

Stories & Songs

Islands of Decolonial Love

by Leanne Simpson

ARP BOOKS • WINNIPEG

Copyright ©2013 Leanne Simpson

ARP BOOKS (Arbeiter Ring Publishing)
201e-121 Osborne Street
Winnipeg, Manitoba
Canada R3L 1Y4
arpbooks.org

Printed in Canada by Kromar Printing
Cover image "Letter to William" by Bonnie Devine
Courtesy of Gallery Connexion, Fredericton, NB
Typeset by Urbanink
Second printing, August 2014

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

This book is fully protected under the copyright laws of Canada and all other countries of the Copyright Union and is subject to royalty. Any properly footnoted quotation of up to five hundred sequential words may be quoted without permission, so long as the total number of words does not exceed two thousand. For longer continuous quotations or for a greater number of words, contact ARP BOOKS for permission.



Conseil des Arts
du Canada

Canada Council
for the Arts



Canadian
Heritage

Patrimoine
canadien



ARP acknowledges the financial support of our publishing activities by Manitoba Culture, Heritage, and Tourism, and the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund.

ARP acknowledges the support of the Province of Manitoba through the Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Book Publisher Marketing Assistance Program.

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for our publishing program.

With the generous support of the Manitoba Arts Council.

Printed on paper from 50% recycled post-consumer waste.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Simpson, Leanne, 1971-, author

Islands of decolonial love / Leanne Simpson.

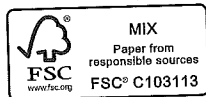
ISBN 978-1-894037-88-4 (pbk.)

I. Title.

PS8637.I4865I75 2013

C813:6

C2013-906100-2



still, i am not tragic

—lee maracle, "blind justice"

*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.*

—richard van camp, *the lesser blessed*

*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?*

—junot díaz, *boston globe*

indinawemaaganidog/
all of my relatives

i am standing on the wharf in cap saint louis just wondering, when a guy i've never met shows up. you should know i make it a policy not to talk to people unless absolutely necessary which is judgmental and damaged and yes i miss out on possibility, but at the same time tricky people do manage on occasion to penetrate my aural perimeter. it all works out in the end. sort of.

so etienne shows up and says allo and obviously he knows i'm not suppose to be there so i'm suspicious of what he wants. i tell him i want to see the seal colony even though that's not what i want and that's not what i'm looking for. he immediately says he'll take me. i ask how much. he says for free.

fine.

nothing in life is free. the best things in life are free. there is no such thing as a free lunch.

we walk down the dock and he offers his hand so i can step down onto the deck of the boat. of course i refuse and step down onto stacked broken plastic bins on my own because we need to get a few things straight right from the beginning and this is one of them.

he starts the engine and i'm in the back with the gear so we can't talk. it's sunny and it's windy and it's perfect and as we drive away from the shore i think about dexter and all the possible scenarios. he interrupts, offering me a coors light iced tea and i take one on impulse even though its only ten thirty in the morning and coors light is always gross. suddenly we're a mile off shore in the atlantic.

we drive past a kayaker and kumbaya plays in my head and i stand up and wave like a happy person so he'll remember me when the cops question him later.

it's only a few more minutes to the seals which are herded on a sand bar so they can catch the fish moving into the river with big tides. we get close and they stampede into the sea reminding me of dogs and sheep and buffalo and etienne asks me if i want to go farther.

with the same impulse as the coors light iced tea, i say yes and he says he knows this place where there is a school of mackerel. we could fish because last night he was there and he caught a thousand pounds just jigging for them. i decide he is mi'kmaq because he could be and even though that probably means nothing it makes me feel less nervous.

on the way to the mackerel, etienne tells me how the feds kicked his family out of the park and paid them three hundred and fifty bucks for their land in 1968 and then they bulldozed the house. i tell etienne that i know how that feels but i don't think he believes me because he thinks i'm from toronto and i'm rich and judgmental and full of shit because that's what people think when you say the word "ontario."

etienne gets out the lines and in two minutes we know we're on the school because we're pulling in mackerel easy. he watches as i hold the hook and snap the fish into the garbage pail, which is my reveal. it's sunny and it's windy and it's perfect and the arms of the day are wide open and no one has to be anywhere. i see a northern gannet and i love gannets because they can disconnect their wings before they plummet into the sea after a fish. imagine disconnecting a body part! the gannet swims over to the boat smelling the fish blood and etienne hands the gannet a fish and says "the bird is my family, all of this, the fish, the seals, the water—this is my family," which is his reveal.

our eyes meet because now he has my attention. i walk over and hug him and he is the kind of person that can give and receive a real hug and i'm not one of those people because my alarm system goes off when people touch me and i freeze up and shut down. this time that doesn't happen. i decide to kiss him and it's perfect and easy and we make out void of awkwardness but with a clearly defined beginning and a clearly defined ending. then he drives back to shore while i gut the fish in the back of the boat using his terrifyingly sharp knife, feeding the guts to the gulls and the gannets. he drops me off on the dock. we thank each other. we say goodbye and i pay attention to each step, instead of looking back.

he's reading the signs and forecasting tomorrow. i'm taking inventory of unasked questions, wondering which holds the most regret. he starts the truck and tells me to get in. i say, "i'll walk." he nods, shuts the door and then drives off the ice, stopping to wait until i turn towards the shore.

binesiwag

You are eight years old and your mom decides it's time you stay overnight at her relatives, for no particular reason other than it is a milestone she needs to stroke off on her child development checklist, and you fucking hate the idea and there is enough anxiety in your stomach to power the electricity needs of southern ontario well into the next generation, but your mom says you are going anyway and you decide to pray to god to intervene because it is the only thing you can think of that can save you and because for some reason you don't understand, santa claus and the tooth fairy are not real but god is, apparently.

your mom loads you and your sister into her dark green dodge station wagon with fake wood paneling on the sides and she drives you first to ingersoll and then to kitchener for the sleepover, which at this point is juvenile detention in your mind and this is confirmed by the weather because it's august and the humidity is smothering

you in the backseat, your bare legs stuck to the vinyl seating, the windows all down, even the one at the very back.

you pray all the way to ingsoll because god likes persistence and you are not a quitter, and even though your prayer repertoire is weak and uninspired you know that inspiration doesn't move the god you have been introduced to, persistence and hard work and sacrifice do, so you stop thinking about it and resume the lord's prayer interspersed with "dear god, please, please don't let her leave me at auntie marvelous' for the weekend."

you are on the 401 when the sky begins to get much too dark for four in the afternoon and your mom says in an adventurous suck it up way, "we're heading into the eye of the storm," right before you see a magnificent flock of hawk-sized shingle birds taking off, their hold defeated and severed from the flat roof of a warehouse.

it starts to rain with the violence of any mid-summer thunderstorm, there is lightning, not the sheet or heat lightning you are used to, but fork lightning, the wind is everywhere and so your mom pulls the car over because the visibility is too poor to drive, her hands gripping the steering wheel like the strength in her fingers are the only thing keeping the car upright.

your mom turns around from the driver's seat and yells, "roll up in a ball if the car tips over," which at this point hadn't occurred to any of you in the back seat, but your mom soldiers on trying to pull her knees around the steering wheel and towards her chest to demonstrate.

the sound is the loudest sound you've ever heard, like the amplified sound of an old vacuum before anyone knew you could lose your hearing through prolonged loud sound exposure, and it is so loud you can and do scream as loud as you want and no one can hear you.

you scream "i don't want to go to auntie's," over and over.

you don't scream "please save us" or "i don't want to die yet."

the worst of it is over within minutes, and your mom pulls the car back onto the 401, gawkily driving past wire fencing, crumpled transports lying on their sides and through overpasses reduced to rubble—the corn stalks are standing bare and alone in the fields, their leaves harvested.

you are thinking that surely there is no way you are going to auntie marvelous' after that weather apocalypse and you wait with raw anxiety for the cancellation, but your mom doesn't say anything about what just happened or about changing plans.

she just drives on to auntie's, drops you and your sister off and leaves, with you standing on the suburban burnt lawn, the dead blades of grass pricking your toes, you wondering for the first time if god really does exist, or if perhaps it is possible that your mom wields more power than him.

later that night, the news tells your mom that the you were one hundred metres from death in the f4 tornado that touched down on the 401.

your mom tells you you're fine, you're fine, you're fine the next time it thunders but your sister thinks she's full of shit and goes berserk and when no adults can calm her down they get you, and for the rest of your life you wish that you'd known to hold her and to whisper into her ear that binesiwag are always only here to protect us. they are only ever here to love us.

nishnaabemowin: binesiwag means thunderbirds.

leaks

dirt road
open windows

beautiful one, too perfect for this world

the immediacy of mosquitoes
humidity choking breath

my beautiful singing bird

five year old ogichidaakwe
crying silent, petrified tears in the backseat
until the dam finally bursts

*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*

she's always going to remember this

you are rebellion, resistance, re-imagination

her body will remember

*you are dug up roads, 27-day standoffs, the foil of industry
prospectors*

she can't speak about it for a year, which is 1/6 of her life

*for every one of your questions there is a story hidden in the
skin of the forest. use them as flint, fodder, love songs, medi-
cine. you are from a place of unflinching power, the holder
of our stories, the one who speaks up*

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.

nishnaabemowin: ogichidaakwe is holy woman.



jiibay or aandizooke

all along the north shore of pimaadashkodeyaang
(you might call it rice lake)

all along the north shore of pimaadashkodeyaang,
are those burial mounds.

gore landing, roach point, sugar island,
cameron's point, hastings, le vesconte.

big mounds. ancient mounds.

mounds

that cradle the bones

of the ones that came before us.

this summer

this summer some settlers

who live right on the top of that burial mound in hastings,

right on top

were excavating

renovating

back hoeing

new deck. new patio. new view.

"please pass the salsa."

this summer some settlers

who live right on the top of that burial mound in hastings,

right on top

were excavating

renovating

back hoeing

new deck. new patio. new view.

and they found a skull.

call 911

there's a skull

call 911



there's more
 call 911
 jiiibay.
 breathe.
 we're supposed to be on the lake.
 breathe
 we're supposed to be
 gently knocking
 and
 gently parching
 and
 gently dancing
 and
 gently winnowing.
 breathe.
 we are
 not
 supposed to be
 standing
 on
 this desecrated mound
 looking
 not looking
 looking
 not looking
 looking
 not looking
 looking
 not looking
 looking
 not looking
 did i see that right?
 my skull is in a cardboard box
 in that basement?
 my bones are under

an orange tarp from canadian tire,
 cracked.
 rattling plastic in the wind.
 my grave is desecrated
 my skull is in that white lady's basement
 my bones are under that orange tarp from canadian tire
 cracked
 rattling plastic in the wind like a rake on the sidewalk.
 my body is tired
 from carrying
 the weight
 of this zhaganashi's house.
 ah nokomis
 this shouldn't have happened.
 your relatives took such good care.
 the mound so clearly marked.
 ah nokomis
 how did this happen?
 what have you come to tell us?
 why are you here?
 aahhhhh my zhaganashi
 welcome to kina gchi nishnaabe-ogaming
 enjoy your visit.
 but like my elder says
 please don't stay too long.

nishnaabemowin: jiiibay is a ghost, a skeleton, aandizooke a messenger, a being from a traditional story, nokomis is grandmother, zhaganashi is a white person, kina gchi nishnaabeg-ogaming is a mississauga nishnaabeg name for our homeland.

tions, protecting the circle. for now, her battle with the wiindigo was in its resurgence stage. gezhizhwazh was building an army—a diffuse, scattered group of souls that could see through the wiindigo illusion, because they were whole.

the light of gezhizhwazh's army of dancing eyes would change the world.

just wait.

"just wait for what?"

"you just wait. that's it."

"that's it? nothing happened? it's a great set up, but . . . but i don't know if you should be messing around with gezhizhwazh and wiindigo stories especially if nothing is going to happen."

"nothing happened? howah, you don't even know a story when you hear it. it doesn't all come to you at once. you can't just press a button and get all the answers. press the button, get all the answers, then what you going to do, big shot?"

"then what do we do?"

"you just wait, i already told you. and while you are waiting, get me some tea, and maybe something to eat. i'm hungry after all that story-telling."

nishnaabemowin: zhaganasbiyaadizi means to be colonized, live as a white person at the expense of being nishnaabe, gezhizhwazh means to cut.

nogojiwanong

she is the only doorway into this world

i. it is with great regret that we are writing on behalf of the michi saagiig anishinaabeg to inform you that you will not be permitted to build your lift locks, canals and hydro dams here because this is the place where we come to sit and talk with our aanikoobijiganag.

ii. it is with great regret that we are writing on behalf of the michi saagiig anishinaabeg to inform you that you will not be permitted to build your lift locks, canals and hydro dams because these are the rivers we use to travel from chi'nibiish to waasegamaa. these routes are vital to the health and well-being of our relatives, pimiziwag and maajaamegosag.

iii. it is with great regret that we are writing on behalf of the michi saagiig anishinaabeg that you will not be permitted to build your lift locks, canals and hydro dams because we cannot permit concrete

shackles on our mother, she needs to be free to move around in order to cleanse and give birth.

iv. it is with great regret that we are writing on behalf of the michi saagiig anishinaabeg to inform you that you will not be permitted to build your lift locks, canals and hydro dams because the fish, eels, birds, insects, plants, turtles, and reptiles do not consent to the damage your project will cause.

v. it is with great regret that we are writing on behalf of the michi saagiig anishinaabeg to inform you will not be permitted to build your lift locks, canals and hydro dams because the caribou, elk, deer, bison, lynxes, foxes, wolves, wolverines, martens, otters, muskrats, bears, skunks, raccoons, beavers, squirrels and chipmunks do not consent to the damage your project will cause.

vi. it is with great regret that we are writing on behalf of the michi saagiig anishinaabeg to inform you that you will not be permitted to build your lift locks, canals and hydro dams because of the damage it will cause our sugar bushes and minomiin beds, and our relatives the ducks and geese that depend on those beds for food.

vii. it is with great regret that we are writing on behalf of the michi saagiig anishinaabeg to inform you will not be permitted to build your lift locks, canals and hydro dams here because this is the place where we give birth and breastfeed, and we like to drink the water while doing so. the clean water in our wombs and breasts is the same clean water in the rivers and lakes.

this is the place where we come to sit and talk with our aanikoobijiganag.

signed this 21st day of june, eighteen hundred and thirty, nogojiwanong, kina gichi anishinaabeg-ogaming.

kaniganaa,

wenona x

gizhiikokwe x

niimkii binetikwe x

nokomis x

ogichidaakwe, jijaak doodem x

ogichidaakwe, migizi doodem x

ogichidaakwe, adik doodem x

nishnaabemowin: nogojiwanong is the mississauga name for peterborough and means the place at the foot of the rapids, michi saagiig nishnaabeg is the name for mississauga nishnaabeg people and means lives at the mouth of rivers, aanikobijiganag means ancestors, great-grandmothers, great-grandfathers, and great-grandchildren, literally "the links that bind us together" or a chain, chi'nibiish is the mississauga name for lake ontario, waasegamaa is the nishnaabeg name for georgian bay, maaajaamegosag is a name for salmon, pimiziwig is a name for eels, minomiin is wild rice, kina gchi anishinaabeg-ogaming means the place where we all live and work together, wenona is a spirit-being whose name means "the first breast feeder," gizhiigokwe is sky-woman, nokomis is grandmother, nimkii binetikwe means thunderbird woman, ogichidaakwe is a holy woman, jijaak is crane, doodem is clan, migizi is bald eagle, adik is caribou, bald eagle and crane are clans associated with mississauga territory, kaniganaa is a word often spoken at the end of prayer or scared songs.