to analyze things a little bit more deeply and perhaps uncomfortably, but have that perspective so that you can actually make it into something that says something as opposed to just like a diary entry. Something that has a little bit more universal appeal, which is something that I always have trouble with because I think that when you look at definitions of creative nonfiction, there's some times call outs that basically are like, "Well, creative nonfiction, it has to have a universal kind of quality to it." I was just like, "What the fuck is a universal quality? What does that mean?"

I get it but in terms of creative nonfiction, I still don't get it because sometimes, we write about things that are very specific to yourself and the other people. There's no way that they ever are going to have that experience. But I think that it's in how you write about it that, I suppose, would make it something that can impact other people and that they can take something away from.

I don't know. I guess that maybe what I'm trying to say is that I have, in terms of my own life, very, very little shame. Because it's all come to -- it's all things that I contend with. If you haven't contended with it, then you might be afraid and ashamed of what that means and other people seeing that and what they're going to think of it. This is what I'm -- I'm sorry I'm rambling.

Essentially, it's what I'm trying to get across of. You have to write at the right time. You have to write at the right time so that you can be brave and it can mean something as opposed to just being -- just wanting to be heard is different, I think,

than wanting to create something that is meaningful for other people. So there's a difference.

Erin: I was going to ask you about the right time in relationship to the concept of the futurities and futures. How do you see your work helping to imagine possibilities? Do you see it -- because it seems to have an attention to the past and things that have happened, like in terms of characters having to grieve, but there's also -- I was thinking in terms of relationships and importance of relationships and then you speaking about healing and the characters healing each other but also the story in its relationship. I'm kind of answering the question. I'm sorry.

I just was wondering if you could articulate -- it's sort of our theme for the podcast, but it doesn't have to be. It's not your theme in your work, but I think it dovetails well with your work.

**[0:55:42]**

Alicia: Well, I think that that, you know, I was just in Indigenous writing and publishing conference. And we had some really incredible people there speaking about their own work, their own writing life. Oh my gosh, I can't even recall who it was -- I have it written down, but I don't have my notebook in front of me -- who was basically saying that as Indigenous writers, we are constantly -- oh, I think it was Cherie, Cherie Dimaline, who basically was saying that we have to work constantly holding our hand back into the past to hold the hand of our ancestors but also holding our hand out to the future, to hold the hand of our children and our grandchildren in our work.

So I think that we are all constantly, as Indigenous people, thinking about not just our past but also our future and what that's going to mean and what our relationship and our responsibility is towards that future. For me, personally, something I would like to do in my work is make it so that -- write against stereotypes essentially so that when women, young Indigenous women, want to come up in the next generation or two generations from now and they're like, "You know what? I would really love to write science fiction. I would love to write native science fiction," it's not going to be, "Well, who's going to publish that? Why does the character have to be Indigenous? Why can't you just make it like a non-raced character and then write your science fiction story?" -- you know what I mean -- which is, unfortunately, something that people have to deal with when you're writing from an Indigenous perspective, especially in terms of what stories become popular to Canada.

Publishing houses are constantly -- major ones anyways. Non-Indigenous ones are constantly worrying about the bottom line and making sure that they're going to make money. So what's going to sell? When you live in a society where people are given a very consumable idea of what an Indigenous person is, then anything that goes against that is not authentic and is not what they want. So then you have books

that have very specific -- or films or television shows that have very specific, stereotypical visions of what an Indigenous person is. And those will be palatable. Therefore, that will be something that sells as opposed to, "Oh, well, I'm just an Indigenous girl just living my life. I do all kinds of things that aren't just braiding sweetgrass, in a leather dress and a pre-colonial era.

It's funny because that reminds me of -- and this isn't necessarily my story. But Cherie told me that when she was writing *The Girl Who Grew a Galaxy* that she -- it has like a Métis girl as its lead character. It starts off on the res. She's with her grandfather. Then she ends up leaving the res and go to New Orleans. She submitted the first few pages to numerous publishers and they were just chomping at the bit. And they're like, "Okay. Send the rest of that," when she was still on the res.

Then when she sent the rest of the manuscript, they were like, "Why is she in New Orleans? That's not what -- can't you just write a story where she's just on the res?" And she was just like, "No, I can't." So she didn't end up even going with a non-Indigenous publisher. She ended up publishing with Theytus Books, which is an Indigenous publisher. You know what I mean?

**[1:00:01]**

Those are the kinds of things that we're still contending with. The fact that she was just like, "No. I'm not going to do that. I'm going to write my story because there's going to be a Métis girl who's going to pick up this book and she's going to see herself and not see just like, you know, I'm still on the res, which that is people's lives, but there's so many different experiences that we have. Why can't we celebrate all of those experiences the same way that -- white Canadians can have all sorts of different experiences and no one bats an eye."

So I think that stuff like that is important. And that's what I want to do with my work. I want to make sure that other Indigenous writers coming up after me are going to be able to have, hopefully, that and not have to contend with stuff like that.

And even just in terms of reading, I mean I didn't read a single book by an Indigenous woman until I was in my undergraduate. You know what I mean? They weren't available. And I wasn't able to see myself in that writing. I mean, obviously, it could connect on an emotional level, but it's different. It's fundamentally different. And the first time that I did see that, I cried because it was such an emotional thing for me. I didn't realize until that moment that I've never seen myself in writing. And it was incredible to me that that had never been the case.

The first time I read an Indigenous woman in my undergraduate was Eden Robinson. It was from her book of short stories, *Traplines*. In that book, she's writing about very -- I don't even think she mentioned in some of the stories that the character is Indigenous. But she doesn't have to because I feel like when you're



-- the characters feel Indigenous. And she has written non-Indigenous characters in other works.

And the one book or specific story that I'm talking about, *Queen of the North*, I don't recall if she even mentions, but at any case, she might. But I knew that it was an Indigenous girl in that story. And it just felt like – nowadays, she was someone that I could've known in high school. And to me, that was incredible. It helped me think that we weren't just the same. We weren't just relegated to terrible news stories. There were other possibilities for us. It was very validating in a way that I hadn't experienced prior to that.

Then even in terms of sexuality, when I first read Leann Simpson's *Islands of Decolonial Love*, I – again, I don't want to sound like a broken record. It probably seems like such a sap, but I cried reading that, too, like almost the entire time. I was reading it. I get emotional just even thinking about it because especially -- in a lot of Indigenous communities, our relationship to our bodies and sexualities has been so impacted by colonialism. It's like you don't talk about it. You don't talk about any of it. And seeing her talk about it, not just talk about it but be joyful about it and open about it was something that just resonated with me so much.

When you're talking about futures with Indigenous writing, it's like we are constantly thinking about futures. We are constantly thinking about what can we do to make sure that the next generation doesn't have to worry about these things, these issues that we're contending with? How can we make things better? And that's been built into what is essentially our philosophies. A lot of them is what is going to be the best for these coming faces.

Yeah. I mean that's what I will do with my writing as well. I try and think about what's going to be best for the coming faces. It doesn't even necessarily need to be like the future in terms of like Star Trek but the future in terms of creating a space that wasn't there for you necessarily, making it bigger and more available for those who are coming after you, trying to continue the work that came before you and keep at it even though it's really hard so that the people who come after you will have more.

**[1:05:13]**

Eve: The Henceforward, Indigenous and Black life on Turtle Island.

**[1:07:20] End of Audio**