

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's Decolonial Aesthetics

“leaks”/Leaks, Storytelling, Community,
and Collaboration

Semi-polemical Introduction: Critical Conversations

The call for papers for this issue of *Canadian Literature* on Indigenous Literature and the Arts of Community invited contributors to “explore new ways of thinking about Indigenous literary arts and community engagement,”¹ stressing decolonization strategies. Related topics such as “the responsibilities of artists and/or scholars to the communities of which they are part and to the communities addressed by and in their work” leave ample room for different kinds of interventions by both settler scholars and Indigenous community members, as well as for alliances of several kinds in shared projects for “unsettling” institutions associated with the history of colonialism. However, many Indigenous scholars, intellectuals, and artists remain—with reason—uneasy about Western-based academic and educational structures that tend to reproduce more than to challenge neo-colonial agendas, given the history of residential schools and related state agendas linked to cultural and other forms of genocide. Similarly, especially in more traditional, rural, land-based or reserve contexts, some Indigenous community members feel that literary studies in graduate English departments is not the best way to protect and develop Indigenous language, culture, and community, although for others post-secondary education in the humanities is not necessarily incompatible with community perspectives. When addressing methods of building “relationships among scholars, artists, educational institutions, and Indigenous communities and nations based on reciprocity and respect,” we need to consider the multiple kinds and locations of Indigenous communities and perspectives. Stressing

nation-to-nation relationships is one way of “moving beyond academic lip-service” regarding “community consultation” that all too often replicates colonial power structures and agendas.

Inescapably, proposals such as the call for papers for this special issue emerge from contexts and are couched in discourses that reflect uneasy power relations. If “moving beyond academic lip-service” calls for a decolonizing of academic-community and settler-Indigenous relations, it also remains discursively embedded within Western academic frameworks that contain contradictory ways of talking about Indigenous literatures. Such contradictions at times are associated with approaches to scholarly protocols meant to acknowledge Indigenous sovereignty. Honouring the homelands of specific Indigenous communities where academic conferences are being held, for instance, can be a deeply political and respectful gesture, or a form of academic lip-service; sometimes it is both simultaneously. Similarly, statements of positionality prefacing conference talks can seem disconnected from the academic papers they serve to introduce, even when that is not the scholars’ intention.² According to Chickasaw scholar Sákéj Henderson, “[c]olonial dominators have an answer for everything because they constantly change their level of coherence to favour their domination”; he adds that “[i]n Aboriginal thought, this process creates the ‘anti-trickster’ or the imitator of the Imitator, its twin” (71). Indigenous writers and scholars sometimes feel the need for a separate, safe space in which to meet and talk, a space in which a greater diversity of Indigenous storytelling traditions, a more fluid approach to Indigenous literary-critical methodologies, and a less censored critical stance can emerge. At the same time, as Plains Cree Métis scholar Emma LaRocque reminds us in “A Personal Essay on Poverty,” “The Colonization of a Native Woman Scholar,” and *When the Other Is Me: Native Resistance Discourse 1850-1990* (2010), Indigenous writers and scholars also want and need to engage in necessary, productive, “unsettling” dialogue with the community of non-Indigenous academic friends and allies, but also to partake in and contribute to the pleasures and beauties of Indigenous literary aesthetics both within and beyond the academy. Such dialogue begins to change power relations and perspectives on both sides—although the conversations are seldom easy.

As part of that dialogical process, journals such as this one play an important role, as do organizations like the Indigenous Literary Studies Association (ILSA), in making space for Indigenous voices and views within structures that strive not to recolonize Indigenous people in the process of

discussing and debating key aspects of Indigenous literatures. That said, complexities, contradictions, paradoxes, and imbalances inevitably emerge and need to be addressed in these as well as other overlapping institutional spaces where, as Blood/Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear reminds us, “colonization left a heritage of jagged worldviews among Indigenous peoples”:

Yet all colonial people, both the colonizer and the colonized, have shared or collective views of the world embedded in their languages, stories, or narratives. It is collective because it is shared among a family or group. However, this shared worldview is always contested, and this paradox is part of what it means to be colonized. Everyone attempts to understand these different ways of viewing the world and to make choices about how to live his or her life. No one has a pure worldview that is 100 percent Indigenous or Eurocentric; rather, everyone has an integrated mind, a fluxing and ambidextrous consciousness, a precolonized consciousness that flows into a colonized consciousness and back again. (84-85)

Little Bear’s notion of ambidextrous consciousness anticipates critical emphasis on decolonizing processes in more recent commentaries about Indigenous literatures. The state of decolonial love invoked by Leanne Simpson and associated with resurging First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures and societies entails occupancy of Indigenous lands, revitalization of Indigenous languages, and expressions of cultural continuity. Resurgence acknowledges coexistence with Western perspectives and dialogue with settlers; however, decolonial aesthetics, like Indigenous activism, does not necessarily take colonialism as its central starting point. The decolonial love specifically associated with literary resurgence stresses the persistence and relevance of ancestral knowledge and cultural memory as embodied in story and spirit. Contemporary Indigenous literature written in English is one vital vehicle among many for articulating resurgent Indigenous cultures and identities.

Aspects of Little Bear’s ambidextrous consciousness can be seen in each of Simpson’s three epigraphs to her 2013 book of songs and stories, *Islands of Decolonial Love*, which underscore and celebrate relationships with other Indigenous writers as well as with anti-racist immigrant and refugee perspectives. Ambidextrous consciousness is implicit in Simpson’s first epigraph, an evocative, short citation from Sto:lo essayist, poet, and fiction writer Lee Maracle’s poem “Blind Justice” from her 2000 book *Bent Box*: “still, i am not tragic” (qtd. in *Islands* n. pag.). A second epigraph, taken from Dogrib (Tlicho) writer Richard Van Camp’s 1996 novel *The Lesser Blessed* (made into a feature film in 2012), reminds me of a passage from Simpson’s *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back* (2011), in which she notes that the Anishinaabe³ word for truth is linked to the sound of a beating heart. Here,

the Van Camp citation—“i have to tell you something, i said. i’m not going to lie. i have to tell you. i have this god-shaped hole in my heart, and i think you do too” (qtd. in *Islands* n. pag.)—simultaneously acknowledges the God-shaped hole linked to the ravages of Christian missionaries, residential schools, and their legacy, and a “god-shaped hole” that by contrast invokes the permeability of spiritual and physical being within Indigenous ontology and epistemology. Simpson’s third epigraph, taken from Dominican American writer Junot Díaz, reminds us that resisting colonialism is an act not of hatred but rather of solidarity and of love:

the kind of love that i was interested in, that my characters long for intuitively, is the only kind of love that could liberate them from that horrible legacy of colonial violence. i am speaking about decolonial love . . . is it possible to love one’s broken-by-the-coloniality-of-power self in another broken-by-the-coloniality-of-power person? (qtd. in *Islands* n. pag.)

The qualified answer provided to this not-so-rhetorical question is “yes,” with the proviso that such love extends beyond sexual relationships between humans to include one’s relationship to the earth and to other aspects of kinship, as defined by Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice (2008) among others. Dene scholar Glen Coulthard and Simpson, for instance, state that Anishinaabe, Wendat, and Haudenosaunee nations exist “in deep reciprocal relationships with the Great Lakes . . . and foster deep relations to the St. Lawrence River leading to the Atlantic Ocean, the diverse plant and animal nations within their territories, the thunderers and rains, and all the spiritual and physical forces that connect them to this place, their place of creation, in an intimate and meaningful way (249).⁴ I propose that Simpson’s artistic treatment of decolonial love, in speaking to the G/god-shaped hole in our hearts, resists tragedy and revisits concepts such as ambidextrous consciousness. Her writing foregrounds a distinctive, novel approach to Western poetic practices, Indigenous storytelling traditions, and loving relations in a number of contexts, including spiritual dimensions of Creation. Simpson’s generation of writers and intellectuals is in dialogue, both implicitly and explicitly, with many other Indigenous authors such as Anishinaabe scholar John Borrows, Coulthard, and Cherokee scholar Jeff Corntassel, whose works theorize, each in their own way, relationships between settler and Indigenous nations from the standpoint of their own traditions. These intellectuals and writers also challenge and unsettle boundaries between and across Western and Indigenous literary genres and academic discourses. While Simpson’s work is not inconsistent with the

decolonial perspectives of both Díaz and Walter Mignolo, the American-based Argentine scholar who has coined the phrase decolonial aesthetics, her own focus is on Anishinaabe women's somewhat different relationship to decolonial love as experienced *within* rather than across different borders and boundaries on Turtle Island.⁵

Simpson's story-poem "leaks"—which captures in condensed form the decolonial aesthetic deployed in *Islands of Decolonial Love*—realigns Anishinaabe relationships to land, history, self, and community. It challenges neo-colonial binaries and hierarchies that would separate and isolate traditional Indigenous territories from contemporary urban cultural spaces; as she stresses in several of her essays, Simpson sees all of "Canada" as Indigenous land. While she writes primarily for an Indigenous readership, her work encourages all readers to hear and heed the multi-layered echoes and repetitions of older creation stories that "leak" through and reframe the static of neo-colonial violence. Decolonial love governs relationships between mother and child, between people and land, between physical and spiritual aspects of being, and between ancient and new art forms. While scholarship has stressed Simpson's essays as key documents in resurging Indigenous thought and knowledge, making her work required reading in the Indigenous studies curriculum, her books of poems and stories—which are taught in many English courses and which, in my view, are continuous and contiguous with the essays—have received less attention in published commentaries on her work.

Like the poem, the film *Leaks*, which premiered at the *imagineNATIVE* Film and Media Arts Festival in Toronto in 2014, is informed by knowledge of the verbal violence directed at one of the author's Elders, a highly respected male teacher, storyteller, and knowledge-holder in her community. This incident occurred when Simpson, her young daughter, and the Elder were gathering leeks, and was traumatic for the child. While not necessary to the audience's interpretation of the film, this context adds a layer of meaning inaccessible to those who access the film only via the author's website. Ancestral knowledge transmitted from one generation to the next is a key cultural value and methodology in Anishinaabe oral tradition, and often entails the performance of a song or the telling of a story on occasions such as the seasonal gathering of food and medicines. Healing ceremonies that have always aided Anishinaabeg in leading the good life are now needed to address racism in Euro-Canadian society, reinforcing the desire to protect sacred knowledge from further intrusion, appropriation, or other

forms of violence. The story of *Leaks*, then, or rather the telling of it, not only responds to the need for individual and collective healing in the wake of colonialism but also, in keeping with Simpson's decolonial aesthetic, contributes to resurgence and a new creation that counters colonialist violence by quietly underscoring the continuity of cultural traditions in the face of such violence. In the film, when the site of the racist incident is revisited, the viewer witnesses the tentative first steps of the child's jingle dress dance and her spontaneous interpretation of the thunderbird hoop dance. The jingle dress dance, traditionally associated with healing, entails wearing ceremonial regalia; the playful, free-form interpretation of the hoop dance does not. In these film sequences, Simpson sits on the ground, quietly observing and smiling from her own vantage point under a tree. Métis filmmaker Cara Mumford, whose skilled direction, camerawork, and editing weave into a seamless whole these narrative segments, remains silent and invisible throughout.

In opening my argument by comparing "leaks" in the published version of Simpson's 2013 book with Mumford's Vimeo (featuring a spoken word version of the poem performed by Simpson, song and music by Anishinaabe-Nehiyawak singer-songwriter Tara Williamson, and dance by Simpson's daughter Minowewebeneshiinh), I wish to underscore how collaboration between urban/land/community-based storytellers working in different media opens up a space for youth to find their own voices and resurges Anishinaabe cultural values. Before undertaking a reading of the film and the poem, let me conclude this semi-polemical introduction with a brief comment on some of the creative and critical challenges facing Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and academics, challenges being addressed by the overlapping audiences, shared interests, and constructive dialogue taking place in organizations such as ILSA, as reflected in this special issue of *Canadian Literature*. Some of these challenges have to do with taken-for-granted differences in theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and terminologies—the discourses that, for better or for worse, have come to define key aspects of Canadian and Indigenous literary studies. Such differences extend to diverging understandings of peer review, the critic's intention and positionality, and accountability to the author and her community, among other issues in Indigenous and Western scholarship. This divide—whether real or perceived—between "Indigenous" and "Canadian" scholarly protocols is arguably much deeper than that between competing theoretical formations within Western literary criticism, although Indigenous scholarship of course

also comes with its own theoretical debates and discursive diversity. My own critical stance, as an older tenured academic trained in Western literary methodologies and cross-appointed to both Indigenous Studies and Canadian Studies departments, and as a self-identified “small-m métis” (mixed-blood) Acadian-Maliseet woman, inevitably entails compromises, uneasiness, and complicity in the academic politics and other power relations invoked earlier in this essay.⁶ That younger First Nations PhD candidates interested in literature are affiliated with English departments in some instances, with Indigenous studies programs in other cases, and with both in yet other contexts speaks to the complexities that continue to inform the “discipline” of Indigenous literary studies and fertilize ILSA. Simpson, for her part, commenting on the desire to follow up the more academic essays in *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back* with a book of stories and songs, observes that “within Nishnaabeg thought, theory is generated and regenerating from the ground up, and it has to be carried with you through your relationships and your life. . . . Rather than writing about gendered colonial violence, [in *Islands*] I created characters that had experienced that kind of violence but didn’t let it define them” (qtd. in Winder n. pag.). In *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, invoking Edna Manitowabi, one of her Elders, teachers, and co-authors, Simpson explains how creation stories are intimately understood by a self not caught up in the Cartesian mind-body split embedded in European languages and post-Enlightenment European thought. This is the perspective foregrounded in “leaks,” both in Simpson’s poem and in the film version by Mumford.⁷

Situating Anishinaabeg Literary Methodologies

I believe that it is important to use Anishinaabe sources to discuss Anishinaabe literature, although critics from other nations also offer valuable insights on Simpson’s work as well. One useful source is the critical anthology *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World through Stories* (2013), co-published by the University of Manitoba and Michigan State University, and emerging from the 2011 Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (NAISA) conference. According to Anishinaabe editors Jill Doerfler, Niiganwewidam Sinclair, and Heidi Stark, stories are “being used as theoretical frameworks guiding questions in law, history, anthropology, environmental studies, and other fields” in the work of Anishinaabeg scholars, such as the contributors to their anthology, “many of whom [have been] exploring issues and interests of their own

communities” in ways that reveal “stories operating as different entryways, foundations, beginning points—as centers—to Anishinaabeg Studies” (xvi). Their introduction to the anthology explains the difference between *aadizookanaag*—“‘traditional’ or ‘sacred’ narratives that embody values, philosophies, and laws important to life . . . stories [that] are most often classified as animate in Anishinaabemowin”—and *dibaaajimowinan*—everyday narratives that are considered “histories” and “news” (xvii-xviii). Commenting on the essay by Leanne Simpson and Edna Manitowabi in their volume, the editors note that Simpson considers “these two types of stories as interrelated forces, echoes, and parts of a greater whole,” as she also states in *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back* (xviii). In keeping with this methodology, I read “leaks” as reflecting several related aspects of Simpson’s work as an Anishinaabe-kwe. For me, this poem-story intersects with the “spontaneous” resurgent eruptions of inter-tribal, urban, Cree-inspired flash round dances associated with Idle No More; with long-standing “grassroots” forms of cultural, political, and spiritual resistance; with “traditional,” land-based Indigenous knowledge, language, and spirituality; and with contemporary Indigenous literary theory. I emphasize its significance as performance that enacts a positive form of continuity in Indigenous worldviews and change in settler-Indigenous relations. Like many of Simpson’s other stories and essays, “leaks” allows for the presence of ceremony in everyday life, in contemporary art, and in community politics. It interprets, adapts, and applies grandmother teachings about reciprocity and respect that cannot entirely be translated from Anishinaabemowin into English, but that reverberate and hold meaning on different levels for diverse readers. Poems such as “leaks” spark new kinds of conversations between Anishinaabeg, but also between writers from different First Nations, as well as between Indigenous and settler readers and critics.

Poetry, Music, Dance, Film

In Simpson’s work, we hear echoes of the *manidoog* and of the Anishinaabe Creation Story and the vast collection of related stories that Doerfler, Sinclair, and Stark characterize as reliving, changing, and growing “through continuous retellings” in the many versions of various tellers (xviii). If as previously suggested these echoes do not always drown out neo-colonial static, they nevertheless resonate strongly enough to survive on their own terms and to help generate newly decolonizing political moves and art forms. In *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, Simpson notes that performance is “most

powerful in terms of transformation in its original cultural context because that context places dynamic relationships at the core,” although “a song, a dance, or a spoken word story,” like “theatre, performance art, visual art, music and rap, film and video,” allows us to partake in an “individual and collective experience” that can lift “the burden of colonialism by visioning new realities” (34). Cherokee literary critic Daniel Heath Justice offers a similar insight:

There’s a traceable and hopeful genealogy of Indigenous critical thought that moves from the *self* to the complications of *community* . . . to *community-in-relationship* . . . This model places the People into the web of familial rights and responsibilities that define that particular tribal community, while acknowledging the reality of changing historical experiences and their impacts on the various threads of that relational web. (*Our Fire* 210-11)

Simpson’s spoken-word performance of “leaks” testifies both to the strength of cultural memory and to the legacy of colonialism, revealing, as Jarrett Martineau and Eric Ritskes argue, how the “task of decolonial artists, scholars and activists is not simply to offer amendments or edits to the current world, but to display the mutual sacrifice and relationality needed to sabotage colonial systems of thought and power for the purpose of liberatory alternatives” (qtd. in Simpson, “Land” 22).

Both the poem “leaks” and the film *Leaks* can be accessed on Simpson’s website.⁸ The collaboration between spoken-word artist and filmmaker further illustrates Simpson’s decolonial, Anishinaabe understanding of contemporary artistic practices, which in this instance relates to the implicate order, ancestral memory, personal experience, neo-colonial violence, and intergenerational trauma and healing. Like the poem, the film turns to contemporary art forms to evoke land, language, community, and cultural knowledge grounded in Anishinaabe being. Some of these perspectives, embedded in an oral tradition that cannot fully translate into Euro-Canadian cultural contexts, are also given voice in Simpson’s essays, which, like the film, blend autobiography, storytelling, community history, and critical theory. In keeping with the creation story at the Heart of *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, dance functions both literally and metaphorically in Simpson’s thought and in Mumford’s film. The film juxtaposes contrasting emotions, experiences, and art forms: Simpson’s ambidextrous oral rendition of the poem, a lullaby-like song composed and performed on the piano by Tara Williamson, images of family gathering leeks in the forest in the spring, and instances of Simpson’s daughter Minowewebeneshiinh dancing in the

woods. Métis choreographer/dancer Rulan Tangen and Mohawk dancer/designer Tammy Beauvais also contributed other aspects of the process, underscoring the relationships between artists from different Indigenous nations and territories and making use of different media. The film and the poem use a layered storytelling technique that speaks to overlapping Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences as well; this technique could be described as dialogical, contrapuntal, or call-and-response, depending on one's point of reference. Simpson compares the layering technique in some of her own creative work to that used in petroglyphs she has visited (DaCosta n. pag.); it could also be compared, in my view, with the cut-out and overlay techniques seen in underlying and surface decorative layers (and layers of meaning) of bark in birch canoes, cradleboards, and dishes variously used in sacred and everyday contexts. The dialogue between traditional and contemporary art forms generates a multi-dimensional palimpsest of meaning. For Simpson, "storytelling, or 'narrative imagination,' is a tool to vision other existences outside the current ones by critiquing and analyzing the current state of affairs, but also by dreaming and visioning other realities" (*Dancing* 40). While respecting distinctions between sacred stories told in ceremony and personal or "everyday" stories that also entertain and instruct, Simpson considers "Dibaajimowinan as *echoing* the Aandisokaanan" (*Dancing* 40; emphasis mine).

The word "leaks" carries multiple meanings and usages here. It connotes a sudden or an ongoing flow of water, whether in the form of human tears, amniotic fluid, breast milk, or the rain showers associated with thunderstorms. It also signals the piercing through of a ray of light, as in sunlight breaking through the clouds, creating a rainbow, or filtering through a kaleidoscope or camera aperture. "Leaks" reminds us of the fluid boundaries characterizing relationships between mother and child, between lovers, between humans and other life forms, and between European and Anishinaabe peoples and worldviews, as seen from an Indigenous perspective. There is a play of words on "leaks" and "leeks," the latter of which is an endangered species of plant that in the spring serves as both food and medicine to Anishinaabe people. Repairing "tears" in the fabric or web of life—renewing the skin of the earth-mother—means crying "tears" of sadness and joy, bringing back the balance of pain and pleasure associated with birthing. The sacredness of water, traditionally associated with women and with rivers as the life-blood of the earth, also means that women, water, and earth all were (and sometimes still are) deeply cherished and highly respected. Citing Wendy Geniusz's book

Our Knowledge Is Not Primitive, Simpson reminds us that “Aki [earth] includes all aspects of creation: land forms, elements, plants, animals, spirits, sounds, thoughts, feelings, energies and all of the emergent systems, ecologies and networks that connect these elements” (qtd. in “Land” 15). Each individual has “their own personal stories or narratives that communicate their own personal truths, learning, histories and insights,” while the story of the gentle lowering to earth of the first Nishnaabe, “this most perfect, beautiful, lovely being,” is spoken of as “not just any ‘First Person,’ but that it was me, or you” (*Dancing* 41-42). Linking the story of the first being to one’s own story and place in the implicate order reveals how “we were created out of love.” Repetition and re-enactment of sacred stories in everyday contexts open up space for new meaning and understanding, mitigating more coercive forms of repetition in the repertoire of Western libidinal and other economies tied to patriarchal power structures.⁹

Textual Analysis of “leaks”: Resurging Ogichidaakwe

By way of introduction to the print version of the poem published in *Islands of Decolonial Love*, the layering of perspectives is signalled by the author’s diction, indentation, spacing, italics, lower case, and punctuation. Due to space constraints, I limit my own reading here mostly to diction, although features such as recurring shifts between first, second, and third person, between positive and negative grammatical formulations, and between tenses—especially the present continuous and simple future—underscore Indigenous ontology more generally as well as the particulars of the specific story being told. Like these features, the layout of the poem on the page, together with its syntax and diction, underscores its dialogism while hinting at the difficulty of translating into European languages the kinds of relationships built into Indigenous languages such as Anishinaabemowin. In an interview about the book in which this poem was published, Simpson comments on how traditional approaches to language, vision, and technique inspire some of her own literary experiments:

I wanted to use Anishinaabek esthetics or Anishinaabek ways or techniques of storytelling. Those are encoded in the language, and encoded in the way our traditional storytellers tell stories. A lot of our stories take place on Ahki (on the land) but there’s also other things happening in the spirit world, in another dimension. I wanted to have that multi-layered, multi-dimensional technique. I wanted to reference our stories, and repetition was really important in mirroring the poetry, a technique I learned by spending a lot of time at the petroglyphs—I wanted to use some of that. Metaphor is also really important in our traditional

stories . . . all of those things are conceptualized really well in the language, so what if even though it's in English and in print, what if I use some of those techniques that my ancestors used. (qtd. in DaCosta n. pag.)

Fully cognizant of the complexities of conveying Indigenous knowledge in English, Simpson incorporates echoes of stories and linguistic structures into her work. The poem “leaks” references the persistence of colonialism using a poetic technique that allows for the palpable, wordless, ongoing, spiritual presence of Aki. In the poem, some of this earth- and language-based holistic knowledge “leaks” through into English-language usage.

Simpson’s storytelling practices layer contemporary societal realities, Anishinaabe Creation stories, the author’s personal creation story, and elements of her daughter’s story. Like the film, the poem at times merges the story of the ancestors, of the earth, of people today, and of women; cultural memory is embodied in the mother’s and the child’s distinct, interrelated dreams and realities. Its double-voiced discourse points to modernity and to ancestral knowledge, often in the same utterance. The poem’s structure reflects its discourse. Aligned on the left-hand side of the page we find the story of what happened to Simpson’s daughter, a story that hints at the poet’s own unstated childhood traumas. The italicized words on the right point to the significance of this history with reference to Anishinaabe understandings of the sacredness of children, of women, and of the earth. Recent events are viewed from a temporal vantage point anchored in the distant past and looking to the future, which are all conflated in the continuous present as sacred time. The opening line’s reference to a “dirt road,” for instance, evokes the unpaved routes of reserves as well as the good red road associated with Indigenous cultural and spiritual pathways—countering colonialist negative images of the earth and Indigenous people, especially women, as “dirty” or unclean. The second line’s “open windows” invoke clarity of vision, unrestricted breath, and a measure of freedom in the family vehicle travelling down country roads, breaking down barriers between “inside” and “outside.” The dirt road and open window of the poem’s opening lines, like Simpson’s tricky use of the second-person pronoun “you” in some of her italicized lines, evoke Anishinaabe critic Gerald Vizenor’s theory of *transmotion*, which he defines as presence, survivance, and sovereignty, rather than as imitation, hybridity, and cultural mimicry. For Vizenor, “the native *you* is a trickster pronoun with no obvious antecedence. The you is the transmotion of the other, the transcendence of the *indian* as other” (36). He adds that “native identities are in words, to be sure, and in traces

of wind and water; the distance of pronouns in a summer rain, the run of a thunderstorm, is as much assurance of native survivance as the chiasmic inversions of the names” (36). Simpson’s own poetic discourse challenges neo-colonial social constructions of Indigenous being, offering the reader her own vision and version of Anishinaabe cultural identity today.

The third line of “leaks,” *“beautiful one, too perfect for this world,”* does not refer to the fallen nature or lost garden of Christian iconography—or to stereotypes of the vanishing noble savage—but rather to the innocence of a young child wounded by colonialism. This child has to deal with a number of experiences, challenges, and hurts that should not be part of her world, such as racism, disrespect directed at her beloved Elder, and the lack of positive images of her culture reflected in mainstream Canadian society, as well as human struggles including the compromises negotiated daily by family and community members. The line “immediacy of mosquitoes / humidity choking breath” reminds us that life entails struggle and sacrifice and calls for patience, but that there is magic in the cycle of the seasons allowing for the return of *“my beautiful singing bird.”* The next lines refer to this bird, which presumably relates to the daughter’s spirit name, Minowewebeneshiinh. The poet identifies this “five year old ogichidaakwe” as holy woman occupying her own special place in the circle of life and cycle of human regeneration.¹⁰ That she is “crying silent, petrified tears in the backseat / until the dam finally bursts” brings home the terrifying impact of colonialism; it signals the reaching of a crisis point that gives voice to trauma, breaks a long silence, and releases pent-up emotion. The flood of tears flows into and signals both individual and collective healing, as well as recognition of the beauty of Creation. The link between the spirit of earth, mother, and child becomes explicit in the poem’s images of decolonial love:

*you are the breath over the ice on the lake. you are the one
the grandmothers sing to through the rapids. you are the
saved seeds of allies. you are the space between embraces*

The gestational cycle of the seasons is layered with that of humans and of the earth-world, embodying presence and continuity through women’s work, words, cries, and pregnant silences. The line “saved seeds of allies,” referring to settlers who support Indigenous values, alludes to the need to protect traditional subsistence crops such as corn and “wild” rice (manoomin) from genetically modified and commodified seeds spawned by monocultural agribusiness as well as from unsustainable commercial harvesting by outside interests. The phrase also acknowledges the possibility of more positive,

loving relations between settlers and Indigenous people, while signalling solidarity between different racialized and oppressed groups resisting the forces of globalization.

I am once again reminded of the title of Simpson's collection and the epigraph upon which it is based. Simpson explains:

I started with a different title for the manuscript, and when I was in the final stages I happened to read an article by the Dominican-American author Junot Díaz entitled "Decolonial Love." He was talking about his own experience as an immigrant and a male, trying to find love and intimacy with a romantic partner, despite having the damage of colonialism, rape culture, and gendered violence as a starting point. The interview really resonated with me . . . I started to see Anishinaabe women—whether it's their love of land, culture, Elders, or partners—as little islands of hope, little islands of love. Maybe we don't always get it right, but we get glimpses of love, so the title really seemed to fit. (qtd. in DaCosta n. pag.)

The next few lines of the poem comment on the significance of the events alluded to earlier: "she's always going to remember this" and "her body will remember" could refer to the embodied memory of the ancestors, of sacredness, of trauma, and of healing. There is also an allusion to the knowledge that individual and collective refusal can be empowering, as suggested in the intervening lines "*you are rebellion, resistance, re-imagination*" and "*you are dug up roads, 27-day standoffs, the foil of industry prospectors.*" We are forever forced to dig up the dirt of colonialism, which desecrates earth and people alike: "she can't speak about it for a year, which is 1/6 of her life." The layers upon layers of meaning are hinted at but deliberately not revealed: "*for every one of your questions there is a story hidden in the forest.*" Her response to this—as a mother, an activist, and a poet—makes use of the imperative grammatical mood, underscoring the necessity of remembering and of acting: "use them [these stories hidden in the forest, including the story of gathering leeks every year] as flint, fodder, love songs, medicine." Like the repetition of the pronoun "she," the recurrence of the pronoun "you" is layered, multiple, and inclusive, affirming the collective vision and untiring work of Indigenous women and Indigenous artists: "*you are from a place of unflinching power, the holder of our stories, the one who speaks up.*" Besides her daughter, Simpson includes other potential readers in this "you," although she speaks primarily to the Indigenous readership that she identifies as her first audience: "I also encourage non-Native readers to seek out the histories and perspectives of the Indigenous Peoples' territory they call home and work towards becoming a decolonizing influence where they live" (*Gift* 5).

The last three lines of the poem compound the storied layers built up by the author:

the chance for spoken up words drowned in ambush
 you are not a vessel for white settler shame,
even if i am the housing that failed you.

It is possible to interpret “drowned in ambush” and “housing that failed you” as the recognition of human frailty in general and the daunting task facing Indigenous mothers in particular. Being human, we are all blindsided from time to time, subject to the vagaries of chance and of choice; a mother feels this especially keenly, an Indigenous mother doubly so. It is also possible to interpret these lines as implying the deeper ravages of colonialism, generating a sense of inescapable violence and irreparable loss in the community, something that we all feel at times, as Simpson notes elsewhere: “storytelling becomes a space where we can escape the gaze and the cage of Empire, even if it is just for a few minutes” (*Dancing* 34). However, I also interpret “spoken up words drowned in ambush” as Anishinaabemowin, and “the housing that failed you” as English. Here, language is not the clothing so much as the housing of thought—if language functions, according to Heidegger, as the house of being, then English betrays the Indigenous subject. While we can never fully convey the mystery and beauty of Creation in *any* language, spoken or written, the silences no less than the words carry a heavy burden of meaning for the poet, her daughter, and her Elder here: “*you are not a vessel for white settler shame.*” The sounds of the jingle dress, the Elder’s words, the wind in the woods—these are not seen or heard but are palpable beneath the words and rhythms of the poem.

Pedagogy as Embodied Flight

In “Land as Pedagogy,” Simpson reminds us that relationships are based upon consent, that “[r]aising Indigenous children in a context where their consent, physically and intellectually, is not just required but valued goes a long way to undoing the replication of colonial gender violence” (15). Having experienced the biases and power relations inherent in Western educational systems, Simpson has produced alternative pedagogical tools and stories suitable for both children and adults, stories learned from the Elders. These include oral and written performances of Nanabozho (Elder Brother) stories which, like the essays in *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, revisit the significance of key words and concepts from Anishinaabemowin. In “Land as Pedagogy,” Simpson refers back to a story about the gift of maple syrup retold in her

2013 book *The Gift Is in the Making*, emphasizing how we relate to these stories on a deeply personal, gendered level. In the essay, Simpson's use of the name-word Kwezens [girl], together with her commentary on the story, makes it clear that Kwezens simultaneously refers to herself, her daughter, and the girl in the older traditional story passed on by her Elders and reinterpreted here—reminding me of the layering of meaning in “leaks.” As she suggests, land is both context and process in this story about the joy and the responsibilities of sustaining and being sustained by the sugar maple bush:

It is critical to avoid the assumption that this story takes place in pre-colonial times because Nishnaabeg conceptualizations of time and space present an on-going intervention to linear thinking—this story happens in various incarnations all over our territory every year. . . . Kwezen's presence (and the web of kinship relations that she is composed of) is complicated by her fraught relationality to the tenacity of settler colonialism . . . and her very presence simultaneously shatters the disappearance of Indigenous women and girls from settler consciousness. (“Land” 8)

In a further comment on decolonial aesthetics, Simpson cites Martineau and Ritske's claim that “the freedom realized through flight and refusal is the freedom to imagine and create an elsewhere in the here; a present future beyond the imaginative and territorial bounds of colonialism. It is a performance of other worlds, an embodied practice of flight” (qtd. in “Land” 23). For me, this “embodied practice of flight” is suggested by the “beautiful singing bird” of the poem and by the girl's thunderbird hoop dance in the film. Tara Williamson's lyrics, not always clearly audible beneath the overlay of music and spoken-word poem, include the words “Nagamon binesiioons” [sing, little bird] as well as the Nishnabemowin words for “don't cry” and “don't forget,” serving to remind that child of who she is no matter what transpires.¹¹ The reverberations of such decolonial aesthetics, as part of a larger movement, have yet to be fully realized in both settler and Indigenous community contexts, but the seeds of song have been planted. According to Simpson, in order to access knowledge from a Nishnaabeg perspective, “we have to engage our entire bodies: our physical beings, emotional self, our spiritual energy and our intellect. Our methodologies, our lifeways must reflect those components of our being and the integration of those four components into a whole” (*Dancing* 42). This places the dancing, singing, and storytelling self at the heart of resurgence, bringing family and community back into the circle of life.

The introduction to this essay mentions my own uneasiness with some of the contradictions inherent in turning to Western academic frameworks

to discuss Indigenous literatures; because I am not versed in Anishinaabeg methods, I use theory and criticism by Anishinaabeg scholars who do have knowledge of those traditions. Even for those interested in other approaches, it is evident (at least to me) that the relation of academic studies to Indigenous communities, and of disciplines to interdisciplinary frameworks, is called into question by Indigenist perspectives, as Simpson's 2008 critical anthology *Lighting the Eighth Fire: The Liberation, Resurgence, and Protection of Indigenous Nations* clearly illustrates. While we now have at our disposal numbers of books by Indigenous literary critics, such as the Doerfler, Sinclair, and Stark volume, there is still the tendency for Indigenous studies methodologies to be associated with the social sciences more than the humanities—although recent publications such as Chris Andersen and Jean O'Brien's *Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies* (2017) includes work by literary scholars such as Daniel Heath Justice and Heidi Stark among others. At the risk of sounding even more polemical than in my introduction, I would argue that more needs to be done in support of Indigenous academics and activists in the humanities and in literary studies. I wonder whether—the economics and politics of scholarly publishing aside—we might wish to consider a new “Canadian-based” journal whose mandate would be to create space for Indigenous literary scholars, while also leaving room for work by settler allies wishing to support such a project?

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NOTES

- 1 See “Indigenous Literature and the Arts of Community” for the call for papers cited in this introduction.
- 2 Leanne Simpson and Glen Coulthard make a more pointed comment about their own experience of a conference organized in Toronto, one where historic Wendat, Mississauga Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee relationships to each other and to settlers in that place were not acknowledged by the organizers, who apparently did not see these Indigenous nations as hosts. See Coulthard and Simpson.

- 3 My citations retain variations in my sources' spelling of Ojibway words: there are differences in dialect, usage, orthography, etc., in work by Indigenous scholars. When not citing secondary sources, I use the noun Anishinaabe (plural Anishinaabeg) to refer to Algonquian-speaking people, and the singular form Anishinaabe as adjective in my own (English) sentences. I use Anishinaabe-kwe to refer to a woman who is identifying or speaking specifically as an Indigenous woman, and Anishinaabemowin to refer to the language itself. The word Aki or Ahki (earth) is also spelled differently by different people; I use Aki. I assume full responsibility for any mistakes in my usage of such words in this essay.
- 4 See also Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "Relationality: A Key Presupposition of an Indigenous Social Research Paradigm."
- 5 See Mignolo's *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. The history of the phrase "decolonial aesthetics," associated with the collective decolonial manifesto linked to related art exhibits, is briefly outlined in Rolando Vazquez and Walter Mignolo's article "Decolonial AestheSis [sic]: Colonial Wounds / Decolonial Healings," published in *Social Text Online* on July 15, 2013.
- 6 My extended introduction would not be complete without a few words about my own positionality, which reflects the biases of my training in both thematic and post-structuralist approaches to Canadian literature and women's writing in the 1970s and 1980s. My reading practices have also been shaped by my urban childhood in New Brunswick Maliseet territory and northeastern Quebec Innu territory. While I am interested in Simpson's contributions for their intrinsic worth, my focus on her work is also influenced by her presence at Trent and in Peterborough, a city located in traditional Anishinaabe territory. Finally, it should be noted that as someone born on the Maine-New Brunswick-Quebec border, I have always been drawn not only to nation- and place-specific literatures in general, but also to Indigenous writing that traverses and challenges geopolitical boundaries such as the 49th parallel.
- 7 This Vimeo was screened at Laurentian when Edna Manitowabi was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Sudbury in 2014, and during which Dr. Manitowabi delivered her convocation address entirely in Anishinaabemowin. I attended both the ceremony and the screening on this occasion.
- 8 <http://leannesimpson.ca/>
- 9 I am reminded of Cree playwright Tomson Highway's contribution to Sam McKegney's *Masculindians* (2014), an anthology of conversations with Indigenous authors, in which Highway explains the implications of the deep difference between Western and Indigenous stories and narratives, including foundational creation stories and discourses associated with monotheism, pantheism, and animism.
- 10 A footnote appended to this one-page poem explains that in Anishnaabemowin "ogichidaakwe is holy woman" (21).
- 11 I am grateful to Cara Mumford for this information about the meaning of Tara's words, as I do not speak any Indigenous language.

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