

WENDAT

Daniel Sioui²

I watch myself rushing toward the stage, prancing like a fawn. I nod to another publisher, who looks completely overwhelmed; I smile to a customer who came by our booth half an hour before, and to whom I managed to sell two hundred bucks of books, so I owe him the respect of acknowledgment. I slap a smile on my face and pretend I'm happy to be heading over to the events area, but I'm shaking all over. I hate this, I hate speaking in front of people. I always feel like what I say is going to be dissected, that my words will be taken as law. As if every Indigenous person who opens their mouth is an expert on the Indian Act or the next leader of the Nation. I know most people in the room have probably never actually spoken to an Indian, and will find this exotic. The myth of the Indian as woodland philosopher is still alive and well, and that's what they're expecting. They've got another thing coming. I am a modern Indian and I am not afraid to say it.

2. Through community efforts, after a long dormancy, the Wendat language is slowly coming back to life, though unfortunately not quickly enough for us to include it in here.

You can't always get what you want, and instead of running for home, I push against my deepest instincts and get up on the stage. A big part of my work is talking about my company so others talk about it too, so I pretend to be happy and go hold court at the microphone. I'm all dressed up in my nicest jacket, and with silver armbands made by the best artisan in my community. I've got to show off a little, right? Add a little Indian touch. I look like a peacock strutting through the garden of an English nobleman, or else maybe a young warrior going off to war, take your pick. I prefer the latter, because I do feel like I'm going to war. Every time I speak in public, I'm fighting a battle against racism and misunderstanding about us "Indians." That's why I keep doing it, but every time I think will be the last; every time I feel like I'm about to have a heart attack.

Here we go! I make it to the stage at the same time as one of the featured authors. There are four of us: her, another author, the host, and me—the publisher. The host winks at us as if to ask if we're ready. I'm a serious man, and I nod. *Bring on your questions, you don't scare me.* Though surely he knows I'm bluffing. This is the first time he's interviewing me, but he's an old hand and he knows his job.

He dives right in. I grab my mic. I'm not his first victim, and knowing that somehow helps calm me down. I pretend to listen to them talking, but I honestly couldn't care less. I've heard it all twenty times. *Why do you think Indigenous literature is important?* Why not, man?! We're just Indians, so we should shut up?

I'm not going to say that out loud, obviously. I don't know what the author says, but it must be politically correct because the audience doesn't seem too shocked. Half-listening, I play it as cool as I can and scan the room. Bad idea: my anxiety goes through the roof. What the hell am I doing up here, up on a goddamn stage again? It's just more of the same, and I never have the answers they're looking for. I feel so out of place. When I was young, it was beaten into my head that Indians don't talk and White people don't want to hear what we have to say. And now they're after us for interviews. I know I'm caught between tradition and modernity, but whatever... It's not like I'm going to find any answers here.

Okay, I should really concentrate on what's going on. My turn! The host turns to me and asks *the* question:

“Mr. Sioui, you're the founder of the only Indigenous publishing house in Québec. How do you reconcile that with the fact that your ancestors didn't know how to write? Isn't that denying your culture's oral tradition?”

The fox is loose in the henhouse. There it is, the question I get asked all the time. In the minds of many White people (and, it must be said, even some other Indigenous people), the fact that our ancestors didn't know how to write means we shouldn't be allowed to write books. They think it's weird that Indigenous people are trying to live in the twenty-first century. They think that, as Indigenous people, all we should want is to go back to living in the bush. That if each of us had our own little patch of trees maybe we'd stop whining and White people could finally live in peace on their stolen land without feeling guilty. Well, I've got some

news for them: I'm not too keen on traplines. I like the comforts of the twenty-first century. Among other things, I like to lose myself in a good book and let it take me everywhere. I'm trying to find a way to combine my Indigenous identity with living in the world today, and personally I don't see anything wrong with loving books. I've learned a lot from reading—more than I did from school. Books are my way out, they let me escape from everyday life. I need to read; I can't help it. Is that so odd?

Whoops: the interviewer is looking at me kind of intensely. Long seconds must have ticked by since he asked his question and I'm just sitting here in silence like an idiot, staring into space. Even if I'm tempted to do you know what, I deliver the same bullshit as always:

“It's true that my ancestors didn't write, but I don't feel that doing so is a denial of my culture. I actually feel that I'm giving it a chance to survive. We've already lost too much in the last two or three generations, and we have to make sure we preserve what we have left, for our children's children. My ancestors loved to tell stories, especially in winter, when Hínon hides under the snow. The difference is that now the culture is passed down on paper.”

After two or three more insipid questions, the torture ends. I restrain myself from chucking the microphone, walk offstage classy as a true Indian warrior, and go back to my booth to sell as many books as I can.

Seriously, does it matter if I spend my life selling books? Every time I have to answer that question, it makes me wonder. It's like I'm having doubts and I

don't even know what it is to be First Nations. There are thousands of ways to be Indigenous, as many as there are Indigenous people. I happen to want to be a book-loving Indian.