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## Land, Water, and Stars: Relationality in Anishinaabe and Diasporic Literature

Maral Moradipour, *The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor: Phu, Thy, *The University of Western Ontario*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in English

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## Abstract

*Land, Water, and Stars: Relationality in Anishinaabe and Diasporic Literature* examines how relationality is encoded and portrayed in poetry, short stories, and novels by Anishinaabe and diasporic authors, Elizabeth Acevedo, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Gerald Vizenor, and Mohsin Hamid. Through engagement with select works by these writers, the thesis contributes to critical discussion about relationality, a concept that posits that all existence is relational and asserts that no human being is outside this state of being. A generative, complex concept for analyzing responses to displacement and dispossession, critiques of power, and visions of just and balanced co-existence, relationality provides a useful analytic lens through which to consider and assess literary frameworks for imagining connections between Indigenous and racialized diasporic communities. Through close readings of *Beastgirl and Other Origin Myths* (Acevedo), “nogojiwanong” (Simpson), *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* (Vizenor), and *Exit West* (Hamid), I analyze the significance of two pivotal themes for unfolding relationality’s potential: (i) the concept of decolonial love and (ii) the concept of constellations, as conveyed in the representation of land and stars.

The first section examines the relational aspects of decolonial love as taken up in works by Black Dominican-American poet Elizabeth Acevedo and Anishinaabe writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. Through engagement with these works, the thesis demonstrates how decolonial love might conjure attraction, intimacy and care, which colonialism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism have damaged. The second section explores the significance of stars and constellations for unfolding relationality in novels by Anishinaabe theorist, Gerald Vizenor and Pakistani-British writer, Mohsin Hamid. This section illuminates the innovative ways that these writers draw on star knowledge to produce cross-hemispheric novels and reveals their insightful strategies for grappling with rootedness, migration, conquest, and displacement. Taken together, the thesis provides a critical description of the ways that literature might imagine, express, and enact relationality.

## Keywords

relationality, diaspora studies, Indigenous literature, Anishinaabe literature, refugee,  
Indigenous theory, decolonial love, constellational thought

## Summary for Lay Audience

In this dissertation, I analyze the poetry, short stories, and novels of two Anishinaabe writers, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Gerald Vizenor, and two diasporic writers, Elizabeth Acevedo and Mohsin Hamid. Specifically, I look for the different ways in which each author weaves the concept of relationality into their writings. Relationality is a term that is being theorized and used by scholars in diverse fields, from Indigenous thought to quantum physics to sociology, and others. In an academic context, I first came across the term in Indigenous theory, which has most strongly informed my understanding of the concept. Moreover, I think relationality is a primordial premise for many philosophies around the world, and I discuss it in terms of Afro-Caribbean thought in the first chapter, Anishinaabe thought in chapters two and three, and Sufi thought in the last chapter. In general, relationality is the perspective that all of existence is relational and no one exists as a solitary entity outside of relationships. Such a cosmological framework is counter to an individualist, exploitative worldview. Through close readings of *Beastgirl and Other Origin Myths* (Acevedo), “nogojiwanong” (Simpson), *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* (Vizenor), and *Exit West* (Hamid), I examine how relationality is expressed through two concepts: (i) decolonial love and (ii) constellations. The thesis offers a critical engagement with literature as a form of art that can help society imagine the ways in which relationality can be embodied and enacted towards the realization of a more balanced, just, and peaceful world.

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## Introduction

### Relationality, Decolonial Love, and Constellations: Grounded Critiques of Indigenous and Diasporic Literature

I am six years old. My two-year-old sister and I sit in the front seat of a pick-up truck on my mother's lap. A young Jewish woman sits next to us and digs her nails into my mother's thigh. She is terrified, having been caught and tortured in a previous escape attempt. In the back of the truck, covered beneath a tarp, my father lays down, pressed against the bodies of numerous others fleeing. The truck's lights are off, so the blackness of night can hide us.

Though the driver, who is from the region, can't see anything on the ground, still, he weaves his way through the mountains between Iran and Pakistan. He is guided by stars across Baluch territory, bisected by a modern border. This nighttime journey as a refugee teaches me that, wherever you are, your relationship to the stars can help position, orient, and guide you through land and water. But only if, like this Baluch smuggler, you understand what the stars and constellations mean in relation to where you find yourself.

My journey as a Bahá'í refugee eventually brought me to Canada, a place where, though the stars remain the same, their relationships to each other, to the land and water, and to the land's original inhabitants were different from what I knew. This hemispheric shift prompted me to reflect on my changed relationship to all three elements. Soon after our arrival, my family became close with a Bahá'í family, whose matriarch, Evelyn Loft Watts, was Ojibwe, Anishinaabe, and Mohawk, and who remained beloved and influential in our lives until and even beyond her death in 2016.<sup>1</sup> Evelyn shared her perspectives on Bahá'í and Anishinaabe teachings and was a major part of my formative years. She provided a bright, orienting light that countered Canadian socio-political discourse that attempts to eclipse Indigenous presence and position the

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<sup>1</sup> Her book *Return to Tyendinaga: The Story of Jim and Melba Loft, Bahá'í Pioneers* was published in 2011. Evelyn's mother, Melba Whetung Loft, grew up on the Curve Lake First Nation community and her father's, Jim Loft's, maternal family were from Hiawatha First Nation and paternal family were from Tyendinaga (part of the Mohawk Nation).

settler state and white society as our benefactors—when it is Indigenous peoples who are our true hosts.<sup>2</sup>

I begin on this personal note in order to self-locate and culturally ground my research, which seeks to develop a relational methodology inspired by the cosmology of the Anishinaabeg (Anishinaabe people), one of the Indigenous peoples whose land I have come to occupy. Nêhiyaw and Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach states that “self-location” and cultural “grounding” are features of Indigenous research that are “shared by other forms of anti-oppressive research methodologies” (18). Highlighting the work of Kathleen Absolon (Ojibway, Anishinabe) and Cam Willett (Cree), Kovach affirms that “self-location anchors knowledge within experiences, and these experiences greatly influence interpretations” (111). Just as my family relied on local astronomic and terrestrial knowledge for safe passage across Baluch territory, I consider it vital to find my own cultural and political bearings on the land that Anishinaabeg share with other Indigenous peoples, land which they are compelled to share with settlers as well. It is also equally important to consider how a refugee in a settler state like Canada can, in the process, go about maintaining their non-Western worldview and their responsibilities to kin and place—both of which are often subject to inter- and intra-national forces of oppression and violation.

A relational methodology, or a methodology developed in accordance with relationality, allows me to offer self-reflexive analyses of texts that are attentive to the lands and cosmologies from which each text is shaped. Relationality is a term that has been developed across various fields and disciplines but which I first came across in Indigenous theory. Broadly, it is the notion that all existence is relational in its essence and no human being is outside this state of being.

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<sup>2</sup> In many ways, the Canadian state and settler society largely misrepresent or misunderstand this relationship. Taking the example of the legal category “citizen” and comparing it to the legal category “refugee” illustrates my point. In “Sui Generis and Treaty Citizenship,” James (Sákéj) Youngblood Henderson (Chickasaw and Cheyenne) asserts that “the rights of aliens to Canadian citizenship are derived mostly from the Aboriginal sovereign’s conditional permission to the British sovereign to provide for settlements” (419). It is not “an independent right to presence” (417). People seeking refuge on the lands within Canada’s borders are not always officially recognized by the state as refugees. By extension, a right to seek and/or be granted refuge is also derived from a “conditional permission” given by Aboriginal sovereigns. I take this to mean that it is not the purview of solely the Canadian state to decide who has a right to come to these lands for refuge from harm and death.

Scholars of Indigenous thought, of sociology, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and Islamic Studies have all theorized this term in different ways.<sup>3</sup> Relationality is a promising concept because it has allowed me to develop my project as one that honours Indigenous thought without appropriating Indigenous methodology. Absolon asserts that Indigenous methodologies are still being designed and explored by Indigenous peoples (48). Specifically, for Absolon, Anishinaabe ways of re-search and “making meaning” include accessing “portals of knowledge,” such as dreams and ceremonies, which are not considered conventional in Eurocentric scholarship (66). Thus, she contends that understanding how to use these Anishinaabe methods of *kaandossiwin* (coming to know) is, for now, the work of Anishinaabe people alone. Because I look at a diverse collection of literature—Anishinaabe, Black Latinx Caribbean, and Asian diasporic—I needed a methodology that was broadly applicable but could also be responsive to the particularities of each text.

Close reading is a standard technique of literary criticism that, when guided by relationality, meets these requirements. Moreover, I chose to pair diasporic texts with Anishinaabe texts that drew on similar themes so as to convey relationality in both form and content from each author’s own contexts—a form of close reading I refer to as *reading for resonance*. I chose works that addressed issues of oppression and domination faced by the author’s own communities while also paying attention to other communities impacted by similar forces. In this way, I offer an interconnected and expansive view of relationality from texts responding to displacement and dispossession. Although using relationality to analyze relationality may at first seem tautological, this approach is a matter of consistency and ethics; expounding on relationality from a perspective that is neither self-reflexive nor shaped by place-based contingencies would undermine the very notion of relationality. By relationality, I refer to what Anishinaabe scholar Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair calls the “relational framework” of Anishinaabe thought in which humans are “one part of a life-making system” (86). Shawn Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree) adds that relationality means that “relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality” (7).

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<sup>3</sup> See for example, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Wilson), “Relational Persons and Relational Processes: Developing the Notion of Relationality for the Sociology of Personal Life” (Roseneil and Ketokivi), and “Bread, Freedom, Social Justice: The Egyptian Uprising and a Sufi Khidma” (Mittermaier).

Indeed, relationality facilitates thinking through liberation as rooted in place and moved by a vision of the Earth as one life-sustaining system or entity.

As countless thinkers including Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Frantz Fanon remind us, systems of oppression such as colonialism, racism, and patriarchy operate by implicating even the oppressed in their own oppression. Therefore, while these systems impact each community differently, everyone is responsible for dismantling them. Relationality allows us to leave open the possibility of innumerable human and non-human positionalities while accounting for the diverse communities to which people belong and the different, but entangled, ways that power and oppression impact these communities.

My research contributes to discourse on relationality that is informed by Indigenous scholarship, with a focus on Anishinaabe thought, and interpreted through a Bahá'í lens, which I foreground in the Introduction because of the necessity to situate my own positionality. More specifically, my dissertation examines how relationality is encoded and portrayed in literature by Anishinaabe and diasporic authors through close readings that are attentive to two pivotal themes: (i) the concept of decolonial love in Elizabeth Acevedo's *Beastgirl and Other Origin Myths* and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's "nogojinwanong" and (ii) the concept of constellations, as conveyed in the thematic relationship of land and stars depicted in Gerald Vizenor's *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* and Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*. My scholarship is fueled by a responsibility and desire to act ethically towards liberation within the complex set of relations in which I am implicated as a refugee from Iran and a Canadian citizen living in the lands of the Attawandaron,<sup>4</sup>

Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Lūnaapéewak.<sup>5</sup> This thesis provides a critical description of

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<sup>4</sup> Attawandaron is the Huron name for the same confederacy the French referred to as the Neutral Nation. There is some evidence that they referred to themselves as Chonnonton (Garrard 37; Stewart and Finlayson 27). I use the name Attawandaron in keeping with Western University's land acknowledgement and continue to follow developments in research about this First People.

<sup>5</sup> For the duration of my doctoral studies, I have lived in the Municipality of London, where I have been enrolled at Western University. This land is covered by the Dish with One Spoon Covenant Wampum and the London Township and Sombra Treaties of 1796. The two 1796 Treaties are signed by Anishinaabe peoples and the British. These Anishinaabeg are the ancestors of the Indigenous people from a number of First Nations including Chippewas of the Thames First Nation (Deshkaan Ziibiing Anishinaabeg). While my dissertation is on Anishinaabe literature, the works I look at are by authors from different communities: Alderville First Nation (Leanne Betasamosake Simpson) and White Earth Nation (Gerald Vizenor).

the ways that literature might imagine, express, and enact relationality. Through close reading that attends to decolonial love and constellations, I contend that these texts offer a vision of relationality that calls on every person and every community to think through the particular challenges and oppressions they face with a holistic vision of interconnected movements towards justice and freedom.

## Situating Relationality

Responding to a panel discussion between Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) and Rinaldo Walcott on Indigenous and Black resistance, respectively, Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) reflects on the historical context in which each scholar situates contemporary liberation movements. Noting that both identify histories of “cross-fertilizations,” he ponders the loss of such “coalition-building, that sort of solidarity, between Africa, the global South, and Indigenous Peoples in the Fourth World” (Simpson et al. 88). Coulthard suggests that part of the loss of such “internationalism” has been a shift *away* from contesting systems of domination and *towards* efforts for state recognition. Considering the impacts of this shift for Indigenous Peoples, he argues that they have become siloed away from those others “who are facing similar structural violences in their lives and conditions” (88).

Pursuing such international mobilizations necessitate situating settler colonialism within a global context. Debates on settler-colonial-Indigenous relationships have drawn attention to the limits of a binary framing, which has foregrounded the subject position(s) of white settler colonials (Amadahy and Lawrence; Phung; Byrd; Day; Morgenson). Framed in this way, these debates do not adequately account for the diverse experiences of racialized diasporas who are made complicit in the settler colonial project but whose conditions are underpinned by related forms of (neo)colonial, white supremacist displacement and dispossession.

Diaspora studies scholars and critical race theorists, especially Black scholars, caution against including displaced and racialized peoples among those who have actively served and continue

to benefit from the privileges of a white supremacist state.<sup>6</sup> Grappling with the concerns that arise from dichotomous analyses, Jodi Byrd (Chickasaw) and Iyko Day help lay bare the complex workings of settler colonialism and provide ways of looking for and creating the language that can help articulate, understand, and ultimately dismantle it. Byrd and Day introduce third terms, “arrivant”<sup>7</sup> and “alien” respectively, so as to splinter this dichotomy and interrogate how racialized communities, despite having settled on Indigenous lands and positioned by the state in the service of settler colonialism, nevertheless acquire ambivalent subject positions due to systemic racism and displacement and dispossession by Western imperialism. While this move is useful and generative, the additive approach of triangulation still carries some of the original limits of the binary, which is the collapsing of diverse subject positions.<sup>8</sup>

My objective in this thesis is not to intervene in this debate by adding another term that would consider additional positionalities, but rather to reflect on the ways that shifting critical frameworks enable us to ask different questions about the impact and potential of relationality. What conceptualizations of relationality might honour Indigenous intellectual genealogies and nurture the kinds of international coalition-building that Coulthard calls for? What do methodologies look like when they do not replicate the Eurocentric propensity to foreground a singular mode of thought at the cost of suppressing the diverse cosmologies and experiences of marginalized people?

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson offers generative ways of taking up these concerns in her award-winning *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*. In this book, Simpson refers to constellations as embodiments of relationality that model how different communities/peoples can align, like the stars, to guide or transform life on the Earth. An

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<sup>6</sup> See Zainab Amadahy and Bonita Lawrence’s article, “Indigenous Peoples and Black People in Canada: Settlers or Allies?” (112) and Eve Tuck and Rinaldo Walcott’s discussion on *The Henceforward*, “A Conversation Between Eve Tuck and Rinaldo Walcott.”

<sup>7</sup> Byrd draws on and extends Kamau Brathwaite’s term for the Black diaspora that arrived in the Americas via the transatlantic slave trade.

<sup>8</sup> As Malissa Phung reminds, “[s]uch a terminology debate is quite common to any new area of focus as scholars work to define the parameters of their object of study” (“Indigenous and Asian Relation Making” 21).

Anishinaabe relational framework accounts for a community of vast and diverse members, including the land and water, which are understood as sentient beings. Sinclair explains that in such a configuration, responsibility and reciprocity are not burdens but rather standards to strive towards. A relational paradigm not only informs how Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples might engage with one another, but also holds potential for envisioning how refugees, as non-Indigenous peoples (directly or indirectly) displaced by Euro-American imperialism, might maintain their relationships to the people and parts of the Earth from which they originate and from which they arrive.<sup>9</sup> Relationality requires that we think of the Earth in holistic terms. It is not possible to care for the water, land, air, or people of one locale while ignoring or participating (intentionally or unintentionally) in their harm in another.

Additionally, when it comes to coalition-building, Simpson insists that Indigenous thought is and has always been international. Just as importantly, Indigenous internationalism encompasses solidarities with other radical traditions and movements. In this regard, Simpson suggests that Black and brown communities, “on Turtle Island and beyond” (228), can participate in “constellations of coresistance”—adding yet another scale—because, as she puts it, they are “fighting the same forces [“dispossession, capitalism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy” (228)], building movements that create the alternatives” (228-9). One of the great promises of relationality as demonstrated through constellational thought is that it does not force one mode of thinking over others. Instead, an approach that draws inspiration from constellational thought allows for both the articulation of multiple cosmologies and positionalities as well as for their participation in collective movement towards justice and liberation. This model offers a relational framework of thought and action that is premised on respect and understanding rather than domination or cooptation. As a racialized, displaced person from the Global South, I interpret Simpson’s articulation of “constellations of coresistance” as a call to action for Black

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<sup>9</sup> By Euro-American imperialism, I mean the philosophy and moving force that manifests in all forms of colonialism (including settler colonialism and military interventions and extractions of the developing world) and the transatlantic slave trade, which are all contingent on white supremacy, Eurocentric Judeo-Christian cosmology, heteronormative patriarchy, misogyny, and capitalism. Also, unless I specify otherwise, when I use the term Indigenous in this dissertation I am referring to the people indigenous to Canada and the United States. Indigeneity is not a fixed or racial category. Some refugeeed people fit various definitions of indigenous—for example, the United Nations’ multi-factorial basis for “a modern understanding of this term” (*Who Are Indigenous Peoples?*).

and brown communities—both diasporic communities on Turtle Island and racialized communities the world over. Specifically, it is a call to diasporic peoples for a grounded approach that supports Indigenous resurgence at the same time that it serves the needs of diasporas and their communities.

Relational methodology is not a multicultural analysis. Using constellations as a model for understanding relationality helps to make this distinction between the two terms. By definition, constellations consist of stars that are individual entities, infinite distances apart. Because stars are understood in relationship to each other in different ways by different peoples on Earth, the very notion of constellations differs markedly from the distinctively Canadian metaphor for neoliberal multiculturalism: the mosaic. A mosaic makes a single, cohesive image from fragments affixed to each other in close proximity. A mosaic tells a single story at the expense of its individual components, a rhetorical feature that benefits the narrative of the settler state at great cost to Indigenous peoples. James (Sákéj) Youngblood Henderson (Chickasaw and Cheyenne) calls multiculturalism a “romantic narrative” that “avoids and effectively denies the *sui generis* and treaty relationship of the Aboriginal peoples with the British sovereign” (417). Unlike the metaphor of the mosaic, the concept of a constellation foregrounds the differences faced by racialized activists and scholars as they attempt to constellate ways of resisting subjugation. Critical Race and Diaspora Studies scholar Lisa Lowe uses the term “constellation” similarly in *Intimacies of Four Continents*, wherein she undermines the logics of settler colonialism through a mobilization of affect, using intimacy as an analytic for a rigorously historical tracing of relationships between the four continents. Specifically, Lowe emphasizes “a constellation of asymmetrical and unevenly legible ‘intimacies’” by “drawing into relation” places that are geographically distant and yet intimately related in the ways they have been impacted by the pursuits of Euro-American empire and capitalism (18). The concept of constellations, and in my project more broadly, relationality, can help those who have been most grievously impacted by Euro-American imperialism grasp the ways in which their interests and persecutions have been interconnected and/or set against one another in order to bolster the designs of their oppressors.

In settler colonial nations such as Canada, the state relies on newcomers, including refugees, for population growth, and thus sells its multicultural mosaic story of citizenship. Particularly in the



case of refugees and economic and environmental migrants, this mosaic is supposed to replace all the damaged, attenuated, or lost relationships they and their communities have suffered. In turn, the displaced person's loyalty and gratitude constitute repayment for their inclusion in the nation. However, the state offers no direct support that would connect displaced peoples to their homelands and efforts to make their home safe again—especially in cases involving Euro-American interventions. Accounting for difference does not mean that racialized diasporas—a category that includes refugees—are somehow outside or innocent of complicity in settler colonialism. But it does mean that part of interrogating settler colonialism involves wealthy developed nations such as the U.S. and Canada accounting for their roles as refugee producing settler states, given their ongoing active participation in political, environmental, and economic crises around the world.

While critics must be careful not to structure their work in such a way that places further pressure on or expectations of communities that bear the traumas of displacement, it might still be generative to examine how, for example, refugee experiences might help create cross-global networks of compassion and political solidarities that may counter the tyranny of Euro-American military and corporate imperialism. An approach based in relationality can potentially bring to light linkages between refugees, those back home, and the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island on whose lands refuge is sought. Such an approach enables us to address crucial questions, including: What are refugees' responsibilities to the peoples and lands from which they come? Can attempting to identify and fulfill these responsibilities be linked with efforts to combat the ways in which refugees are made complicit in settlement processes after their flight? Furthermore, how might Indigenous philosophy guide our conceptualization of relationality and, in so doing, guide these questions?

## Interpreting Relationality from a Bahá'í Lens

Taking seriously the examples charted by Indigenous and anti-oppression methodologies means recognizing that responsible scholarship can only be produced from one's position within relationality—from the confluence of their relations in past, present, and future. It is from this perspective that I will share Bahá'í teachings about the stars as a means to further elaborate my understanding of relationality, reflect on the lessons of Anishinaabe cosmology, and situate the

stakes of relationality within my own personal and critical practice.<sup>10</sup> According to Bahá'í teachings, the physical world is sacred in that it is made by the Creator or God (Bahá'í sacred texts refer to this spiritual entity by many names).<sup>11</sup> Therefore, all of creation is endowed with divine spirit and has the capacity to teach human beings about the sacred, as this passage from 'Abdu'l-Bahà, the successor of the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, demonstrates:

And whensoever thou dost gaze upon creation all entire, and dost observe the very atoms thereof, thou wilt note that the rays of the Sun of Truth are shed upon all things and shining within them, and telling of that Day-Star's splendours, Its mysteries, and the spreading of Its lights. Look thou upon the trees, upon the blossoms and fruits, even upon the stones. Here too wilt thou behold the Sun's rays shed upon them, clearly visible within them, and manifested by them. (*Selections* 42-3)

The “Sun of Truth” and the “Day-Star” are other names that refer to the Creator; just as the sun of the solar system sheds its light and contributes energy to other life forms on the earth, so too does the Creator “manifest” Its<sup>12</sup> “mysteries” or share Its teachings through the smallest “atom,” through the “stones,” plants, and so on.

Resonating with Anishinaabe cosmology, these teachings extend to other celestial bodies and what they can share with human beings about relationality or living according to the principle of

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<sup>10</sup> I bring these perspectives on constellations together not because I wish to conflate cosmologies or suggest that I am or wish to be an expert in Anishinaabe cosmology, but rather to take seriously Ojibway Anishinaabe storyteller and scholar Basil Johnston's reminder of the importance of stories in helping people of different heritages understand Indigenous peoples. It is my attempt at aligning efforts toward a just and peaceful existence for all of creation. Johnston states: “If the Native Peoples and their heritage are to be understood it is their beliefs ... that must be studied ... by examining native ceremonies, rituals, songs, dances, prayers, and stories” (*Ojibway Heritage* 7). For this reason, Johnston says he shares “a small portion” of Ojibway stories and teachings as “one way of perpetuating and enhancing the bequest of our forefathers as it is a means of sharing that gift with those whose culture and heritage may be very different but who wish to enlarge their understanding” (7). Johnston explains that the sharing of beliefs for the Anishinaabe is their inheritance, a part of their culture, and for those of us who are of different cultures or heritages, stories are an appropriate way through which we can strive for understanding. As Simpson's explication of Anishinaabe Internationalist thought suggests, this is a process that works both ways for the Anishinaabe.

<sup>11</sup> This is translated from the original Farsi. It was translated into English in a biblical style to identify it as sacred teachings.

<sup>12</sup> The Creator is not gendered in Bahá'í cosmology and there are no gender-specific pronouns in Farsi. However, some writings translated in English do use gendered pronouns.

being “one part of a life-making system” (86), as Sinclair puts it. Relationality is what I believe Edward Benton-Banai (Ojibway Anishinabe teacher and writer) refers to as “the feeling of oneness with the Rhythm of the Universe” (57). Key to living in balance and peace are both an acknowledgement of this oneness and the capacity to exist in accordance with this rhythm or, what Ojibwe scholar and writer Armand Garnet Ruffo might call, order and harmony. He states that a “concept of order and harmony in a (moral) universe” (169) is critical to Anishinaabe worldview. The purpose of Bahá’í teachings is to assist people to live “as one band, united in soul, heart and tongue, even as stars assembled in the constellation of Unity, although the distance between them is extensive and the interval infinite” (*Tablets* 183).

Indeed, when it comes to constellations, what resonates between Anishinaabe and Bahá’í teachings is how this oneness, this Unity, is not uniformity but a kind of harmony. In the above excerpt from Bahá’í teachings, difference and human diversity can be likened to the “extensive” and “infinite” distances between the stars. The promise in relational analysis is that each star or cluster of stars that together create the constellation maintains its unique character and value systems at the same time as they are united through “soul, heart and tongue.” In this way, Unity or oneness can be thought of as the ability to commune and collaborate physically and spiritually; this ability respects difference, sustains a non-homogenizing relationality, and ensures that life flows through all communities.

In advancing a relational method, I am not advocating for a comparative analysis of Anishinaabe and Bahá’í worldviews; rather, I bring these two intellectual frameworks together to provide a new way of processing ideas. Comparative analysis seeks to discern similarity and difference; relationality engages resonance and complementarity without collapsing distinctions into “shared” or “similar” qualities. The relational approach from which I draw offers a way to reflect upon and note the resonance between both the relationships in distinct communities as well as the relationship-building between distinct communities who are differently oppressed by the effects of Euro-American imperialism; moreover, it does so in a way that is neither mediated through nor centered on Eurocentricity. Scholars cannot account for every subject position, experience, or community, nor can we presume to fully understand cosmologies or worldviews that are not our own or that we are not invited to learn about. But using a relational framework means recognizing possible connection between different forms of liberation in addition to the

intertwining of varied oppressions. It follows then, that one ought to seek understanding about where such inquiry is welcome—and the grounds on which it is encouraged or discourages—with the purpose of supporting the liberation of others while seeking one’s own.

## Chapter Overview: Relationality in Anishinaabe and Diasporic Literature

As noted above, this thesis analyzes literature by Anishinaabe and diasporic writers, focusing on the ways in which different cosmologies mobilize and represent resonant philosophies of relationality. It is structured in two parts and around two themes that explore key valences of relationality: “decolonial love” and constellations. The term “Decolonial love” has been developed by Afro-Caribbean writer, Junot Díaz, as “the only kind of love that could liberate” his Black diasporic characters from the “legacy of colonial violence” (“The Search”).<sup>13</sup> Díaz’s framework has been taken up and further developed by Indigenous writers such as Simpson and Billy-Ray Belcourt to consider strategies for healing the body and communities that are targeted by colonialism and white supremacy. Constellations, as explained above, is relevant to this critical examination through Simpson’s work on “constellations of co-resistance” as well as Lowe’s “constellation of asymmetrical and unevenly legible ‘intimacies.’”

In the first section, I examine how decolonial love is an expression of relationality that shapes the poetry of Black Dominican-American poet Elizabeth Acevedo and short stories of Anishinaabe writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. This first section consists of two chapters that engage the concept of decolonial love as a means of consciously striving towards and enacting forms of relationality, intimacy, and attraction that have been targeted and damaged by colonialism and its devices of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism. In Chapter One, I elaborate on the roots of this concept in the works of feminists of colour. As “decolonial love” continues to be theorized by Black, Indigenous, and other racialized women and queer writers and critics, I examine the ways in which it is a generative mode of thought for these diverse communities. The first chapter, then, focuses on Elizabeth Acevedo’s first chapbook,

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<sup>13</sup> Díaz is a controversial figure and I provide an extended discussion on this context in Chapter one.

*Beastgirl and Other Origin Myths* (2016). I suggest that through the community of Black, Indigenous Caribbean, and Latinx feminine figures in these poems, Acevedo portrays the challenges to and the possibilities of enacting love from within racialized bodies and communities that are bound to histories of gendered colonial violence. An award-winning slam poet, Acevedo's poetry venerates orality and the language forged from colonial tongues by communities who are forced to adopt them—in the context of her work, Afro-Dominican-Americans who are doubly displaced and confront the linguistic legacy of both Spanish and English. The adaptation of language to reflect the realities, creativity, resistance, and beauty of Dominican culture and people is symbolic of Acevedo's approach to decolonial love towards Black bodies, mythic and spirit beings, and the island itself. Specifically, I conduct close readings of her representation of La Ciguapa, Anacaona, *brujería*, and the figure of her own creation, the beastgirl as a mode of future mythmaking. Through these entities, Acevedo cultivates a notion of love that is both decolonial and constitutes recuperative relationality. This decolonial love restores relationality by healing both the way that racialized women perceive their own bodies as valuable and desirable and the way that they counter colonial attacks towards their connection with kin, community—ancestral, physical, and spiritual—and land.

Chapter Two traces the ways in which decolonial love is encoded in the stories and poems of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's *Islands of Decolonial Love* (2013) as a continuation of Anishinaabe sovereignty. Through a close reading of "nogojiwanong," a four-part short story contained in this collection, I argue that Simpson uses Anishinaabemowin (Anishinaabe language) and literary techniques that emulate orality to fashion a text that participates in Anishinaabe oral tradition. These formal and stylistic assertions bolster Simpson's depiction of Anishinaabe women as sovereign bodies capable of flowing decolonial love and worthy of receiving it all in the movement towards healing and resurgence—or Anishinaabe nation-building. "nogojiwanong" also depicts how colonialism has impacted incorporeal beings and other entities from the land and water that make up Anishinaabeg relatives. Thus, Simpson's vision of resurgence and of dismantling colonialism necessarily involves the healing and strengthening of Anishinaabeg's relations with all of these other beings. Finally, I take up Simpson's use of paratext and interviews to model a way of envisioning co-liberation with Black and other racialized thinkers and communities in order to consider how her work provides a framework for a relational reading practice for audiences from these other communities.

Together, I argue, these reading strategies can ignite ways of imagining future-making that supports Indigenous resurgence as well as the liberation of other communities facing various forms of (neo)colonialism.

In the second section, I explore how stars and constellations guide expressions of relationality in the novels of Anishinaabe theorist Gerald Vizenor and Pakistani- British writer Mohsin Hamid. This section is inspired by how an Anishinaabe author and diasporic/Global South author draw on star knowledge to produce cross-hemispheric novels. The global scope of these two novels creates challenges for responsibly engaging with the particularities of vastly distant communities of peoples confronting imperialism and injustice. However, they provide insightful strategies from an Anishinaabe and Sufi perspective, respectively, for understanding rootedness, migration, conquest, and displacement with an eye toward relationality and interconnectedness. Chapter Three continues to focus on Anishinaabe literature by turning to an examination of Gerald Vizenor's novel, *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57* (2003). In this chapter, I consider how Vizenor's evocation of stars, stardust, and constellations grounds his work in Anishinaabe cosmology, storytelling traditions, and survivance. Vizenor's term for an Indigenous practice of relationality that is encoded in Anishinaabe stories, survivance facilitates the Anishinaabe ability to continue existing as a nation in the face of any challenges or difficulties—including but not exclusive to colonial occupation. Through the reconstructed narratives of the life and character of Ronin Ainoko Browne—the protagonist born to a Japanese (possibly Ainu) mother and Anishinaabe father serving the American military in occupied Japan—Vizenor uses Anishinaabe philosophical models to critique various manifestations of nationalism and dominance not only on Anishinaabe lands but in the territories of the Japanese and Ainu as well. Just as importantly, his use of survivance as a way of thinking about liberation between peoples—Anishinaabeg, other Indigenous peoples of North America, the Ainu, and the Japanese—brings Anishinaabe thought into global discourse about approaches to eliminating all forms of domination and honouring life.

In Chapter Four, I analyze Mohsin's Hamid's novel *Exit West* (2017) to consider the figure of the refugee in terms of global relationality. While critics in Asian American, Postcolonial, and Indigenous studies have complicated the settler-colonial binary by examining forced migrations and racial triangulations (as noted earlier, through the figures of the alien [Day] and arrivant

[Byrd]), until recently there has been less sustained attention paid to refugee relationality. How might refugees navigate their fraught passages in ways that elude discourses of settler colonialism? Chapter Four takes up this critical question through an exploration of refugee relationality in *Exit West*. I argue that relationality in this novel is a principle that denotes how all entities and elements in the universe exist in interconnection; this is a common theme in Sufi poetry, which emphasizes that we exist in universal relationships and that the universe exists in us. Specifically, I contemplate how the novel's fixation with stars and its representation of the seeming binaries of dark and light demonstrate its reliance on a Sufic framework for understanding these elements and critiquing Euro-American binaries.

Central to this reading is the novel's representation of refugee states, modes of perception that critique epistemological frameworks established by "states of refugee" wherein the state sets the terms by which refuge(e) is recognized.<sup>14</sup> I consider the implications of such cultural perspectives illustrated in *Exit West* by examining anthropogenic light and its impact on the relationship between the natural light of the sun and stars, darkness, and the Earth's inhabitants. I also ponder the ways that oppositional conceptions of light and dark inform Eurocentric constructions of self and other and, furthermore, how this has laid the rationale for white supremacy, Euro-American imperialism's various manifestations, and the devastation of the natural world.

While I examine contemporary texts published in English, the scope of this dissertation is necessarily broad. This creates challenges in terms of the depths and detail with which I could examine relationality from within one cosmology. One of the reasons why I focused on Anishinaabe texts pertaining to relationality was to maintain a clear focus on one Indigenous nation so that I could mitigate the possibility of conflating the ontologies and epistemologies of diverse peoples under a pan-Indigenous analysis that risks contributing to the ongoing erasure of Indigenous peoples. The breadth I cover by including a text that centres on Black Latinx diasporic experience and one on West Asian refugee flight is essential to my project, as I believe

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<sup>14</sup> Thy Phu and Vinh Nguyen, *Refugee States: Critical Refugee Studies in Canada*, (U of Toronto Press, forthcoming).

relationality tells us that liberation is a global endeavor insofar as the forms of oppression and freedom examined here are inextricably bound together.

This dissertation carries the thread from Chapter Four into the conclusion by looking at two works of art, one by an Anishinaabe artist and another by a Kurdish artist and journalist, that simultaneously address Indigenous and refugee states of dispossession and displacement. Given the mounting mass migrations of Indigenous, mestiza/o, and Afro-Latina/o (not all mutually exclusive demographics) peoples from Latin America seeking asylum or security in other parts of the continent, including the United States and Canada, scholars taking a hemispheric approach to Indigenous studies have argued for the necessity and power of decolonial methodologies and terminology that consider the overlaps between the different colonial histories across the Americas.<sup>15</sup> They argue that examining the overlaps of experience between these different demographics in discourses on indigeneity, migration, displacement, and diaspora across the Americas is crucial in contemporary resistance to (neo)colonialist attempts to destroy and subjugate them. Scholars writing about displaced racialized peoples within the borders of settler states are particularly concerned that their experiences with capitalism and state repression and violence in the local context and colonialism in a global context will be erased (erasure being one of the most destructive and powerful techniques of settler colonialism), whether through *terra nullius*; policies of assimilation, abduction, and slavery; negations from history; or denial of culpability in efforts to topple sovereign nations around the world. This is not a matter of equivalence or hierarchy; rather, these multifaceted, inter-related experiences of dispossession and displacement requires that we ethically consider forcible relocation and dislocation. Opening the conversation across hemispheres, are Rebecca Belmore's (Anishinaabe) *Biinjiya'iiing Onji* and Behrouz Boochani's *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*. Belmore's sculpture, *Biinjiya'iiing Onji* (From Inside), is evocative of both a refugee tent and a wiigiwaam (traditional Anishinaabe lodge or dwelling); Kurdish-Iranian refugee writer Boochani's film *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* examines the detention of asylum seekers on Manus Island, part of Papua New Guinea. Both evince a generative sensibility that exemplifies how artists and storytellers continue to move for more challenging and ethical understandings of relationality. Pairing these works by

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<sup>15</sup> See *Comparative Indigenities of the Americas: Toward a Hemispheric Approach* (Castellanos et al. 2012).



way of conclusion, this thesis ends by demonstrating the creative ways in which Indigenous and diasporic writers—and artists—foreground the necessity of relational perspectives in envisioning ways of living together.

## Chapter 1

### Decolonial Love and Relationality

In recent years, the term “decolonial love” has acquired increasing influence among Indigenous and other racialized scholars and artists. While this term is often attributed to Junot Díaz, a controversial Dominican American writer who in 2018 was disgraced in the wake of accusations of sexual harassment,<sup>16</sup> “decolonial love” resonates broadly for Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) writers, who continue to grapple with its liberating potential.<sup>17</sup> Many women of colour writers, community organizers, and scholars—and I count myself among them—are drawn to the concept of decolonial love as a means of consciously striving towards and enacting forms of relationality, intimacy, and attraction. This striving is necessary in order to heal the damage done in these affective spheres by white supremacy and cisheteropatriarchy, two forms of Euro-Western imperialism<sup>18</sup> that have distorted expressions of love. What are the contexts in which “decolonial love” has emerged? How has it been mobilized by women of colour writers to challenge complicities in settler colonialism? I address these questions in the first section of my thesis, which consists of two chapters, by considering the ways that two writers take up the concept of decolonial love: Dominican-American poet and novelist Elizabeth Acevedo (in Chapter One) and Anishinaabe essayist, theorist, and short story writer, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (in Chapter Two).

These writers situate their poetry and short stories within an ongoing critical conversation about the concept of decolonial love. So, before looking closely at their work, it is first necessary to

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<sup>16</sup> Junot Díaz has faced public opprobrium in the wake of sexual harassment accusations that came to light during the #MeToo movement.

<sup>17</sup> For example, *As/Us*, a magazine created in 2012 as a platform for the publication of literary and scholarly works “by underrepresented writers particularly Indigenous women and women of color” (“About Us”), released their fourth issue in 2014 entitled “Decolonial Love” with “a theme that was initially inspired by Junot’s Díaz’s 2012 talk on decolonial love” (Andrews). See also “Decolonial Love: These Indigenous Artists are Taking Back the Self-Love that Colonialism Stole” (Benaway), which also attributes the concept to Díaz and spotlights numerous “two spirit and queer Indigenous creators” such as Kiley May, Ziibiwan Rivers, and Lindsay Nixon who, discuss what the term means to them and their respective art.

<sup>18</sup> By this I mean colonialism, settler colonialism, neo-colonialism and its various forms such as war, interventions in the economies and governance of the global South, or contentiously called the “developing” world and so on.

consider the broader context in which this conversation took shape and continues to unfold. Perhaps the most commonly cited early invocation of the term “decolonial love” appeared in a June 2012 interview between Díaz and literary critic Paula M. L. Moya for the *Boston Review*. In this interview, Díaz explains that decolonial love denotes “the only kind of love that could liberate them [his characters] from that horrible legacy of colonial violence,” which, he explains, is the “rape culture of the European colonization of the New World” that has profoundly “broken” every level of intimacy and love for people towards themselves and within their relationships to others (“The Search”). Later that year, he delivered the keynote address at the Applied Research Center’s<sup>19</sup> Facing Race Conference, in which he further elaborated on the term. At this event, he explained that the practice of decolonial love first requires people to understand that systems of oppression operate by making the oppressed complicit not only in their own oppression but also in oppressing others. As such, the practice of decolonial love also entails working through solidarity across communities in order to counteract these processes of oppression for the ends of liberation from white supremacy, colonialism, and cisheteropatriarchy.

We can also trace the concept of decolonial love to Chela Sandoval, who invokes the term in her book, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000), which was published over a decade before Moya’s interview with Díaz. Sandoval’s work participates in what she calls “U.S. Third World feminism” (10) to envision love as a hermeneutic that becomes “a body of knowledges, arts, practices, and procedures for re-forming the self and the world” (4). Decolonial love, for Sandoval, is a conception of love beyond the hierarchical binary oppositions of Western thought—colonizer/colonized, male/female, good/evil, etc. Drawing on canonical post-structuralist thought,<sup>20</sup> Sandoval asserts that decolonial love, by existing outside of these binaries, is a practice of relationality that has been freed from “love” as it is constructed via Western ideology (142). She explains that, “it is another kind of love, a synchronic process that punctures through traditional, older narratives of love, that ruptures everyday being” (142) and is, thus, “a methodology of renewal, of social reconstruction, of emancipation” (10). Decolonial

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<sup>19</sup> Now Race Forward: The Center for Racial Justice Innovation.

<sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes in this particular segment.

love operates at the levels of the “everyday being” of the human body and of immediate familial and community relations. However, Sandoval’s vision for its power extends to the level of the planetary body. She writes that as a “social movement” of the “1960s, 1970s, and 1980s[,] ... US third world feminism provided access to a different way of conceptualizing not just feminist consciousness but oppositional activity in general: it comprised a formulation capable of aligning U.S. movements for social justice not only with each other, but with global movements toward decolonization” (41). She elaborates that, “[t]he differential occurs when the affinities inside of difference attract, combine, and relate new constituencies into coalitions of resistance. The possibilities of this coalitional consciousness were once bypassed when they were perceived as already staked and claimed by differing race, gender, sex, class or cultural subgroups” (63). This consciousness forms a coalitional consciousness, which, for Sandoval, constitutes solidarity towards liberation by drawing on affinities while holding space for difference across movements.

Though it is not clear whether Díaz was aware of Sandoval’s work, it is important to foreground this other lineage of the term decolonial love. Citationality is important—especially in an academic context in which the contributions of BIPOC critics have too often been ignored or stolen; acknowledging and discussing Sandoval’s contribution to the field counters the fact that, although she arrived at a similar understanding and the same term independently of Díaz, and is also referenced by scholars on the topic, she is often not mentioned in popular media discussions of decolonial love. For a term so rooted in the thought of women of colour writers, a lineage Diaz himself has acknowledged, this popular omission glosses over decolonial love’s debt to writers like Sandoval. Methodologically, situating her work alongside others more popularly credited with the term foregrounds the voices of racialized women who have integrally contributed to the development of this concept.

Beyond methodology, though, it is important to include Sandoval’s work because her conception of decolonial love is compatible with that of Díaz. At a conference on “Facing Race” in 2010,<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> A partial video and full transcript of his talk can be found on YouTube.

Díaz discusses the term Martí Mind<sup>22</sup>—an idea similar to coalitional consciousness—and contrasts it with the “conquistador’s mind” (“Junot Díaz’s Keynote”). In invoking “conquistador’s mind,” Díaz refers to the mentality of a colonizer or conqueror, which is internalized in varying degrees by those who are subjugated.

Not only are there suggestive parallels between Díaz’s and Sandoval’s thinking, which hint at intellectual alignments, but the concept of “decolonial love” is built on the insights of Black feminist critique. Even though the term decolonial love is not directly invoked in this tradition, many foundational Black feminists touch upon its core issues, not least of which is how the oppressed become implicated in both their own oppression and the oppression of others. Audre Lorde does so, for example, in “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” (1987) when she writes: “if I fail to recognize them [Black women, women of Color, queer people, poor and marginalized people] as other faces of myself, then I am contributing not only to each of their oppressions but also to my own.” Similarly, bell hooks succinctly reminds us that “Patriarchy has no gender” (185).<sup>23</sup>

In conceptualizing decolonial love, then, Díaz builds—intentionally or not—on the thinking of numerous women of colour writers. Indeed, in the *Boston Review* interview with Moya, Díaz explicitly acknowledges the influence not only of Audre Lorde, but also Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Octavia Butler, among others, on his work; specifically, he credits these writers with providing “social, critical, cognitive maps” towards liberation. Their works, he goes on to praise, demonstrate how the struggle to fight and resist oppressive systems is both external and internal, requiring the oppressed to face the ways they have internalized the conquistador’s mind and participated in their own oppression as well as the oppression of others. Furthermore, the “radical emancipatory epistemologies” in which these maps were based are forged from their relationship to their bodies as the site of “raced, gender, sexualized subjectivities” (Díaz, “The

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<sup>22</sup> Martí is a reference to the Cuban revolutionary, thinker, and poet Jose Martí and is a reference to the solidarity work he was engaged in in the late 1800s across the Caribbean and Central America.

<sup>23</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, on the topic of radical Indigenous resurgence also points to the insidious nature of such oppression when she says: “We need to be willing to take on white supremacy, gender violence heteropatriarchy, and anti-Blackness within our movement” (*As We Have Always Done* 231).

Search”). Díaz highlights “how real a threat these foundational sisters posed to the order of things” (“The Search”), even challenging the very fundamental Western premise of the body-mind binary opposition. We can see the particular influence of hooks and Lorde in Díaz’s contention that thinking with the conquistador’s mind means that, under capitalism, people of colour have developed a “possessive commodified investment in our identity matrix,” which has consequently “sealed us off to the possibility of more dynamic and profound collectivities” (“Junot Díaz’s Keynote”). In other words, Díaz reminds us to push back against the capitalist, colonialist impulse towards fetishizing identity — “the conquistador’s mind” in all of us—and that liberation can only come through a Martí Mind and through enacting love towards other communities who also struggle against imperialism and white supremacy. This reflexive practice is critical to understanding how the conquistador’s mind “has shaped how you feel and more importantly how you love” (“Junot Díaz’s Keynote”). Because of colonialism’s pervasive and ongoing impact, we must be vigilant in recognizing how its tenets impact even the most intimate spaces of our minds and hearts.

Despite this engagement with women of colour writers, Díaz’s own commitment to liberation has been widely questioned since accusations about sexual misconduct and abuse of young and aspiring women writers came to light. In May 2018, Zinzi Clemmons, a Black novelist and professor, accused Díaz in person and via Twitter of sexually assaulting her in 2012, after he spoke at a workshop she had organized while she was a graduate student. Moreover, she asserted that Díaz had done the same to others and had “made his behavior the burden of young women—particularly women of color—for far too long, enabled by his team and the institutions that employ him” (Alter et al.). The enormity of these accusations against Díaz for violating the trust of the very women whom he claimed to mentor illuminates the Dominican American writer’s own complicities with cultures of oppression.

The controversy acquires an ironic tinge when we consider an exchange about toxic masculinity that took place at the 2012 keynote. Specifically, at the keynote, a woman in the audience asked Díaz about his resemblance to Yuniór, a recurring figure in his fiction, whom he described as “the book’s most salient proponent of the masculine derangements that are tied up to the rape culture” (“Junot Díaz’s Keynote”). In his reply, Díaz underscored the pervasiveness of complicity, observing that he and Yuniór both grew up “super misogynistic” and “in a culture

that rewarded us for all sorts of ... anti-woman” behaviour, such as philandering (“Junot Díaz’s Keynote”). He suggested that this misogynistic behaviour is often shaped by the intimate trauma experienced by Dominican boys and men. This, for Díaz, is one of the pernicious legacies of misogyny, and an example of the conquistador’s mind—or, following Lorde, how the oppressed become complicit in oppression. Decolonial love involves challenging and healing from external forces of harm, but it is also the constant effort to identify, face, and undo these complicities and reckon with the harm that has been done to the self as well as the harm that one has done to others—a reckoning and amends that Clemmons never saw.

My point in this brief discussion of the controversy is to reveal the risky and fraught terms and contexts in which the concept of decolonial love has taken shape. In this thesis, my concern is neither with Junot Díaz nor his body of work; instead, I wish to grapple with the significance of the term he helped conceptualize and that many racialized scholars, artists, and activists have subsequently further developed—not least of which is the issue of reckoning with complicity even as one commits earnestly to liberation. The Díaz controversy reveals both the potential of decolonial love and the betrayal of its potential on the part of those who simply recognize their complicity but do not follow through on their responsibility to reckon with it and help repair the damage they have caused. In other words, the controversy illustrates the dangers of reducing decolonial love to merely a literary theme—as arguably was the case for Díaz as he failed to actualize the concept he helped to develop. Instead, decolonial love is an embodied practice that can be portrayed in art. Moreover, as I will detail later, art can also be a channel through which writers flow decolonial love towards their communities and the communities of other marginalized peoples.

This task of examining the full potential of decolonial love requires taking seriously the ramifications of complicity and the ways that they hinder liberation efforts. Indeed, the risks of trying to enact decolonial love is much higher for some groups than others. Racialized women (both trans and cis), such as Clemmons, are made vulnerable in asymmetrical relationships, such as mentor and mentee, with those who are perceived to be part of their community, those who are supposed to love and nurture them. Indeed, as Clemmons’s case reveals, power asymmetries threaten to unravel potential solidarities, even when connections are formed to advocate for the ends of social justice. Instead of being afforded protection, racialized women are often the targets

of exploitation, even within their own communities, a risk that is perhaps greater for trans than for cis women. The threat of gendered violence is present in familial, community, activist, and professional relationships at the hands of the very people who present themselves as collaborators or accomplices in the work of liberation through decolonial love. In the face of these risks, racialized women continue to take up the project of decolonial love because of the vital importance of re-establishing or healing ties of relationality. For this reason, we need to take seriously their efforts, in their literary works, to enact decolonial love.

Engaging responsibly with the concept that Díaz has helped shape entails neither apologizing for nor overlooking his complicities. However, given the importance of the politics of citationality noted above, it does entail acknowledging his contribution, as a Black Dominican, to the field, as a starting point for generative critical conversation. Likewise, at the same time that engaging with the concept of decolonial love means avoiding erasure, it also requires foregrounding the voices of racialized women who have integrally contributed to the development of this concept. Doing so, I contend, helps deepen an understanding of the ways in which literature might mobilize decolonial love and bring to light a respectful and mutually beneficial form of collectivity. My core concern, then, is to reckon with the significance of decolonial love, a concept many racialized women writers are attracted to despite the risks that come with practicing it.

In taking up this task, I focus in this Chapter on Black Latinx writer Elizabeth Acevedo's poetry chapbook *Beastgirl and Other Origin Myths* and, in Chapter Two, on Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's short story and song collection *Islands of Decolonial Love*. I turn to these writers because they have both expressed their deep connection with Díaz's account of decolonial love even as they have shaped it further in their own ways. While Acevedo is Dominican American like Díaz, Simpson is Anishinaabe. Both Acevedo and Simpson have observed how the act of reading Díaz's work has impacted them because they recognized themselves and their



communities in his work. They have also commented on how this has affected them as writers writing for their own communities.<sup>24</sup>

This Chapter turns to the ways in which Acevedo engages with the concept of decolonial love, highlighting in particular the gendered dimensions of this form of love. An award-winning Afro-Dominican performer, writer, and educator who has published a chapbook of poems, *Beastgirl and Other Origin Myths* (2016), and two critically acclaimed novels, *The Poet X* and *With the Fire On High* in 2018 and 2019 respectively, Acevedo is the first woman of colour to have won the prestigious British Carnegie Medal (for *The Poet X*). Acevedo is also an established slam poet, and her performances can be seen and heard on YouTube. Here, I look closely at Acevedo's first book, *Beastgirl and Other Origin Myths*, focusing on the ways in which this poetry chapbook questions the terms in which love can be expressed as it is untangled from histories of violence, which have shaped gendered and racialized bodies. *Beastgirl & Other Origin Myths* (2016), a publication that was selected as finalist in an American chapbook competition and won honourable mention for The Eric Hoffer Chapbook Award, contains 21 poems infused with folkloric tradition and deeply concerned with race, gender, colonialism, and diaspora as they are experienced in the body, in intimate relationships, and within larger Black and Dominican communities. The chapbook asks, in other words, how one might love that which the colonial gaze has denigrated as beastly, as unlovable or generally undeserving of affection. While Acevedo does not use the phrase decolonial love or directly refer to Díaz in this chapbook, in interviews she has frequently referenced elements of Díaz's work that are foundational to decolonial love as concepts that inspire her. Through close readings of the representation of literature as liberating embodiment, which for Acevedo entails learning to love the Black body that colonialism has rendered unlovable, mythological figures and ancestors, namely beastgirls (a concept created by Acevedo which she connects to her Afro-Latinx identity), La Ciguapa, and Anacaona, *brujería* and future mythmaking in *Beastgirl*— I contend that *Beastgirl and Other Origin Myths* offers a notion of love that constitutes recuperative relationality. This recuperative relationality connects women and men to their own racialized bodies and links kin, community,

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<sup>24</sup> In this regard, it is telling that the workshop to which Clemmons invited Díaz to was on the topic of “representation in literature” (Alter et al.).

and nation.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, it does so from a perspective that includes incorporeal beings, land, water, and other non-human entities in collectives.

## Countering Colonial Intimacies and Reader-Writer Mythmaking

In response to stories by and about the Dominican diaspora, Acevedo sees and experiences herself and her own community directly, evidenced by her response to a question from the global think tank The Aspen Institute. Replying to the prompt, “what book changed her worldview,” Acevedo selects Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2017). She articulates how a novel striving for decolonial love, as she puts it,

completely changed what I thought a story could be. When you think about the typical book you read in a high school classroom and who those stories are told about it’s never a Dominican American growing up in the hood with his ties to the Island speaking the way we speak regularly—in Spanish and in English right? I’d never seen that. I’d never seen myself in a text where I felt like that’s me. And I know that language ... ooh I get this in a way that ... feels like home. And it taught me what it was that I was trying to do. That for so long I ... [felt] like well I can’t talk like this here because they won’t understand me .... And that book combined so many different experiences that it taught me ... that is how you create a whole human, you know, on the page, and it said who you are and everything you bring is ok here. And I hope my work does that for people. (“What Book” 00:00:11-00:01:04)

Acevedo articulates two synchronic processes she experiences when engaging such literature that foregrounds representation of her community: one as a reader and one as a writer. As a reader, the use of language, depiction of relationships with a homeland, and other relatable experiences in literature arouses what “feels like home” and also makes the reader feel “who you are and everything you bring is ok here.” She suggests that literary works can enact decolonial love towards the Black Caribbean diasporic reader as they facilitate the healing of a relationship to

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<sup>25</sup> Not in the sense of the modern nation state but a larger, self-governing collective with a shared history and cosmology.

body, community, and land by helping the racialized audience to feel humanized or fully seen, to feel a sense of belonging in the world by evoking a relationship to an ancestral land that may be physically out of reach. Speaking specifically about the racialized body and representation in a 2018 interview, Acevedo remarks that in the United States, young women of colour, “particularly of Black descent and Latinx descent” feel “unseen” because they “grow up in places where we don’t see ourselves in books, ... TV, ... movies—and yet we have hypervisibility in our streets and in how we’re seen by the male gaze, by young men, and by our families” (“Elizabeth Acevedo and Sarah Kay”). She explains that this arouses a peculiar and dangerous feeling in which these women and girls are left simultaneously not knowing if they “exist in the actual world, but” remaining “too present at home and in spaces that could be violent” (“Elizabeth Acevedo and Sarah Kay”). Acevedo draws attention to how the lack of authentic representation, combined with a dehumanizing, fetishizing “hypervisibility” impacts the physical safety and well-being of women of color in both private and public spheres. Accordingly, she strives to produce art that helps undo these harms. This second process, the one she sets off as a writer, is one in which she is inspired to tell stories that can engage her audience in a way that humanizes and heals them in a similar way that she experienced as a reader.

Although love is touted as a universal emotion or force, the ways in which we understand and express the sentiment are profoundly informed by both cosmology and lived experience. At a basic level, love is a relational concept. Indeed, discourse around decolonial love indicates that no emotion or force is beyond the reach of colonial violence. Frantz Fanon famously points to this conundrum in *Black Skin White Masks* when he pronounces his belief in the “possibility of love” despite “its imperfections, its perversions” that result from colonialism and racism (42). Thus, survival and liberation depend on critical reflections on human experiences and emotions that are presumed to be primordial and untainted. Even though “love” may be “pure,” our ability to recognize, express, or receive it have not been spared by white-supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, and colonialism. As feminist scholar Dawn Rae Davis points out,

Western discourses have conceptualised love in significantly various ways; however, in the overall scheme of contemporary human experience love is assigned a positive value and privileged status, particularly in domains of intimacy, romance, friendship and family, and spiritual practice. Western feminists have associated the potential for love

with a form of care (for others, the self, and planet) and with transformative politics that address the conditions of women's lives in relation to male domination. However, if Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's claim regarding the trivial intimacy between feminism and imperialism is seriously considered by contemporary feminists, then love's discourse must be examined for the history it shares with colonialism in the context of the civilizing-Christianizing mission of Enlightenment ethics conditioned by reason. For feminists, the revolutionary possibility of love requires identifying and deconstructing historical alliances between love and reason and between benevolence and imperialism; otherwise we collaborate with a violent legacy. (145-46)

On the topic of intimacy and imperialism, Lisa Lowe, in *The Intimacy of Four Continents*, contributes to a long line of scholars ("Ann Laura Stoler, Amy Kaplan, Laura Wexler, Antoinette Burton, Philippa Levine, Peggy Pascoe, Nayan Shah, and others" [17]) "whose important work has demonstrated that the intimacies of desire, sexuality, marriage, and family, are inseparable from the imperial projects of conquest, slavery labor, and government" (17). These scholars have drawn attention to the ways that intimacy structures dispossession, disenfranchisement, and ongoing oppression. My analysis of decolonial love draws on and participates in the discourse of racialized scholars who articulate different expressions of this concept as forms of healing. I suggest that decolonial love provides a rejoinder to imperial intimacies, for it provides a potential means of grasping how people relate in profoundly liberatory psychical, physical, and emotional terms.

Literature and other forms of art and cultural production are important in conceptualizing and expressing this form of love—as shown in Acevedo's poetry, as I will elaborate shortly. In "Reparation as Transformation: Radical Literary (Re)Imaginations of Futurities through Decolonial Love," Afro Diaspora Studies scholar Yomaira C. Figueroa extends the works of Sandoval and Díaz and contends that "literary narratives offer discursive spaces through which to imagine and reimagine" the "material and immaterial" possibilities of decolonial love through the "ideas of reparations and futurities" (43). Figueroa asserts that decolonial love "demands a recognition of humanity and affinity across difference, learning to see faithfully from multiple points of view" (43) and "is a practice that bears witness to the past while looking towards a transformative and reparative future by unraveling coloniality, the matrix of power that is

manifested in our contemporary conceptions of power, gender, and bodies” (44). She further explains that decolonial love is “an integral part of the imagining of decolonial futurities because it imagines a world in which ethical relationships beyond coloniality are built in spite of the impositions of colonial difference” (45). Also building on Sandoval’s conception of decolonial love and Frantz Fanon’s work on love and decolonization, literary scholar Carolyn Ureña, in “Loving from Below: Of (De)colonial Love and Other Demons,” asserts that literature serves an important function when it models the “acceptance of fluid identities and a redefined but shared humanity” that underpins decolonial love. Namely, this type of literature “works to theorise new ways of being and offers feminist philosophy a different way to understand intersubjective relation that challenges hegemonic thinking” (86). Acevedo’s poetry participates in this healing and future-making work through various strategies such as foregrounding counter-narratives to dominant discourse, honouring mythological beings and historical figures, and the creations of new myths.

In a similar vein, Cree cultural theorist Karyn Recollet also articulates the power of decolonial love to envision and enact new, self-reflexive ways of being and relating. Recollet’s analysis extends beyond literature to encompass other forms of cultural expression. Analyzing Indigenous hip-hop cultural production, Recollet asserts that Indigenous art enacts “[r]adical decolonial love” as a space and expression that “can be perceived as an ethical way of life, whereby we acknowledge each other’s differences and gifts and let those manifest into creating new world(s) of possibilities” (“For Sisters” 137). Drawing on Audre Lorde’s articulation of “an erotic life,” Recollet asserts that decolonial “lovemaking” is inclusive of “and beyond acts of sex” and that it is “self-reflexive” because it recognizes that even bodies and peoples who are subjugated by colonialism are susceptible to colonialism’s “influences” (“For Sisters” 137).<sup>26</sup> This self-reflexivity is, as noted earlier, integral to Díaz’s understanding of decolonial love. Scholar and writer from the Driftpile Cree Nation, Billy-Ray Belcourt, in “Masturbatory Ethics, Anarchic Objects: Notes on Decolonial Love,” shifts the scale of analysis to the level of the individual in

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<sup>26</sup> Recollet further examines these elements of radical decolonial love in Indigenous resistance through art installation and flash mob round dance and adds to her conceptualization an analysis of decolonial love as solidarity and activism in “Glyphing Decolonial Love through Urban Flash Mobbing and Walking with Our Sisters.”

acts of self-love. He examines decolonial love as love and desire for one's own body and argues that it is already a revolutionary act to love yourself in a world designed to destroy you.

Moreover, conceptualizing decolonial love as a form of self-care, Belcourt reflects on Sara Ahmed's examination of Audre Lorde's "A Litany for Survival" and adds that "self-care, when practiced by minoritarian subjects, holds the possibility of dwelling long enough to world, to bring about affects and feelings that do not slowly wear us down" (17). Recollet and Belcourt express similar resonance with Black thought as Simpson on the nexus of decolonization and love, a topic I turn to in the next chapter.

Internalizing decolonial love as a reader, Acevedo's own writing presents myth-telling as a rejoinder to colonial notions of love and, in this way, an empowering resource for diasporic narratives. Contemporary diasporic myth-making involves crafting new stories as the progeny of ancient stories to continue making sense of the world as it changes but is always contingent on what has come before. Beginning with the titular figure of the "Beastgirl,"<sup>27</sup> I assert that Acevedo rehabilitates a relationship to the telling and creating of stories—practices of the Black diaspora that have not been spared colonialism's attacks—while expressing decolonial love through techniques that simulate orality and foreground the folkloric.

In a 2016 interview about *Beastgirl and Other Origin Myths*, Acevedo roots her writing process in "the rich and mythic storytelling that exist [sic] in the Dominican Republic. It is a nation where the folkloric weaves seamlessly into the everyday" ("Interview with Read America[s]"). Myth, as critic Asha Jeffers, points out, is integral to considering futurity in diasporic literature. In "Myth and Migration in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*," Jeffers draws on Wilson Harris's conceptions of myth to explain that, "Myth helps a people make sense of the world, particularly those aspects of it that are most difficult to understand" and this means that myths and peoples' relations to their myths respond to the difficulties of displacement and migration (36). In the context of colonization in the Caribbean, this has also meant that the ancestral myths of different peoples have influenced or mixed with those of others (37).

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<sup>27</sup> Acevedo sometimes capitalizes this word and sometimes does not. For consistency, I do not capitalize *beastgirl* as it is not capitalized in the body of the poem that I analyze.

Arguably, such myth-making across difference in the face of destruction and erasure is one of the earliest manifestations of decolonial love. Jeffers looks specifically at Díaz's generic strategies for creating what she terms "myths of the future" (34). Jeffers argues that, by "using myth and mythical language," contemporary immigrant and second generation literature "can open up new ways of looking at the world that not only helps us to understand the past better, but also to build a better future, a future that creates 'hope for a profoundly compassionate society committed to freedom within a creative scale' (Wilson 28-29)" (Jeffers 38). Whereas Díaz refers to, and draws on the language of, comic books and science fiction to create "myths of the future," Acevedo's practice of cosmological continuance is based on other strategies, such as summoning mythic beings, historic figures, and ancestral practices. Significantly, Acevedo describes her poetry chapbook as "a contemplation of the myths we forget, the ones we remember, and the myths we make of ourselves and the places we occupy" ("Interview with Read America[s]). Accordingly, myths are integral to future-making, which is an act of decolonial love for those from communities facing systemic death and dehumanization. Indeed, the title of one poem in Acevedo's, *Beastgirl and Other Origin Myths* (2016), "The True Story of La Negra, A Bio-Myth," establishes the poet's understanding and usage of myth. In this chapbook, myth is not a pejorative or condescending term. That is to say, myths are not the foolish or quaint superstitious tales of the racially inferior or the long-ago ancestors of white people who are the only race to have evolved to privilege science and objectivity over fantasy. Rather, the story of the poem demonstrates myth as truth.

This poem also points to the rootedness of future-myth making as it signals its lineage in Black feminist creation through the title's reference to "Bio-Myth," a term that directly links with Audre Lorde's work, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982). Lorde's publishers described *Zami* as a biomythography because it combines elements of biography, myth, and history. Myth consists of the strands of the story that connect the writer, the work, and the audience to Afro-Caribbean cosmologies, ancestors, and relationships to the Earth. Moreover, for diasporic Black writers, the creation of myth is an important act of future-making in the present that ensures the continuation of their ways of seeing and being in the world. Additionally, Acevedo's work exemplifies the collective element of such genealogies and myth-making characteristic of

Lorde's *Zami*.<sup>28</sup> While this poem is not peopled by a web of characters, it is inspired by a Black poet who is a contemporary of Acevedo's (Safia Elhillo,<sup>29</sup> who is "Sudanese by way of Washington, D.C." [Elhillo, "Bio"]), summons Lorde by title, and structures the overall work to include dedications and homages to numerous other Black, Indigenous, and Brown women.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, when asked about the "arrangement" of this book, Acevedo states that it is "about the myths I've been told, the origin myths, and the myths told about negras (beastgirls) like me" (*Speaking of Marvels*). Importantly, Acevedo talk about myths "told" to her reflects the way that orality and mythology structure the chapbook.

This poem and the title of the chapbook reveal the mythic ancestry from which Acevedo pulls to fashion a new myth that tells of the beastgirl in her own words. Beastgirl speaks her own origin myth into being and, in this way, collapses a linear conception of time. As a slam poet, writer, storyteller, and "negra," Acevedo gives life to beastgirls in written and spoken language, as well as in embodied form through her numerous live and recorded performances. The poem's opening line immediately tells us about this mythological being: "La Negra is a beastgirl" (12). Negra is the Spanish feminine for the adjective black and with the addition of the particle "la" ("the" in English) and capitalization of both words, La Negra becomes a noun that refers to the Black woman or girl. In one sense, a "beastgirl" is a girl or woman of Afro-Latinx descent. Indeed, in this poem, Acevedo speaks about Afro-Latinx bodies and mythology in particular. However, it is important to note that the concept of beastgirl can be extended to other subjects, including Brown Latinas. For example, in her post-textual acknowledgements where the author's list of "fellow Beastgirls" includes "SLU" (Sigma Lambda Upsilon/ Señoritas Latinas Unidas), a multi-racial, Latina sorority. Moreover, at a speaking engagement in 2018, Acevedo refers to another mythological beastgirl, Medusa, and to "us Black and Brown girls" ("National Book Festival" 00:03:01-00:03:03) as "Medusa's favourite daughters" (00:02:13-00:02:15). That Acevedo finds

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<sup>28</sup> A note of interest: Lorde explains that zami is a "Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers" (*Zami* 255).

<sup>29</sup> See Acevedo's interview in *Speaking of Marvels*.

<sup>30</sup> These identities are not mutually exclusive.



inspiration in Elhillo suggests the figure of the beastgirl might even apply to Black girls and women who are not Latina. Therefore, a beastgirl in the broadest sense is a woman who experiences this world in a racialized body. Overall, the beastgirl myth is different from other myths tackled in this chapbook because it is a new origin story, rooted in both ancient myths and a contemporary, ongoing undoing of colonial narratives about race, gender, land, and belonging.

Acevedo also wrenches the word “beast,” like she does “myth,” from pejorative dismissals. Much like her ode to rats, “For the Poet Who Told Me Rats Aren’t Noble Enough Creatures” (29), a popular work that she has performed and can be seen on YouTube, Acevedo is committed to honouring and celebrating the entities and relationships that she and her community value, especially those that Eurocentric values discard as unlovable. In this manner, her poetry exemplifies the work of decolonial love to actively love, honour, and celebrate the beings and relationships that Eurocentric, white supremacist and Imperialist systems denigrate. Not only does Eurocentricity dismiss animal relations, it also devalues the very bodies of Black women, which are deemed to be unattractive and “beastly.” The Eurocentric perspective construes beastliness through the prism of the transatlantic slave-trade that was predicated on the dehumanization of Black women (and men), a process that rendered their bodies as purely material, that is, designed for all kinds of labour, including reproduction, as though they were, to use a European idiom, beasts of burden. Moreover, Black women’s bodies and physical features—brown skin, full lips, tight curls, and big curves—have been construed by white society as foil to Eurocentric standards of beauty. At the same time, these very features are coveted, objectified, and hypersexualized by white spectators, who, in so doing, again relegate Black people to the domain of the corporeal and carnal. It is in response to these generational, unending assaults, that La Negra’s entire body is “callused” (12). Though her body is the site of the attacks of colonialism and anti-Blackness, it is still hers and can generate what is needed, like calluses, to protect her. Her body is worthy of being the subject of stories and poetry. Moreover, calluses are symbolic of self-love and care as they are the besieged body’s repairs to itself and a protection the body creates against further harm.

La Negra’s origin must be seen as a fraught part of colonialism and slavery’s legacies, for, as Acevedo reminds, she is “Risen on an island of shit bricks, / an empire” (12). Through the equation of empire with “shit bricks,” the origin myth of the beastgirl powerfully lays bare the

truth behind the triumphant story of European imperialism. Columbus did not discover new lands from which glorious Empires expanded but cobbled together the shit bricks of colonialism. La Negra's birth into the world is not from her mother's vaginal canal but from her "throat: a swallowed sword, a string / of rosary beads" (12). Being born of her mother's throat, the beastgirl makes the same journey into the world as her mother's words, stories, screams, and songs. The beastgirl is born through oral traditions that protect and fight, physically, like the sword, and spiritually, like the rosary beads. Although the sword and the rosary beads may appear to be a colonial legacy of the Spanish, like the Spanish language, the very existence of the beastgirl attests to how Afro-descendants repurposed these devices of terror, language, militarism, and religion for survival.

The poem also underscores the gendered dimensions of these devices. La Negra's father signals the gendered differences doled out by colonialism and the subsequent impacts on familial relations. The Black father in this poem exists only through his physical, economic labor: "La Negra's father is a dulled / sugarcane machete." (12). The father is not alluded to via part of his body but through the metaphor of a plantation tool, dulled from back-breaking labour. However, though it signifies oppression, the machete also symbolizes uprisings in Latin America and serves as a reminder of Black resistance and life force. Moreover, the father is syntactically divided from the La Negra and her mother by a period and contained within his own sentence: "The doctor pulled La Negra from / her mother's throat: a swallowed sword, a string / of rosary beads. La Negra's father is a dulled / sugarcane machete" (12). The syntactic separation mirrors the impacts of gendered colonialism, slavery, and plantation economies on Black families and kinship organization.

Similarly, La Negra's umbilical cord "crown" is a reminder that Spanish, the sword, the rosary, and the machete that Acevedo conjures are not the language, tools, or cosmologies weaponized by the colonizers. They are, instead, symbols of Black ingenuity and resistance. As Lorde famously observed, the master's tools cannot take down the master's house. The poem reminds us that these tools are made potent against colonialism and white supremacy through their distinct African and Black origins, repurposing, and/or interpretation. The umbilical cord is an emblem of origins and, in Dominican culture, is not discarded but rather valued, as it is kept for different uses and ceremonies (Brown 84). In addition, the cord crowns La Negra, connecting her

to Indigenous African kinship and ways of being in the world. Though slaveowners sought to erase diverse languages, cultures, and knowledges from stolen Africans and their descendants, the efforts of their ancestors ensured that present day inhabitants and diasporas of the Dominican Republic and Haiti retained practices and knowledge, which are passed on in the form of music and spiritual practices and which continue to generate new forms.

## Healing from Tangled Oppressions: Land, Ancestral Knowledge, and Intercultural Exchange

Just as myths adapt, and sometimes new ones are born, to help people understand and live in the world, medicinal practices of Dominican peoples have also responded to the physical and incorporeal realities faced by the African diaspora. One uniquely Dominican innovation is a special healing, invigorating drink that the newborn beastgirl desires—as the poem puts it, she “craves / only mamajuana” (12). Mamajuana is a bitter tonic whose history is deeply enmeshed in colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>31</sup> Symbolically, it is also a testament to the botanical and medicinal knowledge of Africans and Taíno as well as evidence of the mercantile and knowledge sharing and exchange between these systemically repressed peoples. While an extensive commentary on Taíno<sup>32</sup> peoples on the island Christopher Columbus called “Hispaniola” is beyond the scope of this chapter, a brief background is required to provide context for interpreting Acevedo’s invocation of mamajuana in her work.

Hispaniola, which some scholars assert is known as “Kiskeya or Quiqueya and Bohio” by Indigenous inhabitants (Guitar et al. 41), was the first place that Europeans raided in the Americas and is part of what Latin American decolonial thinkers call “the cradle of coloniality” where everything “from racism to predatory capitalism and also novel forms of challenging or

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<sup>31</sup> The ingredients include various plant parts such as barks and herbs and sometimes parts of sea creatures that are soaked in rum, red wine, and sometimes gin (Vandebroek, et al.). Some sources also list honey as an important ingredient.

<sup>32</sup> Some scholars use Taíno to refer to a People in the Greater Antilles at the time of European arrival and others debate the usefulness and/or accuracy of this term and its problematic homogenization. See for example Curet’s “The Taíno: Phenomena Concepts, and Terms” and Oliver’s “Believers of Cemíism: Who Were the Taínos and Where Did They Come From?”

evading colonial power” began (González-Ruibal vii). Specifically, the Italian explorer, Columbus, arrived on the island inhabited by a Taíno peoples in 1492, as part of an expedition he led for the Spanish Empire. While the conquistadors enslaved many of the Indigenous peoples of the island, they also enslaved inhabitants from surrounding islands, whom they brought to Hispaniola. As the Indigenous population began to significantly decline due to European diseases, by “the second decade of the sixteenth century” the Portuguese brought enslaved Africans to the Caribbean islands to meet labour needs, thus “paving the path toward the modern sugar plantations” (Clayton and Lantigua 23). Moreover, by 1542, Spain officially abolished the enslavement of the Indigenous people of the Americas—an act attributed to the efforts of Bartolomé de Las Casas, a Catholic cleric who arrived in the Caribbean in 1502 in service of Spanish conquest. Shortly after his arrival, Las Casas grew concerned about the treatment of the Indigenous people of the Americas. He eventually became instrumental in Spain’s issuing of reform laws called *Leyes Nuevas* (or New Laws for the Indies), which included the abolition of slavery of the continent’s Indigenous inhabitants. Troublingly, Las Casas’s proposed strategy for freeing the Indigenous population came at the expense of Africans when he suggested that Spain could meet their labour needs and “reduce the suffering of the Amerindians by importing African slaves to take the place of the Amerindians” (Clayton and Lantigua 22).<sup>33</sup>

The arrival of the Spanish had devastating consequences for the Taíno and their socio-political structures. The conquistadors’ diseases and swords ravaged the population. Some historians even suggest that the Taíno dwindled to as few as “only a handful” by the 1520s and 1530s (Clayton and Lantigua 7).<sup>34</sup> However, “[r]ecent historical, ethnographic, ethno-archaeological, linguistic,

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<sup>33</sup> He later recanted and regretted this position.

<sup>34</sup> It is difficult to ascertain the state of the current Taíno communities in present day Haiti and the Dominican Republic, as I have been unable to find collective governing bodies or representatives of the Indigenous peoples as I am familiar with from mainland North America. While scholars and educators such as José Barreiro, Juan Estevez, Marianela Medrano-Marra, and Erica Neeganagwedgin who identify as Taíno from Taíno communities write about Taíno subjects, there are others who adamantly refuse to share much information about their identity and culture. For example, there was a website, which has recently become defunct, [www.taihono.org](http://www.taihono.org), that asserted it was the official online presence of the Taíno Nation and was connected with a group who ran the Tumblr blog “this-is-not-Taíno”, active from 2014-2016, with the objective to educate the Taíno diaspora. As a public forum, the main focus of the blog is to dispel false understandings and fetishizations about the Taíno identity, history, and cosmology. But as they repeat throughout the blog, Taíno community and culture is closed to those who are not Taíno, unless they

and DNA studies are demonstrating multidisciplinary evidence for both Taíno cultural and biological survival” (Guitar et al. 41-2). Some scholars, such as Marianela Medrano-Marra, have turned to non-state sources, such as families’ oral records and cultural practices to indicate that the Taíno continue to inhabit the island, importantly suggesting that Black and Indigenous are not mutually exclusive categories of identity in the Dominican Republic.<sup>35</sup> That is, while Taíno peoples were long thought to be “extinct,” there is a growing body of research suggesting this assumption is part of the problematic settler colonial discourse of the vanishing native. Furthermore, colonialism has impacted different peoples in the Americas in different ways. In the Dominican Republic—indeed in the Caribbean more generally—factors such as lack of written records, the massive Indigenous population loss, and introduction of large populations of enslaved Africans has meant that much of the records of Indigenous continuity and African and Taíno relationships are oral and/or unconventional by European standards. For these reasons, as a reading practice, decolonial love entails taking care not to lob accusations of self-Indigenization while also paying close attention to the ways in which Acevedo brings these entangled histories and the present to life in her poetry.

The mamajuana that La Negra craves conjures the entangled history of Africans and Indigenous peoples of the island. It is a bitter tonic from a category of medicinal drinks prominent “[a]cross the black Atlantic” that are “boiled, slightly fermented or strong alcoholic plant mixtures” serving an array of uses such as “aphrodisiacs, ... general strengthener, blood purifier, or cure for impotence or venereal diseases” (van Andel et al. 841). Considering the African diaspora’s severely reduced access to an African pharmacopeia (van Andel et al. 841), no comparative medicine made or used by Indigenous Caribbeans or European colonizers, and their lack of botanical knowledge in the Americas, mamajuana reveals how this diaspora could not simply replicate their original medicines nor did they simply adopt Taíno or European medicines or

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are Taíno descendants seeking “reconnection.” As a result, they significantly limit the sharing of cultural and cosmological information.

<sup>35</sup> Erica Neeaganagwedgin also uses oral family stories and cultural practices to affirm Taíno presence in Jamaica in “Rooted in the Land: Taíno Identity, Oral History and Stories of Reclamation in Contemporary Contexts.”

healing practices.<sup>36</sup> Mamajuana symbolizes the diaspora's tenacity, its subjects' capacity to hold on to their medicinal knowledge and conceptions of wellbeing. It also represents the scientific practices of peoples who continued to learn about the plants and their botanical properties on a different continent. Moreover, it speaks to the relationships of knowledge sharing<sup>37</sup> and economic exchange<sup>38</sup> between Afro-descendants and Indigenous Caribbean people.

This brief background helps illuminate that mamajuana is not some hybridization of African, Taíno, and European knowledge or medicine. La Negra, who is born “crav[ing] only mamajuana” (Acevedo 12), craves both what mamajuana symbolizes and does. Symbolically, the beastgirl craves the knowledge, intellectual modes of inquiry, and cross-cultural exchange and sharing she inherits through her ancestors. Functionally, La Negra seeks all that heals and strengthens sexuality and vitality, which includes a renewed relationship to land, water, vegetation, and all manner of other creatures. By writing about ancestors like beastgirls, Acevedo carries on the work of invigorating marginalized origin myths in oral practice, as her own family and community have done by sharing myths with her. Throughout the chapbook, she also brings these traditional oral stories and the entities they are about into the written page.

## La Ciguapa and Anacaona: Love is Tending to Sacred Monsters and Ancestors

Ancestors of the beastgirls (Black, Indigenous, and Brown) populate Acevedo's chapbook cover to cover, beginning with “La Ciguapa,” which is the title of the first poem and is the name of a

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<sup>36</sup> While Indigenous peoples of the region had for centuries prepared and used alcoholic and fermented drinks (van Andel et al. 847), the “popularity of bitter tonics in the Caribbean suggest an African heritage” (van Andel et al. 849).

<sup>37</sup> Van Andel et al. cite “evidence for the exchange of ethnobotanical knowledge between Africans and Amerindians” (847) in the Dominican Republic.

<sup>38</sup> Van Andel et al. provide a 1997 example of how “Carib Indians living in the interior of Guyana harvested roots and barks ... to sell to urban Afro-Guyanese as ingredients for their bitter tonics” which the “Caribs called ... ‘black man's medicine,’ something they hardly used themselves” (847). It is also interesting to note that the Indigenous peoples are noted to use, though marginally, ‘black man's medicine’ and is an example of medicinal exchange in the other direction.

mythological being in Dominican lore. I argue that La Ciguapa is a beastgirl or an ancestor to beastgirls like La Negra, Acevedo, and Black and Brown girls and Latinx women. Although the stories about La Ciguapa's appearance and behaviour vary, in general she is human-like and lives in the wilderness away from human communities. Non-verbal and nocturnal, she has been known to harm or kill men who seek or follow her into the wilderness. One commonly cited attribute that helps La Ciguapa evade human pursuers is her backwards facing feet, which leave confusing footprints that make her hard to track. In her relationship to the feminine and the forests and mountains, La Ciguapa poses a great danger to European "civilization" and patriarchy. In threatening these masculine/urban structures, La Ciguapa, like decolonial love, invokes these binaries to challenge and extend beyond them. Acevedo signals that the greatest danger to beastgirls and thus Black Dominican culture and community is losing the stories, which, like arteries carrying ancestral blood, are a channel for life-sustaining power.

The structure and content of the poem, "La Ciguapa," challenge textual and scholarly authority over La Ciguapa by reflecting a multiplicity of voices. Roughly, the poem comprises nine stanzas of four lines each. The separation between the first five stanzas, as well as the last stanza, is further emphasized by a centered, grey, typographical feature that looks like an ellipsis. The resulting seven distinct segments of the poem all begin with, or contain, the refrain, "They say" and describe La Ciguapa's origins, appearance, and stories about her. Prominent scholars, such as Ginetta E. B. Candelario, suggest that La Ciguapa is born of Francisco Javier Angulo Guridi, a white Dominican writer and nationalist, who delivered her in his eponymous 1866 novella, which contributed to developing a national literature and imaginary for the burgeoning nation-state's struggle for independence. Candelario asserts that, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, "the mythical ciguapa had entered the national folklore as if she were part of the island's indigenous cultural legacy rather than the invention of a nationalist navigating the Dominican Republic's contradictory racial demographics, political economy, and geopolitics" (103). She asserts that La

Ciguapa is a borrowed myth strategically deployed by a white man as a nation-building text to arouse indigenism.<sup>39</sup>

By contrast, Acevedo evokes the oral, “low culture” literature from within which La Ciguapa comes to life for her and a majority of other Black and Brown Dominicans. In keeping with these oral features, the representation of La Ciguapa’s origin story emphasizes multiplicity instead of a singular authorial voice, as signaled in the diverse lineages associated with the poem’s stanzas. Specifically, “La Ciguapa” (Acevedo, *Beastgirl* 1) begins with five sections, four of which begin with, “They say” (1) and one of which has the words “they say” interjected into the first line of the stanza. The anaphoric “they say” conjures the ubiquity of certain kinds of oral narratives.: they are both everywhere and without a discernable point of origin. Moreover, the typographical element separating each stanza—the ellipsis-like three dots—sets up each lineage to stand as a separate origin story within the overall poem. For example, the fifth and sixth stanzas appear as follows:

La Ciguapa, they say, was made on one of those ships; stitched  
and bewitched from moans and crashing waves. She emerged  
entirely formed. Dark and howling, stepped onto the auction  
block but none would buy her. They wouldn’t even look her in the eye.

...

They say she came beneath the Spanish saddle of the first mare.  
Rubbed together from leather and dark mane. Hungry.  
That she has a hoof between her thighs and loves men  
like the pestle loves the mortar; (*Beastgirl* 1-2)

The structure signals that in addition to being diffuse, these oral narratives come from different oral lineages and are not a cumulative description of La Ciguapa. Specifically, each stanza represents a different origin myth for a single figure. In the first, La Ciguapa is born red, of fire and earth “on the peak of El Pico Duarte” (*Beastgirl* 1), the island’s tallest mountain, with

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<sup>39</sup> While I don’t dispute her historical genealogy, with matters of oral transmission and localized myths, it is important not to privilege written accounts over oral ones and instead keep open the possibilities of multiple strands of conception.



“burning hair” and becomes black (1). In the second she is born blue, of ocean water from the belly of Atabeyra, a Taíno feminine spirit entity related to water (Atabeyra also makes an appearance in a poem I discuss later, “La Última Cacique”).<sup>40</sup> In the third stanza, she “spit herself out” (1) and there is no overt connection made between her body and the island’s lands, waters, or Taíno cosmology as there are in the first two. This is the first myth that mentions “inverted” feet (1). But whereas in the third myth, La Ciguapa’s inverted feet are a matter of chance, in the fourth telling they are “no mistake” but a purposeful attribute to help her remain “unseeable”—“never meant to be found, followed” (1). Additionally, she is not red or blue but has “crane legs, ... crocodile scales, / long beak of a parrot” (1). In the fifth story, La Ciguapa is born of “moans and crashing waves” on “one of those ships” (1) from which she, “Dark and howling” steps “onto the auction block” (1). In this story she is not born of the minerals or waters of the Caribbean. Spain’s involvement in chattel slavery predates its arrival in the Americas—that is how Columbus arrived in the Caribbean with a ship holding enslaved Africans. In this telling, La Ciguapa is birthed from the “moans” or inarticulate suffering of the Africans and their violent, oceanic journey of the middle passage. And in the final origin story stanza, we are told that La Ciguapa “came beneath the Spanish saddle of the first mare,” having been formed from “the leather and dark mane” (2). This story illustrates the animals brought to Hispaniola; along with enslaved human beings, on his second trip to Hispaniola, Columbus brought domesticated animals including horses—many of whom escaped Spanish possession and thrived in the lush lands of the Taíno.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Some refer to Atabeyra as a Goddess. For example, in the Medrano-Marra article, she is referred to as the “Great Goddess of fertility, ponds, streams, and rain” (25) and she is also referred to with the name “Atabey-Yermao-Guacar-Apito-Zuimaco” and as the “Goddess of water” (23). However, the tumblr blog, *this is not taino*, which intentionally significantly limits the sharing of Taíno cultural and cosmological information, frequently refutes such portrayals of Atabeyra. For example, it shares another user’s post about Atabey which claims she is a Goddess of Fertility. This-is-not-taino responds: “[w]e do not have a “goddess of fertility”.... Even if we did ... why would that be anyone else’s business?” (“Absolutely Not.”)

<sup>41</sup> Livestock including horses “were carried to Hispaniola beginning with the second voyage of Columbus in 1493 ... and multiplication of both domestic and feral animals was soon rife” (Roth 95). Linda C. Roth also cites one source that “noted that small mountain valleys once cultivated by indigenous farming communities had become home to” herds of horses (95).

Acevedo elsewhere challenges the hierarchization between animals or “beasts” (see the aforementioned “For the Poet Who Told Me Rats Aren’t Noble Enough Creatures”), and in this poem she Acevedo similarly challenges the division between human and beast (horses) or Beast (La Ciguapa). Upon being brought to Hispaniola, these horses sought freedom on the island, much like the Africans who escaped to create maroon communities and “could not be retrieved” (Landers 234). In the poem, horses, Africans, and Taíno alike are evasive and irretrievable, and La Ciguapa brings the three figures together because she shares these qualities as symbolized by her backwards feet. This feature of La Ciguapa’s body is consistent across the narratives that Acevedo spotlights and it is critical to her evasiveness and irretrievability—and thus her freedom—because her footprints confound those who prey on her.

The cultural importance of La Ciguapa is underscored in Ann González’s *Resistance and Survival: Children’s Narrative from Central America and the Caribbean*, which demonstrates the theoretical underpinnings of the figure for understanding how children’s literature from Latin America and the Caribbean has drawn on traditional and oral storytelling strategies and mythic beings for resistance and continuance. González calls this “the dynamic, creative (re)inscription of traditions, myths, and autochthonous beliefs” (3). In conversation with the works of racialized critics and writers from around the world, González argues that resistance to colonial and neocolonial domination in Latin American and Caribbean literature participates in similar ways of “Writing in Reverse/Reading in Reverse” (6). This includes: critically looking at “how the past has led to the present” (6), interrogating dominant discourse and History “from an oppositional stance” (7), and reclaiming and revitalizing “local knowledge” (7). The fourth way of writing and reading in reverse that González posits is specific to “Caribbean and Central American children’s narratives is ... its recurrent admiration for astute, trickster characters, who metaphorically know how to read in reverse” (7). La Ciguapa is the primary example of a mythological entity that embodies reading and writing (or thinking and creating) in reverse. González traces some of the many different versions of understanding of “a magical people known as the Ciguapas” similar to how Acevedo’s stanzas document them: “Some versions say ... others say ... others claim” (8). And, like Acevedo, she highlights that all versions agree on the position of La Ciguapa’s feet. González contends that this “unusual anatomy ... is a mythological modification that permits survival” which, given the experience of racialized peoples on the island under colonialism “must have been a psychological imperative” (8). She

states: “Paradoxically, the Ciguapas exemplify both the plight of the subaltern—mute, hidden, mysterious, Other—as well as successful subversion. Walking in reverse becomes a metaphor, like reading in reverse, for a form of duplicity that offers a space of resistance inside dominant codes” (8). Beyond subversion, La Ciguapa poses a lethal threat to her oppressors. In the final telling of La Ciguapa’s myth in “La Ciguapa,” Acevedo reveals the brutal fate that awaits men who seek her out and end up “scrap[ing] themselves dead” (2) when trying to force themselves on her. La Ciguapa, then, is a powerful ancestor to La Negra who not only embodies and conveys what it is to resist metaphorically but also attests to the very real, corporeal fight against sexual and physical violence on the racialized, feminine body.

By their very telling alone, stories of La Ciguapa act as a kind of protection. They are a warning to violators—most notably men and conquistadors and, by extension, patriarchy and colonialism. Part of the power of La Ciguapa lies in her myth, in the spread of her biography and stories about her. Acevedo expresses the potency of La Ciguapa’s myth and how it is metonymically concentrated in her name when she writes that “the men were the first to undo her name; thinking that burying it would rot her magic, that long cry they were compelled to answer” (2). By referring to the perpetrators as “men” without modifiers, Acevedo implies how the threats faced by La Ciguapa can also come from the hands of racialized men. In so doing, she demands a reckoning with the ways in which colonialism and slavery have differently impacted communities of colour along gendered lines.<sup>42</sup> Part of the reckoning is the self-reflexivity regarding complicity with oppression that community and kin are also “compelled to answer” if they want to practice decolonial love. Furthermore, the men recognize her power as “magic” and attempt to destroy it by “burying” it or killing it by smothering her name and thus her myth. Indeed, La Ciguapa poses a threat to men who wish to use the cover of night to terrorize feminized bodies, making her a protector of women and girls. Moreover, La Ciguapa embodies irretrievability and her stories convey, as González asserts, “successful subversion” to fellow beastgirls who resist and survive their oppressors. Hers is one of the myths that Acevedo is concerned about “forgetting” in her description of this poetry chapbook because forgetting this

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<sup>42</sup> Something to be noted in light of the allegations against Junot Díaz and the complicated risks that racialized women face even alongside kin and community.

sacred monster, which is to say, losing this sacred kin, is also a loss of ways of knowing and being.

Moreover, the fact that La Ciguapa's power over these men is her "cry"—which they cannot seem to help but respond to by seeking her out—is important because this cry continues and amplifies the "moans" of the Africans from which she was born. This cry sounds throughout the chapbook such as in La Negra's birth wails. Through this aural lineage, La Negra emerges a beastgirl like her ancestor, La Ciguapa. However, the segment of "La Ciguapa" stands out from the others because it is not an origin myth or genealogical point of origin but a lament fearful of La Ciguapa's potential death. Acevedo writes:

They say. They say. They say. Tuh, I'm lying. No one says. Who tells her story anymore? She has no mother, La Ciguapa, and no children, certainly not her people's tongues. We who have forgotten all our sacred monsters. (2)

Here, Acevedo's repetition of the refrain reiterates and amplifies the earlier references to oral traditions and highlights them as La Ciguapa's life sustaining system. Without a predecessor or progeny, the "tongues" of Dominican people are La Ciguapa's kin who keep her, her myths, and her powers alive. To forget La Ciguapa is to be complicit with the "men" and systems of domination that attempt to "bury" her. The implications of forgetting "sacred monsters" such as La Ciguapa are dire for Dominican beastgirls such as La Negra. While La Ciguapa's first line of defense are the stories about her that instill fear in the hearts of men, this defense may extend to other beastgirls who may find themselves alone and vulnerable at night.

Through the use of poetry, both written in the book and regularly performed orally, Acevedo opens this chapbook with a remembering and reviving of La Ciguapa and all her valences. It also serves as a call-to-action to "they" who no longer "say" to recognize the power in their oral traditions and cosmologies.<sup>43</sup> Acevedo's work is a testament to La Ciguapa's irretrievability,

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<sup>43</sup> Moreover, this poem and its form which convey the multiplicity of origins stands in stark contrast and defiance to the work of scholars such as Candelario who insist on a single, textually traceable track for La Ciguapa.

subversion, and survival; through decolonial love, relationships with sacred, mythic kin and non-Eurocentric cosmologies can be healed and continue.

Despite the foundational difference in conceptions of La Ciguapa's origins, Candelario, like González and Acevedo, ultimately attests to the power of La Ciguapa for the liberation of Dominicans.<sup>44</sup> Particularly important to my project is Luisa Castillo Guzman's denominalization of ciguapa (*ciguapear*), which Candelario builds on to express La Ciguapa's hemispheric influence, saying: "to ciguapear is to act, to call into being a method for political, intellectual, and cultural strategies of undoing imperialism and racism throughout the hemisphere" (107). As a diasporic Dominican, Acevedo's final stanza seems like a lament but is contextually an admonition and thus a reminder of the importance of nurturing the relationship with mythical kin no matter where one finds themselves on the continent. Moreover, the historical and geopolitical differences between the Dominican Republic and the United States mean that different liberatory epistemologies and ontologies have developed regionally. This becomes apparent in wealthy, settler colonial nations where peoples from the Global South are often forced to enter as either refugees or economic or environmental migrants. In such places, the confluence of cosmologies offers an opportunity to more deeply contemplate global and local reaches and interactions of oppression and, consequently, to imagine more nuanced and interconnected, hemispheric liberation.<sup>45</sup>

From the chapbook's opening poem, "La Ciguapa," to its final poem, "La Última Cacique" (a term translated as the last casik, a Taíno title or word for their leaders or chiefs who were

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<sup>44</sup> Candelario posits that ciguapa has transformed over time into "a method of being and knowing in Dominican society" that animates the current "spirit of queer antiracist feminist organizing" against "anti-Haitianism and negrophobia in the Dominican Republic (101). She articulates this transformation by building on the works of queer, Cuban scholar Jose Munoz on disidentification (106) and Dominican musician Luisa Castillo Guzman's denominalization of ciguapa (*ciguapear*) which I suggest is not unlike González's writing and reading in reverse. Candelario argues that "[f]rom the natural hair movement ... to transnational organizing, black identified, antiracist, and queer feminists are ... affirming their ways of being and knowing ... [and] also affirming a vision of sovereignty they enact in their embodied lives" (111).

<sup>45</sup> For example, to name a few: anti-black racism against Haitians in the Dominican Republic, or American-centric Black liberation politics for Black diasporic Afro-Latinx communities, or the participation of Black and Brown Americans (Latin American and Caribbean descendants or not) in the American armed forces and their historical and current participation in the oppression of the poorer nations of Central and South America and the Caribbean.

empowered socially, politically, and spiritually), *Beastgirl and Other Origin Myths* is shaped by the natural worlds that form both the island of Acevedo's people and the island on which Acevedo lives as diaspora: Hispaniola and Manhattan.<sup>46</sup> Colonialism and capitalism operate in relationship to land, water, and all the entities that dwell in them (including racialized humans) as exploitable and expendable resources to build wealth. La Ciguapa, in one telling, as I discussed in greater detail above, is part of the mountains and minerals of the island because she is “[b]alled up for centuries beneath the rocks” in the womb of “the peak of El Pico Duarte”—the tallest mountain on the island. In other versions, she is part of the ocean and water systems. In Acevedo's poetry, stolen Africans and Indigenous Caribbeans and their mythological entities and deceased leaders are part of the land and waters that comprise the Dominican Republic, not as a nation state but as a people.

At the end of the chapbook, we encounter Anacaona in the poem “La Última Cacique” who, like La Ciguapa, is arguably a beastgirl—a figure indelibly tied to land and water. Anacaona was one of the last casik, or leaders, who in many accounts brilliantly maneuvered a relatively peaceful coexistence with the Europeans. However, she was ultimately betrayed, ambushed, and murdered by the Spanish, as were many of her people. In this final poem, Acevedo again evokes Atabeyra when she describes the eyes of the conquistadors:

... Blue and green as  
 Atabeyra's waters, but starved, clawing,  
 first the women, then the children,  
 the root vegetables from their beds. (31)

The blue and green of Atabeyra's waters nourish and birth La Ciguapa, just as they do all life on the island including that of the Taíno and, specifically in this poem, their leader Anacaona. The Taíno women and children are described as the “root vegetables” and the first to feel the “starved” greed of colonialism and capitalism. They are the ones who ground the Taíno to the land like roots. Like root vegetables, the women and children draw on water and the water's

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<sup>46</sup>Simpson's collection that I examine in the next chapter engages a similar dynamic in relationship to the islands of the Anishinaabeg.

spiritual entities such as Atabeyra. And like roots, they also draw on the minerals, such as stone, from which Taíno were created (according to creation stories) as well as the earth in which their ancestors rest. But this operation of colonialist and capitalist greed is unending, as Acevedo offers these details regarding the conquistadors:

They dropped gold  
 into the mouth of their hands  
 until her people had nothing more  
 than fisted wounds  
 for this never ending hunger. (31)

Acevedo contrasts the conquistadors against the Indigenous people through metaphors and images of hands. The Spanish are like open, entitled palms with gaping mouths whose appetite for gold is bottomless and is ultimately not satiated by gold alone. The conquistadors' appetite is driven by the logics of colonialism and capitalism and becomes a "never ending hunger" for everything on the island. Consequentially, the Taíno are subjected to ongoing exploitation, leaving them with "wounds" and, by inference, empty palms. But Acevedo's "fisted wounds" not only conjure the conquistadors' violence upon the land and its peoples; the term is also a metaphor for the Taíno themselves. Though a fist may be erroneously thought of as an empty hand—a hand that holds nothing but itself—a hand formed into a "fisted wound" is a symbol of resistance like Anacaona has become for people all over the Caribbean and Latin America. The last stanza of the poem conveys how Anacaona endures as a leader of survival and resistance through the Acevedo's description of the island's environmental conditions at Anacaona's execution. She says,

It was a hot day. It always  
 is on the Island. Her toes made wind  
 as she swung, then grooves in the sand  
 as she was lowered and a world ended  
 and a new one cracked open:  
 and swallowed us all. (32)

Referring to the imagined climate of that day, Acevedo connects what "was" with what "is" on the island, tying history to the present day. Her body creates weather, digs "grooves in the sand"

(32) that counter the ruts in the earth left by extraction. Her hanging ruptures the earth, but not in the way of the conquistadors' open-palmed greed; rather, its shattering creates a new world that "swallowed" (32) everyone. With this description, Acevedo shows how Anacaona is not a fictional character from a world of fantasy. The dynamics that impacted her are there today on the Island. The Island also existed before the arrival of Europeans and so Anacaona's reality of having to negotiate with the presence of the Spanish for the benefit of her people and land was not always a reality faced by her people or ancestors. This intertwining of existence, the land and the people as the land, are made even more apparent as her body and motion, even in death, create the physical, natural environment. Though the Spanish kill Anacaona, in death, the swing of her toes creates wind that is both gentle, able to ease the heat from the oppressed, and powerful, able to battle the oppressors. As she is lowered, she makes an even more tactile impact on the land as her toes "made ... grooves in the sand" signifying how even after death she will continue to exert a force on the island.

But more than grooves in the sand, in death, Anacaona "cracked open" the world. Here, Acevedo subverts the new/old world binary of the colonial imaginary. Her invocation of "a world ended" denotes the one in which the Taíno and Spanish attempt to coexist. The Spanish make it irrevocably clear that the kind of world that Anacaona attempted to facilitate is over because they will not participate in it. Their insatiable desire for material wealth did not and does not allow them to participate in conviviality. Colonialism and subsequently capitalism become the order of the day and swallow everyone: Taíno, Africans, and their descendants. But this is not a condemnation of the land. For land, despite severe changes like an engulfing crack, offers nourishment and ways of surviving, resisting, and creating alternatives. This is the beastgirl myth that La Ciguapa and Anacaona offer Black and Brown women, girls, and femmes for future-making.

The hope and evidence of this position is in Acevedo's concluding "Thanks" (35) section, where she states: "Thank you to the islands that inspire me: Manhattan and Hispaniola. Pa'lante, siempre." *Pa'lante* is a conjunction for *para adelante*, which means to proceed forward. The formal Spanish language is governed by the traditionally conservative Real Academia Española. A search for this conjunction on Real Academia Española yielded no results. It is not the kind of language that would be used in the formal space of a courtroom, for example. *Siempre* means



“always.” Together, “Pa’lante, siempre,” the words are associated with informal spaces such as the streets. The expression is a call to resistance and future-making by the disenfranchised, and Acevedo raises this call to the beastgirls and peoples of the islands of Hispaniola and Manhattan, calling them in solidarity as kin across time and space.

## Cleansing, Protecting, Reviving: Water, Salt, Earth and *Brujería*

Through pervasive references to *brujería* and *brujas* (witchcraft and witches) throughout the chapbook, Acevedo foregrounds a non-Eurocentric cosmology that is rooted in honouring earth, water, and the sacred balance of life—a relational worldview. The sanctity of water in Dominican cosmology winds through Acevedo’s poetry, beginning with the evocation of Atabeyra in the first and last poems. Significantly, this account of water also includes Manhattan’s hydrological system. In the poem “Salt,” written from the perspective of a young woman reflecting on an incident from her childhood, the speaker recalls pouring some salt into her hand from a carton “on a rocky ledge” by the Hudson River (7).<sup>47</sup> The young woman confesses that she touched the salt because she “[d]idn’t know then it was left as an offering” (7). The salt is dumped from her hand by her “Mami,” her mother, who says “*Deja eso, eso lo dejó una bruja*” (7) [Leave that, that was left by a witch].

In Dominican lore and spiritual and superstitious practices, salt is a prominent substance that functions as a form of cleansing by drawing negative or bad forces into itself and thus away from those it protects. The factors contributing to the girl’s lack of understanding regarding the salt can be surmised: this poem’s speaker lives in the Dominican diaspora and, while there is a large Dominican population in New York, the poem implies that geographical distance from the Dominican Republic, as well as her young age, has still meant less exposure to cultural practices. Because Mami has had more time and exposure to these practices in the Dominican Republic, she has the literacy to understand not only salt, but also salt in relation to the land and water, to

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<sup>47</sup> This poem is written “*After Pariah by Marcos Dimas, c. 1972*” (*Beastgirl 7*) which is a painting of a portrait of a woman wearing what has been called “an indigenous amulet” and has curly thick hair to indicate African ancestry (Ramos). Dimas was born in Puerto Rico and moved to New York as a child where he eventually “cofounded Taller Boricua, an artists’ collective” (Ramos). The collective was active in the fight for Puerto Rican civil rights and “created works that affirmed the hybrid African and indigenous (or Taíno) identity of Puerto Ricans” (Ramos).

recognize practice, protocol, and community—*brujería*. A biographical reading of the poem further supports this interpretation of generational difference when we consider that Acevedo herself who was born in the United States to Dominican immigrants. Significantly, *brujería*, a Spanish word for witchcraft, has been historically used in Latin America<sup>48</sup> to describe a broad range of practices and belief systems of Africans, Indigenous people, other racialized newcomers, and their descendants.<sup>49</sup> Dominant society has cast these practices and cosmologies antagonistically against European Christianity and thus, evil and backwards. Because one of the enduring impacts of colonization is internalized racism, community members often view themselves negatively. “Mami” in this chapbook would be one such figure. In this anecdote, while her actions indicate that she is protecting her daughter from the negative force absorbed by salt, her words refer to the function of the salt but only disparagingly to the one who left it, “una bruja.”

Throughout the chapbook, *brujas* are frequently mentioned in a way that conveys the suspicion and denigration with which they are viewed in Dominican society, including, for example, the belief that they were spies for a dictator. This sentiment is expressed forcefully in the poem, “The Dictator’s Brujas or Why I Didn’t Grow Up with Disney” (21). In this poem, Mami appears again and tells her daughter “how brujas / were the Dictator’s favorite spies” (Acevedo, *Beastgirl* 21). Here, the Dictator is Rafael Trujillo, who ruled the Dominican Republic from 1930 until his assassination in 1961.<sup>50</sup> However, *bruja* is the feminine noun for witch (as opposed to the masculine counterpart, *brujo*). As such, the term indicates the gendered form of racism and colonialism experienced by women either perceived to possess such powers or actually engaged in such practices. Fear of these women’s supernatural powers is so deeply entrenched that they are even accused of doing the work of those who possess institutional

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<sup>48</sup> I use this to refer to any countries in the American continent (North, South, and Central, including the Caribbean) that Spain and Portugal colonized.

<sup>49</sup> See *Obeah and Other Powers: The Politics of Caribbean Religion and Healing* (Paton and Forde) and “Sex and Sin, Witchcraft and the Devil in Late-Colonial Mexico” (Behar).

<sup>50</sup> He was a brutal dictator for 31 years and was responsible for such horrors as La Masacre del Perejil (the Parsley Massacre) in which tens of thousands of Haitians, and darker hued Dominicans assumed to be Haitian, were massacred.

power. Acevedo points to this troubling effect of colonialism. The roots of various forms of *brujería* are in opposition to Eurocentric religion and white supremacy and also, as Ruth Behar's study of colonization and witchcraft in Mexico indicates, *brujería* has historically been a way for racialized women to empower themselves against colonially imposed patriarchy. Therefore, *brujería* has historically been practiced in secrecy and in the margins of society. It is a sinister colonial spin that has alienated *brujas* from Mamis, or racialized Latinx women and femmes from each other, and has influenced non-practitioners to see those who maintain traditional ways as enemies instead of sister beastgirls like La Negra and La Ciguapa. Decolonial love in this chapbook is a visible reclamation of relationships to non-Eurocentric practices and community members who have maintained these practices and knowledges. Decolonial love, then, liberates Latinx subjects from the constraints of self-hatred, the ongoing legacy of European imperialism.

Acevedo's poetry offers a counternarrative of *brujas* that subverts dominant views by bringing them out of the margins and into the space of art where they can see themselves and be seen by other beastgirls. In "The Dictator's Brujas" for example, the first half of the poem reiterates Mami's telling of how the *brujas* used their powers to carry out the Trujillo regime's surveillance. However, in the second half of the poem, the speaker recounts her childhood speculations on the fate of the *brujas*:

Did they yellow and wilt like plantain leaves?  
 Was their work for him merely forced labor and now free  
 they could go back to making jengibre balms  
 and setting bones and lighting fat candles for our dead? (20)

If the *brujas* depended on the dictatorship, then Trujillo's fall would subsequently cut off their life source and cause them to "yellow and wilt" (20). But in her child's mind, the speaker thinks through the other possibilities—an act reminiscent of what González calls reading in reverse. The speaker imagines a possibility that denigrates neither Mami's account nor the position of *brujas*. The *brujas*, like all others, could have been subjected to the Dictator's coercion. Acevedo imagines that, once "free, the *brujas* do work that is critical to the physical and spiritual health of the community—those living and dead. This "labor" is situated as the *brujas*' essential work, temporarily derailed by systemic intervention, and to which "they could go back" (20). Moreover, tending to ancestors, through the lighting candles, is a call back to the first poem ("La

Ciguapa”) which laments, “Who tells her story anymore?” This poem answers the question: the *brujas* and, by extension, the beastgirls.

The myth of the *bruja*, like that of La Ciguapa, is more than a public redemption of a practice. It is tantamount to an open reclamation of kinship and, as such, demonstrates how decolonial love is expressed as a counternarrative that (re)structures relationships amongst the marginalized and villainized. In “Salt,” the contamination Mami fears becomes a source of feminine power for the speaker of the poem. And yet, initially, she states: “For a whole month I’m afraid to sleep ... / afraid my seasoned hand will float and claw air on its own. / Afraid there is someone other than me in this body” (Acevedo, *Beastgirl* 7). More than contamination, she fears possession. But at this moment, instead of giving in to a fear underpinned by colonialism and white supremacy and attempting to exorcise the *bruja*, Acevedo acts through decolonial love. At this moment in the poem, Acevedo addresses the *bruja* directly:

... Mujer embrujadora,  
 you of all things knotted and kinked, skin of every color found in plum,  
 of storm torrents, of flesh that knows the collision between cuerpo  
 and malecón: (7)

Acevedo calls *la bruja* into being through language by directly addressing her in the invocation: *Mujer embrujadora*.<sup>51</sup> She also evokes her through image with rich references to Dimas’ painting “Pariah” (see fig. 1), describing her “knotted and kinked” hair and “skin of every color found in plum.” Both of these descriptors are also metaphors for the knotted, blended, and contrasted histories of African and Indigenous cosmologies that inform the various practices broadly termed *brujería* and their practitioners, *brujas*.

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<sup>51</sup> *Mujer* is Spanish for woman and *embrujadora* is Spanish for bewitching.



**Figure 1: *Pariah* by Marcos Dimas, 1971-72.**

Moreover, she speaks *brujas* into a corporeal presence through reference to their bodies in relationship to land and water. *Brujas* are “of storm torrents, of flesh that knows the collision between *cuerpo* / and *malecón*”—*cuerpo* is body and *malecón* is the space or structure between the land and a river or other body of water (like the “rocky ledge” in this poem or an esplanade). The context of air, land, and water that the *bruja* is “of” is powerful. This context is also violent with storm torrents and collisions of flesh and stone. In one view, Acevedo’s description of *brujas* is a testament to a spirituality and entity that is born of island and forms distinct relationships and dynamics between air, land, and water. In another view, it is a recognition of the cosmologies and gendered bodies that survive the violence of transatlantic slavery, colonialism, US imperialism, and dictatorship. Once Acevedo has given her a presence through language, image, and land and body, the poet divulges to this “Close-lipped witch” that she herself “Woke one morning / carrying a red sun for a forehead” (7). After sleepless nights, the young girl does not wake possessed by the bruja. Instead, she bears the same mark and carries the same source of power, life, and energy. She reveals to the bruja:

... You taught me that—how to cross my ankles  
 but sharpen my daggers ...  
 how to pose pretty then file my nails into stones (7)

Significantly, the speaker directly addresses the bruja with the second person pronoun “you” and confides that she “taught” her “that.” Teaching is a relational act that involves the sharing of knowledge. The word simultaneously asserts the validity of brujería knowledge and conveys the relationship between the bruja and the girl.

The *bruja* and child have rehabilitated two kinds of relationships attacked by colonialism: the relationship between community members that have been damaged along the Christian-Brujería dichotomy and the relationship between racialized people and the cosmologies and practices rooted in their ancestry. The lines that follow reveal how this rehabilitated kinship is critical to the girl’s empowerment against sources of harm. Furthermore, “that” which the *bruja* has taught is how “to pose pretty” with crossed feet. These postures can be conceived of as, on the surface, conventional performances of femininity. However, at a deeper level these postures are paired with arming the racialized girl, woman, or femme with weapons of combat and survival—metaphoric and otherwise.

An increasing exercise of decolonial love, in the form of the kind of empowering counternarratives exemplified in Acevedo’s work, is manifest across diasporic Latinx communities. Indeed, this subject was featured in Eda Yu’s 2018 *Vice* article, “The Young Brujas Reclaiming the Power of Their Ancestors.” Yu interviewed several young Latinx practitioners of different backgrounds in the United States and asserts that “[t]oday, brujería—and its accompanying bruja ... title—are being taken up by a growing community of primarily Latinx women and femmes who want to tap into the mysticism of their heritage.” She adds that this has been a process of reclamation against the impacts of colonization as “modern-day brujas are taking back the practice and battling [the] ... taboo” surrounding brujería. One bruja, Emilia Ortiz, asserts, “We’re reclaiming our power, for far too long have we practiced in secrecy due to fear/society ... It’s our time. The same way other women/femmes are reclaiming their power in other areas—this is no different” (Qtd. in Yu).

Acevedo’s poetry bears this same pulse as she brings the stories and figure of the *bruja* out of the shadows and offers a story that opposes dominant discourse—*brujas* as servants of dictatorship, as figures to shun and shame in light of colonialist denigration. Indeed, Acevedo portrays *brujas* as powerful and empowering, in tune with the (invisible) spiritual and (visible) natural world, not

least of which is the element of water. The salt offering at the Hudson River is evidence that displacement does not prevent *brujas* from maintaining relationships to water and earth in their spiritual practices even if they are far from the Caribbean—a capacity that, for some, is perhaps inherited from ancestors torn from the African continent. In Raquel Romberg’s doctoral dissertation on *brujería* in Puerto Rico, “a well-known, aging *brujo*” testifies to this capacity when he says, “The spirits are birds, you can get the saints (be possessed) anywhere, the same here as in New York,” (188). Here, I will draw on Romberg’s work to more fully unpack Acevedo’s references to water. While Romberg looks specifically at practitioners in Puerto Rico, she also refers to other Caribbean *brujería* communities. For example, when looking at the diaspora, Romberg states: “today the success of *brujos* does not depend on keeping with a definite tradition, nor on attributing their expertise to a definite social or ethnic group. One may hear that ‘Haitian *brujos* are the most powerful,’ or that Dominican *brujos* make bad works for Puerto Ricans.” (189). Because of the close proximity and entangled histories of the peoples of the islands of Puerto Rico and Hispaniola, I work from the speculative premise that bodies of water and salt have similar significance.<sup>52</sup> Though specific details of ceremonies and practices involving water and salt are beyond the scope of this project, broadly, rivers and seas appear to be critical to cleansing, blessings, and forms of rebirth.<sup>53</sup> The *bruja* who awakens a feminine empowerment within the speaker of “Salt” forms relationships with bodies of water wherever she finds herself as an integral part of her worldview and spirituality. Moreover, she does so as part of her responsibilities to others. For example, in Romberg’s study, Nina, a *bruja*, explains that when helping someone, *brujas* “have to go to a river, the shore, we have to find a little

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<sup>52</sup> This is an important point about how decolonial love operates as the recognition of difference. *Brujería* refers to diverse practices across Latin America and these have been largely practiced out of the public eye for obvious reasons, as I have discussed. I approach even the published work on these communities and ways speculatively because of the history of academic approach to othered peoples and ways of knowing. As a scholar, I am careful to recognize my distance from *brujería* and to not speak authoritatively or even study with the presumption of attaining expertise. Instead, I strive to consult numerous, different kinds of sources to learn about the art and liberation of a community different from my own with the intention of supporting this liberation.

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, *The Profession of Brujería on Spiritual Entrepreneurship in Puerto Rico* (Romberg).

animal and cleanse the person, and sometimes one is left with the burden of that person” (132). It is not clear for whom the salt offering was left with the Hudson River. But in the poem, whatever the *bruja* set in motion through the help of the salt and the river transfers teaching and empowerment to the young girl of Dominican roots, a beastgirl. Like La Ciguapa, the power to resist and survive colonialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy comes from marginalized, ancestrally-connected ways of knowing, being, and relating to the land and water.

As a body of water, the Hudson River itself bears an important relationship to salt and Hispaniola. Seeing bodies of water from a *bruja* bird’s eye view, to invoke the Puerto Rican *brujo* cited earlier, undermines the colonial, cartographic dissection and possession of these bodies. The river itself is given different names on United States maps as it makes its way towards Manhattan and often serves the use of further colonial segmentations of the land, such as the boundary between counties. Hudson River is the last name it is given before its waters flow into New York Bay and then into the Atlantic Ocean. As the freshwaters from the inland sources move closer to the Ocean, the river becomes brackish. Running down the west bank of Manhattan, the salt line between fresh and salt water shifts from year to year anywhere from the tip of Manhattan to mainland north of the island. The island’s Indigenous people, the Wappinger and Lenape, recognize it by other names. While I was unable to find a Wappinger name, the Lenape name for the river, according to the National Museum of the American Indian, is “Shatemuc, meaning ‘the river that flows both ways,’ because the river alternates its flow from north to south along the Atlantic tides” (1).<sup>54</sup> The Lenape name for the river honours the attributes of the body of water and highlights its important relationships between the freshwater sources and the Atlantic Ocean. While the *brujo* I cited above likens spirits to birds, Acevedo’s frequent referencing of bodies of water and spiritual entities, who are connected to them, such as Atabeyra, conveys a mobility and relationship to land and water that transcends colonial displacement and incarceration. The waters from Manhattan carry offerings and participate in cleansing and empowerment south into the Atlantic Ocean and potentially to the shores of Hispaniola and back.

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<sup>54</sup> This same booklet also asserts that Manhattan comes from the Lenape name for the island “Manahatta, which means ‘hilly island” (National Museum of the American Indian 1).



Although Acevedo frequently foregrounds the Indigenous peoples and cultures of Hispaniola, she does not do the same for those of what is now Manhattan. There are no direct or obvious references to the Lenape in her chapbook. I do not point this out as an ethical critique but rather as an observation of how decolonial love is an act that continues to branch out as knowledge is gained about communities different from one's own who face similar destructive forces. I contend that Acevedo, and, as we will see in the next chapter, Simpson, both operate according to an ethics of love, which means bringing visibility to their communities for their self-recognition. The other side of that ethics is *not* speaking for other Peoples, for, even though their experiences may resonate with your own, they should tell their own stories. Acevedo never claims a Taíno identity but there is strong evidence that a significant portion of Caribbean populations, including Dominicans, have Taíno ancestry.<sup>55</sup> Thus, Acevedo never writes through a Taíno voice speaking of Taíno experience. She, instead, foregrounds Taíno figures, such as Anacaona, and in speaking from her own positionality, makes palpable Taíno presence, most notably through references to Atabeyra. A relative newcomer to Lenape territories, she does not have the same generational, deeply interconnected history with the Lenape, but between her paratextual gratitude to the Island and the revolutionary evocation: “Pa’lante siempre!”, a critical approach sensitive to decolonial love makes it clear that the ravages of colonialism, patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism that impact the Indigenous, Black, and Brown bodies of Hispaniola are also present in Manhattan. *Pa’lante siempre!* means that these oppressions cannot be left to stand on either island.

As many other Black writers before her have done, Acevedo writes of the Atlantic Ocean's haunting sacredness for Afro-descendants whose ancestors died within its waters. The Ocean as home to African ancestors is one of the subjects of the poem “La Santa Maria.” A title that references the largest of Columbus's three ships to arrive in the Caribbean, La Santa Maria famously crashed off the coast of Hispaniola, eventually sinking and being lost to the sea. In

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<sup>55</sup> See “Origins and Genetic Legacies of the Caribbean Taíno” (Schroeder et al.) and “What Became of the Taíno” (Poole). I am not suggesting that identity and ancestry are the same; rather, I suggest it is important to recognize the ways in which these ancestors have influenced the unique culture and cosmology of the peoples of the Dominican Republic. Furthermore, it is an important recognition for Taíno communities that have continued to exist in the Caribbean while dominant discourse has perpetuated the colonial myth that they were eviscerated.

2014, an American “[u]nder sea explorer” (Chappell) claimed to have found the shipwreck and that he would be working with the Haitian government “to carry out a detailed archaeological excavation of the wreck” for the purposes of putting it “on permanent public exhibition in a museum in Haiti ... to further develop Haiti’s tourism industry in the future” (Chappell).<sup>56</sup> Acevedo’s poem is a response to this venture. She dedicates it to “Hispaniola” (28) and begins with the imperative statement: “Leave that bitch at the bottom; wooden husk dulled and molded, weighed with water” (28). The use of profanity to refer to the ship immediately undermines any notion of revering this vessel as something worthy of pride and display. Invoking the collective experience of the racialized peoples of the island and their ancestors, Acevedo writes:

... We don’t need any more museums of white men.

Leave something for our dead to play in. The bones of their once  
brown bodies walking the Atlantic floor to dance around this first vessel.

.....

I hope pirates have brushed fingers with these ghosts, that they’ve been led  
to all the gold and pulled apart the ballast until it is nothing but a pile of  
splinters,

a great heap of wood meant to be left at the bottom; sell no tickets for this  
bringer  
of apocalypses ... but if when you pull her up, you want to make a bonfire,

I’ve got the matches. (28)

The irreverence with which the poem begins, in addition to the destruction it fantasizes about and finally proposes, may appear to make it incommensurate with a tender notion of love. Yet this

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<sup>56</sup> Months later, UNESCO asserted that the ship was not the Santa Maria.

dedication to Hispaniola *is* a love poem—specifically, a decolonial love poem. Love, for the ancestors, is intertwined with rage against that which harmed and continues to harm them. Love does not mean all things must be kept and tended to with a gentle hand; recall the “fisted wounds” of “La Última Cacique” evoking both conquistador violence and the resilience and solidarity of the Taíno. The practice of decolonial love means that some things must be left to decay or to be actively destroyed in that they must be cleansed. For the marginalized, many official institutions or state museums symbolize what is stolen and fetishized. They symbolize destroyed kinships, social relations, and communities as in the case of stolen sacred items or, in the case of this ship, the destruction of ties through the transatlantic slave trade, the colonization of the Caribbean and, by extension, the Americas. This heap of wood can be cleansed through being held by water, so that the wood and the sea fashion a place for those ancestors to “dance” on the Ocean floor—or a place for them to have an afterlife of joy. But out of the custodianship of the Ocean and ancestors, the speaker contends that the ship is not to be memorialized and celebrated by those in power. The speaker suggests that the appropriate response to the “bringer of an apocalypse” is a “bonfire,” which is another elemental cleansing around which the descendants of La Ciguapa, Atabey, Anacaona, and all beastgirls can begin to commune around in an act of collective love and healing.

Fittingly, on her website this chapbook is described as a consideration of “how some bodies must walk through the world as beastly beings. How these forgotten myths be both blessing and birthright” (“Books”). Acevedo elucidates that poetry is a radical form of creation that can empower people to view their cosmology as a dynamic one in which they can insert themselves as both myths and mythmakers. Acevedo’s use of the word “myths” and her suggestion that these myths constitute both “blessing and birthright” serve as denunciations of the patronizing, anthropological view of the myths of BIPOC. Moreover, beyond a “blessing,” she asserts that myths, and the entities to which they give life, are a birthright or inheritance, ones that provide special meaning and sustenance to repair gendered forms of violence. The loss of these stories, whether through internal forgetting or external coercions such as colonialism, is therefore a threat to both the inheritance of a form of non-material genealogical wealth and to the ability to fulfill hereditary responsibilities. To remember is to maintain relationships with these stories. Storytelling is the vasculature, or invigorating system, through which life force is delivered to the entities within these myths. Acevedo’s poetry is an act of decolonial love that restores these

relations. Through this process, decolonial love seeks to rehabilitate kinship and relationship with one's own body, mythological entities, ancestors, land, and water and to extend practices of liberatory relationality towards other communities.

While colonialism seeks to obliterate racialized bodies and non-Western family, community, and kinship systems, Acevedo's work suggests that the search for decolonial love marks an attempt to heal and restore culturally-specific forms of relationship beyond the hegemony of Western cisheteropatriarchy and white supremacy. Acevedo's poetry provides strategies for understanding Black survival in the lands and waters of the Americas, particularly as it affects women and girls. Gender is a key concern of Acevedo's approach to decolonial love as the practice of protecting and loving that which has been portrayed as fundamentally unlovable. As the next chapter shows, in Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's work this concept is animated specifically through a consideration of decolonial love and gender as critical to concerns of Indigenous sovereignty.

## Chapter 2

### Healing Aki and Akina: Decolonial Love and Relationality in Simpson's "nogojiwanong"

Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg<sup>57</sup> storyteller and scholar, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, also takes up the concept of decolonial love, as evident in the title of *Islands of Decolonial Love: Stories and Songs* (2013). Though the publication is described as a “debut collection of short stories” (“Islands of Decolonial Love”), it is, in fact a multi-media work that consists of a published book of stories and poems and an audio component of music and spoken word poetry, which can be downloaded online. Indeed, the aural element of the collection allows the audience to engage with the stories and poems more fully as songs and as descendants of an oral storytelling tradition—an experience pivotal to the collection’s larger concern with bringing to life Anishinaabe ways of knowing. For this innovative work, Simpson won the RBC Taylor Emerging Writer award in 2014. While the previous chapter focussed on the gendered dimensions of decolonial love in the work of Elizabeth Acevedo, I now turn to the ways in which Simpson takes up this concept. Here, I focus on how Simpson draws from and further develops decolonial love to model and enact relationality, paying special attention to acts of co-existence and hospitality as a vital means of respecting not only each other but all entities and bodies of land and water.

To understand the significance of decolonial love for notions of relationality and co-existence, it is helpful to turn to the introduction of the collection of traditional stories as retold by Simpson, *The Gift Is in the Making: Anishinaabeg Stories* (2013). In this book, Simpson encourages “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” (5, emphasis

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<sup>57</sup> This is the spelling Simpson often uses when identifying herself. The Michi Saagiig are Nishnaabeg or Anishinaabeg or Anishinaabe people. There are variations in spelling due to dialect and pronunciation as well as regional and personal preferences. Simpson is specifically a member of Alderville First Nation. I generally use the spelling Anishinaabe, which is common amongst the scholars I cite, when referring to something broadly (for example Anishinaabe literature), but I refer to the Michi Saagiig when appropriate. Moreover, Simpson uses “michi saagiig anishinaabeg” in “nogojiwanong” and that is the spelling I use when referring to the story. She also uses “mississauga” in this piece and, thus, I also use that term to refer to the Michi Saagiig.

added). For the racialized diasporas who comprise what cultural critic Lily Cho has described as “the underclass” (19) of displaced people, decolonization is a process that unfolds in meaningful ways both in Canada and beyond. Many of them, including refugees and migrants, have already experienced or participated in decolonization as subjects who were indigenous to their own homelands. Accordingly, decolonization needs to be both grounded in place and connected to other sites. Moreover, many scholars have illuminated how the global domination of Western imperialism and white supremacy depend on the interrelated deployment of oppressions (Morgensen; Mawani; Walia). Scott L. Morgensen, for example, draws particular attention to “anti-blackness, Orientalism, and Indigenous genocide.” Because decolonization is a process deeply rooted to place it is also integrally bound to where one lives, Simpson emphasizes. To be a “decolonizing influence” on Anishinaabe land requires critically attending to positionality and decolonization. This process, that is, requires “us to locate ourselves within the context of colonization in complicated ways, often as simultaneously oppressed and complicit” (Walia, “Decolonizing Together”). Decolonial love is multi-dimensional precisely because it constitutes a form of relationality. Accordingly, to assert a decolonizing influence, I argue, one must be rooted in solidarity and self-reflexivity.

Simpson articulates the power of reading and writing to receive and enact decolonial love. Indeed, she describes experiencing and responding to Junot Díaz’s notion of “decolonial love” in ways that align with Acevedo’s. This concept of “decolonial love” affected Simpson so strongly that, after reading Díaz’s *Boston Review* interview, she changed the manuscript title of her 2013 collection to *Islands of Decolonial Love*. She also included an excerpt from that interview pertaining to writing literature that portrays decolonial love and liberation to imagine the possibilities to “love one’s broken-by-the-coloniality-of-power self in another broken-by-the-coloniality-of-power person” (Díaz qtd. in *Islands* 7). In an interview, Simpson emphasizes that Díaz’s work has “always resonated”—an especially evocative term, as I will explain shortly—and that through her reading she imagined characters that “weren’t Dominican men but Anishinaabe or Haudenosaunee women” (“Oceans of Love”). This reader-writer engagement enabled her to “see Anishinaabe women—whether it’s their love of land, culture, Elders, or partners—as little islands of hope, little islands of love” despite colonial trauma (“Oceans of Love”). In another interview in 2014, in the *As/Us* issue I mentioned in Chapter One, Simpson grounds her creative writing process in Anishinaabe thought as an act of “doing,” in contrast to

scholarly writing, which she calls “writing about doing” (“Falling Into”). She goes on to assert that one of the most horrendous things about colonial trauma is the way it “is encoded in our emotional lives, our spiritual and intellectual lives and in our bodies and it plays out in how we relate to those we are closest to, the ones we love the most” (“Falling Into”). Thus, in *Islands of Decolonial Love*, Simpson chose “to explore the nation within our bodies” (“Falling Into”). Moreover, in this interview, Simpson indicates how reading literature concerned with decolonial love can itself flow decolonial love to its audience. She again reiterates how “creating counter narratives” to Díaz’s work “especially imagining scenarios of what a strong, decolonizing Nishnaabekwe challenging him and loving him” would think and do. This practice in turn helped her to “undo all the colonial racist and sexist stereotypes that infiltrated ... [her] as a very young girl” (“Falling Into”). For Simpson, this process of reading and creating became “a project where ... [she] to some degree undid the shame and hyper-sexualization that gets coupled to the identity of Native women and [managed to] redefine ... [herself] outside of the stereotypes of ‘squaw’, ‘dirty’ and ‘slut’” (“Falling Into”). In this way, reading and interpreting another writer’s work on decolonial love inspired Simpson in decolonizing her self-perception.

Simpson’s description of her connection to Díaz’s work—which has “always resonated”—is significant. Resonance, in the field of physics, according to *Britannica Academic*, “was first investigated in acoustical systems such as musical instruments and the human voice. An example of acoustical resonance is the vibration induced in a violin or piano string of a given pitch when a musical note of the same pitch is sung or played nearby.” Resonance is a relational property that manifests between two or more objects or entities. Metaphorically, resonance occurs when others innately recognize an utterance in the course of joining this articulation. The reading experience that Simpson identifies as resonance constitutes, I contend, the ability to recognize similarities in the struggle towards decolonial love, a recognition that can empower efforts in one’s own community even as it also honours and makes space for differences. Moreover, although this reader-text or reader-author relationship appears to involve just two actors, resonance is a quality or expression that can have unlimited participants.

This approach constitutes what I describe as *reading for resonance*—a practice that I attempt to enact in the overall thesis. I suggest that reading for resonance is a relational reading strategy and, as such, requires the capacity to perceive the deceptiveness of language and its dangerous

potential to collapse experiences and positionalities. As this introduction shows, Simpson attends to the resonances between her work with Díaz's conception and depiction of decolonial love; she does so, however, in a manner that is sensitive to their distinct positionality. In interviews, Simpson significantly avoids conflating her experiences with those of Díaz by acknowledging the difference in his point of view as an "immigrant and male" ("Oceans of Love") and "a man of color" ("Falling Into") and thus honours difference.

This positionality is evident when Simpson asserts that she wrote "these stories for an Indigenous audience first" ("Falling Into"). Indeed, in discussions of her dialogical reading/writing process, Simpson also reveals how decolonial love for Anishinaabeg is a matter of sovereignty at the level of the body, language, and collectivity. She indicates this when she elaborates how creating narrative responses to Díaz's work helped undo "the shame and hyper-sexualization" ("Falling Into") that she experienced as an Indigenous woman. Simpson's experience of invisibility/hypervisibility and of using storytelling as a counteracting force at the level of the body and intimate relations to kin, community, and land are analogous to Acevedo's.

Moreover, because the targeting of Indigenous languages by colonial powers has had a devastating impact on Anishinaabe peoples, the use of Anishinaabemowin<sup>58</sup> is an act of decolonial love and healing for Simpson herself, who calls it "a way of learning" ("Oceans of Love"). The use of Anishinaabemowin creates a space of language engagement in literature for Anishinaabe people who have limited ways of accessing their language.<sup>59</sup> Because Simpson writes for an "Indigenous audience first" so that her larger aim is for her audience to "come out transformed—feeling a little more seen and loved" ("Falling Into"), her work offers a means for Indigenous community members to find intimacy with their language and cosmology. Simpson's comments on language in literature, when further considered in light of Acevedo's account of

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<sup>58</sup> Anishinaabe language.

<sup>59</sup> Speaking about her own Indigenous tongue, *nēhiyawēwin*, in "Land, Language, and Decolonial Love," *Nēhiyaw* Philosopher Queen and community organizer Erica Violet Lee emphasizes that language revitalization is inseparable from tending to land relations. She states, "in order to learn the language, the land must survive. Our languages and lands were made for love" (3). To ensure reciprocity means that when she cannot be on the land "out of the city" then she "immerse[s] ... [herself] in Indigenous writing" (3).



finding her own language in Dominican-American texts, reveals the ways that what initially appears as English text is not necessarily the case. Put differently, racialized peoples under colonialism have re-purposed the English language so that it aligns with their own languages and cosmologies. Although Simpson's collection is predominantly written in English, her use of Anishinaabemowin, tropes, figures, and other writing conventions and strategies are part of an Anishinaabe storytelling and literary tradition.

Just as importantly, Simpson centres myth in her project of decolonial love as future-making in a manner that calls to mind Acevedo's approach. By myth I mean ancestral stories and entities—entities that are incorporeal either because they are spirits or because they are ancestors who no longer walk the Earth in a human body. I use the word myth here to both identify resonance with Acevedo's *Beastgirl and Other Origin Myths* as well as in the sense that Basil Johnston uses myth in *Ojibway Heritage*, a collection of Creation stories, other traditional stories, poetry, and insights into Ojibwe cosmology.<sup>60</sup> When it comes to considering Simpson's specific work, given the care with which she invokes Anishinaabemowin and crucial elements of Anishinaabe storytelling, it is more appropriate to refer to stories and spirits or, more specifically, in Anishinaabemowin terms such as *aandisokanag* (sacred stories) and *manitous* (spirits).<sup>61</sup> In the "Preface" to *Ojibway Heritage*, Johnston states that he shares Ojibway stories in the book because "it is in the story, fable, legend, and myth that fundamental understandings, insights, and attitudes toward life and human conduct, character, and quality in their diverse forms are embodied and passed on" (7). Moreover, "Ojibway stories are as broad and deep in meaning and mystery as are the tales, legends, and myths of Greek, Roman, Egyptian and other peoples and just as difficult to understand as are the parables of the Bible" (Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage* 8).

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<sup>60</sup> Johnston is Ojibway, also spelled in other ways such as Ojibwe and Ojibwa, who are Anishinaabeg. Noodin explains that the Anishinaabeg are "a confederacy of several ethnicities" (5) known as the Three Fires Confederacy made up of the "Odawa, Potawatomi, and Ojibwe" who share a "broader linguistic and cultural community" (6).

<sup>61</sup> Manitou is often translated as "spirit," but Johnston defines it as "[m]ystery, essence, substance, matter, supernatural spirit, anima, quiddity, attribute, property, God, deity, godlike, mystical incorporeal, transcendental, invisible reality" (*The Manitous* 242) or manitous simply as "mysteries" (*Ojibway Ceremonies* vii). Johnston pluralizes the Anishinaabemowin word in English grammar to manitous (*Ojibway Ceremonies* vii) and I maintain that practice here for consistency.

An analogy between Ojibway and Greek, Roman and Egyptian myth is one way in which Johnston pushes back against racialized notions of human progress. Even if this move seems benign to a racist mind who may consider it a comparison across heathen cultures, Johnston extends the comparison further and confronts Eurocentric thought with its own roots in stories of mythic proportions from the Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, his description of the depth that is “embodied and passed on” in Ojibway stories reminds us that “myths” do not have to be viewed as simple, superstitious stories of primitive human beings. Critical to the function of traditional stories are beings of what Johnston describes as “The Incorporeal World” (149), which includes various manitous (spirits), supernatural beings, and Anishinaabe ancestors. In her creative process, Simpson draws on the profound importance of stories when she posits that when people contemplate “the impact of colonization on us as humans, and the land and animals,” they often forget “the spirit world” is also impacted (“Oceans of Love”). By attending closely to the ways that Simpson imagines colonialism’s impact on spirit beings, I argue that Simpson draws inspiration from the spirit beings while at the same time giving them renewed life in her writing through references to ancestral stories. Moreover, these spirits play important roles in Simpson’s attempt at future mythmaking. Through the crafting not only of a reimagined form of English that enables the articulation of Indigenous perspectives, but also of a creative relationship with spirit entities, Simpson strives to heal relations between Anishinaabe people and their spirit kin, stories, and cosmologies. At the same time, these relationships empower Anishinaabeg to imagine liberation.

In this chapter, I read Simpson’s *Islands of Decolonial Love* for resonance with “decolonial love” as a framework, focusing on the representation of embodiment, human-supernatural relations, and future-making in one of the collection’s short stories, “nogojiwanong.” While the pieces in this collection take a variety of forms, I turn to “nogojiwanong” because of its singular form and explicit engagement with the theme of European arrival and colonization. This story is the only one in *Islands* to be arranged in four distinct segments with separate subtitles, each

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<sup>62</sup> Though Egyptians are not Europeans, in *Orientalism* Edward Said identifies the process by which Europeans have conceived of themselves as the heirs of the Ancient civilizations of near East societies by purporting those societies’ own people to be somehow undeserving and incapable of inheriting them.

written in a different style and form but all revealing some perspective of the story of how the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg and their relations deal with colonialism. The title of the four-part story, “nogojiwanong,” is the Anishinaabemowin name for what settlers have claimed and re-named as Peterborough, and so enacts a reclamation of place. The story concerns the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg, or Mississauga nation, and their new “neighbours,” presumably the European colonizers and settlers who continue to occupy the land.

Significantly, one part of the story—the section that spans the beginning of European settlement to the present and into a speculative future—has been published in *The Gift Is in the Making* with a different title, “Good Neighbors.”<sup>63</sup> Together, these two titles, “Good Neighbours” and “nogojiwanong,” suggest that the story is about the struggle to assert Anishinaabe principles of relationship and to detail what can happen in the wake of the violation of these principles by (relative) newcomers. In particular, “nogojiwanong” examines what it means to be a good neighbour to the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg in a place where they are the stewards of the land on which others have come to reside. By extension, the story also contemplates ways one might be a good neighbour to other Anishinaabe peoples in Anishinaabewakiing.<sup>64</sup> Just as importantly, the story re-asserts the relationship that the Anishinaabe, the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg in particular, have with the land, which Simpson elsewhere explains, “includes all aspects of creation: land forms, elements, plants, animals, spirits, sounds, thoughts, feeling, energies and all the emergent systems, ecologies and networks that connect these elements” (“Land as Pedagogy” 15).

In considering Simpson’s work, I take up Anishinaabe scholar and poet Margaret Noodin’s invitation to readers to “think in an Anishinaabe way, not just think about the Anishinaabeg” (xx). I understand Noodin’s call to mean that readers are challenged to analyze Anishinaabe

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<sup>63</sup> There are some differences in how the story is textually represented and told but the action, events, tone, and much of the text are the same in both versions. Additionally, all of the stories that Simpson retells in the *The Gift Is in the Making* are traditional Anishinaabe stories that have been previously published except for “Good Neighbours” which she explains she “wrote to teach [her] ... own children about resistance and the importance of standing up for the land” (7).

<sup>64</sup> Or “Anishinaabe country” (Noodin 1).

literature in accordance with what I described earlier as a distinct narrative genealogy. To do so, I first contextualize my overall analysis within Anishinaabe story theory and contend that Simpson uses features of this story theory, storytelling, and Anishinaabemowin to assert an embodied sovereignty. Second, I propose that Simpson's story enacts decolonial love towards spirits and ancestors by giving them a space to live as empowered actors in the present, and to do so with Anishinaabeg who are actively creating their future within Anishinaabe society in the here and now. Third, drawing on Simpson's modelling of decolonial love towards racialized, displaced communities, I argue that "nogojiwanong" offers people who are not Anishinaabe a way to participate in this future-making as "good neighbours." The story suggests that a "good" neighbour is one who is a "decolonizing influence." According to the story, neighborliness requires drawing on models of relationality demonstrated by the Anishinaabeg and recognizing that the forms of decolonial love practiced by Anishinaabeg are diverse. Moreover, it involves an acknowledgement that practicing decolonial love on the land in which the Anishinaabe are stewards means imagining realities that not only extend beyond the narrow and damaging framework of the settler-colonial state but also remain open to possible futures that do not even *include* any remnants of a settler-colonial state.

## Relationality and Anishinaabe Storytelling

Before engaging in a close reading of Simpson's story, it is necessary to consider features of Anishinaabe storytelling traditions and some of the ways they nurture and guide engagement with narratives. In Anishinaabemowin, Simpson's "nogojiwanong" is an example of a *dibaajimowin*, a story such as a personal narrative, an ordinary story, history, and teaching (*Dancing* 46). Along with *aandisokaan*, *dibaajimowin* is one of two kinds of stories that comprise Anishinaabe literature (Noodin 21).<sup>65</sup> It is important to situate Simpson's approach to

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<sup>65</sup> Joshua Manitowabi explains Anishinaabe stories in more detailed terms through three categories: *aadzookaan* (sacred, unchanging stories), *dibaajimowin* (oral history), and *miimgwensiwin* (personal narratives) and the overlaps of these categories: *aansookaan* (oral teachings that can be contextually tailored), contemporary perspectives, and spiritual knowledge (144). According to this understanding, "nogojiwanong" would be a *miimgweziwin* as it is the "product" of one "person's natural talents and abilities, [her] gifts from the Creator" (143).

*dibaajimowin* in light of *aandisokaanag*,<sup>66</sup> or sacred stories, in particular Creation Stories, which for her, provide the “theoretical framework” for interpreting other stories (*Dancing* 32). Specifically, *aandisokaanag* inform and inspire *dibaajimowinan*, which are important because they help Anishinaabeg to communicate the meanings they find within *aandisokaanag*. Stories, and thus literature, are critical to Anishinaabe society because, as Anishinaabe legal scholar John Borrows contends, stories “embody ideas and systems that form the basis for law, values, and community” (Borrows, *Recovering* xii). Moreover, Simpson explains that storytelling provides the space and tools with which we can “lift the burden of colonialism by *visioning* new realities” (Simpson, *Dancing* 34, emphasis added). Vizenor further explains that Anishinaabe continuance is imbedded in their stories and is crucial for survivance: “Native survivance is an active sense of presence over absence ... [it] is the continuance of stories, not mere reaction” (“Aesthetics of Survivance” 1). In one historically contingent regard, survivance explains Indigenous presence in this moment in relation to colonialism, noting it is a counter to Euro-American narratives of victimhood and the vanishing Indian—the “hypotragic,” as Vizenor calls them. More broadly, stories demonstrate and enact Indigenous survivance by safeguarding the existence/presence of Indigenous nations through the continuance of their cosmologies, ethics, sciences, and conceptions of sovereignty from creation and into the future.

By encoding Anishinaabe oral storytelling practices into *Islands of Decolonial Love*, including “nogojiwanong,” Simpson demonstrates through form and content that Anishinaabe continuance is intricately connected to kinship and relationality. Indigenous concepts of relationality refute Eurocentric hierarchies that assert human dominion over animals and nature, as exemplified in the Enlightenment notion of the Great Chain of Being. In contrast to Eurocentric notions of the individual human subject who acts “*in* relationship with other people and things,” Cree scholar Shawn Wilson states that Indigenous ontology and epistemology are grounded in relationality (80). That is, within Indigenous ontology and epistemology, human beings “*are* the relationships that we hold and are a part of” (80). Such relationships include “human persons, animals, and ‘other than human persons’ ... as well as the land” (Darnell 2). Kinship is a part of relationality

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<sup>66</sup> This word is also spelled *aadizookaan(ag)*. The -ag ending in the plural form of this word indicates, as Noodin explains, that this class of stories have more complex layers of meaning (21).

but, as Anishinaabe-Eurowestern scholar Johannah Bird elaborates, “kinship practice is particularly exercised in those contexts where there exists a recognition of relatedness that can be understood in terms of familial or community ties” (4). More generally, a fundamental element of relationality is context and accountability (Wilson). These principles guide my own practice, as I endeavor to provide a respectful study of Anishinaabe literature that is informed by Anishinaabe storytelling traditions as well as the specific land and history of nogojiwanong.

The four sections of Simpson’s story, “nogojiwanong” (meaning “the foot of the rapids” [Simpson *Islands* 115]) are arranged as follows: (i) a notice, contract, or letter to the new neighbours with regards to the Trent-Severn Waterway canal route they want to build; (ii) a short monologue by an Anishinaabe woman who blows up the Trent-Severn Waterway canal route; (iii) an account of how the relationship with the new neighbours began and ended; and (iv) a song the salmon sing to the odenaabe river as they return to it once the canal route and new neighbours have been vanished by the mishibizhiw (“large, underwater lynx” [Simpson, “nogojiwanong” 123]). These four components of the piece evoke multiple voices and constitute a type of collage that gives oral form to the story. Anishinaabe writer and scholar Kimberly M. Blaeser draws on numerous Indigenous storytellers from different nations to illustrate how the exchange between teller and audience “creates the reality or life of the story” (55). She explains that a feature of oral storytelling is the use of “multiple voices to create a cacophony of reality” (62). As I explain shortly in my close reading of Simpson’s story, this feature is often emulated textually. A prominent strategy is to employ “collage forms” that attempt to “re-create the oral, human voice” through different forms such as poetry, essay, and song (Blaeser 62). In her work, Simpson assembles a collage form when she arranges four distinct written pieces together alongside one performed audio recording of the final song to the salmon (accessible online) into a creative whole under one title. The four sections are distinguished by a distinct subtitle, each of which begins with the feminine pronoun “she”: “she is the only doorway into this world,” “she asked why,” “she asked them for help,” and “she sang them home.” Listening across these forms and in the spaces between them “requires active participation of ... readers in the making of the story just as traditional oral narratives are often participatory” (Blaeser 62). The collage form and multiple narrators of “nogojiwanong” fits this tradition; Simpson crafts a story that demands the active participation of the audience in the process of meaning making with and through the story.

Just as importantly, in this multimedia arrangement, Simpson creates a silence in the spaces between title, texts, and audio. This silence is significant because it calls on readers to seek what is not, or cannot, be said or done on the written page. Nēhiyaw/Nakawe/Métis scholar Tasha Hubbard explains that silence is a strategy derived from oral traditions, which reject the “supposition that dictates a text’s ideas exist within the words alone” (145). To privilege silences as much as words is to encourage audiences to “take the time to reflect” (Hubbard 145). Blaeser adds that, “[t]hese stories harbor an absence which is really a presence, inviting or alluding to a greater political message. In that sense, the stories are, as oral literature has always been, alive” (53). These silences allow audiences the space and time to pause, reflect, look inwards as well as outside the text, and perhaps connect to other stories and stories of others in looking for meaning. In this way, Simpson enacts how Anishinaabe story theory teaches audiences to engage with stories as active listeners. She also cues audiences to the life of a story and how it exists within the web of creation and within a web of voices. Through these qualities, Simpson’s work gestures toward orality that emerges through relationality while modelling it as a philosophy and social practice.

### Unceded: Bodies of Earth and Flesh, Islands and Water

Through this multimodal process, Simpson’s story depicts and enacts what Noodin refers to as Anishinaabe “unceded identities” (xx), relations to incorporeal entities, and participation in future-making. Notably, each of the four sections that structures “nogojiwanong” participates differently in the healing work of decolonial love. While Simpson explains that she sees Indigenous women as islands of decolonial love, I suggest that each of the sections in this story embody Anishinaabe women as relational, sovereign (like Noodin’s “unceded”) beings. Critically, Johnston articulates how, in Anishinaabe cosmology, womanhood and motherhood are predicated in the Earth (*Ojibway Heritage* 23). He muses, “motherhood of Earth emanated from its elemental substance, rock” which appears “immune to change so as to live on in order to give life” (23). This constant attribute that is epitomized in rock and is at the core of the Earth’s quintessential motherhood is likened to “love” as the “foundation” of human motherhood (23). Johnston explains: “If children were to grow into manhood and womanhood, they had to have confidence in the abiding nature of the love of motherhood, otherwise they would be wanting in

trust in themselves and in others” (*Ojibway Heritage* 23).<sup>67</sup> Human motherhood, as Johnston elaborates, strives to emulate the Earth’s enduring nourishment through love. This love is the life-source that sustains and strengthens Anishinaabe society—and it undergirds Simpson’s work.

Significantly, Anishinaabemowin provides a resource to think through the connection between rock and love in Anishinaabe womanhood and helps to understand its critical role in sustaining nationhood. Noodin asserts that, through the use of Anishinaabemowin in contemporary literature, writers bring “the stories of the past into the current language ... by connecting the present writing with the thought patterns of the ancestors” (xvii). Moreover, “[r]eaders are invited to unravel the web of knowledge contained in Anishinaabe words” (Noodin xvii).

Although neither Simpson nor Johnston use Anishinaabemowin words for rock or island, I base my analysis on the idea that they defamiliarize and repurpose the English language to reflect Anishinaabe thought, culture, and history. Specifically, I look for what Noodin refers to as the “traces” that language leaves in narrative traditions “long after it has been translated” (xvii). Some Anishinaabemowin words translated into English as “island” include: *mnis*, *mnisehn*, or *mnishenh* (Nishnaabemwin: Odawa & Eastern Ojibwe Online Dictionary (NOEO)) or *minis* or *minisi* (*minisiins* for the diminutive) according to the Ojibwe People’s Dictionary (OPD). Interestingly, according to the Eastern Ojibwa-Chippewa-Ottawa Dictionary (EOCOD), *mnis* is translated as “bare rock island” while *mnisenh* is translated as island, suggesting that the concept of rock is encompassed within one understanding of island.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Reading for resonance at this point, for audiences not familiar with or deepened in Anishinaabe worldview, it is important to allow distance from a Eurocentric understanding of a gender binary to the possibility of different notions of womanhood and manhood. When I attended a two-day telling of the Creation Story by Ojibway-Anishinaabe Elder, Onaubinisay (Jim Dumont), he spoke of dualities in Anishinaabe cosmology which is different from understanding the world through binary opposition. Additionally, it is important to understand that different peoples have long-standing notions of gender identity that differ from traditional, rigid Western conceptions. The storytelling was organized by the Office of Indigenous Affairs at Wilfred Laurier University and was held over two days in February 2019.

<sup>68</sup> Comparatively, in English, the word island contains the root “land;” however, in Anishinaabemowin, the word usually translated as land is *aki*, which Noodin relates to the word *akina* meaning “everything” or “unity” (2).



Taking inspiration from Noodin’s encouragement to “hear . . . images” in the “sounds” (8) of language so as to understand Anishinaabe cosmology and literature, I turned to online and other resources, which drew me to the distinction in the EOCOD between *mnis* (bare rock island) and *mnisehn* (island). By this means, I was able to discern audible connections in the language. My approach is not etymological. Instead, to undertake literary analysis in this way is to be mindful of orality; such an analysis requires attending to trace soundscapes. Words for rock or stone in Anishinaabemowin are *asin* (OPD) and *sin* (NOEO and EOCOD). Audibly, an echoing can be heard in between the “sin” from stone and the mini-*sehn*, mini-*si*, and mni-*siin* even though the vowel sounds are not exactly the same, or there is no final alveolar nasal, or the final sound is a nasal vowel (-ehn) or alveolar nasal consonant (n). The islands whose core elements are stone are paralleled with the Anishinaabekwewag (Anishinaabe women) who embody that stone as love—both towards the sustenance of Anishinaabe sovereignty.

Islands also convey a relationality that evokes the stars—a point that I develop further in Chapter Three, which contemplates the constellational relationship of stones and stars in Gerald Vizenor’s *Hiroshima Bugi*. As my introduction explains, Simpson’s conception of “constellations of coresistance” is grounded in the idea that constellations can form in various ways, between individuals in the same community, between individuals across communities, and between different communities. This complex point is important in asserting that each individual and each community maintain a respected autonomy. These interstellar solidarities and visioning are not separate from the land. Instead, they exist for the purpose of guiding or informing how people live and move on the land in a balanced relationship with all other entities, whether human or other-than human. Stars can be conceived of as distinct bodies existing at vast distances from one another in a vast sea of space. On the land, islands can also be thought of as relational bodies that are distinct entities surrounded and separated this time by water. In fact, Noodin cites an account by a Jesuit who in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century “asked an ‘Algonquian’ where God was before the creation of the earth and was told ‘he is resting in a canoe that floats on primordial waters’” (59).

Between this evocation of a pre-earth time and the Anishinaabe creation and (re)creation stories, there is a parallel between the creation of the stars in space and the creation of the earth in water. Stars and islands have a special relationship when humans and other beings are brought into the

fold. Humans rely on both terrestrial and celestial cues to navigate waters between islands and other shores. Although the Anishinaabeg “are often called a ‘woodland’ culture,” Noodin points out the inadequacy of this categorization (1). First, the “center of Anishinaabewakiing, or Anishinaabe country, is the life-giving *gaming*, the ‘vast water’” (1). According to elders, this vast water “once shared a single name and identity, Chigaming” (1) with “chi” being a prefix that means great. Second, in addition to the lakes, Anishinaabewakiing includes: “*miskwaasini’ing*” (swamp), “*mashkodeng*” (grassland) and “*mitigwaakiing*” (woodlands) (1-2). Noodin reminds readers that the *miskwaasini’ing* and *mashkodeng* are critical to Anishinaabewakiing and thus Anishinaabe culture and knowledge as they connect water to woodlands (2). One feature of Anishinaabewakiing not explicitly named by Noodin is *mnis*, *mnisehn*, or *mnishenh* (island). However, it can be inferred that *mnisan* (plural) are also critical to Anishinaabewakiing.

Islands for the Anishinaabeg are important and sacred places, where individuals go for visions (Erdrich 30 and 38), where ancestors left paintings and songs for Anishinaabeg (Erdrich 3), and where burials take place (addressed in Simpson’s “*jiimaanag*”<sup>69</sup> [61-65] and “*jiibay* or *aandizooke*” [67 – 69]).<sup>70</sup> Notably, in *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*, Anishinaabe writer Louise Erdrich documents her travels in Lake of the Woods, which “has 14,000 islands” (3), and she refers to those *mnisan* bearing paintings as books (3) and thus, to Anishinaabewakiing, “lakes as libraries” (5). Erdrich’s comparison of the Anishinaabemowin words for “*mazina’iganan*” (5) (books) and “*mazinapikiniganan*” (rock paintings) nuances this idea. Erdrich’s assertion suggests that Anishinaabe storytelling also has a long tradition in print or through visual form. Moreover, these islands are critical to the maintenance of Anishinaabe relations in an ontological and temporal sense. Not only are islands the resting place of ancestors and places for Anishinaabeg seeking visions to “meet their spirits” (30), but they are also the

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<sup>69</sup> In part of this story, two people covertly take the body of a deceased older Anishinaabe woman from her casket awaiting a church burial to canoe her out to an island and bury her in accordance with Anishinaabe tradition.

<sup>70</sup> The desecration of graves on islands by “*zhaganashi*” (white person or English person) (Simpson 69) houses is the subject of this song.

stone bodies through whom Anishinaabeg ancestors communicate to those in corporeal form. Or as Erdrich, invoking an ancestral voice, puts it: “So we can talk to you even though we are dead” (55). In Anishinaabemowin, “[n]ouns are secondary in importance to verbs,” which are often the roots from which nouns are produced (Noodin 11). The root for the words Erdrich offers as books and rock paintings is “mazini” which Noodin defines as “to design” (10) and is recorded as the verb “mazini” and defined as “make a representation or image of” in the OPD. In the OPD, it is also the root for a profusion of verbs that includes different ways of making designs, such as to imprint, to carve, to embroider, and to bead something (*mazinigwaazo*) but also *to be* embroidered or *to be* beaded (*mazinigwaaso*). The ability of language to move the relationship of the action in multiple directions calls to mind the way that literature may be made through print. Moreover, literature, when considered as a form of storytelling that draws on oral tradition, imprints onto the reader. Not only is text imprinted upon, but it also imprints. Just as Erdrich views islands as books in the library of the Lake, Simpson’s songs and stories are islands in the lake of her book, *Islands of Decolonial Love*. Moreover, just as Simpson “designs” or creates images or reflections of Anishinaabe women as islands of decolonial love, these images—and the overall text—can imprint or enact this decolonial love onto her audience.

Islands, as invoked by the title of Simpson’s book, are also a reminder that no body and no relationship has escaped colonialism unscathed. In *Inaakonigewin Andaadad Aki: Michi Saagiig Treaties*, a documentary that looks at the treaties involving the Michi Saagiig, Curve Lake First Nation Elder Doug Williams observes that the Anishinaabeg “are ... attracted to living on islands and burying our people on islands” (00:20:52-00:20:60), reinforcing Erdrich’s point. Williams explains that the Mississauga have an important relationship with their islands and fought to maintain them in the wake of successive waves of colonial expansion.<sup>71</sup> According to the documentary, after the Treaty of Niagara of 1764, English settlers from the north shore of Lake Ontario continued to move further north, a process of encroachment that only intensified after the Rice Lake Treaty, Treaty #20 (1818). For their part, the Michi Saagiig signed Treaty #20 to

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<sup>71</sup> The Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg are also referred to as the Mississauga and includes the following First Nation communities: New Credit First Nation, Mississauga First Nation, Curve Lake First Nation, Alderville First Nation, Hiawatha First Nation, and the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation.

maintain their livelihood in an act of “almost desperation,” as Alderville First Nation Historian Dave Mowat puts it (*Inaakonigewin* 00:15:18-00:15:19), giving the British access to more of their lands but “[keeping] islands for [our] own sustenance” (Williams 00:15:37-00:15:40). The British, having found themselves vulnerable to American attacks after the War of 1812, sought this treaty to secure a stronger inland presence (*Inaakonigewin*). Partially in anticipation of further American threats, by the mid-1800s the British pursued further treaties with the Michi Saagiig for access to the navigable waterways north of the Great Lakes border. What the colonial government saw “running through Mississauga territory was a system of lakes and rivers that with some infrastructure could be” commercially and militarily navigable (Taylor, *Inaakonigewin* 00:19:58-00:20:04). They did not see a holistic set of relations that makes up Anishinaabewakiing.

This history shapes the Trent Severn Waterways and forms the crucial context that Simpson addresses in “nogojiwanong,” a story that asserts Anishinaabe women—and the islands, or earthen bodies in waterways—are unceded and in relationship. As a consequence of these infrastructural interventions, as revealed in *Inaakonigewin Andaadad Aki*, the Waterways flooded 12 000 acres of Michi Saagiig land and disrupted and disappeared the salmon who Simpson sings of in the fourth section of “nogojiwanong.” Many of the islands the Trent Severn Waterways did not flood were unlawfully sold by Indian Agents, and they now house “a lot of rich cottages” (*Inaakonigewin* 00:16:29-00:16:31). Through a colonial worldview that prioritizes commercial and military interests, the islands are seen as disposable unless they are repurposed for cottage or luxury home development. They are not seen as part of aki or akina—land and unity. Rivers and lakes are perceived as exploitable routes and not relational entities of a watershed that rely on and are relied upon by innumerable other beings.

Through her formal experimentation, Simpson also encodes an integral aspect of relationality in her work: kinship. As noted earlier, the title of the first section of the story, “she is the only doorway into this world,” is important because it evokes Johnston’s reference to the Earth as the first mother, positioning this land relationship in opposition to settler colonial incursions. Specifically, the short story draws on the orality of storytelling to evoke kinship through references to clans, relatives, and ancestors who have passed as well as those to come. Such storytelling devices include, as noted earlier, a collage-like form, a strategy used in Indigenous

literature to gesture toward orality. Indeed, “she is the only doorway into this world” is structured as a list and presented as a letter that is characterized by the collective voice of the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg against settler colonial incursions.

Notably, the form of this section mimics the treaty form that many First Nations peoples signed with Europeans. It is an itemized list, followed by the recording of a date and place, and concluding with the series of x’s signed by different Anishinaabe entities and representatives. However, unlike the European recorded treaties, this section ends with the word “kaniganaa,” which is invoked at the end of a song or prayer. In this segment of the overall story, there are seven points made, each of which begins: “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” (“nogojiwanong 113). The expression “it is with great regret” evokes the hollow, disingenuous ring of corporate communications, tying together colonial and capitalist projects to suggest the collusion of government and corporate interests that violate Indigenous authority. Each list point in this section provides a reason that the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg refuse the project.

The very first reason highlights the impact the project would have on their *aanikoobijiganag*—ancestors or “the links that bind us” (Simpson 113). *Aanikoobijiganag* also includes those yet to come and seems to connect those on the Earth to those that have passed and those not yet born (Simpson 113). Acknowledging the *aanikoobijiganag* situates the assertion that “she is the only doorway into this world” and the overall piece within an Anishinaabe understanding of time, which intertwines past, present, and future. Significantly, this understanding of time contrasts with Western prioritizations of linearity. Nogojiwanong is where the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg come to “sit and talk with [their] *aanikoobijiganag*” (113) and the lift locks prevent them from tending to this relationship and fulfilling their responsibilities just as it imposes Western conceptions of time that disrupt how the Anishinaabeg can live in accordance with their own notions of temporality. An understanding of relationality that holds those presently walking the earth accountable to those who have left their corporeal states or have yet to manifest in the flesh is premised on a notion of time that does not prioritize the physical present over all other states of being.

Additionally, four of the seven items offered by the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg as grounds to deny permission for construction detail how the canal system would compromise the well-being of non-human communities, including plants, animals, and the Earth itself, who are all considered sentient beings. The remaining two points address the negative impact the structures will have on the movement of the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg and on their collective health. By repeating that it is the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg who deny permission for construction on and along the waterways, Simpson reinforces the sovereignty they have over the ways in which humans interact with *nogojiwanong*. Moreover, through this action, Simpson emphasizes that the Anishinaabeg already have responsibilities to others through previously established treaties.

The language of “she is the only doorway into this world” mimics and undermines the Euro-American understandings of treaty by collaging Indigenous understandings and practice of treaty and kinship into the form by using language and phrases I have discussed above. Blaeser argues that in order to liberate themselves from a process of “literary annihilation” pervasive in Western literary depictions of Indigenous peoples, “American Indian authors often struggle against established literary and linguistic structures, practices, and images, and work to create new ones” (57). For example, for Europeans and the settler state a treaty is conceived of as a contained, strategically narrow legal contract between parties. Rather than attending to the spirit of treaty relationships as a lived, embodied, and ongoing sets of responsibilities, settler states attempt to reduce treaties to dead text that can be reduced to their most limited forms through crafty readings.

Moreover, through the pronoun “we,” Simpson contrasts the dead, corporate “we” that blankets individuals within the cloak of corporate law with the living “we” of Anishinaabe oral storytelling. The voice that speaks is not a singular authorial voice; the utterance of this first-person plural “we” reveals that use of first-person singular pronouns in the other three sections of “*nogojiwanong*” join this collective storytelling. Furthermore, the speakers in the next three sections become what Hubbard calls “a conduit for the voices of [their] ancestors” (145). In this way, each speaker “moves beyond the containment of the first person to become a place for her community to speak and be heard” (Hubbard 145). By gesturing to orality through the use of the collective noun “we” and evocation of polyvocality through collage form, Simpson subverts the ways that Europeans and the settler state have tried to contain, define, and manipulate Indigenous

people in legalistic language and documents. Just as importantly, she suggests how treaty for the Anishinaabeg is living and outward looking as it tends to all the relationships that *are* the Anishinaabeg.

Furthermore, the specific “we” of this document are also the signatories *wenona* (“a spirit-being whose name means ‘the first breast-feeder’”); *gizhiikokwe* (“sky woman”); *nokomis* (“grandmother”); *nimkii binesikwe* (“thunderbird woman”); and *ogichidaakwewag* (or “holy women”) from each *doodem* (“clan”): *jijaak* (crane), *migizi* (eagle), and *adik* (caribou) (Simpson 115). The portrayal of the signatories as women spirits, spiritual beings, and ancestors emphasizes and foregrounds the importance of women and the spiritual in Anishinaabe social order and governance. Considering the “she,” who is the only way into this world within this collective of women figures, enables us to perceive how Simpson centers reverence for the first mother, the Earth and every other descendant of such a figure. Indeed, reverence for Mother Earth is also embedded within Anishinaabe philosophies of temporality and relationality. As Johnston asserts, “the principle of equal entitlement” prioritizes collective responsibility towards the Earth and sharing of the Earth’s bounties over private, present ownership, a concept that includes those who will come in the future as part of the collective (*Ojibway Heritage* 25).

Moreover, a footnote explains that the three clans who sign this document are the ones “associated with the Mississauga territory” (“nogojiwanong” 115), enabling those who are “the culturally uninitiated” (Ruffo 163)—to invoke Anishinaabe scholar Armand Garnet Ruffo’s term for those whose worldview and life experience has not been informed by Anishinaabe thought, culture, and context<sup>72</sup>—to understand that Simpson’s story upholds and enacts Anishinaabe kinship. She does so by having the appropriate signatories—the holy women from the appropriate clans only—mark their x on the document. Though Simpson provides the brief definition “doodem is clan” (115), it is important to note that doodem is a dependent stem that

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<sup>72</sup> Indigenous literature critic and settler scholar Sam McKegney discusses the important differences and overlaps of notions of culture-specificity in Indigenous literature and Ruffo’s concept of cultural initiation. Accounting for Métis scholar Kim Anderson’s assertion that part of Indigenous experience is dispossession, dislocation, and restrictions of access to community and culture and the responses to these impositions, McKegney states that Ruffo’s cultural initiation includes “forms of Indigenous knowledge beyond what is commonly referred to as tribal-specific traditional knowledge, without denying traditional knowledge’s value” (418).

requires a personal prefix to be used. For example, *ndoodem* means “my clan” or *jijaak ndoodem* means “I am crane clan.” In Anishinaabemowin, the word for clan is always relationally expressed. According to Johnston, the different Anishinaabeg *doodemiwaan*<sup>73</sup> represent the “five needs of the people and the five elementary functions of society”: leadership, defense, sustenance, learning, and medicine (*Ojibway Heritage* 60). The *jijaak* and *migizi* are both leadership clans while the *adik* is a sustenance clan (Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage* 60). Moreover, the clan animals are each known for idealized traits that the “Anishinaabeg endeavor to emulate ... and make ... part of themselves” (Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage* 53). These traits by clan are: *jijaak*, “eloquence for leadership”, *migizi*, “courage, preknowledge”, and *adik*, “grace and watchfulness” (Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage* 53). Courage and eloquence are necessary leadership qualities when addressing those for whom one is responsible as well as those who pose a threat against one’s nation. Preknowledge<sup>74</sup> and watchfulness are also evident when the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg demonstrate foresight about the damages the lift lock and hydro dam systems “will cause” to them and their relations (Simpson, “nogojiwanong” 114). Simpson has taken care in the specifics of signatories as an observation and act of Anishinaabe social and political organization.

The fact that the signatories use the generic x is also crucial and requires close examination. In some historic treaty documents, Anishinaabe leaders signed with pictorial depictions of *doodemiwaan*; however, Simpson’s story invokes the x mark. Anishinaabe scholar Scott R. Lyons describes the x marks signed by the Anishinaabeg on treaties with European and settler states as a metaphor. According to Lyons, the x signifies consent under coercion. Like Vizenor, Lyons refuses the “hypotragic” narrative, and instead of seeing the x-mark as a sign of victimhood, he sees it as signifying survivance. The x, for Lyons, indicates an act of agency and contamination rather than submission to settler colonialism. Indeed, Anishinaabe leaders were fully aware of the dishonourable record of those who compelled the signing of these documents.

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<sup>73</sup> Language Specialist for Chippewa of the Thames First Nation, Monty McGahey II helped me with this translation for “their clans.”

<sup>74</sup> Preknowledge is also referred to in terms of “precognition” (Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage* 46) and “prescience” (Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage* 49) and is the capacity, particularly evident in animals, to sense coming natural and supernatural changes or events.



However, treaty for the Anishinaabe is a concept that encompasses more than just a document and, accordingly, the x marks a promise to themselves for a future for their peoples. Lyons further explains that the Anishinaabeg have long histories of treaty-making that predate “arrival of the whites” (xv)—an explanation that also appears in Simpson’s work. Agreements between Indigenous nations, Lyons takes care to assert, maintained respectful relations that “encouraged different peoples to retain their ways of life, while . . . establishing territorial boundaries, conditions of trade” etc. (xv).

In a similar spirit, Simpson’s story subverts the European treaty form and the dishonourable, narrow readings of Euro-Western treaties’ textuality. In so doing, the story reconstitutes the x mark. Here, it is not a mark of contamination—it is a sign that exceeds singular definition, narrow textual interpretation, and closure. The x mark is a rich, multivalent opening that signals the Anishinaabe spirit of treaty that exceeds textuality, that exists and persists in ongoing, lived, and embodied relations. In turn, unlike Euro-Western treaties, the new neighbours’ signatures are absent from this document; they are excluded as parties to this treaty because they fail to honour the relationships that predate their arrival, because, that is, they refuse to live the treaties. Simpson’s x marks become a metaphor and practice of Anishinaabe governance and kinship through her literary practice of decolonial love. As a dimension of relationality, decolonial love is also the expression of holding accountable the neighbours who harm the Anishinaabe and their relatives.

Just as crucial is the *time* of signing, which in Simpson’s representation of the document specifies is “this 21<sup>st</sup> of June eighteen hundred and thirty” (“nogojiwanong” 140). This date is symbolically significant as June 21<sup>st</sup> is National Indigenous Peoples Day. However, National Indigenous Peoples Day was first announced by Canada’s Governor General in 1996, more than one hundred and fifty years after the year indicated in this letter.<sup>75</sup> This seeming anachronism brings to light the controversial nature behind this supposedly celebratory day, for the idea for such a day was neither born of Canada’s good will nor did it emerge fully in collaboration with Indigenous peoples. In fact, the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB)—now known as the

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<sup>75</sup> It was first named National Aboriginal Day and in 2017 was renamed National Indigenous Peoples Day.

Assembly of First Nations—campaigned in 1982 for a National Aboriginal Solidarity Day, to be held in the summer solstice (White). In removing the word “solidarity,” the settler state depoliticized the trajectory begun by Indigenous peoples and co-opted the day, which celebrates Indigenous Peoples’ “contributions” to the Canadian society instead of the solidarity efforts on the part of non-Indigenous people in support of the self-determination of the Indigenous peoples who live under occupation of their land.<sup>76</sup>

Simpson’s seemingly anachronistic gesture does more than re-politicize this date in connection with the 1982 genesis, however. By adding the year eighteen hundred and thirty, she further reclaims this date as significant for Anishinaabe people well before the existence of the Canadian state. The NIB selected June 21<sup>st</sup> because it marks the summer solstice, the moment when the sun is at its northernmost point in the sky—a seasonal event that is traditionally significant to many Indigenous peoples. To the Anishinaabeg in particular, the summer is signaled by the appearance of the “Noondeshin Bemaadizid” (“Exhausted Bather”) (Lee et al. 15) and demarcates a time after spring—the time for spiritual renewal through the sweat lodge ceremony—when people emerge physically exhausted but spiritually “full of life and renewed on the inside” (Lee et al. 15). In other words, the beginning of this section, which proclaims that, “she is the only way into this world,” establishes significance for June 21<sup>st</sup> in a manner that critiques National Indigenous Peoples Day while also incorporating the history of the creation of this commemorative day as a brief moment in Anishinaabe continuance which has always moved in cycles of renewal.

This date is so important that it appears in Simpson’s other works. For example, in the first chapter of her scholarly collection, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, Simpson begins with a

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<sup>76</sup> In his June 21, 2017 statement, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau asserted that “we join together on this day to recognize the fundamental contributions that First Nations, Inuit, and the Métis Nation have made to the identity and culture of all Canadians.” In this statement, in which he famously claims that “No relationship is more important to Canada than the relationship with Indigenous Peoples,” he goes on to assert that his government will do the work to “build nation-to-nation” and “government-to-government relationships” (Trudeau). However, on the Government of Canada’s website on the page that describes National Indigenous Peoples Day, there is only reference to this day as one to “recognize and celebrate the unique heritage, diverse cultures and outstanding contributions” of Indigenous people (“About National Indigenous Peoples Day”). Heritage, language, culture, and spirituality are mentioned again but nothing about sovereignty, governance, or autonomy. Here, the language of multiculturalism is used again to efface the specificity of Indigenous rights and existence in these lands.

recollection of the “Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg” in a “community procession” on June 21, 2009 in Nogojiwanong (11). Simpson makes no mention of National Aboriginal or Indigenous Peoples day, for, as explained above, the Anishinaabe celebrated this day long before contact. Instead, she refers to the date as marking a “collective act of resurgence” (*Dancing* 11)—or nation building.<sup>77</sup> Marking the date does not mean consenting to the settler state’s cooptation of Indigenous solidarity; instead it serves as a “reminder” that regardless of whether or not they are visible to Peterborough’s “newcomers,” Indigenous people, when united in heart and mind, can “transform our land and our city into a decolonized space and place of resurgence, even if it is only for a brief” moment (*Dancing*, 11). Similarly, whether settler-colonial governments (municipal or federal) acknowledge Indigenous nations’ existence or not, art can also create moments or spaces of decolonized, and decolonizing, existence as Simpson does with her short stories in *Islands of Decolonial Love*.

1830 further enforces this position as it marks the year in which British policy towards the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg and other Indigenous peoples of “Upper Canada took an abrupt official turn” (Surtees 87). Until this point, the British depended on the military support of “Indian bands,” including various Anishinaabe peoples such as the Mississauga (Surtees 87). This year marks Britain’s decision to move the Indian Branch of their administration from military to civil responsibilities. The shift marks a reorientation of British policy from engaging with Indigenous peoples as military allies to a paternalistic project of assimilation legitimated as a Christian “civilizing” mission of ostensibly pagan and primitive peoples. To make such a shift, the British more clearly reveal their malevolent understanding of their relationship to Indigenous peoples not as one between separate, sovereign peoples but rather one in which a superior civilization dominates a lesser race. Positioning Indigenous peoples as inferiors enabled the British to claim the land. Therefore, by dating this letter as June 21, 1830, Simpson reminds readers that the British had no authority to change the terms of their relationship to the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg and reveals the racist and dishonest underpinnings for the policy change.

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<sup>77</sup> “Indigenous resurgence, in its most radical form, is nation building” (Simpson, “Indigenous Resurgence and Co-resistance” 22”).

This is one historically informed interpretation of the signing date, but beyond investigating what the date means, it is important to also consider what the story *does* by being woven through with history. The story tasks readers, both those who are Indigenous and those who are not, with the responsibility of investigating the history about the places that they inhabit. To non-Indigenous readers who are not the primary audience, instead of *telling us* to be “decolonizing influences” by seeking “out the histories and perspectives”<sup>78</sup> of the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg, the story prompts readers to *do* that intellectual work. A racist, deceptive shift in colonial policy does not impact the innate state of an Indigenous people. The date, then, is also an act of continuance as it demonstrates how the Anishinaabe are now as they have been since 1830—and since before contact and, moreover, since they came into being as a people in accordance with their creation story. That is, the Anishinaabe are a nation with human authority and responsibility for their territories in the Great Lakes region, including nogojiwanong. However, reading or listening to the remaining three components of “nogojiwanong,” demonstrates how the change in the perspective of the new “neighbours” still has real implications for the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg and their relationships to their relatives and the land.

For readers who may be “the culturally uninitiated” (163), knowledge of these other treaties would be acquired by engaging with Anishinaabe stories beyond *Islands of Decolonial Love*. In this regard, while Simpson’s primary intended audience consists of diverse Indigenous communities, she also does address other, non-Indigenous readers in complex ways. The structure of her story challenges culturally uninitiated readers, requiring them to be mindful of the matrices within which Anishinaabe stories exist. Audiences who are culturally initiated or those who seek out further stories for a relational or intertextual reading of “nogojiwanong” can achieve a more profound understanding of the story. For example, I understand there are treaties and specific intercommunity relationships that predate European arrival based on traditional stories Simpson retells in *The Gift is In the Making*. “Our Treaty with the Hoof Nation,” for examples, discusses Anishinaabe responsibilities to the hoofed animals, and “All Our Relations” explains Anishinaabe responsibilities to *ginii* or the rose—Johnston shares the story of the roses

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<sup>78</sup> These are Simpson’s words I refer to in the introduction.

in “The Primacy of Plants” (*Ojibway Heritage* 43-45). In addition to outlining Anishinaabe responsibilities to the well-being of the hoofed creatures and plants, there are also teachings within those specific stories about balance and what to do if you are the party who has broken a treaty or wronged another community. Though these relationships predate any agreement proposed by Europeans, Simpson demonstrates that the new “neighbours” do not honour them.

Though “nogojiwanong” is not a traditional story, then, it exists in relationship to traditional stories and the resulting layers of meaning and the cultural work that the story does are understood more profoundly by audiences who are familiar with these webs of relations. For audiences who do not know more about these and other treaties and arrangements with other creatures, references by the Anishinaabe to other beings, such as ducks and geese, as “our relatives” illustrate how principles of kinship inform the narrative. Indeed, the narrative itself is an act of kinship that remembers and reaffirms these relationships. The culturally uninitiated can inform their practice of decolonial love by striving to become familiar with these storied webs of relations.

## Reflecting Love Across Dimensions: Relationality with Incorporeal Beings

In “nogojiwanong,” Simpson illuminates the centrality of incorporeal entities—including ancestors and spirits—and their relationships with the Anishinaabeg as a concern in decolonial love by mirroring, or reflecting and reiterating, the action of the story in the physical world by the actors in the spiritual realm who come to the aid of the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg. Specifically, she uses a mirroring technique between the second section (a short, passionate monologue) and third section (a longer story reminiscent of traditional legends) of “nogojiwanong.” As Noodin explains, the action is the central concern of Anishinaabe storytelling just as it is the focus in *Anishinaabemowin* (*Bawaajimo* 16) and, as stylistically and generically different as sections two and three may seem, the basic action of the narratives in both is that a young Anishinaabe *kwe* (woman) autonomously initiates the destruction of the lift locks. The second section, “she asked why,” is told in the voice of a presumably young *Anishinaabekwe* as she recounts to colonial society why and how she destroyed the lift lock. There is no obvious reference to spirit world in this simplistic interpretation of this account. However, the subsequent section, “she asked them for help,” begins with the speaker’s account

of manitous, the “binesiwag” (117) or thunder birds, and other spirits or incorporeal entities and their relationship to the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg and a particular *kwe*. In response to *kwe*’s plea for help to deal with the damage caused by the lift locks, the actors of the spirit world destroy the lift locks.

As these examples suggest, mirroring is crucial to the short story’s form. It is also a fundamental feature of Anishinaabe narrative structures (Simpson, “Oceans”). I posit that the parallel between these two sections—which initially seem different—foregrounds a relationship of decolonial love between a contemporary *Anishinaabekwe* and entities in the spirit world. This multi-dimensional reflection of action reveals connections between tangible and intangible states of existence. Moreover, this repetition suggests that healing the actors’ relationship in these coexisting realms is an empowering exercise of decolonial love. Though resurgence is a prominent theme in the overall work, the two middle sections take it up most explicitly. In this story, decolonial love is an expression of care between the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg, *binesiwag*, and *mishibizhiw* (another manitou), and their collective efforts toward liberation from colonialism is critical to their resurgence.

As noted earlier, “she asked them for help” is published in less detail in *The Gift Is In the Making* as “Good Neighbours.” In “nogojiwanong,” the plot spans the beginning of European settlement, to the present when settler-cottagers continue to destroy wild rice beds, and into a speculative future. Throughout, the new neighbours or “white people” (“nogojiwanong” 118) live without regard for the well-being of the Mississauga (what the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg are referred to in this story) or any other communities or entities, as evident in the fact that their cottages encroach on Anishinaabe land and, especially, in the threat posed by the canal systems and other industries to the natural world and Indigenous ways of life. The Mississauga repeatedly convey their concerns to the neighbours but eventually realize their neighbours are dishonourable. With the guidance of the *binesiwag* (thunderbirds), they decide to focus on self-care before dealing with the neighbours again and head to the thunderbirds’ “massage therapy clinic” (“nogojiwanong” 123). Meanwhile, a young *Anishinaabekwe* who is not interested in getting a massage goes down to the water and prays for the assistance of the *binesiwag*. The *binesiwag* know they must seek the help of *mishibizhiw* (water lynx) and consult about the careful way they must approach *mishibizhiw*, who “gets a little snippy” (“nogojiwanong” 120). While the rest of

the *binesi*wag discuss the matter, a young *binesi* (thunderbird) takes it upon herself to make an offering to *mishibizhiw* and the two devise a plan. Comparing the young Anishinaabe woman who chooses her own path and the young *binesi* who chooses her own path shows that mirroring is also used to internally structure this section of the story. After *mishibizhiw* carries out the plan and the rest of the community return, all signs of the neighbours have vanished. The Mississauga try to remember what they were doing before the neighbours arrived.

This third story stimulates readers' capacity to listen, as they can reflect between the spaces of the collage form and enrich understanding of the first piece in which the addressee is not named. The addressee of section one is section three's new neighbours, who have failed to act with the understanding that one is responsible for and to all other communities with whom one lives, including those in the treaties that existed before one's arrival.

## Neighbourliness, Non-Interference, and the Affective Spectrum of Decolonial Love

“she asked them for help” stimulates a re-reading of the first section in “*nogojiwanong*” that illuminates the importance of non-interference<sup>79</sup> for Anishinaabe relationality, which entails honouring the autonomy of other individuals and societies. Specifically, it does so in a manner that suggests decolonial love encompasses a broad affective spectrum, including anger. This third section conveys the *Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg*'s profound efforts to accommodate and respect the new neighbours' way of life. As previously discussed, the first section of “*nogojiwanong*,” which takes a contractual form, appears to mock corporate speak, by invoking formal language that obscures language's intended abuse and exploitation. Recall the corporate duplicitousness in the reiterated phrase “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” (Simpson, “*nogojiwanong*” 113).

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<sup>79</sup> I learned about the importance of the principle of non-interference to the Anishinaabeg and how they conduct themselves within their society as well as in relationship to other communities when I attended the Anishnaabe Law Camp in Chippewa of the Thames First Nation (The Anishinaabeg of *Deshkan Ziiibiing*) in March, 2017.

While the sarcastic humour here bitingly calls out the tradition of European and settler state capitalist strategies for denying responsibility and re-inscribes Anishinaabe authority as stewards of their territories, it also models honest consideration of the needs of one's neighbours when considered in relationship to "she asked them for help." "she asks them for help" details a series of dialogues between the Mississauga and their neighbours over time. Each time they come together for a discussion, the white neighbours have built something for themselves by impeding the Mississauga's daily lives or destroying or harming the land, water, and animals or something created or built by the Mississauga, such as their gardens. In each dialogue initiated by the Mississauga, who approach the neighbours with hospitality to convey their concerns or set "ground rules" (Simpson, "nogojiwanong" 119), the neighbours feign understanding and agreement but continue to break their promises. Despite the neighbours' repeatedly dishonourable behaviour, the Mississauga continue to give significant thought to their expressed desires, needs, and reasons for pursuing their projects.

What the first section of "nogojiwanong" makes clear is the details of the concerns the Mississauga would have been communicating in those meetings with the neighbours. The Mississauga, in section one, convey their decision to withhold permission from the neighbours to continue their activities with "great regret," which can not only be read as sarcasm, but also, when read in consideration with the third section of "nogojiwanong," suggests that the decision-making process was a weighty one. This gravity is reinforced in the third section of the story in the last exchange between the Mississauga and the neighbours. In response to the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg's concerns about the adverse impact of the canal, the new neighbours defensively retort: "we can't stop riding our elevator machine or our economy fall apart and we have no health care and we get sick. You don't want us to get sick, do you...? // mississauga don't want any ones to get sick. sick is no fun" (Simpson, "nogojiwanong" 119). That the Mississauga don't want "any ones" to get sick is a reminder to neighbours that the Mississauga have shown a sense of responsibility for the well-being of the neighbours and are guided by a principle of non-interference. They consider that they want their neighbours to be well and they do not immediately presume to know what is best for others. However, they also have responsibilities to many other communities, including their *aanikoobijiganag*.



Enacting decolonial love for outsiders, then, entails knowing that although they do not share *aanikoobijiganag*, new neighbours would do well to consider the significance of the connection between place and familial, spiritual relationships to the Anishinaabeg if they wish to live in these spaces. One cannot be a good neighbour to the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg unless one is a good neighbour to all of the communities to which the Anishinaabeg have responsibilities. Importantly, these communities also consist of the spirit realm, including ancestors and the *binesiwag* and the *mishibizhiw*, who are prominent actors in the third section of this story. As Simpson elsewhere states, Indigenous theoretical frameworks differ from Western theory not least because “the spiritual world is alive and influencing” (*Dancing* 40). To be a good neighbour means showing accountability and consideration for the health and well-being of all of these communities on their own terms when making decisions that could affect them. It also means understanding the critical role of the Anishinaabeg in communicating what this looks like to non-Anishinaabe people in Anishinaabewakiing.

According to Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, Anishinaabe thought “adopts a relational framework with humans as one part of a life-making system...As life is constantly moving, fluid, and interconnected, the most meaningful relationship with it is to embody these same principles in a reciprocal and ecological exchange” (86). In contrast to the Western, antagonistic, self-other binary, an Anishinaabe relational framework accounts for a community of vast and diverse members with the land and water also being accounted for as sentient beings. In such a configuration, responsibility and reciprocity are not burdens but the standard to strive for. Anthropologist Regna Darnell says this is the spirit out of which the Anishinaabe expression “all my relatives” comes from and refers to all of the entities making up the land, including plants, animals, humans, and “other than human persons” (2). Anishinaabe traditions of relationality explain that human beings live within an ecosystem that includes the spiritual realm and within which all are responsible for each other’s well-being.

Anishinaabe thinkers on relationality relate responsibility to *k’zaugin*, love. Indeed, Borrows asserts that love is fundamental to Indigenous peoples’ legal traditions (“Fragile Freedoms”). Similarly, Sinclair contends that love inspires Anishinaabe people to keep their stories and cultures alive and to resist colonialism (97). Looking at other Anishinaabemowin words that are related to *k’zaugin*, Sinclair concludes it is love that “can feed, support, and ensure our

responsibility to one another ... how we can assure a future for our children, alongside and with others—who depend on working with us to keep this world going” (97). All sentient beings are to fulfill their responsibilities toward one another out of love. Although it may sound abstract, Borrows points out that it is no more abstract than concepts such as “justice” or “good government,” which are central to Western forms of sovereignty (“Fragile Freedoms”).

When it comes to Anishinaabe traditional governance, the story suggests that one must turn to the plants of *nogojiwanong* for guidance, a message of deep and abiding love expressed through the silences between “she is the only doorway into this world” and “she asked them for help.” In “she is the only doorway into this world” Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg specify that *minomiin* (wild rice)<sup>80</sup> beds are the first of many much-loved plants that will be damaged through settler colonial development, which include “tramping all over those plants mississauga use to heal. eating everything out of mississauga’s garden” (“*nogojiwanong*” 117). Although the damage caused by intentional or unintentional destruction of plant life as well as over-harvesting or consumption have taken various forms from European arrival to the present day, a major concern currently facing the Anishinaabeg of the region is the removal of wild rice beds by cottagers, a violation that impacts them in manifold ways. A conflict between cottagers and First Nations who are part of the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg erupted in 2015 when the former started destroying rice beds to facilitate cottaging activities and secure real estate values.<sup>81</sup> In 2016, the Ogimaa Mikana (Reclaiming/Renaming) Project used publicly displayed billboard art to highlight Anishinaabe relationship to wild rice not just as an informative exercise but as “part of the effort to decolonize cottage country” (Carleton). One reads: “Anishinaabe manoomin inaaakonigewin gosha” and translates to “wild rice is Anishinaabe law” (Carleton) (see fig. 2).

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<sup>80</sup> This word is spelled in other ways, such as “manoomin,” in other sources.

<sup>81</sup> Al Jazeera tellingly called this ongoing conflict “Canada’s Wild Rice Wars,” thus making the continued assaults on Anishinaabe sovereignty at the hands of settlers and the settler state palpable (Jackson).



**Figure 2: Billboard in Peterborough, Ontario from ogimaamikana; “Anishinaabe Manoomin Inaakonigewin Gosha.”**

Co-curator of the project, Susan Blight, explains that in addition to being integral to Anishinaabe understandings of continuance and relationality,

“manoomin is connected to notions of governance ... governing our communities and governing ourselves ... Anishinaabeg rarely tell each other how they should be—we have too much respect for freedom and self-determination to do that—instead we are shown how we should be through our land-based practices including manoominike (the harvesting of manoomin) ... wild rice is our teacher.” (Qtd. in Carleton)

The beds are not only important for the rice, which is the basis of a traditional diet, but the rice itself is also crucial to Anishinaabe social and political well-being.

Engaging “nogojiwanong” with an understanding of the relational nature of Anishinaabe storytelling helps elucidate the impacts attendant to the loss of minomiin. In Anishinaabe story theory, *dibaaJimowinan*, which is the kind of story “nogojiwanong” is, encourages opening one’s ears, figuratively in this case, to the world outside the immediate story and bringing what you hear, or what you learn, back to the story. The Ogimaa Mikana Project’s assertions about the

relationship of the Anishinaabeg with *manoomin* provide critical specificity about how I interpret the reference to *minoomiin* and the impact of cottagers and the cottaging in “nogojiwanong.” In Simpson’s text, because the new neighbors prioritize personal leisure activities and property values, they threaten a relation and teacher of the Anishinaabe—*manoomin*. This in turn threatens Anishinaabe knowledge transmission and consequently philosophy, spirituality, and individual and collective governance.

The principles of freedom and self-governance—which, as Blight explains, are encoded in cultivating, harvesting, and processing *manoomin* and highly respected in Anishinaabe interpersonal conduct and collective governance—are also encoded in the form and content of Simpson’s “nogojiwanong.” The distinct voice in the monologue in “she asked why” reveals that good neighbours who prioritize decolonial love understand that the Anishinaabeg express love and responsibility in diverse ways. So, while the content of this second section of “nogojiwanong” is concerned with love and responsibility, Simpson dramatically changes the form and tone. In contrast to the weighty, firm but gentle, and at times satirical tone of the preceding segment, the prose in this second section is written in the colloquial voice of a speaker whose humor and sarcasm is edged with profound anger. No time is wasted as the speaker informs the listener: “I blew the fucking lift lock up in downtown Peterborough ... So what ... I hated that thing” (Simpson, “nogojiwanong” 116). The abrupt and irreverent language is in stark contrast to the preceding section of the story but it is still rooted in concern and care as the speaker bitingly frames her action as a response aimed to undo the damage settler-colonial conceptions of leisure have done to the “weather” and the “fish in the lake” (116).

While it may seem counterintuitive to locate decolonial love in the confrontation, aggressive profanity, repeated use of the word hate, and the violence expressed in this section, my interpretation is guided by the insights of Frantz Fanon, whose theories have impacted many Indigenous thinkers, including Simpson. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon analyzes the instrumentalization of love and desire as an exercise of colonial power, which has affected the psyches of both colonized and colonizer. He states: “Today I believe in the possibility of love; that is why I endeavour to trace its imperfections, its perversions” (*Black Skin, White Masks* 42). To recuperate love or enact decolonial love, then, is to trace and combat, if not eliminate, these colonial, white supremacist, gendered perversions. But to do so one cannot love the fountainhead

of these violations because, as Fanon says, “colonialism is not a machine capable of thinking, a body endowed with reason [I would add, nor is it an organ capable of love]. It is naked violence and only gives in when confronted with greater violence” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 23). Fanon argues that the colonial state cannot love as it only communicates through “language of force” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 42). In response to non-Indigenous scholars who configure Indigenous resurgence in a temporal evolution from anger to love, Indigenous scholar from Leey’qsun Nation Rachel Flowers states that “this move to separate love and rage portrays our rage as merely reactionary to external forces and only through love can we transcend those structures” (10). Flowers counters that “our resentment reveals ongoing harm and a desire for freedom” and in no way excludes the presence of decolonial love within Indigenous communities (16). In “she asked why,” the speaker’s resentment and rage are directed at the neighbours because they act without love or responsibility, thereby harming others. Colonialism is violence and thus this Anishinaabekwe, like the young woman in section three who indirectly summons the mishibizhiw, manifests love through rage and through destruction of the cause of suffering. Care in the form of confronting violence with violence is a discernable response in the eyes of the neighbours and is done with duty to her relations and kin who the neighbours have continually harmed.

But not all the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg respond in this way. The rest of her nation chooses to enact decolonial love through self-care, reflection, and massage—an approach akin to my discussion of Belcourt on Audre Lorde in the previous chapter. However, the Anishinaabekwe in “she asked them for help” does not participate in decolonial love through the same kind of self-care because she is “frustrated with all the patience” and “takes things into her own hands” (Simpson 120) to eliminate the source of harm. Specifically, she takes things into her own hands within the appropriate Anishinaabe protocols and channels by laying down *semaa* (tobacco) before praying for the assistance of spirit beings, the *binesiwag* (thunderbirds). This is another assertion of the respect for individual choice within Anishinaabe worldview.

Mirroring the young woman’s affective response and action towards colonizers and colonialism is the young female *binesi*, overseer, who also grows tired of her community of *binesiwag* taking a long time to talk and “maybe going to get massages” (120). Overseer decides independently to go down to the water and put down an offering and “sings that song” to mishibizhiw (120). The

mirroring is a technique akin to repetition from oral tradition<sup>82</sup> to imagine the ways in which settler colonialism impacts beings of both the material and the spiritual world. It also illustrates the value of independent action and the complex and diverse ways the Anishinaabeg can, have, and will respond to an array of hardships including living next to *bad* neighbours. Moreover, it affirms that love and anger are not mutually exclusive and that being a good neighbour means that outsiders do not get to set the terms of appropriate behaviour or how decolonial love is enacted by the Anishinaabeg.

So, while the woman in section two does not explicitly share how she blew up the lift lock, the woman in section three uses prayer to set off a chain of events at the end of which mishibizhiw sucks out the entire system of lift locks, canals, and dams, underscoring the importance of embodied sovereignty, non-interference, and Indigenous knowledge in resistance. The mishibizhiw (also spelled *mishipizhu*), as Anishinaabe/Métis/Norwegian ecologist Melissa K. Nelson tells us, is not just a spiritual entity but also a figure who speaks to knowledge about hydrological systems that Anishinaabe people have accumulated over careful systematic observations for thousands of years. Mishipizhu are spirits that live in the water and maintain the hydrological systems in conjunction with other manitous such as the binesiwag and are responsible for the water. The “she” in the story becomes multiplied yet again as the new neighbours have to face the response of individual Anishinaabe women, the female entities of the spiritual world, and the hydrological system of the Earth that are all impacted by settler colonial interventions of the land and the relationships that make up the land. Attending to them requires a respectful and fundamental reckoning with damage wrought by actions—the settler colonial love of exploitation and profit—that have been detrimental to the forms of love that the Anishinaabe people value and uphold.

## Visioning Futures

The speaker in section two and the young woman who prays to the mishibizhiw demonstrate how decolonial love is radical in its vision of the future. Indeed, their vision and courageous

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<sup>82</sup> Simpson also attributes the technique to emulating Anishinaabe petroglyphs (“Oceans”).

action make the final poem/song possible. In the final section, “she sang them home,” Simpson depicts a world in which the Trent-Severn Waterway canal route has been destroyed, the lifelines of the Earth flow again, and the river heals itself and its relations. “nogojiwanong” dares to depict for Indigenous people the promise fulfilled by resurgence and reminds non-Indigenous readers that they are not guaranteed a place next to the Mississauga just as the mishibizhiw erases all traces of the neighbours. Accordingly, “she sang them home” is voiced by *shki maajaamegos* (salmon) to *odenaabe* (the Otonabee river) as she is finally able to swim there from Lake Ontario now that the canal system is gone, in a future that does not include the state.

Significantly, the third person singular pronoun “she” of the song title is connected to the “we” from oral tradition and becomes a conduit for Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg *kobade* (ancestors and those to come). “she” who is singing is a choir of voices is the *odenaabe*, “meaning the river that beats like a heart” (Simpson, “Bubbling Like a Beating Heart” 107), singing “them,” her kin, home to her for the first time in over a hundred years. She is *shki maajaamegos* singing the other *shki maajaamegos*, “pimizi” (eel), “all the ones that are gone” and those “waiting to be born” back to *odenaabe* (Simpson, “nogojiwanong” 126). She also denotes Simpson, singing her people “home” through literature that creates the “decolonial islands” in which Anishinaabeg can do the work of transforming places like Peterborough into the resurgence of *nogojiwanong*, much like they did on June 21, 2009.

Taken together, these acts conjure futurity, a term that has been theorized by both Indigenous and Black scholars. Drawing on Black feminist scholar, Tina M. Campt, I understand futurity to denote the way in which marginalized peoples exercise “a politics of prefiguration that involves living the future *now*” (17).<sup>83</sup> Black feminist theory posits that acts of futurity do not have to be intentional or grandiose. They are often expressed through the quotidian in “acts of flight” and “practices” of creativity that “undermine the categories of the dominant” (Campt 33). Similarly,

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<sup>83</sup> Carl Boggs coined the term “prefiguration” in 1977 (see “Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the problem of Workers’ Control” and “Revolutionary Process, Political Strategy, and the Dilemma of Power”). It refers to the praxis in the kinds of social movements that endeavour to operate in accordance with the culture and structure of the social reality they aim to bring about in the future. The term is also often used to discuss resurgence by Indigenous scholars/activists such as Glen Coulthard, and it has also been attributed to the driving vision of the Bahá’í Faith (*cf. Social Mutualism as the Psychology of Alter-cultural Praxis* [Bou Zeineddine]).

Nêhiyaw and Dene Suline scholar and frequent collaborator with Simpson, Jarrett Martineau defines futurity as “a desired state-of-future-being denied to us in the present” (59). Both Campt and Martineau talk about the importance of flight or fugitivity, as opposed to stasis, when finding or creating spaces for futurity. Though Campt’s use of “fugitivity” is rooted in Black radical thought—in which critics use it to address the specific legacies of slavery for the Black diaspora—Martineau’s turn to the term demonstrates how fugitivity can also be considered in other contexts. Finding the “resonant” (iii) elements in Vizenor’s articulation of survivance as enacted through “fugitive poses” and Black feminist scholar, Joy James’s illumination of the traditions of maroon philosophy in Black radical thought, Martineau and Erik Ritskes describe fugitivity as a state of refusing assimilation into colonial systems of domination and a continuous flight to the liminal spaces at the margins of such systems. In relation to the experience of “future *now*” (Campt), fugitivity “is the freedom to imagine and create an elsewhere in the *here*” and is “realized through flight and refusal” (Martineau and Ritskes iv, emphasis added).

Black feminist theories about refusal and fugitivity can be seen to intersect with Indigenous notions of survivance. Vizenor’s theories suggest that Anishinaabe survivance—“an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories,” which are integrally “renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (*Manifest Manners* vii)—nurtures Simpson’s vision of a future in which the salmon return. This is a future wherein the Anishinaabeg outlive settler colonialism. The *shki maajaamegosag*, beings whose cycles of creation and regeneration are defined by difficult journeys and movements, sing back to the odenaabe and the river’s “bubbling / beating” (Simpson, “nogojiwanong” 124) rhythm. They sing about how they are able to return even though, for decades, they have been separated from “home”—or the particular parts of their land, relations, and practices from which they had been separated. Though this salmon—and many previous generations of salmon—were not able to make this journey once the canal system was built, the text still represents the being’s memories of swimming in the odenaabe:

my kobade [or link] told her daughter about that feeling  
 my great grandmother told her daughter  
 my kookum [grandmother] told her daughter  
 and my doodoom [mother] told me. (Simpson, “nogojiwanong” 124)



In her representation of the intergenerational expression of love among the salmon and Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg, Simpson's account of love is akin to Sinclair's in that love is the impetus through which these communities have maintained their cultures and nations while under occupation.

One manifestation of "love" can be understood through Glen Coulthard's (Yellowknives Dene) term "grounded normativity," a concept that Simpson describes as "the systems of ethics that are continuously generated by a relationship with a particular place, with land, through the Indigenous processes and knowledges that make up Indigenous life" ("Indigenous Resurgence" 22). For Simpson, Anishinaabe grounded normativity is central to decolonization ("Indigenous Resurgence" 22). Even though generations of the ancestors of *shki maajaamegos*, and generations not yet born, are unable to physically swim and breathe in odenaabe, by transferring knowledge of relationship to place (and the systems of ethics that come from such long-enduring relations), the fish comes to know how to feel and move in her own land. But neither *shki maajaamegos* nor odenaabe are unaware of the tender state of their recent reunion from the dispossessions of settler colonialism as *shki maajaamegos* asks the river to be "careful" with her as it is her "first time" (Simpson, "nogojiwanong" 125) and comforts odenaabe's worries that are conveyed to the audience only through *shki maajaamegos*' words. She assures odenaabe that her "wounds" (Simpson, "nogojiwanong" 125) will "heal now" (Simpson, "nogojiwanong" 126). The river and salmon tell of a possible future of healing, but its actualization is a process that takes time and great care.

As was the case of the Mississauga described in the third section, *shki maajaamegos* participate in resurgence by remembering their actions before the neighbours' arrival. The song ends with

it's over

we're all going to be ok now

they're gone.

and there is more of us waiting to be born. (Simpson, "nogojiwanong" 126)

In this way, Simpson gestures towards the radical nature of decolonial love to think and act independently of colonialism through practices of futurity that dismantle the settler-colonial system. The Anishinaabeg in this story perform what Simpson elsewhere calls rebellion “against the permanence of the settler colonial reality” not just by dreaming “alternative realities” but by actively creating “them, on the ground in the physical world, in spite of being occupied” (“Land as Pedagogy” 8). To reflect on actions and practices that reunite the entities that compose a healthy *odenaabe* entails thinking about how Anishinaabeg’s actions bring about conditions for change. While the agent of the lift lock’s destruction is left deliberately ambiguous in the story—it could be the speaker or the spirits—the fact that the speaker contemplates, or, indeed, calls for this violence is important. This calling forth of destruction is occasioned after her admission that simply “painting it into the landscape”<sup>84</sup> cannot remedy the harm imposed by lift lock. A future can only be secured, then, through an act of violence that heals settler colonial violence. This recourse to violence suggests that, ultimately, while art can help to envision a freed landscape, such a vision is useful to decolonization as inspiration for the actualization of the freeing of the land. The destruction of the lift lock becomes a form of resistance even though it is part of a creative work and the real lift lock remains intact. The young woman and thunderbird in section three enact a spiritual resistance in that they practice Anishinaabe grounded normativity. However, they do so from the margins of their communities because the collective chooses a different course of action. This marginality illustrates how significant the principle of non-interference is for Anishinaabeg.

Simpson’s story conveys the role non-interference plays in honouring both the role of autonomous, individual action and the role of collective decision-making in futurity. Johnston provides an example of non-interference in a story about the warrior Bebon-Waushih that elucidates the Anishinaabe warrior tradition. He asserts that the Anishinaabeg are primarily a people “of peace” (*Ojibway Ceremonies* 59) and thus the “War Path/Baunindobindidowin” (57) is a restorative, sacred undertaking. This War Path is not used for “conquest or subjugation” but rather to “avenge an injury, whether real or imaginary, to oneself” or one’s kin (Johnston,

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<sup>84</sup> Like Thomas King’s Monroe Swimmer in *Truth and Bright Water*, who tried to paint a church to camouflage into the land.

*Ojibway Ceremonies* 59). In an exemplary story, the chief and elders all advise Bebon-Waushih against avenging his sister's death to avoid further violence. While they do not sanction or support him following the War Path, Johnston explains that the chief concedes that they could not stop him "from pursuing his course" (*Ojibway Ceremonies* 61). In a similar spirit, in Simpson's "she asked why" and "she asked them for help," the young woman chooses a course of action towards resurgence that involves a violent event to avenge the harm done to her nation and relatives, but it is an event that will restore the balance of life. Moreover, the community's non-interference with her actions is an acknowledgement of what Simpson means when talking about sovereignty as embodied within each Anishinaabe person. Importantly, the talking, reflecting, and self-care that the majority of the Mississauga were involved with are not deviations from resurgence. They are integral parts of resurgence as the Anishinaabeg rely on this work to continue nation building and revitalizing their knowledge and governance systems.

## Conclusion

For Simpson, this project of healing one's relationship to their own body and tongue, or "the nation within our bodies," as cited earlier, is inextricably linked to resurgence and liberation—that is, with the recovery, rebuilding, and revitalization of Indigenous nationhood, what she refers to as "land and politics and nationhood in an Indigenous context" ("Falling Into"). Her theories, along with those advanced by leading Indigenous thinkers like Coulthard, Taiaiake Alfred, and Jeff Corntassel, assert that the contemporary work of Indigenous peoples is resurgence. Resurgence involves various kinds of work, such as the revitalization of Indigenous languages and the recovery and strengthening of Indigenous knowledge systems and governance; importantly, this work includes the revitalization of social, political, scientific, and spiritual knowledge. Art can contribute to resurgence by visioning these different futures.

As Simpson's story illuminates, at its core, decolonial love radically challenges not only the structures of colonialism but also the very notion of its permanence. Therefore, even if readers are neither cottagers nor white settlers in Anishinaabe homelands, they must grapple with what it means to be a good neighbour. This action involves more than trying to understand and behave within a relational model and more than acknowledging that no one else defines the terms of decolonial love for Indigenous people but Indigenous people. A practice of decolonial love entails, then, unlearning the destructive forms of love at the core of settler colonialism; it is, in

other words, to practice radical neighborliness. It requires imaging a future in which the entire system of settler colonialism is thoroughly dismantled—like the destruction of the lift lock system and the banishment of the neighbours. Otherwise, all “neighbours”—white or racialized diasporic individuals, some of whom are Indigenous to other lands—need to come to terms with the bleak consequences of being bad neighbours, such as being completely “erased” from Anishinaabe land (Simpson, “nogojiwanong” 123). For racialized diasporas also concerned with decolonial and anticolonial movement building in other parts of the world in which they have relations and responsibilities, Simpson’s term “place-based internationalism” (“Indigenous Resurgence” 24) as a tradition of Anishinaabe thought offers a place to consider acts of solidarity. She calls it a “beautifully fertile spot” that “links place-based thinking and struggle with the same decolonial pockets of thinking throughout the world” (“Indigenous Resurgence” 24). In this spirit, Chapter Three turns to a consideration of constellations, focusing on how Gerald Vizenor’s novel *Hiroshima Bugi* takes up the ways that American imperialism is implicated in a series of dislocations that affect Anishinaabe and Asian characters.

## Chapter 3

### Constellational Visions: International Configurations of Survivance in Gerald Vizenor's *Hiroshima Bugi*

In *As We Have Always Done*, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains that constellations convey Anishinaabe notions of relationality—the view that relationships, not discrete subjects, are the primary state of existence. Simpson writes, “constellations are place-based relationships and land-based relationships are the foundation of Indigenous thought” (214). In this way, she situates constellations as part of an interdependent network: “Constellations exist only in the context of relationships; otherwise they are just individual stars” (215). As I noted in my Introduction, Simpson refers to constellations as embodiments of relationality that model how different communities/peoples can align, like the stars, to guide or transform life on the Earth. Through a close-reading of Gerald Vizenor’s 2003 novel *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57*, this chapter contemplates Vizenor’s writing about survivance as a practice of relationality through its evocation of stars and the resonance between stardust or stones.

Although Vizenor grounds survivance (the practice of active presence even in the face of domination) in Anishinaabe epistemology, his novel offers the term as a useful way of thinking about liberation between peoples—in particular, between Anishinaabeg, other Indigenous peoples of North America, the Ainu, and the Japanese, all of whom have been impacted and/or displaced by Euro-American imperialism. Specifically, I demonstrate how Vizenor extends his concept of survivance to Anishinaabe and non-Anishinaabe peoples often separated by considerable time and space, thereby enacting relationality between them. Like constellations composed of distant celestial entities whose light reaches our eyes sometimes long after a star has died, this relationality between people transcends linear notions of both time and space.

Before discussing the novel’s approach to and use of constellations and stone to vision relationality between peoples, I will first outline Vizenor’s concept of survivance and its embeddedness in Anishinaabe models of relationality. In *Manifest Manners*, Vizenor characterizes survivance as “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance,

tragedy, and victimry” (vii).<sup>85</sup> Survivance, then, is a practice co-constituted through what Vizenor calls *natural reason*—embodied, relational, place-based knowledges and ways of knowing<sup>86</sup>—that speaks to Indigenous continuance.<sup>87</sup> Survivance includes practices like the continuance of Anishinaabe stories and storytelling, reliance on and relationships with non-human entities in the natural world, and maintenance of Anishinaabemowin. Within these practices, survivance is the inherent capacity of Anishinaabe society to withstand and outlast any form of domination, exploitation, or deracination. Although it is relevant to the colonial moment, survivance pre-exists colonialism in the form of Anishinaabe relationality that is rooted in the relationships to time and place and enable Anishinaabeg to move through one time to another, through one geolocation to another.

Margaret Noodin provides a helpful starting point for conceptualizing this relationality, in a story that she summarizes in *Bawaajimo: A Dialect of Dreams in Anishinaabemowin Language and Literature*. This story follows Nanabozho<sup>88</sup> and his brother, who was a stone. The stone-brother becomes jealous of Nanabozho’s stories of worldly travels and the teasing he receives about “his permanence and inability to be anywhere but one place” (165). Cunning proves to be a family trait; the stone-brother offers Nanabozho a way to destroy him but ultimately tricks Nanabozho into helping him be less grounded to a single spot. After Nanabozho follows his instructions to toss stone-brother into a fire and then give him an ice-cold shower, stone-brother is not destroyed but shattered and scattered all over the earth. This story conceptualizes Anishinaabe relationality as being rooted in relationships that stretch across time and space.

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<sup>85</sup> Following Vizenor, I use the term “victimry” in this chapter.

<sup>86</sup> Vizenor defines and discusses natural reason throughout his extensive corpus. In *Hiroshima Bugi*, Manidoo Envoy says, “Natural reason is an active sense of presence, the tease of the natural world in native stories[,] ... the use of nature, animals, birds, water, and any transformation of the natural world as direct references and signifiers in language” (36).

<sup>87</sup> Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe scholar Vanessa Watts articulates a related concept through her term “Place-Thought,” which she defines as “the non-discursive space where place and thought were never separated because they never could or can be separated (21). Her conception more explicitly addresses the agency of the land as “alive and thinking,” insofar as “humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts” (21).

<sup>88</sup> Spelling varies by writer; this figure is also called Nanabush (for example, by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Basil Johnston).

Stones often play important roles in traditional Anishinaabe stories and Vizenor frequently uses the term stone to refer to tribal tricksters, stories, and himself. Significantly, tricksters are linked to stones. While I elaborate on tricksters more broadly below, here I consider stones' manifold meanings in Vizenor's work. In *The Heirs of Columbus*, Vizenor's main character states that his "stories are stones" (9). Similarly, in *Postindian Conversations* he states: "I am a stone, and stones are native stories. ... Everywhere there are stones of that first fire of the tricksters" (130-131). Likewise, in *Griever: An American Monkey King in China*, he associates the Anishinaabe Trickster with the Monkey King, a Chinese trickster, through the Monkey King's birth via stone. About this latter connection, Vizenor states: "the beginning of life comes from something substantial, like a rock" ("Head Water" 50).<sup>89</sup> As Noodin expertly shares in *Bawaajimo*, Anne M. Dunn, an Anishinabeg elder and grandmother (Cover copy, *Grandmother's Gift*), tells a story in which the first storyteller is a stone. Indeed, in an interview a decade before the publication of *Hiroshima Bugi*, Vizenor refers to the story in which "the trickster-stone bursts" and says that "today every stone from anywhere on this world is metaphorically from that first break-up of the trickster" (51). These stone stories, which for Noodin provide the foundations for Anishinaabe literary studies, inform my approach towards and, indeed, my methodology for reading the novel by tracing resonance across time and geography.

I contend that, in *Hiroshima Bugi*, Vizenor shatters the stone through language and casts one of its pieces across the world to Japan where it transforms, like the "tiny stones" Nanabozho tosses into the air that turn into butterflies (Johnston, "Butterflies"), in its new location. These stone shards or pebbles capable of transformation are stories that can be considered nodes of Anishinaabe thought which, as an embodied practice—as with all matter—have a natural frequency of vibration. I extrapolate from this physical property for my reading of the novel and suggest that, when in alignment with another body, or story, which shares this natural frequency, the second entity begins to vibrate in tandem. Each entity maintains its distinct integrity, but both

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<sup>89</sup> In this Interview, Vizenor shares a version of the Nanabozho and his stone-brother story that Noodin uses in *Bawaajimo*; he shares this version in reference to how and why he embedded that story within collection of stories *Dead Voices: Natural Agonies in the New World* (1992).

resonate in recognition of a shared or compatible quality. This is another distinct expression of what I call *reading for resonance*.

As I outlined in the Introduction and Chapter Two, reading for resonance means recognizing compatibility without conflation and respecting locational difference. Accordingly, Vizenor's scattered stones elicit storied resonances in their new locations in time and space while extending his concept of survivance outwards from an Anishinaabe centre. In so doing, they unsettle processes of settler colonialism and domination for both Anishinaabe and non-Anishinaabe peoples. At the same time, Vizenor models how other peoples can mobilize from within their own cosmologies and localities to imagine alternative ways of cohabiting the Earth, again like a constellation at the confluence of stones, stars, and place-based relationality. I argue that Vizenor's work connects overlapping and dismembering systems of power and domination to reveal to the grounded, careful reader the interlocking ways in which systems of dominance operate. Through the stories of stone, *Hiroshima Bugi* conveys the risks of violating relationality between human beings and other entities. Furthermore, the concept of shattering stone can be applied to other formative moments that radiate outwards and form their own nodes or resonances. In this way, the stone provides not just a literary genealogy but also a reading model. A place-aware reading of his novel, focusing on the motif of rivers that weave through the named and implied places within their watersheds, enables readers to envision a world in which relationality, a concept underpinned by natural reason, is honoured.

## Stones as the Substance of Structure

Because it is not simple to follow the trajectories of stardust and stone in *Hiroshima Bugi* through the circuitous journey of the novel's protagonist, Ronin, I offer a brief sketch to contextualize my analysis of stones, constellations, and relationality in the novel. Ronin Ainoko Browne is the 57-year-old son of an Anishinaabe World War II veteran and Japanese (possibly Ainu) boogie dancer. He was born in Japan, moved to America as a young teen, and returns to Japan to fulfill his father's vision and to destroy the symbols of "fake" or "nuclear" peace, which are sites memorializing the Atomic bombs the United States dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. We learn that his mother, Okichi, abandoned him to an orphanage for the mixed ("hafu") kids of the war and that the White Earth Nation adopted him in his teens. He lived there well into adulthood until he went in search of his father. His father, Orion "Nightbreaker" Browne—who



is unaware that he has a son—worked in Nevada at a nuclear test site after returning from the war, eventually departing for the Mississippi headwaters and finally travelling to Nogales, Arizona to stay at the Hotel Manidoo, a hotel for Indigenous war veterans. Manidoo Envoy, an *Anishinaabenini*<sup>90</sup> from Leech Lake who is also a connoisseur of Japanese culture, becomes Nightbreaker's roommate at the Hotel. Because Nightbreaker dies several days before Ronin arrives at the Hotel to finally meet his father, Manidoo Envoy is the one who receives Ronin. After Ronin's departure for his adventures in Japan, it is Manidoo Envoy and the other "native vets" at Hotel Manidoo who receive the boxes of Ronin's writings from Miko, a hostess and Japanese shaman, and put them together into a book. In this book, Manidoo Envoy provides the explanatory companion segments to Ronin's chapters. Given these meanderings, it is not surprising that Ronin bears different names at different times. Through his many nominal and physical transformations and his cunning—or trickster moves—Ronin arrives in Japan to forge relationships with the Japanese and Ainu and deface the symbols of fake peace, victimry (as noted above, this is a term that Vizenor uses throughout his novel), and domination.

In the novel, the image that Vizenor conjures of a first fire of tricksters, which creates stones, brings to mind the explosion of another primordial fire: a dying star. From the explosion of a dying star comes dust and gas and the formation of a nebula. Under the right conditions, this dust and gas come together to birth new stars and planets. Elements like silicon, carbon, and others that make up the stone on the Earth were at one time stardust from a first fire of creation. *Hiroshima Bugi*'s protagonist, Ronin Browne, is the progeny of Orion Browne, whose first name conjures the Orion Nebula, tracing his trickster lineage to the stars and the most ancient creation stories of many of the world's peoples. It also summons the Orion constellation, which, in one understanding of Anishinaabe star knowledge, in the spring shares many of the main identifying stars as a Nanabozho constellation, notably its east-pointing shape. While the figure in the constellation points to another important Anishinaabe constellation, more generally its east-pointing shape reflects the direction of Orion and Ronin's travels from Anishinaabe territory.

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<sup>90</sup> An Anishinaabe man.

Orion's name is thus significant because it both underscores the flow of both his and his son's travels and references their literary and cosmological inheritances.

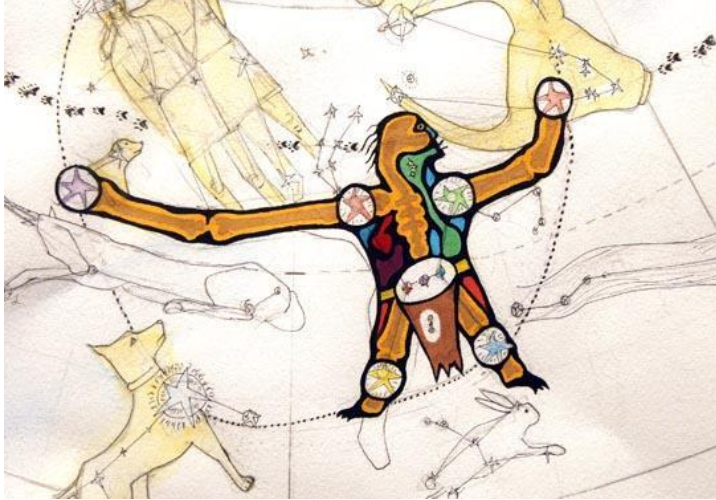
Anishinaabe cultural advisor Joseph Bert Sutherland teaches that, in the spring, the stars of the Orion nebula make up the Nanabozho constellation that points to the east and the “Bagone Giizhig” constellation (also known as the Pleiades constellation), from which the Anishinaabeg come to the Earth. He explains that with the first snowfall this constellation “changes to the ... [B]iboonekeonini” (Ogimaa Wab).<sup>91</sup> In *Ojibwe Giizhig Anang Masinaa'igan (Ojibwe Sky Star Map Constellation Guidebook): An Introduction to Ojibwe Star Knowledge*, “[t]he main body of Biboonekeonini – Wintermaker overlaps with the Greek Constellation Orion” (Lee et al., 27) and signals the time when “[w]inter-only stories are told ... because a person knows the winter spirits are there” (26). Thus, while Orion's name points to the east-pointing journey he and Ronin undertake while highlighting their literary and cosmological inheritances, in another view, Orion as Biboonekeonini creates a literary climate in which Nanabozho is present and stories about him are appropriate—traditionally, his name and stories are not to be said during other seasons.

And yet in a land-based, relational form of knowledge, stars mean different things to peoples across the world. While the stars remain the same celestial entities whether Ronin is in the United States or Japan, the ways that Japanese and Ainu Peoples understand their relationships and stories in constellations differs from Anishinaabe cosmology. To read for resonance, I examine how some Japanese constellations overlap with Nanabozho/Biboonekeonini. Vizenor's references to Anishinaabe star knowledge prompt readers to consider how this overlapping might also affect the narrative in terms of both its content and decorum (see fig. 3, 4, and 5).<sup>92</sup>

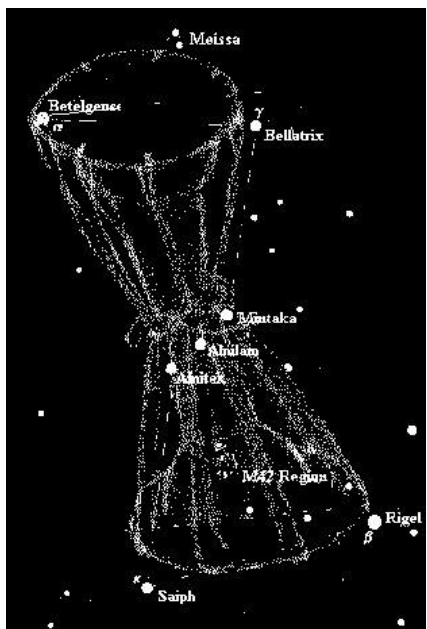
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<sup>91</sup> Joseph Bert Sutherland gave me permission to share this teaching, which he shared on his Facebook page in 2019, in my dissertation.

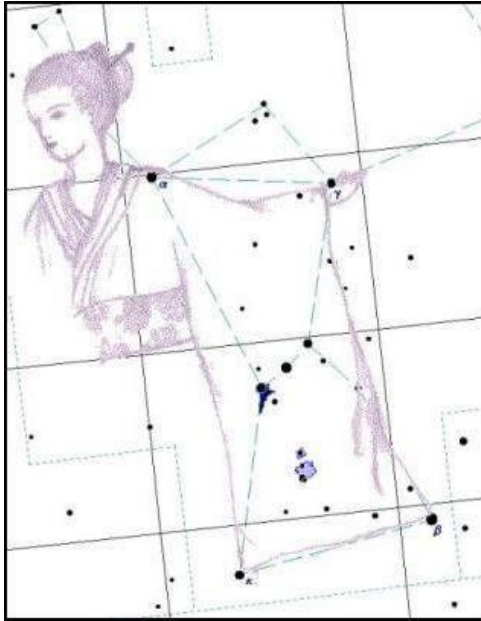
<sup>92</sup> It has been difficult to find resources about Ainu star knowledge. I have been in email contact with Megumi Yamauchi from Astro Ninja Projects but, due to my inability to speak Japanese and my contact's limited knowledge of English, I have not learned enough to offer a respectful and informed analysis that enriches my reading of the text.



**Figure 3: Biboonikeonini (Wintermaker) by Annette S. Lee from *Ojibwe Giizhig Masinaaigan*.**



**Figure 4: Tsuzumi Boshi from "View of Orion in Japanese Folklore" (Renshaw and Ihara 74).**



**Figure 5: Sode Boshi from "View of Orion in Japanese Folklore" (Renshaw and Ihara 75).**

Though the Japanese map numerous constellations onto the major star markers of Biboonikeonini, the stars that align with the shoulders, waist, and legs of the Anishinaabe constellation (see fig. 3) are often learned by Japanese children as Tsuzumi Boshi (see fig. 4). The *tsuzumi* is a Japanese drum used in kabuki theatre and *boshi* means stars. In addition, “[the] stars forming the drum’s outer edges are sometimes called Waki Boshi ... and are associated with the striking together of the two wooden blocks (*hyoushigi*)” (Renshaw and Ihara 75). The sound of *hyoushigi* “summon[s] and gain[s] the attention of protective deities” and “signals the beginning and end” of religious ceremonies in addition to dramatic events such as kabuki and sumo (Renshaw and Ihara 75).

Early in Manidoo Envoy’s first exposition, he says that “Ronin creates a dialogue in a kabuki theater style” and “sounded the hyoushigi” at the Atomic Bomb Dome (12), the space where we first meet Ronin. Orion’s name carries the ceremony of *hyoushigi* into Vizenor’s narrative and opens the novel by summoning Japanese spirits for protection against the agents and processes of false peace. Moreover, while the Anishinaabe constellation embodies a masculine spirit (“nini” in Biboonikeonini means man) and thus Ronin’s father, the Japanese interpretation of the astral configuration as Sode Boshi or a “young woman’s ... decorative kimono sleeve” (see fig. 5; Renshaw and Ihara 75) embodies a feminine spirit, which readers can understand as Ronin’s

mother, Okichi. Ronin himself can be seen in this constellation through a Japanese lens when peering at Mitsu Boshi, or the three stars of Orion's belt. When referred to as Oyakoukou Boshi, this tri-star configuration "implies a kind of filial duty one has to one's parents" wherein the "three stars are viewed as the child holding up his/her parents or the three (parents and child) standing together" (Renshaw and Ihara 78). Ronin's journey to reunite with his father in visions and his drive to foster responsible relationships with the Anishinaabe, Japanese, and Ainu through trickster moves fulfills this Japanese familial, ancestral duty—one that the night sky depicts.<sup>93</sup>

It is important to note that the original Trickster, Nanabozho, as Basil Johnston explains, "was a supernatural being" (*Ojibway Heritage* 19) sent by Kitche Manitou<sup>94</sup> (the Great Mystery or Creator) to teach the Anishinaabeg (17) through his "paradox[ical]" capacity as both "physical and spirit being" (20). Within Anishinaabe cosmology, Nanabozho is clearly a spirit and teacher and not an archetype or literary device; however, Nanabozho embodies and teaches certain modes of thinking within Anishinaabe thought. Noodin asserts that Vizenor "rewrites the colonial language that has been used to describe the Anishinaabe" (178), arguing that tracing the genealogy of Vizenor's usage of "trickster" through Nanabozho enables literary analysis from "an Anishinaabe perspective" and points to "the raw power of transformation and possibility" in Vizenor's trickster novels (174). Vizenor states that "tribal tricksters are embodied in imagination and liberate the mind" (*Trickster of Liberty* x) through narratives that "contradict, unsettle, and unglue the creeds" ("Follow the Trickroutes" 294). Through embodied imagination, *Hiroshima Bugi* unsettles and unglues creeds of nationhood that are built on racialism and separatism as premises for domination. Vizenor foregrounds survivance as both a basis of Anishinaabe society and a practice counter to racialist and separatist thought that underpin societies of dominance. Trickster as a "paradox," at once two seemingly different states of being—physical and spirit—embodies unsettling or challenging the status quo, such as simplistic divisions between body and spirit, while always remaining a whole, distinct being.

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<sup>93</sup> Ronin does not pursue this same relationship with his mother, but she is a felt presence in the novel.

<sup>94</sup> Spellings vary between writers. For example, Noodin writes "Gichi Manidoo" and Simpson uses "Gzhwe Manidoo."

Similarly, I suggest that the crossblood trickster storiers in Vizenor's works, such as *Ronin*, do not venerate racial or cultural hybridity. Instead, they challenge what Vizenor calls the "translated trickster" figure (*Trickster of Liberty* x) of the Eurocentric scholarly imagination in which the Anishinaabe are a tragic race of "Indians," vanishing through death, assimilation, or blood dilution. Therefore, Vizenor's tricksters and Trickster narratives unsettle colonial, anthropological, tragic "translations" of Anishinaabe peoples and thought as only qualifying as Anishinaabe if they are historically fixed, static, and pure.

### Trickster Stones: Orality and Trickster Consciousness through Structure and Typography

With *Hiroshima Bugi*, Vizenor casts one of the stones of Anishinaabe stories across the ocean and into Hiroshima, where survivance reverberates through the novel by means of *Ronin* and his trickster logic. Within the opening sentences, Vizenor evokes the image of stone as storyteller when *Ronin*, sitting at the site of the atomic bomb dome, beckons an unidentified addressee to "Come closer to the stone" (*Hiroshima* 1) and "[s]tay overnight [so that] ... you may see a theater of human horseweeds and perfect memories. This is our new story" (2). By addressing the reader in the second person, the text leaves readers to initially assume that *Ronin* is speaking to them, thus indicating that the story demands an active listener. An active listener who comes closer to the "stone" can see it as "the planting" of a story within a story, which Noodin identifies as an "essential trait in oral stories" and a technique used in Anishinaabe stories to connect to "other archetypes that may help listeners anchor the story to Anishinaabe" epistemology (74). By coming closer to the stone or anchoring *Hiroshima Bugi* to Nanabozho as a philosophical impetus—that is, by using a trickster logic—the audience can witness *Ronin*'s "new story," which the narrator describes as the "theater of human horseweeds and perfect memories" (2). I discuss "perfect memories" in my next section, but at this point it is helpful to note that horseweeds were the first plants to grow in the scorched ruins of the atomic bomb and they became a source of sustenance for the starving survivors. Horseweed or *Conyza canadensis* is native to almost all of North America. In 1867, its introduction to Japan was "accidental"; today, however, its habitat range is nearly the entire country to the extent that it competes with native vegetation and is generally considered a parasite (National Institute for Environmental Studies, Japan). Thus, horseweed does not have a single, self-contained meaning in the text.

Rather, horsetweed conveys meaning through its relationship to place and how human beings participate in this relationship. Horsetweed, like the shattered Nanabozho stones, transforms as it travels and transplants in a different land. Presumably, in its native habitat, horsetweed is part of a balanced ecosystem. In Japan, however, where it is introduced by a thoughtless human vector, it behaves invasively with explosive expansion that harms the balance of the native ecosystems—not unlike the behaviour of American imperialism and the radiation from the atomic bomb. However, as the first plant to grow from the ruins, it nevertheless helps re-establish life-supporting systems. As one part of this ecosystem, human survivors who defy annihilation and grow from the decimated land are nourished by this plant; in this sense, the metaphor of “human horsetweeds” suggests that the trickster mode sustains survivance or a theater of presence and continuance in the face of domination and destruction.

In *Hiroshima Bugi*, Vizenor animates the presence and creativity of oral storytelling practices using textual strategies such as nonlinear plot development, gaps between what is told by co-narrators, and communal discourse. The novel is structured through the constellation of Anishinaabe and other Indigenous storiers, Vizenor’s term for visionary creators of narratives—from oral storytellers to novelists and beyond—of Turtle Island. Moreover, in one view, the novel is the relational story of three Indigenous characters: Ronin, Orion “Nightbreaker” Browne, and Ranald MacDonald. Vizenor calls this interwoven story “perfect memories” (*Hiroshima* 22), which I define as a collective vision generated by survivance. The novel begins with Ronin in the atomic ruins. Fifty-eight years after the Americans dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, Ronin stages a number of acts of survivance by subverting the monuments of “fake peace” erected by militarism, colonialism, and dominance. The novel moves back and forth through time and space and interweaves the lives of Ronin, Nightbreaker, and the real-life sailor from the 1800s, Ranald MacDonald, the son of a Chinook mother and Scottish father.

This interwoven quality gestures toward the novel’s communal narrative. Vizenor explains that “[n]arrative voices are corporeal in the oral tradition” (*Trickster of Liberty* x), and this corporeality is carried into the trickster narrative as “a wild venture in communal discourse” (*Trickster of Liberty* x). The active, corporeal reader is part of the communal discourse and “implies the author, imagines narrative voices, inspires characters, and salutes tribal tricksters” (Vizenor, *Trickster of Liberty* xi). Each chapter is narrated first by Ronin, then, under the

heading *Manidoo Envoy*, by an otherwise unnamed Anishinaabe veteran who lived with *Nightbreaker* in the Hotel Manidoo in Arizona, where Ronin meets and befriends him. Ronin's accounts are sparse, poetic, and literary, and they are often contextualized, problematized, or expanded by *Manidoo Envoy*'s lengthy, citation-filled sections. These sections, however, are not always consecutive and are frequently spread across chapters.

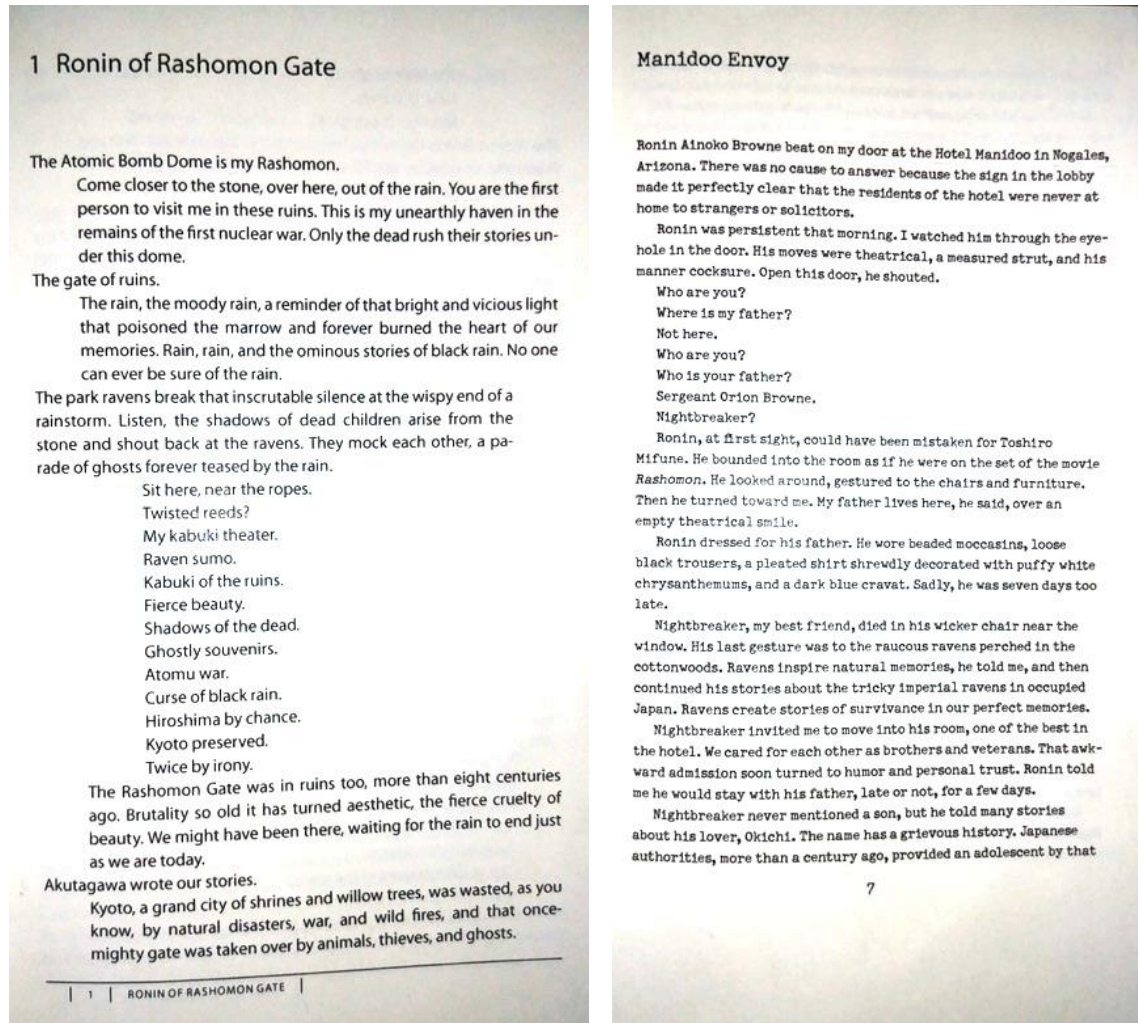
Vizenor fashions what Kimberly M. Blaeser identifies as a practice in Indigenous literature to use "multiple voices to create a cacophony of reality" and demands an active listener or audience who can fill in the gaps and create connections. As I noted in Chapter Two, the effect of this practice is to formally emulate oral storytelling in which "traditional oral narratives are often participatory" (Blaeser 62). For example, the Table of Contents indicates that both Ronin and *Manidoo* share chapters and that their voices are not structurally separated (see fig. 6.). Moreover, though the thirteen chapters are sequentially numbered, they are also distinguished by title. Each numbered title connects Ronin to a place, entity, or a thing through the relational preposition "of." For example, the first chapter is "Ronin of Rashomon Gate." Beneath each of these titles and adjusted to the right of it is the name, *Manidoo Envoy*.



Contents	
1. Ronin of Rashomon Gate	1
Manidoo Envoy	7
2. Ronin of the Imperial Moat	15
Manidoo Envoy	19
3. Ronin of Sagami Bay	27
Manidoo Envoy	33
4. Ronin of the Peace Park	39
Manidoo Envoy	49
5. Ronin of the Inu Shrine	55
Manidoo Envoy	63
6. Ronin of the Black Rain	75
Manidoo Envoy	85
7. Ronin of the Origami Cranes	91
Manidoo Envoy	99
8. Ronin of the Invisible Tattoos	105
Manidoo Envoy	113
9. Ronin of the Ainu Bears	119
Manidoo Envoy	133
10. Ronin of Yasukuni Jinja	143
Manidoo Envoy	157
11. Ronin of the Ginza	167
Manidoo Envoy	175
12. Ronin of Matsue	179
Manidoo Envoy	193
13. Ronin of Lafcadio Hearn	197
Manidoo Envoy	205

**Figure 6: Table of Contents from *Hiroshima Bugi*.**

Typography also contributes to this communal mode of storytelling as well as to the multi-dimensionality of the text as the narrative crosses time and space. Manidoo Envoy, like the font in his sections of the text, is printed in a smaller, serif font reminiscent of typewriter text (see fig. 7). Within the body of the novel, Ronin’s segments have a running footer beneath a clean line and include stylized chapter headings and page numbers while Manidoo Envoy’s simply contain centered page numbers (see fig. 7). His name role as a messenger is emphasized by his name, “Envoy” and in the name of the font, Courier, which is used for his follow-up missives to Ronin’s narrative. The bare formatting and font make Manidoo Envoy’s contributions look like they have been typed on an old typewriter in the Hotel Manidoo.



**Figure 7: Ronin and Manidoo Envoy's first entries from *Hiroshima Bugi*.**

Although the idea of an old typewriter conjures a material setting—one can hear the sound of the keys clicking, smell the metal and ink, and almost feel the weight of the machine—the name of the hotel implies that it also exists in a non-corporeal dimension. *Manidoo* (or *manitou*), as I mentioned in the previous chapter, is translated by Johnston with words such as “[m]ystery, essence, . . . supernatural spirit” and “invisible reality” (*The Manitous* 242). Thus, the unique visual representation of Manidoo Envoy’s sections when interpreted through the narrator’s presumed setting also demarcate the hotel’s distinct multi-dimensionality. The Hotel Manidoo is both a physical place peopled with human beings and a spiritual space that is inhabited by incorporeal entities or spirits. Consequently, we can infer that Nightbreaker still dwells in the Hotel Manidoo albeit in an incorporeal form. The multi-dimensional plot development used by

Vizenor is critical to Anishinaabe oral storytelling. Analyzing translations and transcriptions of *aadizookakaanag* (traditional, sacred stories), White Earth Anishinaabe critic Adam Spry articulates that by unfolding parts of the action in “sacred (and ambiguous) *space[s]* ... stories retain the sense that spiritual power is ineffably tied to geography” (59). Therefore, the Hotel Manidoo dwells at a particular intersection of spiritual space and geographical place from which Manidoo Envoy participates in the narrative.

Moreover, in contrast to Ronin’s spare details but numerous, sometimes obscure references, Manidoo offers paragraph after paragraph of information, including direct quotations from newspapers, scholarly works, travel narratives, and works of literature. He also frequently offers translations for Japanese and Anishinaabemowin words. His transitions between paragraphs are choppy and sequential paragraphs are often unrelated. As Linda Lizut Helstern observes, “his additions often [read] like footnotes as he meticulously credits his sources” (180). Although his contributions generally directly illuminate Ronin’s preceding segments, Manidoo Envoy sometimes offers details about things Ronin talks about in later or earlier chapters. For Helstern’s project, the “multiple disconnections and the lack of obvious order” is how “Vizenor insists that the reader focus on the constructedness of this text” (180).

Though this reading is insightful, I am interested in a different dimension this form brings to the story. Beyond a simply aesthetic differentiation, these visual choices give distinct senses of presence to the two narrators. In its formatting, font, style, and content, Ronin’s chapter is infused with his flair for performance. His chapters are also notable for their irony and their ever-elusive quality; his dialogue is hard-to-pin down, and in each chapter, he re-creates himself through a relational preposition. He is always Ronin but never Ronin “of” the same place, community, or thing.

Additionally, the structure is informed by natural reason and Anishinaabe knowledge because, even as Ronin creates an Atomic Calendar that begins with the year the bomb is dropped (referenced in the novel’s title, *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57*), it has thirteen chapters, which are reminiscent of the thirteen moons of the lunar calendar. Manidoo Envoy explains that Ronin “established an original measure of time ... The Atomu calendar is based on a standard solar year that starts with the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima” (49). Thus, while the title, *Atomu 57*,

refers to the year in which “Ronin created these stories” (49) and demands a reckoning with nuclear devastation and its violations of relationality, the rhythm of the chapters mimic natural reason in the cycle of lunar time. Viewed thus, the novel does not end with Ronin’s death, but rather signals his rebirth and appearance in a new story with a new moon, or a new Chapter 1 in another story.

While Manidoo Envoy is always Manidoo Envoy—in contrast to Ronin’s ever- changing names—he is also never static. His presence, as noted above, is conveyed through the serif font and minimalist formatting of the pages that evoke the tactile imprinting process of the typewriter. The abrupt transitions between often unrelated paragraphs also contributes to the sense of Manidoo Envoy’s composition being concurrent with the reader’s experience of his passages—almost like a highly educated stream-of-consciousness response to Ronin’s renderings. The pulse between these two contrasting narratives creates a sense of oral narration within the text. Both command an intense level of reader engagement—whether it be following the dialogue of speakers with nothing more than layout patterns and content cues or trying to take in significant amounts of fascinating details, tie them to Ronin’s preceding passage, and integrate it into the overall novel. The excitement and artistry of Ronin’s provocative accounts, in combination with the sense of immediacy, tactility and spontaneity of Manidoo Envoy’s counterparts, give the novel an air of orality that connects this book to Anishinaabe oral storytelling. For Vizenor, Anishinaabe oral storytelling exemplifies the continuance at the core of survivance. Like stone, survivance, as Vizenor tells us and I cited above, is “substantial” or material presence, a kind of presence that is difficult to refute. Oral storytelling is an embodied or corporeal practice and in its material transmission is also an irrefutable presence. Through such literary strategies, Vizenor creates a pulsing, almost corporeal presence for each narrator. More broadly, the pairing of and resonance between each narrator emphasizes their distinct characters while highlighting their compatibility. Ronin’s recognition of this relational capacity is perhaps why he “instructed me [Manidoo Envoy] to complete the stories from his notes and papers and provide an envoy with information about the scenes in the stories” (194).

Moreover, Manidoo Envoy explains that Ronin sent his journal to the Hotel Manidoo where it was laboured over with the “favor and scrutiny of *many*” (194; emphasis added) native storier veterans to communally produce the novel through their “perfect memories” (*Hiroshima* 9). The

novel is not only co-narrated, but it has also been communally composed through this practice that Ronin learns from the Hotel's Indigenous inhabitants, which I will engage in greater detail shortly. These co-narrations and collective compositions are also Anishinaabe constellations insofar as the image or story is relationally produced.

Beyond his relationship with Manidoo and role as a narrative co-creator, Ronin himself has a literary or narrative genealogy beyond the novel. As a descendant (at least a literary descendant) of Vizenor's character Almost Browne, his name offers a play on racial identity and also tells us that Ronin Browne is a storier who, like Almost, will always tell us "almost the whole truth" ("Ice Tricksters" 24). His first name comes from, *Rōnin*, which, as is commonly known, is a samurai who has lost his master to death or dishonor. An honourable samurai would respond to this loss by *harakiri* (ritual suicide), whereas a dishonorable one would carry on living without a master or purpose like a man adrift on the waves of the sea. In Japanese, "Ronin" literally means "wave man." Despite the word's modern day popular cultural connotations of an alluring rebel,<sup>95</sup> Ronins were wanderers, drifters who were largely considered social outcasts. On all accounts, Ronin Browne is a social outcast; as not only an orphan, but also a *hafu* or crossblood, he refuses to be obedient to any master. His continuous rebirths defy social order, time, place, and even death. Although Ronin is not Nanabozho, he embodies Vizenor's conception of trickster logic, which is a key element of survivance.

Survivance defies colonial containment through trickster narratives, which are "a wild venture in communal discourse, an uncertain humor that denies aestheticism, translation, and imposed representations" (*The Trickster of Liberty* x). Ronin's presence and his vivacity are premised on his ability to evade being pinned down. Neither his identity nor the meanings of his stories, nor even his physicality, can be fully apprised. This evasion also speaks to the nature of survivance, which depends on practice, dynamism, and transformations rooted in natural reason.

Although "wild" and "humorous" tales can be generically compartmentalized as comedy, Vizenor has emphasized how the comic aspect of trickster consciousness and narratives emerges

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<sup>95</sup> Consider, for example, *Ronin* (1998) starring Robert De Niro, a film about a team of international former special operatives turned mercenaries.

from an Anishinaabe storytelling tradition. In “Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games,” Vizenor impresses, “The trickster is a comic discourse, a collection of “utterances” in oral tradition; the opposite of a comic discourse is a monologue, an utterance in isolation, which comes closer to the tragic mode in literature and not a comic tribal world view” (191). Vizenor uses the co- in comic as the relational prefix meaning joint or together to create a new definition of comic, one that fits Anishinaabe literary tradition. The Anishinaabe comic is discursive and characterized by the exchange of utterances. As I detailed above, Vizenor infuses *Hiroshima Bugi* with an oral dimension—characterized by multiple voices and intense audience engagement—in order to create a corporeal narrative voice and communal discourse. Moreover, Ronin’s numerous attacks against fake peace and oppression are comic in that he uses wit, humor, and bawdy actions. For example, when Ronin is arrested for setting the Pond of Peace on fire, he is wearing a t-shirt bearing the words, “Is it big enough?” (42), which Manidoo Envoy explains is a reference refers to the power of nuclear arms to establish a fake, tyrannical peace (24-5). Ronin cleverly uses the phallic innuendo to evade police interrogation. This element of the story’s action enriches the novel’s relationship to Anishinaabe narrative tradition.

Another important trait of trickster consciousness is compassion. Manidoo Envoy specifically describes “naanabozho” as a “compassionate trickster figure” (*Hiroshima Bugi* 138). Through the use of the adjective “compassionate,” Vizenor signals how his use of the word “trickster” is derived from Anishinaabe language and knowledge. Elsewhere, he states that the “tribal trickster is a liberator and healer in a narrative” (“Trickster Discourse” 187). Ronin’s compassion is the force that moves him to champion the liberation and healing of numerous communities in Japan. Indeed, the compassionate and comic aspects of Anishinaabe literary tradition are key elements of trickster consciousness, and these are exemplified through Ronin’s loyalties and actions. He may not have a master, but he is loyal to the hibakusha (survivors of the nuclear bombings) and orphans of the Japanese occupation. He places his mastery of the comic at the service of those to whom he is loyal through a number of comic actions that attack, unsettle, and reveal systems of oppression.

Accordingly, these descriptors, compassionate and comic, contrast Anishinaabe literary and cosmological understandings against Western anthropological interpretations of tricksters—the “translated” tricksters that exist only on the printed page and in the realm of “monologue” for

readers' passive consumption. It would be a mistake to assume that these terms originate within the matrix of Western literary genres. As Noodin directs, scholars can strive to read Anishinaabe stories in an "Anishinaabe way" (xx). Noodin urges us to think with Anishinaabe literature as existing within Anishinaabe cosmology, a perspective that includes storytelling structures and content. The Anishinaabe world, or an Anishinaabe understanding of the world as conveyed through trickster narratives, is comic not in a superficial sense that focuses simply on pleasure or amusement. And yet it also does not denigrate positive feelings in favor of adverse effects. This is particularly important when looking at Vizenor's work, which, though largely written in English, is rooted in Anishinaabe thought and exists in a web of Anishinaabe oral and textual literature. In such contexts, language can too easily deceive us into false equivalencies and tempt us to attribute terms incorrectly to genealogies within Western philosophy and literary traditions. Vizenor contends that the language of Anishinaabe stories is metaphoric in that it refers to dynamic ideas or concepts, which thus must be approached with a creative mind attentive to how language refers to something that evades containment—post-structuralists might refer to this as the gap between the signifier and signified. Part of understanding "comic" in an Anishinaabe way requires considering how survivance in trickster narratives "arises in the agonistic imagination" (*The Trickster of Liberty* x). While Vizenor is not saying that Anishinaabe stories are combative in the sense that survivance is solely a response to domination, his novel suggests that Anishinaabe stories are naturally combative of any source that would attempt to undermine or extinguish this continuance precisely because they are a mode of continuance.

Indeed, the nature of Anishinaabe stories and peoplehood is continuance—carrying forward Anishinaabe philosophy, creativity, vision, and memory. Survivance is the practice of doing this work in the face of domination; survivance nurtures continuance while challenging narratives and structures that are designed to destroy the Anishinaabe. This is how survivance is presence in the face of absence. It is a single process, but it is dualistic in nature. By rooting "comic" in Anishinaabe survivance, the term survivance thus also offers an agonistic response to Eurocentric artistic conventions and scholarship. I understand the comic, then, as Vizenor's response not only to traditional classifications of the Western literary categories of tragedy and

comedy but also to the settler-colonial narrative of the “tragic Indian.”<sup>96</sup> Yet it is clear that Vizenor does not advocate comedy’s equivalence or superiority to tragedy. Instead, he speaks of the comic or comedy from a place independent of Western literary traditions.

At one level, Ronin’s last-name identifies him as a trickster; however, more significantly than identifying a literary figure, it grounds Vizenor’s use of the term in Anishinaabe survivance as a mode of liberatory consciousness. Although Orion Browne is never named as a descendant of the Browne’s from Vizenor’s 1988 novel *The Trickster of Liberty: Tribal Heirs to a Wild Baronage*, his last-name and belonging to the White Earth Reservation, where he has “several relatives” (207), signal his, and thus Ronin’s, kinship to the tribal trickster Luster Browne and storier Novena Mae, as well as their generations of biological and adopted trickster progeny. As one of Vizenor’s tricksters, Sergeant Alexina Hobraiser, states in the prologue to *The Trickster of Liberty*, “The trickster is never in a name, tribal tricksters are in our consciousness” (xii). Ronin continues that consciousness both temporally in the events of *Hiroshima Bugi* as well as across novels. The resonance of this consciousness as embodied by Ronin and his antics connects *Hiroshima Bugi* to a body of distinct but related and/or compatible texts. Through Ronin, Vizenor repurposes the English language to transmit the vibrations of Anishinaabe stones, stories, and storiers, into contemporary contexts and across oceans.

## Uranium Stones and Reading for Resonance in *Hiroshima Bugi*

Thus far, the stones I have discussed invoke trickster consciousness and Anishinaabe cosmology. However, another stone evoked throughout the entire story—one that remains unnamed—is uranium ore.<sup>97</sup> Through this stone (which is used to refine uranium for nuclear technologies),

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<sup>96</sup> The ancient Greeks valued tragedy above comedy; tragedy was in fact viewed as the dramatic genre, whereas comedy was central to their social order. This proclivity has persisted into present-day “philosophical aesthetics, literary criticism, and among many ordinary literary appreciators” (Kieran 427). Matthew Kieran argues that this is premised in the idea that the tragic figure is more complex and thus “gives rise to the complex dramatic structure of tragedy” (429).

<sup>97</sup> Although the Uranium primarily used in the making of Little Boy was most likely from the Congo, between 1931 and 1942 Uranium was mined from Dene territory near Great Bear Lake for the Atomic Bomb program and the Sahtú Dene themselves have affirmed their part in this atrocity via their own prophecy (See *A Village of Widows* (1999) and “Deline and the Bomb” (2015)).



Vizenor tells the entangled story of settler colonialism and Western imperialism. Like the trickster stone, this stone also shatters and bursts, but it does so through a process counter to natural reason and survivance. It shatters through mining, excavation, and processing, and it bursts through radiation and atomic explosion. The sacredness and violence of stones for relationality can be seen in the story of the Sahtú Dene, who worked as labourers to mine uranium from their own lands near Great Bear Lake and suffered (and continue to suffer) from radiation exposure. Despite this, they have taken responsibility for what they view as their contribution to the bombing of Hiroshima, even going so far as to apologize to the Japanese and Korean hibakusha, survivors of the nuclear catastrophe.<sup>98</sup>

Here, this practice of taking responsibility seems to align with the notion of relationality conveyed in a passage from the novel wherein Manidoo Envoy shares Nightbreaker's experience at Camp Desert Rock. He details that, "because of [Nightbreaker's] experience with investigators at Hiroshima, he was assigned to Camp Desert Rock, a nuclear test site in Nevada" (19-20). He ties Orion's experience to real-life military man, Reason Warehime. Although Vizenor does not say it explicitly, the Western Shoshone and Southern Paiute suffered greatly from the testing that was done on their lands, which were made into the Nevada nuclear test site. Indeed, they continue to bear the impact of these tests culturally, physically, and in terms of their relations in the water and in the land, all of which have suffered (see Frohberg et al.). Nightbreaker's own death from cancer is linked to his ongoing work as American military personnel. First, Nightbreaker's exposure to hazardous material in Japan makes him vulnerable to the invasive disease. Second, his work in North America witnesses the ongoing expropriation and

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<sup>98</sup> The Dene have suffered severely from exposure to radiation, as they were neither informed of the dangers of Uranium mining nor given the appropriate safety measures to mitigate the detrimental impacts. They were also never informed of the intended use of the rock that was being mined and then refined in Port Hope before being sent off to Staten Island atomic bomb facilities. Gina Bayha, a Uranium Committee Member from Deline, in the 1999 documentary *A Village of Widows*, expresses how difficult it has been to come to terms with the reality that "the land and the resources and everything is very sacred...and that very source is what actually caused damage to another people" (*A Village of Widows* 00:35:49-00:36:05). In 1999, a delegation of Dene from Deline visited Japan and Cindy Kenny-Gilday, Chairperson for the Deline Uranium Committee, told the Japanese that she was there to accept responsibility for "what has happened here" (00:41:55-00:42:03). In 2008, the Dene apologized to the Japanese for their role in the devastation. Historian Robert Bothwell has argued that the trail of documents prove that Dene uranium was not used in either bomb, but the Dene trust their prophecies and appear to operate by a different ethical code than Bothwell ("Deline and the Bomb").

exploitation of Indigenous peoples and their lands in Nevada, along with the damage done to the land. From one invasive disease (cancer) to another (Western imperialism and settler colonialism), the novel repeatedly emphasizes that Nightbreaker's work as American military personnel contributed to his eventual death.

The kind of relationality modelled in the novel is a very high call to responsibility. This responsibility entails care of the earth and the earth's peoples, as well as acknowledgement for one's culpability, intentional or not, in both the causing of harm to others and the violation of what is sacred in the service of domination and violence.<sup>99</sup> Specifically, here, the novel highlights how stone, which is sacred, and story, as well as storyteller and teacher, are violated and refashioned into weapon, cancer, death: "The Nevada Test site is their *Rashomon*" (20). As Jodi Byrd states, the novel's reference to Japanese filmmaker's Akira Kurosawa's iconic work *Rashomon* "[draws] the characters and readers into a world where absences, conflicting realities, and dis/locatedness trouble one's accepted notions of consciousness in order to address what the novel terms a 'moral survivance' informed by samurai and trickster ethics" (212).

To understand how the Nevada Test Site serves as the *Rashomon* for Nightbreaker and other Indigenous veterans, as well as how Nightbreaker's experiences turn certain absences into presence, we need to consider the context and consequences of U.S. militarism in the Second World War (hereafter WWII). After its apparently successful foray into nuclear warfare, the U.S. had greater demands for uranium and began looking for cost-efficient raw material on home soil. Of course, this meant the machinations of settler colonialism dug deeper into lands that were clearly established as reservations and were supposed to be out of the reach of the settler state, where those who would receive the most harm under the guise of security and economic growth would be Indigenous peoples. After WWII, the U.S. government intensified efforts to extract domestic uranium by setting its sights on Diné (also called Navajo) lands in the Southwest. The Diné, who had long staved off the mining industry, were forced to capitulate to this intrusion

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<sup>99</sup> This is comparable to decolonial love and the necessity to reckon with one own complicity in the oppression of others.

with the promise of some financial benefit.<sup>100</sup> In Nevada, the Western Shoshone and Southern Paiute, had their traditional lands expropriated and assigned as the Nevada Test Site for nuclear weapons testing of the bombs made from the uranium ore mined from other Indigenous territories from 1951 to 1972 (Frohmborg et al.). In *Hiroshima Bugi*, the hibakusha in Japan who are so beloved by Ronin are joined by the Diné, Western Shoshone, and Southern Paiute, who are also impacted by radiation exposure in North America; together, these groups become forever connected in the web of empire. In this way, the novel gestures towards aligning their experiences without conflating them and models healing as a collective process in which aligned harm is treated through aligned healing.

The idea of healing through survivance stories evokes the first storyteller story retold by Dunn, which I invoked in my Introduction in the context of Noodin's analysis of the relationship between stones and Anishinaabe literature. In this story, a young hunter seeks refuge in the shelter of a large stone. The stone tells the boy stories and asks for a gift in return. The boy, who has been able to kill limited game for his kin, "thought of his hungry family ... waiting for the food. But the stone had asked for a gift and could not be refused" (Dunn 16). In this story, the hunter carries this strength back to his people through the practice of storytelling and the content of the stories. Over the cold, snowy months, the hunter repeats this exchange of gifts with the stone. Through the giving away, or sacrifice, of physical food, he receives a different kind of sustenance to support his people. This form of sustenance is so satiating that the boy returns numerous times. The immaterial sustenance of stories and oral storytelling enables the boy to see the difficulties of winter through to the promise and plenty of spring. In spring, when the boy brings another offering, the stone tells him that the boy has heard all of the stone's stories but, what's more, the stone wants the boy "to make new ones" (Dunn 17). Thinking of the winter season symbolically, stories and the act of communal storytelling offer the promise of sustenance through difficulty and hardship.

Nightbreaker also suffers difficulty and hardship. The novel notes his "nuclear wounds," which I argue not only stems from his physical cancer but also the psychological, emotional, and spiritual

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<sup>100</sup> See Traci Brynne Voyles's *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country*.

wounds from witnessing the devastation of the bombs and occupation in Japan—as well as the devastation to the Western Shoshone, Southern Paiute, and Diné and their lands. Fittingly, part of Nightbreaker’s treatment is a regimen of “meditation, native medicine, and annual survivance stories” (18). But in this story of a stone, of uranium ore, relationality means healing the stone as well; it means acknowledging both the devastation caused by the bomb as well as the desecration attendant to gutting the sacred and manipulating it for destructive designs of domination and decimation. Healing demands the return to natural reason and existing in the world in ways that honour relationality.

Even though Nightbreaker arrives in Japan through the mechanisms of empire, Manidoo Envoy’s explanation of Nightbreaker’s original interest in Japan reveals he was motivated by relationality. Nightbreaker was useful to the American military because of the knowledge and skills he developed from his attraction to Japanese and Ainu culture and cosmology and their resonances with his own. He “learned about haiku poetry ... at the mission school” and later “studied Japanese on his own for several years because he was fascinated with the adventures of Ranald MacDonald ... from Ainu communities in Hokkaido to Nagasaki” (22). MacDonald and his travels symbolize relationality on a global scale. Regrettably, the only opportunity that presents itself for Nightbreaker’s pursuit of this vision is one mediated by empire—one that makes him complicit in death and domination. Even Ronin’s existence is implicated; Vizenor names his mother Okichi, and although she is described as a boogie dancer and her relationship with Nightbreaker is described as amorous, the reader is led to really interrogate the simplicity of this notion—or, in the tradition of oral storytelling, reflect on the gaps or what is left unsaid. Manidoo Envoy laments that her name “bears a grievous history” (7) as the first prominent Okichi was a child given “as a consort for ... the first consul of the United States” (8) and that, after her, “prostitutes” (probably sex-workers and trafficked girls and women) like those who service foreign occupiers often bore the name Okichi. Even the intimate and sexual relationship that brings Ronin into physical being is one of complicity with empire. Vizenor uses this naming practice common in Anishinaabe narrative tradition to re-entrench the connection to the stories of American and allied soldiers fathering children with Japanese women during the occupation. This literary strategy highlights the intimate violence central to such unions in a manner similar to Ronin’s upbringing in an orphanage for these children.

While Vizenor's protagonist travels the world like Nanabozho's stone-brother as a practice of survivance, his predecessors were unable to enact relationality in their travels in accordance with natural reason. Their moves and existence in place became mediated by the whims of empire—regardless of whether they bought into or were made complicit in it. Their movement across the world became like the movement of uranium, like the violation of relationality towards the mineral entities of the Earth as Vizenor's work considers "American Indian participation in and disruption of conviviality within the transits of empire" (Byrd 190). Jodi Byrd notes that Vizenor's "unmapping of the nineteenth-century voyageur and half-Chinook Ranald MacDonald's travels through the Pacific and into Ainu territory in Japan troublingly parallels ... the consequences of the atomic weaponry that violently ended World War II" (190). I draw on Byrd's analysis of MacDonald's journey as parallel to atomic weaponry to contend that the movement of people, like the movement of stone or processed uranium, represents the violation of relationality. Moreover, Byrd's invocation of "the nineteenth-century voyageur" conjures the motif of rivers in the novel, which, as part of the relational systems called watersheds, model ways to embody and practice relationality. When natural reason scaffolds a literary work, as is the case of *Hiroshima Bugi*, the text is embedded with details that require active readership (close observation) beyond the text and towards the land in which the stories unfold. In addition to reading the literary and cosmological functions of stones in the novel, analyzing the representation of bodies of water in *Hiroshima Bugi* in accordance with natural reason undercuts colonial mappings and control of land insofar as the rivers model healing, love, and survivance.

## Learning Relationality from Rivers and River Spirit Relatives

The stone and all its implications impart a consciousness to the novel, imbuing it with survivance; similarly, rivers and bodies of water as part of relational systems infuse the text with natural reason. Just as the first chapter immediately grounds the text in stone, rivers are quickly evoked with the words: "The Atomic Bomb Dome is my Rashomon" (1). The Atomic Bomb Dome to which Ronin returns is located on the bank of the Ota River, where the Motoyasu and Honkawa rivers (Kawa) branch off. I suggest that this site is critical to understanding the important difference between natural reason and a Euro-Western notion of reason based in ideas of human, gendered, and racial superiority that results in designs towards domination. Rivers and

their natural forking can at the very least be an important marker of place that helps people who know a land orient themselves.

However, the American pilot who dropped the bomb, Little Boy, on Hiroshima was not looking for this natural point. From the clouds, he was instructed to look for the Aioi Bridge, which Manidoo Envoy points out “was the actual target site” (50). If mapping refers to ways of knowing land, then the American military understands the land through human-made targets, through infrastructure superimposed over the land. The novel illustrates that the eyes of imperialism use the geometric symmetry of human-made structure, the distinct T-shaped Aioi bridge, which would be easily visually located by the bomber, and not the natural marker of the land-carved branching of two rivers.

While the pilot saw a target and the Japanese government fashioned the site into an altar to false peace, Ronin presents a different experience of place. Notably, he uses rivers to assert a way of knowing land; Ronin identifies place by the rivers—he calls Hiroshima, with its six rivers, the river city. In this way, Vizenor honours relationality between numerous diverse entities and challenges colonialism and imperialism. Indeed, Ronin sees and interprets the site in accordance with natural reason and for the purposes of healing and justice, not mass murder and domination. He describes how, “Early in the morning, every morning since this river city was decimated, at this very site, the ruins of the hypocenter, shadows of the dead gather in a ghost parade ... The children of incineration and the white bones of an empire war, arise in a nuclear kabuki theatre” (2).

Kabuki, a performance art that, as I mentioned earlier, Manidoo Envoy tells us influences Ronin’s storytelling style, is a centuries-old art form or practice involving dance, music, and acting that was itself born on a river bank.<sup>101</sup> Its creation is subaltern and subversive, as it was crafted by a shrine maiden and other women and was distinguished by its eroticism and cross-dressing. Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to address the complexities of kabuki theater, Kyoto Matsunaga suggests that, in the novel, it is through the “kabuki ghost parade” that

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<sup>101</sup> The Kyoto river.

Ronin brings together “the histories and consequences of two genocides, one waged against Native Americans for over five hundred years and one that resulted from the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki” (111). First, Matsunaga draws together similarities between kabuki and trickster logics by noting that “the style and elements of kabuki embrace many notable traits of the trickster narrative” (112). These traits include gender-play/fluidity and, as Matsunaga observes, “imagination and adaptability to changes” (112). Matsunaga goes on to note that “Kabuki actors are celebrated for their creativity, particularly the interpretive changes they make to the original plays, just as tricksters are known for their disruptive and transformative actions” (112). Manidoo Envoy illuminates that, although Ronin “never discussed the style of his scenes, shifts of pronoun, transformations, or metaphorical tease ... he was strongly influenced by kabuki and sumo theater ... [and] created from perfect visual memory a theatrical, literary style” (12). Another interesting reading that Matsunaga offers is considering Vizenor’s “kabuki ghost parade” next to “The Ghost Dance.” The layering that Vizenor does here evokes elements of the Ghost Dance: in both, spirits of the dead and living unite in thwarting colonialism and domination in the path of renewal and peace. American imperialists suppressed both the Ghost Dance and kabuki as strategies of destroying Indigenous practices in order to maintain power (112 -113). It is important to remember that the “kabuki ghost parade” is Vizenor’s invention, however, and not an actual Japanese practice.<sup>102</sup> But, at the site of the river, the river represents natural reason and survivance, while the manufactured bridge is an imperialist marker for the kinds of understanding of human reason and intellect that produce destruction and domination. Vizenor turns to the river for natural reason, which yields transformation, renewal, and real peace. Like Ronin, kabuki theatre teases and mocks fake peace at the site of its monumentalization and performance.

Despite the existence of six rivers around Hiroshima, Vizenor names none of them. Since natural reason is directly related to spending time on the land in observation and interaction, literary strategies to evoke natural reason would thus need to arouse similar relationships. There are

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<sup>102</sup> The Ghost Dance itself was not an ancient practice but was conceived by Wovoka (Northern Paiute) through a vision in 1890. It was adopted by members of other Indigenous nations, most famously by the Lakota. Wovoka’s Ghost Dance is comparable to Vizenor’s conceptualization of the “kabuki ghost parade” in that both practices are created in a way that other peoples and nations can use them for their own survivance.

some explicit references to the city's rivers, but mostly the novel contains implicit references to rivers and bodies of water. In a novel that contains extensive details on all manner of topics, this uncanny refusal to specify the names of rivers tasks readers with the responsibility to employ a kind of literary natural reason to learn more about the lands where the story is staged. While the novel refers to Hiroshima as "the river city," the only river named in the novel is the Mississippi. Part of Anishinaabe lands, the name "Mississippi" is the anglicization of the Anishinaabe name, "Misi-zibi (Great River)" for a distinct segment of the body of water that the settler state identifies with a single name—the Anishinaabe identify six segments by specific names (Lippert and Engel). It is at these headwaters that Nightbreaker is healed. Ronin tells us:

He was an army interpreter with the advance occupation forces at the end of the war and travelled with investigators and photographers to Hiroshima. Near here, in my nuclear kabuki theater of the ruins, he was exposed to nuclear radiation, and twenty years later he was diagnosed with cancer. Hiroshima he might have survived, had he not been ordered a few years later to witness nuclear tests at Yucca Flat in Nevada. He retired from the army, nursed his nuclear wounds, and built a cabin at the headwaters of the Mississippi river near the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota. He recovered by meditation, native medicine, and the annual stories of survivance at the headwaters. Later, after many years as a roamer, he moved south with two other wounded veterans to the Hotel Manidoo in Nogales Arizona. (18)

For an understanding of the connection between Nightbreaker's healing and the Mississippi headwaters, I turn to an interview with Jim Jones Jr. (Maajijjwan), a member of the Leech Lake Pillage Band and the Cultural Resource Director for the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council. Sitting at the headwaters of the Mississippi river at Itasca State Park, Jones explains that "the Mississippi provides us with life-giving water, wild rice, plants, the mammals that we hunt. Its continuity is the continuity of our culture. To me, it is sacred because for thousands of years we have chosen to bury our dead here, returning them to the womb of mother earth ... For me, it is life itself" ("Down the Mississippi"). Jones's use of the terms "life itself" and "continuity" when describing the Mississippi, specifically at the head waters, is reflected in Vizenor's description of survivance. The river, as part of a watershed, embodies and conveys relationality between the spirits of Anishinaabe ancestors (buried near the river) with those who are physically alive as



well as the *manoomin*, plants, and animals, and the connection the water gives to all of these entities, including “the womb of the earth” (Jones). Nightbreaker’s illness resulted from exposure to the side-effects of violating relationality: the radiation that comes from mining uranium ore out of the Earth and using it to produce and use weapons of mass death and destruction. It also resulted from his complicity in imperialism both in North American territory and in Japan. His recovery, then, necessarily relies on living back in the balance of relationality, in accordance with survivance. At the headwaters of the Mississippi, he can recover in the continuity and life-supporting networks the Anishinaabe have maintained for generations. Once recovered, Nightbreaker “roams” for many years before relocating to Nogales Arizona, where other “native veterans” are also living.

Trying to think with natural reason, I emphasize Manidoo Envoy’s first entry, where he states: “Nightbreaker, my best friend, died in his wicker chair near the window. His last gesture was to the raucous ravens perched in the cottonwoods” (7). Understanding place and the natural environment means recognizing that cottonwoods grow in and near riverbeds. In the context of Nightbreaker’s last days in Arizona, I suggest that this is an implicit reference to another river, the Santa Cruz. Moreover, on the following page, Manidoo Envoy describes how Ronin sat at the same spot as Nightbreaker, writing letters to his deceased father, “overlook[ing] three giant cottonwood trees and the border between Mexico and the United States” (8). With his last gesture, Nightbreaker indicates the ravens and the cottonwoods. Nightbreaker’s trickster son, Ronin, also repeatedly notes that the ravens in Japan are “tricksters.” In one reading, his last gesture foreshadows the arrival of Ronin. Meanwhile, Ronin’s meditation on the cottonwoods as he writes letters to his father sets up riparian relationality against American and Japanese imperialism and settler colonialisms as foreshadowed by the ravens and the Mexico-U.S. border.

Nightbreaker’s subsequent decision to roam away from the Mississippi and convene with a collective of international native veterans on the Santa Cruz River creates another situation wherein turning to the land enriches the close reading. The land in this instance refers particularly to river systems, watersheds, and the relationship between them. The Mississippi headwaters do not flow to the Santa Cruz River; it is actually connected to the Colorado River system on the western part of the continent, flowing south, starting in rocky mountain headwaters and emptying into the gulf of California. The Santa Cruz is a tributary of the Gila

River, which is a tributary of the Colorado River. The part of the Santa Cruz River that is of interest to my reading of relationality and natural reason is the way it flows through Arizona: it flows south from Nogales, US and into Nogales, Mexico, and then back up through Nogales, US before it flows North into the Gila River. The Manidoo Hotel is on the banks of the Santa Cruz River, a part of the traditional territories of the Tohono O’odham nation (translated into English as Desert People) while the Gila River is part of the related Akimel O’odham (River People) nation’s territory. The Tohono O’odham lands and people are split along the longest border that divides an Indigenous nation’s land on the southern border of the United States.<sup>103</sup>

*Hiroshima Bugi* provides inferences that support an understanding of place against the mappings of land in terms of colonially imposed borders.<sup>104</sup> While none of these rivers are mentioned by name—nor are the Tohono or Akimel O’odham Nations named—reflecting on this information simultaneously with what is elucidated by the Mississippi nevertheless suggests that considering these two river systems and their watersheds together might enrich understanding of the novel. The Mississippi flows from close by the White Earth Reservation at Lake Itsaca to the Gulf of Mexico—flowing from north to south along the length of the United States. The Colorado river systems connected to the Santa Cruz run along the western part of the North American continent, while the Mississippi runs along the eastern side. The Mississippi illustrates the difference between an Anishinaabe understanding of belonging to land against US government compartmentalization into states and reserves/reservations. Moreover, this context prompts us consider the disruption of Anishinaabe relationships between communities and Nations brought about by the US-Canada Border. Applying this analysis to the water system on the west side of the continent, the waters flow through the southern border of the United States, which bifurcates another nation’s territory and relations along the US-Mexico border. The logic of the river

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<sup>103</sup> With his close attention to acknowledging Ainu and Anishinaabe territories in which the story unfolds, it is perplexing as to why the Tohono O’odham are not named in an acknowledgement in the text, as the omission participates in contributing to this nation’s erasure—especially in a novel that uses Envoy’s mediator status as both a structural and literary technique to provide extensive detail.

<sup>104</sup> In recent years, with Donald Trump’s proposed wall on the Nation’s land, the Tohono O’odham have voiced concerns about how such a structure will cause ecological destruction of waterflow and creature migrations (Montiel). This further exemplifies my point about the conflicting logics of rivers and colonial borders.

systems and watersheds undercuts notions of territory based in settler colonialism, laying bare the myopia of this way of seeing, like the imperial eyes that look for the tidy T-shaped Aioi bridge because they cannot comprehend the fork and bend of the river. By contrast, human understanding of social organization and relationship to land that learns the logic of rivers and water through deep personal, generational, and societal observation and engagement would be the practice of natural reason.

Rivers are critical to Anishinaabe legal scholar John Borrows' discussion of the principle of love in Anishinaabe legal traditions drawn from "the land itself" ("Nitam-Miigiwewin" 36). He uses a land-informed methodology "in order to identify a pattern present within many Indigenous legal orders: reasoning that occurs by reference to the natural environment" (36). He asserts that Elders who were his teachers, such as Basil Johnston, drew on aural (not necessarily linguistic) connections between the word *zaagiin* (river mouth) and *zaagi'idiwin* (mutual love) to convey how "rivers should be studied to identify analogies that provide standards about how we should extend our love to others" (38-39). According to Borrows, the standards which the river teaches are that "Love, like a river, should continually flow ... to fortify those who gather around us. It creates a rich, varied, diverse, and abundant life" (39). Love means flow, movement, and distribution of nourishment and strength to support life. This understanding leads to a significant difference between the Santa Cruz River and the US-Mexico border. The River can convey life, movement, and nourishment while the border operates according to theft, containment, annexation, coercion, violence, and control. The cottonwoods that Nightbreaker's last gesture are towards also embody similar principles as the river. *Maanazaadi* (cottonwood) (Morse 35) is a "floodplain foundation species, meaning that it is a species that creates stable conditions for other species. It is one of the first to grow in recently flooded areas" and serves as a home for both aquatic and terrestrial animals at different points in its life-cycle ("Eastern Cottonwood [Populus deltoids]"). This standard is also seen in the novel with the Hotel Manidoo, where a community of veterans from diverse nations find both a home and the conditions to enrich their lives and enact survivance.

Similar to the stones from Dene territory, the Santa Cruz River can also indicate the risk of humans treating the natural environment and other-than-human entities in violation of natural reason. It is important to note that, before the arrival of the representatives of the Spanish Crown

in O’odham territory, the Tohono O’odham, and their Hohokam ancestors, used a sophisticated system of irrigation along the Santa Cruz, a long-standing practice.<sup>105</sup> The scientific and technological knowledge of the Tohono O’odham of the area clearly influenced the colonial interests of the Spaniards, who arrived in the late 1600s and soon began to develop European-style agriculture and mining. However, within two and a half centuries, European approaches to land significantly damaged the river. During the Great Depression, farmers attempted to draw even more water from the overtaxed river system by destroying thousands of cottonwoods which were “deemed thirsty” competitors to agriculture (Logan 182). These trees were recorded to be up to “thirty-five feet in circumference” and “giant” next to other kinds of trees (Logan 182). The massive loss of this foundational species would have undoubtedly been felt by all other living beings who depended on them. In terms of *Hiroshima Bugi*, *maanazaadi* also calls to mind the attack on relationality. Up until recently, the ecosystem and natural cycles of the river have been so devastated that some segments have been “dry for more than 70 years except after big rains” (Davis). Whereas the Tohono O’odham devised a system of irrigation that was based in natural reason with attention to natural balance and cycles, Euro-American interventions in the land has been premised in exploitation and dominance.<sup>106</sup>

### Riverbanks: Where Soldiers Decimate Targets and Warriors Weave Perfect Memories

The placement of the Hotel Manidoo draws our attention to the stakes of understanding land and relationality through natural reason. The inhabitants or composition of Hotel Manidoo, I suggest, set the scene to reflect the loss that results when Indigenous warrior traditions enacting survivance are replaced by imperialist martial roles. Readers only know for sure that two of the native veterans are Anishinaabe. The others are only referred to as native veterans and can presumably come from different nations all over the land occupied by the United States. The spirit hotel of veterans, we can imagine, also housed members of the Tohono O’odham and

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<sup>105</sup> See “Tohono O’odham History.”

<sup>106</sup> It was not until 2019 that, due to the formidable efforts of the Nation, the riparian ecosystem of the Santa Cruz has begun to flourish again (Davis).

Akimel O’odham, who both contributed many members of their nations to the WWII effort—most famously Ira Hayes, who belonged to the Akimel O’odham and one of the six US Marines immortalized in the Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of American troops raising the American flag on Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima. Ronin references Hayes near the end of the novel when he and accomplices blast Johnny Cash’s “The Ballad of Ira Hayes” in the Ginza, Tokyo. In Japan, the song “moved everyone on the street, and many worried hearts mourned over the miseries of the Amerika Indian” (173). Hayes, like many veterans, suffered many tribulations after the war and died a tragic death. Through historical veteran figures like Hayes and fictitious ones like Nightbreaker, Vizenor foregrounds another important linguistic difference and cultural significance between Indigenous and Euro-American conceptions around what may seem like similar ideas: not between trickster or comic but between warrior, soldier, and veteran.

The veterans of Hotel Manidoo enact survivance by practicing a warrior tradition based in relationality and not martial impositions of the authority of nation-states. In *Unsettled Solidarities: Asian and Indigenous Cross-Representations in the Américas*, Quynh Nhu Le refers to Al Carroll’s work criticizing and expounding “the Native American veteran tradition of the twentieth century” (34) while discussing Vizenor’s contributions to this discourse. Le highlights how, for many Indigenous peoples, the veteran tradition is an extension of warrior traditions in its “investment in the futurity of Native nations,” which also includes roles in the continuation of culture, spirituality, education, and social order (34). This is another example of how Vizenor draws our attention to the deceptions of language, as I detailed above with terms such as “trickster” and “comic” or “comedy.” Euro-American and Indigenous etymologies for the same word, “veteran,” are drastically different. In the Anishinaabe traditions that Vizenor presents, the warrior’s roles extend to preservation of culture and sovereignty and thus survivance. The word for “soldier” is *zhmaagan* (*Nishnaabemwin: Odawa and Eastern Ojibwe Online Dictionary* [NOEOOD]) or *zhimaaganish* and (*The Ojibwe People’s Dictionary* [OPD]), while the word for “warrior” is *miigaazoownini* (NOEOOD), related to the word *miigaazwin* (fight) and *miigaaza* (fight, wage war) (NOEOOD), or *ogichidaa*, which is defined as “a ceremonial headman; a warrior, a veteran” (OPD). Le’s study of *Hiroshima Bugi* as a “self-reflexive historiograph[y]” (27), asserts that Vizenor uses the figure of the veteran for two main purposes. First, this figure

critiques how “the complicated memorialization of these figures<sup>107</sup> reveal[ing] the asymmetrical yet intersecting ways that U.S. Asian American and Indigenous historical narratives can become complicit in the liberal reproductions of U.S. settler colonialism and imperialism” (27-28). Second, the figure helps “gesture toward an alternative memorialization of the Native warrior tradition [that] speaks explicitly to its necessary relationship to Indigenous futurity” (34). It is not that Vizenor denigrates Native Veteran traditions; rather, he critiques the ways in which these traditions can veer away from the survivance practiced through warrior traditions and towards tragic victimry, past-tense entrapment, and death of a veteran tradition that buys into the settler colonial imaginary. At the Hotel Manidoo, the veterans are healing the warrior tradition, themselves, and perhaps also the river and riparian ecosystem.

For example, Manidoo Envoy reveals that Handy Fairbanks, who “founded the Hotel Manidoo ... is native, a decorated veteran, and once a great hunter on the reservation [and] ... created a hotel of perfect memories for wounded veterans” (8). His last name, Fairbanks, is another reference to rivers—banks or riparian communities that are “fair”—that is, healthy, just, and beautiful. His first name is suggestive of his handy or practical capabilities such as hunting. As a “great hunter,” Handy ties the warrior traditions of cultural practice and preservation as represented by hunting to the Native Veteran tradition as vital to communities. More than that, he demonstrates the importance of storying to the warrior tradition. Almost nightly at the Hotel, the veterans “came together for dinner and to create our perfect memories. The marvelous, elusive tease of our many stories and variations of stories became concerted memories. Our tricky metaphors were woven together day by day into a consciousness of moral survivance ... Our stories create perfect memories of survivance” (9). Perfect memories, as I briefly mentioned above, are the result of a practice of communal composition that challenge dominant, singular narratives of history and anthropology and transcend time and space.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Le is also referring to the Native American veteran (in *Hiroshima Bugi*) and Asian immigrant laborer (in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men*), but this chapter focuses on the Native American veteran figure only.

<sup>108</sup> Linda Lizut Helstern in “Shifting the Ground: Theories of Survivance in *From Sand Creek* and *Hiroshima Bugi: Atomu 57*” examines Perfect Memory from the perspective of individual agency as a form of survivance that centres the body in assisting “individuals ... to see that they have the power to perform or not perform the roles in which they have been cast” (165).

Ronin took the practice of perfect memories across the ocean and “created perfect memories of his father on the road of visions, and that was how he returned with his father, a visionary union, to Japan” (*Hiroshima* 22). Perfect memories are co-created in *waabi* or vision. In Anishinaabe cosmology, visioning is the “capacity” that distinguishes humans from other creatures and casts them as “moral beings” animated by the necessity “to seek and fulfill vision” born of each individual’s “innermost being” (Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage* 119). As an incorporeal faculty, visions are not spatially or temporally restricted. Consequently, Ronin demonstrates how perfect memories offer a mode of constellation or being in relationship that is not restricted by systems of colonial mediation such as military occupations or colonial explorations. Perfect memories are an Anishinaabe mode of survivance comparable to how Simpson interprets Jarret Martineau’s “resistant constellations as flight paths to the future” not as a future *time* but as *a way of living the “future” now* in the fugitive spaces outside of the reach of colonialism (*As We* 213).

Nightbreaker’s vision was to trace MacDonald’s trip to Japan. He learned Japanese “because he was fascinated by the adventures of Ranald MacDonald, who was a native and, ironically the first teacher of English in Japan” (21-22). Nightbreaker planned to carry out his vision by “shadow[ing] MacDonald in Japan” (122). However, as Ronin explains, “The war recast his adventures, and my father served as a military interpreter in the occupation in Tokyo. ... [M]y father inspired me to carry out his vision of the journey. MacDonald was in custody most of the time he was in the country, so my rove was on the paths he and my father might have taken, first with the Ainu in Hokkaido, and then the ghost parades in Hiroshima” (122). As a member of the occupation forces, Nightbreaker was unable to build meaningful relationships with the Japanese or Ainu, the Indigenous peoples of northern Japan. Similarly, MacDonald wanted to foster kinship relations with the Japanese, as he thought Japan was where “North American Indians originally came” from (140), but his ability to interact with Japanese society was heavily inhibited by the Japanese suspicion of European invaders. In this context, his presence was mediated through his proximity to English—a colonial tongue. Moreover, Manidoo Envoy asserts that MacDonald thought that, as an English teacher, he could make himself “something of a personage” among the Ainu who he presumed to be “similar to the Indians and probably ignorant” (140). MacDonald’s motivations constitute a troubling *mélange* of ideas of kinship, white supremacy, and empire. Ronin, by contrast, uses trickster modes to bypass imperialist mediations and make his way to the Ainu. Having attacked manifestations of “fake peace,” it is

only amongst the Ainu as they tell their stories of “natural reason” (*Hiroshima* 122) that Ronin first feels the presence of his father and MacDonald and a resulting, genuine “peace” (*Hiroshima* 124). This is a peace whose flight path came from the constellation of Indigenous visions that lead to the creation of perfect memories.

Vizenor also recognizes natural reason as resonant between Anishinaabe and shinto worldviews and uses this premise to co-create and imagine with a distant people what human life that respects the natural and spiritual worlds can look like. Traditionally, shinto shrines honour nature and kami spirits (*Hiroshima Bugi* 157). Vizenor positions shinto as a Japanese form of natural reason when the novel describes it as “a native persuasion” (63), “a sense of presence” with a relational understanding of land, human, and non-human beings as kin that is compatible with an Anishinaabe worldview but whose “participants ... for a time, surrendered to a fascistic emperor” (*Hiroshima* 63). However, the Yasukuni Jinja, a shinto shrine not located in nature or the site of kami spirits, is a monument to Japanese Empire that reveres military men and racial superiority at the expense of the hibakusha survivors of the atomic bomb and others. Ronin’s “desecration” (*Hiroshima* 117) of the Yasukuni Jinja is a trickster move to *unsettle* and *unglue* conceptions of racialist nationhood. The Manidoo Envoy includes this attack as one of Ronin’s “tricky moves” through which “the illusions of peace were converted into stories of survivance” (*Hiroshima* 13) where the stories belong to the hibakusha and occupation orphans—not the Anishinaabe.

Ronin pronounces the shrine, and by extension shinto, “misused by the emperors and then by the militarists” (*Hiroshima* 143). In the middle of discussing the Yasukuni Jinja, Vizenor jarringly juxtaposes the fake peace in Japan with the fake peace of settler colonialism in the United states when the Envoy notes: “the shrine was founded in 1868, the same year that the United States government established the White Earth Reservation” (*Hiroshima* 117).<sup>109</sup> Supporting this dual, complex critique of dominance as manifested by American and Japanese imperialism, Ronin

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<sup>109</sup> Interestingly, the Yasukuni Jinja was founded in 1869 (“History.”). Vizenor’s tweaking of historical data at the service of the story is a kind of perfect memory making. Creating perfect memories is not an endeavour to capture or recover historical fact so much as it is a practice of healing from past and ongoing traumas and fashioning something different. This practice, as Ronin demonstrates, includes the fulfillment of collective vision through action.



enters the shrine in Nightbreaker's U.S. military regalia, with an Imperial chrysanthemum seal on his helmet, to the tune of U.S. military hymns such as "From the Halls of Montezuma," whose lyrics trace American conquest from the Americas to Africa (*Hiroshima* 165). Ronin's composite costume and his choice in music within the context of the shrine hold Japan accountable for its colonialism as well as its neglect of its responsibility to denounce American domination. In this way, he also holds the U.S. accountable as a global force of domination that continues to occupy the lands of Indigenous nations such as the Anishinaabe. This parallel suggests that America is also a nation of "fake peace"; indeed, the existence of reservations is testament to this.

The parallel between two imperial powers is characteristic of the novel's narrative structure insofar as its trickster structure can be understood to expose and unglue creeds of domination. Trickster as a narrative structure employed by Vizenor can also be understood as a form of Anishinaabe internationalism, which includes Anishinaabe relations with other-than-human nations (*As We* 56); relationships with "different Indigenous nations" of Turtle Island (*As We* 58); and relationships with other global relations, such as with the "Black Radical Tradition" or "revolutionary movements in the Global South" (*As We* 66). Simpson elucidates how Nanabozho teaches Anishinaabe internationalism and its ethical frameworks when, after the creation of the world, Nanabozho "walked the world to understand their place in it, [Nishnaabeg] place in it, to create face-to-face relationships with other nations and beings" (*As We* 56). These relationships can involve "shar[ing] and generat[ing] story, ceremony, song, and action" (*As We* 57, emphasis added). This is what the stone, Ronin, does as Vizenor generates Anishinaabe literature that creates international relationships through the sharing of survivance. Speaking specifically to Vizenor's long engagement with Japanese thought and literature, Noodin asserts that he "compar[es], contrast[s], and weav[es] two compatible threads of tradition together ... in an international context and ... demonstrates how a detailed knowledge of another culture can enhance the understanding of one's own" (164).

Situating this novel in Japan, Vizenor looks at a culture whose cosmologies, like the Anishinaabeg, are premised in natural reason, one whose philosophical roots have been violated through the adoption of racialist and separatist postures, thus becoming ordered by systems of dominance. Japanese colonialism in Asia, erasure of the Ainu, abandonment of the hibakusha

and Japanese children fathered by foreign occupiers, and exile of lepers are shown to have resulted from racist notions of nationhood that betray shinto. By contrasting racialism as the basis for national identity to Japanese ontologies such as shinto, Vizenor elucidates that natural reason must be understood as a living practice and not a reified, decontextualized doctrine. As Noodin has observed, Vizenor uses an international context with the Japanese to enhance his, and his community's, understanding of Anishinaabe culture. Accordingly, Ronin and Manidoo Envoy's criticism of the American Indian Movement within the Yasukuni Jinja survivance episode as "racial simpletons and paranoid separatists" (166) serves as the author's reminder and warning to his own nation, the Anishinaabeg.<sup>110</sup> It is a reminder that Anishinaabe nationhood is not based in philosophies of racial superiority but in survivance. Unlike the Japanese, whom Vizenor suggests were led astray by their own leaders, Vizenor's conception of Anishinaabe survivance suggests that the Anishinaabe should be cautious not to internalize Eurocentric notions of race and nationhood. To do so would be to accept an anthropological view of themselves. Instead, Vizenor's novel suggests that Anishinaabe nationhood is constituted by native stories of survivance and not some purist idea of race or anthropologically fetishized, fossilized rituals. He insists that Anishinaabe ontology and epistemology are vitally dynamic, creative, and resilient. These qualities (not race or hybridity), demonstrate that Anishinaabeg are a distinct people with philosophies that can participate in transforming the world in response to present-day needs and concerns.

From this vantage point, Vizenor critiques any system of domination and any posture of victimry that is internalized by those under the thumb of domination. For example, in Hiroshima there is a post-war tradition of lighting lanterns and floating them on the Motoyasu River as a symbolic memorial for those lost and for peace. Ronin, in full trickster form, prefers to set the nearby, artificially constructed Pond of Peace on fire. He says, "I poured gasoline on the Pond of Peace at the Peace Memorial Museum ... I counted the seconds and threw a lighted match into the water at eight fifteen of the hour, the start of the ghost parade ... That moment was a tribute

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<sup>110</sup> For decades, Vizenor was a vocal critic of the AIM and preferred "serious Native intellectual discourse combined with less visible grassroots activism" (Noodin 152). Noodin provides a more nuanced perspective on this difference when she argues that the "stereotypes AIM embraced and used to their advantage are the very aspects of Native American Identity that Vizenor rejects" (152).

to natural reason and perfect memories” (39). This may seem like an act against relationality, like the blowing up of the lift lock in Simpson’s “nogojiwanong” that I analyze in Chapter two, but it is a tricky move to unsettle creeds. Lies must be revealed so they can be addressed. “Peace” must be shown to be a “fake peace,” a “nuclear peace,” so that society can confront its hypocrisy before recovery can begin. Ronin’s act reveals the actual state of harm the river is in so that it can be recovered in the path to real peace. In fact, after the lighting of the fire and as the fire engine arrives, Ronin waits “near the ruins, on the stone stairs to the river, and cast[s] fresh cucumbers into the dark water to tease and appease the nanazu trickster” (39). Ronin’s offering to these river spirits aligns actions with natural reason.

### *Ndinawemaaganidoog*<sup>111</sup>: Water, Spirits, and Human Relatives

For the Japanese, like the Anishinaabe, rivers are vibrant with spirits. Ronin confides in Manidoo Envoy that “Shin[t]o kami and anishinaabe manidoo are common ancestors in my dreams” (64). The word “common” suggests that they not only appear frequently in Ronin’s dreams but also that they are related. Furthermore, for the Anishinaabe and Japanese, rivers are both places of healing and places to be respected because of the potential for power and thus danger. We are first introduced to river spirits when Ronin meets them as a child at Sagami Bay. He had escaped his hafu orphanage at 7 years old and was thought to have drowned. However, he was saved by a tribe of nanazu. And yet there is no evidence about the existence of nanazu in Japanese mythology, history, or stories. What seems more likely is that the nanazu are a Vizenor-created spirit-tricksters with literary lineage from the Namazu, Nanabozho, Mishibizhiw, the Kappa, and little people. While the act of creating spirit entities and attributing them to the cosmology of another culture is problematic, it is puzzling that Vizenor did not simply use the Kappa figure, which Manidoo Envoy admits sounds very similar to Ronin’s nanazu. One generative way of understanding Vizenor’s invention of the nanazu is to take seriously his commitment as a storyteller engaged in relationality, which might have compelled him to use his powers of creation and his vision for cross-cultural resonance to bring into being something new. He avoids importing Anishinaabe manitous such as Mishibizhiw to Japan, and perhaps this is a testament to

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<sup>111</sup> “My relatives” in Anishinaabemowin and my conclusion.

honouring the place held by kami and other spirits—to not imposing the spirits of Anishinaabe territories onto the territories of other spirits. Instead, he pulls together from spirits and other beings that have similar attributes that can illustrate the importance of natural reason and the role of the spiritual realm within it.

The figures from across Anishinaabe and Japanese traditions that I see reflected in the nanazu are Nanabozho, Little People, and Kappa, but also Mishibizhiw and namazu (whose name is quite similar to Vizenor’s creatures). As this chapter has already discussed Nanabozhoo extensively, here I will focus on comparisons of the little people and Kappa. Johnston uses the term *manitoussiwuk* to little people, or “little manitous” (*Manitous* 242) generally and explains that this refers to a range of entities known by numerous different names such as *Memegwesi*, *Pa’iins*, and *Bgojinishnaabenhsag*.<sup>112</sup> According to Johnston, Memegwesi “means stranger who speaks a strange language” (242). He adds that “[t]hese little people are regarded as special guardians of children” (*Manitous* 242) and *Pa’iins* is a “little manitou . . . that dwelled on shores and beaches and emerged at night to warn humans of mermen and mermaids” (245). There is some variation across Anishinaabe peoples in conceptualizing these beings. Views range from perceiving them, like other Ojibwe water creatures, as “inherently good, provided that humans accorded them respect” to demonstrating both harmful and good “qualities: sometimes beneficial and sometimes malevolent, though with the beneficial prevailing” (Pomedli 191). By comparison, the Japanese Kappa, as they are predominantly known in the West, are called different names and conceptualized in various ways as they are known in stories “from Hokkaido in the north to the Okinawan Islands in the south” (Foster). Similar to some understandings of little people, Kappa is a “water spirit” and can range from “mischievous” to “malicious,” for it pulls children, adults, and other animals into the water to their deaths. And yet, despite this, they possess “healing” and “positive regenerative qualities” (Foster). Although these starkly contrasted qualities often categorize the Kappa as a “trickster figure,” they also demonstrate the kappa as a metaphor for the “violent potential of the natural world” (Foster).

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<sup>112</sup> See Anishinaabe historian, Alan Corbiere’s discussion of Arthur McGregor’s story in “Ninaatigwaaboo (Maple Tree Water): An Anishinaabe History of Maple Sugaring.”

Another water spirit that embodies the awful power of the natural world is the Japanese Namazu. It is “a subterranean serpent-like catfish” who lives in rivers and lakes and is “normally subdued by the Kashima deity pressing down on it through a gigantic stone” (Severn 352). They are thought to cause earthquakes either when they free themselves of the stone by chance or when there is an imbalance in the “primal forces controlling the universe”: “fire, metal, wood, earth, and water” (352). In addition, when there was an imbalance in the primal forces—an earthquake—the namazu would be used metaphorically, in both oral and visual depictions, to critique the social imbalance caused by those with political, social, or economic power, “sometimes with considerable irreverent humour, but without committing overt personal attacks” (365). The Anishinaabe Mishibizhiw is an underwater panther or lynx with similar ambivalent powers. It “draws people down to their deaths. It also caused floods” (Basil Johnston, *The Manitous* 243). As Melissa K. Nelson<sup>113</sup> explains in “The Hydromythology of the Anishinaabeg,” water “is an essential relative, elder, and teacher” (217) and “Niibi manitous ... are essential for understanding of metaphysical realms, the fluidity of consciousness, and the ambivalence of power” (218). Mishibizhiw can use his power for “malevolence or compassion” (221) and for this reason the Anishinaabe have to be vigilant in being “cautious” around the water and “mak[ing] proper offerings for safety and long-term balance” (222). Like the Namazu, the Mishibizhiw is critical to balance and representative of the full spectrum of the power of water and the natural world. Perhaps, like the Memegwesi in Louise Erdrich’s *The Silence Game*, who has “relatives all through this land” (238) and may pass word to his relatives to continue his vow to look after the young Ojibwe protagonist and her family, the nanazu illustrate that not only do humans have kin across the world but so too do spirits. The nanazu who gift, heal, and protect Ronin, go back to the White Earth Reservation through stories infused by the spirit of the Namazu and Kappa, where the nation loves the story because they see their relatives, the Memegwesiwag and Mishibizhiw, in them.

The scene in which the seven-year-old orphanage escapee, Ronin, meets the nanazu unfolds at Sagami Bay, the site where his “second death was staged” (16). On the banks of Sagami Bay,

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<sup>113</sup> Nelson spells the name “Mishipizhu.”

where the authorities assumed he had drowned, “the ocean gave [Ronin] another chance to create a lasting presence in the world” (27) through the gift of a driftwood “sword” (27). Soon thereafter, “a tribe of water tricksters, curious, moist, miniature humans” come to Ronin and tell him “stories about trickster creation, the vast empire of water and stones” (28). Vizenor ties the nanazu to that original storyteller and practitioner of survivance, the stone and the stone trickster but also the primordial waters critical to both the Anishinaabe and the Japanese. Moreover, Ronin learns that the “wooden sword was a gift of the nanazu, the tricksters of the rivers and ocean waves” (29). Through the gift of story, poetry, and a sword, the nanazu tell Ronin that “The water is our perfect memory. The water holds our names, words, and stories ... Your soul is a story only when you give it away” (29). Here, the nanazu demonstrate how the water, and, I would add by extension, bodies of water such as rivers and bays, embody perfect memory. Through the practice of natural reason, presence, and deep observation in the bay, Ronin is able to internalize the teachings of relationality and survivance (those names, words, and stories) carried by the water and water spirits.

In the bushido driftwood sword gifted by the nanazu, soul, stories, and swords become intertwined and interchangeable. When the orphanage director, Sumo, takes away Ronin’s “wooden weapon of survivance” (30), he tells her, “My sword is a story ... Take my soul” (30). As he pleads to keep his sword, he offers her his “soul,” which the nanazu earlier informed us is “a story” when it is given away. Ronin wants an audience for his story, but he cannot find one in the orphanage. The nanazu intertwine the story of water and stone through the importance of stories to survivance. In the story retold by Dunn, the first storyteller is a stone who offers the young hunter protection and the opportunity and means for strength. Before telling the boy a story, the stone says, “A story is a gift. If I give you a gift, you must give me a gift, too” (Dunn 15). The gift that Ronin offers in return to the nanazu is the “promise” of his “mighty word” (*Hiroshima Bugi* 28). I assert that this gift he offers first in the haiku is the one he creates for the nanazu and then in years to come by sharing the stories of the nanazu.

Moreover, this ceremonial gifting inaugurates Ronin in the samurai tradition. At the river, he is not only healed by the nanazu, Chaimu, but he is also set as a warrior of survivance. It is critical to see that Sumo confiscates his sword but promises to return it to him when he is adopted: “She banned weapons and any toys of war at the school” (*Hiroshima Bugi* 30) and “warned the

students that swords and warrior traditions were forbidden by the occupation” (31). In one way, this act of confiscation and return is related to the corruption of bushido by empire or the manipulation of bushido code in the interest of empire. Bushido is samurai code and is underwritten with the motive to live a life in which the warrior pursues death. Ronin refers to this code in the Sagami chapter when he says, “The master said, We are separated from a sense of presence because of our fear of death” (15). Here, Ronin sheds light on what it means to live a life on the path of death. It means to live according to a code of loyalty to life, to children, to life for those generations yet to come, even if it means facing death. It does not mean to live according to a loyalty to death in which life is laid at the feet of militarism, power, and domination. The slippage between sword and stories in Sumo’s warning suggests the nature of the American occupation’s military presence as a faux liberation from imperialism. Regimes of dominance always forbid stories of natural reason because they are incompatible. I interpret Sumo’s promise of returning Ronin’s sword in a different context as an understanding that, in Japan, the notion of death in bushido has been perverted by those in power and that Ronin’s practice of bushido, as emblemized and enacted through this sword, will be likewise tainted. It is not until he is adopted by the White Earth Nation that he is restored to his sword. At the White Earth Reservation, where death has a whole other implication for Indigenous peoples, Indigenous people cannot afford to glamourize death in the same way the Japanese have. In this context where death is not revered, Ronin can add a new understanding of death or living in the path of death. The aversion to death stories by the Anishinaabe is particularly acute with Miko’s visit and cold reception. No death stories of the tragic, vanishing Indian will be heard on the part of the White Earth community. However, if death is a part of continuity and ancestors and those not-yet-born are all present in different ways, then bushido can be understood in the context of survivance and continuity. Ronin says of his own deaths, “I am dead once more, my most memorable samurai signature. The person you see has become a raven, a bear, a sandhill crane of Anishinaabe totems” (*Hiroshima Bugi* 17). In this context, death means rebirth, continuance, and survivance.

Ultimately, Vizenor provides insight on how to deal with urgent issues of our time that stem from failing to abide by relationality. *Hiroshima Bugi* shows how the act of looking to each land’s survivance stories and finding resonance between stones and confluence or places where different rivers, or river spirits, meet can offer healing from the damage done by Western

imperialism and other forms of domination. At the same time, this act presents dangers, such as the risk of conflation, which nevertheless help us conduct ourselves in accordance with natural reason. We do not have to be isolated, nor do we have to dominate others into conforming to a single way of life, nor do we have to hybridize into one mixed-breed new mass. However, we can honour what natural reason supports in each locality while recognizing the power of finding points of confluence and resonance when facing entangled or related forces of domination.



## Chapter 4

### Constellations, Refugees, and the “Elegant Patterning” of Relationality in Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West*

At a moving moment near the beginning of *Exit West* (2017), Mohsin Hamid’s most recent, Sufi-infused novel about refugees, the character Saeed recalls how his father once brought his telescope onto the balcony, where the family would practice “stargazing” (15). Though the city had become “too polluted” to see anything most nights, on the rare occasions when conditions were just right, they could take in the “breeze,” and “look up at objects whose light, often, had been emitted before any of these three viewers had been born—light from other centuries, only now reaching Earth” (15). Through their telescope, they would marvel at the phenomenon that Saeed’s father calls “time-travel” (15). Though their balcony was a tight and narrow space, the family could still envision the possibility of movement when they looked upon the celestial expanse—a memory that informs Saeed’s own subsequent movements across terrestrial spaces through the pages of *Exit West*. This important moment in the opening chapter juxtaposes what can be understood as a natural experience of time and space against factors that constrain it, what this passage refers to as “pollution” or obstacles obstructing our capacity to look upon and be guided by stars, and to move from one place to another. The novel suggests that the natural world’s balance or order has been violated, which, in turn, causes harm to all beings and their relationships to each other. It prompts questions about human movement and the relations that multiple displacements make possible and disrupt.

Drawing inspiration from Saeed’s memories of stargazing, this chapter considers how a constellational reading method might help illuminate diverse forms of relationality and their significance. Hamid’s invocation of stars prompts critical questions about relationality, ones that inform the refugees’ multiple displacements. In a world where the modern nation state and capitalism obstruct natural systems, how do individuals navigate passage across the territories of other peoples? When seeking safety, how can individuals and communities look to the stars—a metaphor that prompts consideration of diverse relationalities—not only for temporal and spatial orientation but also for mediating the terms of community-making and cohabitation?

This chapter addresses these questions by reading for resonance between varied modes of relationality represented in *Exit West*. When I turn to Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Jarret Martineau's accounts of "constellations of corsesistance" and mobilization, I do so not as an intervention in Indigenous literary studies, a task that is outside the scope of this chapter.<sup>114</sup> Instead, I draw on and expand their approaches in response to Sarah Ahmed's call for a feminist citational practices that foreground the "intellectual genealogy" of those knowledge systems or thinkers that are marginalized from academia or the institutions of "white men" (15).<sup>115</sup> While I do not mean to imply that Hamid invokes Indigenous theories, it is striking how Saeed's family's nighttime viewings highlight the ways that the traversal of light, which enables us to perceive stars, challenges normative notions of time as linear, calling to mind Simpson's observation that stars convey Anishinaabe notions of time. My approach, as an extension of Simpson's ideas, enables us to attend to the ways that *Exit West* conceptualizes forms of relationality and the political potential that they activate.

Published in 2017, *Exit West* is a novel that grapples with the contemporary refugee crisis in compelling ways. Earning almost immediate acclaim, *Exit West* was included among the *New York Times*'s 10 Best Books of the year list and in the shortlist for the prestigious Booker and Dublin IMPAC Prizes. In this novel, an omniscient narrator follows Saeed and Nadia, young professionals who meet in a night class, from their budding relationship in an unnamed, presumably Islamic, country in south Asia to several places where they seek refuge in a journey that is repeatedly driven westward. In following Saeed and Nadia, the narrator uses markedly concatenated sentences that extend the length of a paragraph, as though to prolong time and

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<sup>114</sup> See my discussion of Simpson's articulation of this concept in this dissertation's Introduction.

<sup>115</sup> Considered in this way, citations might be seen as acting like stars in the sky. As Ahmed says they are "how we acknowledge ... those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow" (15-16). In this chapter, my approach is relational in ways that recall the acknowledgments that Martineau and Simpson have made to their relationship to the work of Black and other racialized scholars.

stretch space, in addition to adopting a wry and sardonic tone so marked as to take on the distinctiveness of a third major character.

Just as importantly, the series of escapes and migrations undertaken by Saeed and Nadia are facilitated by passage through mysterious “doors,” portals that spontaneously appear all over the world, which enable travel between physically distant places. The first door leads the protagonists from their unnamed country to the island of Mykonos, Greece, where they have a short and inhospitable stay. Eventually, they find another door, which takes them to London, England, where they face xenophobic violence and containment, witness and participate in refugee community-making, and find the potential to build a new life. However, this opportunity is ultimately foreclosed, and Nadia and Saeed find entrance to Marin, a small city in California’s Bay Area, where they make a home in a refugee camp and see glimmerings of belonging in different communities. Although their future remains uncertain, the novel represents refugees as active participants who seek new ways of bringing balance and coexistence to a shifting world. Though Saeed and Nadia eventually part and lose touch with each other, their westward migration brings them full circle and they meet again in old age in their native city where the novel began —having ultimately exited west and thereby rendered the title ironic.

In a novel animated by a central tension preoccupied with balance, this final move back to their homeland is significant, especially since conventional refugee narratives often construe settlement as a proof of the backwardness and irredeemable condition of racialized societies in the Global South (see Espiritu [2014] and Nguyen [2012]). Racialized refugees are often presented in news media as a homogenous mass, what Liisa Malkki calls the photographic portrayal of refugees as a “sea of humanity” (388) in a camp, travelling on feet with their meagre possessions or crammed onto boats, so that a discursive emphasis on massification and destitution ultimately dehumanizes refugees. The flipside to such portrayals is that, even when an individual refugee is spotlighted, this single figure can still be dehumanized as this individual metonymically stands in for the whole or masses from which they are plucked. While all of Hamid’s previous fictional works are told from the second-person narrative point of view, a stylistic choice that he explains in terms of Sufi traditions that are a major influence on his writing (“An Interview”), *Exit West* is voiced in third person. Crucially, a third-person narrative perspective with a certain degree of access to the interior lives of not one but two central

characters, Nadia and Saeed, underscores the multiplicity of refugee experiences, a central theme in the novel. By telling the simultaneously overlapping and diverging story of two characters, Hamid's novel pushes against the impulses of homogenization and massification typical of conventional refugee narratives.

Further multiplying representations of refugee experiences, the novel's mysterious doors function to prismatically illuminate different stories from around the world within each chapter. Rather than dwelling on the journey from displacement to resettlement, Nadia and Saeed's story focusses on the several locations, or nodes, along this journey where the characters are able to dwell until conditions are no longer livable. Hamid also uses both fantastical elements and rhetorical devices to break with conventional refugee narratives and challenge dominant discourses that represent refugees in ahistorical and racist ways. The doors are especially intriguing, for they are the only aspect of the novel that generically overlaps with speculative fiction.<sup>116</sup> Indeed, the representation of the doors as portals highlights the significance of refugee communities, whose contingent heterogeneity lays bare the failures of the modern nation-state to nurture cohabitation and coexistence on the Earth. The doors make possible a form of multi-nodal, or constellational, storytelling, which defies linearity; in addition to Saeed's and Nadia's narrative, *Exit West* also offers a series of vignettes featuring characters who are not central to the novel's main plot. The task of considering these different nodes—or storylines— together, akin to observing and discerning a constellation, allows for different kinds of stories to be told or made discernable. The narrative structure pushes the bounds of linear plot design until it expands multi-directionally into a vast narrative universe. These additional, evocative stories

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<sup>116</sup> The doors seem governed by the laws of physics as understood through the theory of relativity and not classic physics, operating similarly to black holes wherein the gravitational force is so powerful that time is a part of the dimensions of space and the spacetime continuum becomes deformed. The doors operate by natural laws that undermine the classical Western understanding of time upon which Eurocentric societies are built. Notably, in classic or Newtonian understandings of the laws of the natural world, time is charted along as the independent factor—no matter what else one is measuring, time would be constant and move predictably with no regard or response to anything else.

dot the narrative plane and demand a reading approach that accounts for them. Some of the vignettes, for example, feature the people who choose stillness over movement by electing not to go through these portals. Critically, the novel's structure allows for the spotlighting of stories of those who do not become refugees and, thus, further nuance perceptions of flight and displacement.

The novel's constellational perspective is also reinforced through its structure, which emulates constellations or inter-star relationships. The entire first half of the novel and the final, twelfth chapter, Nadia and Saeed spend in their city in the unnamed country. Half of the sixth chapter they spend in Mykonos, and the following three chapters take place in different locations in and around London, England. Sections of each chapter generally spotlight different characters as they emerge from doors around the world, although in two instances, they feature characters that stay put. Two chapters, less than a fifth of the novel, unfolds in and around a fictitious refugee camp in the foothills of Marin, California. This structure functions as a form of terrestrial constellating wherein different positions around the world are placed adjacent to one another but not seamlessly, challenging readers to search for and contemplate connections that may not be obvious (see fig. 8). In the process, the novel becomes discernable to each reader from both their own personal knowledge and experiences and the degree to which they look for relationships between those different peoples or demographics who move and those who stay. Each star exists autonomously in the night sky, but it is human relationship to place, culture, ways of knowing, and other non-human entities that informs how human beings comprehend the stars in relation to one another as they move through the night sky and become discernable, storied patterns—or constellations—in their own right.



**Figure 8: A representation of where doors open in the novel.<sup>117</sup>**

This chapter structures its constellational exploration of forms of relationality in three parts. First, I consider how the novel portrays relationality by representing light and dark in a manner reflective of Sufi cosmology. Though this novel never uses the words “Islam” or “Sufi,” Hamid has commented on several occasions about the influence of the Sufi tradition, Islamic mysticism, on his novels (“Being a Writer”; “An Interview”; and “Comes Home”) and particularly the conceptualization of love as “the prism for relating to the universe” (“Comes Home”).<sup>118</sup> This model of relationality differs from an oppositional view of light and dark prevalent in Western discourse. In *Exit West*, relationality is a principle that denotes how all entities and elements in the universe exist in interconnection; this principle is a common theme in Sufi poetry, which emphasizes that we exist in universal relationships and that the universe exists in us. In my reading of the novel, I consider the implications of such cultural perspectives as illustrated in *Exit West* by examining anthropogenic light and its impact on the relationship between the natural light of the sun and stars, darkness, and the Earth’s inhabitants. I also contemplate the

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<sup>117</sup> Image was made by Faran Moradipour based on my concept inspired by *Exit West*’s starry cover.

<sup>118</sup> All of Hamid’s other novels, three in total, use the second person narrator which is common to Sufi poetry conventions while it remains the least used in Western literary tradition.

ways oppositional conceptions of light and dark inform Eurocentric constructions of self and other and how this has laid the rationale for white supremacy, Euro-American imperialism's various manifestations, and the exploitation and harm of the natural environment. Hamid's novel asserts that human beings are of nature, and not outside or oppositional to it. As such, humans would benefit from observing and living within the principles animating the natural world. One such principle is the balance of things as illustrated through the many references to the stars in the night sky. The novel suggests that harmful human activities that produce light and air pollution create imbalance in the relationship between light and dark, thus obstructing the relationships between terrestrial and celestial entities. It follows that, human innovation, whether technological, social, or political, which does not honour and act in accordance with the principle of relationality, harms the natural world, which includes human beings. Second, I analyze moments in the novel where human activity is portrayed as better aligning with the stars or, in other words, embodying the principle of relationality, one that is conceived in terms of tribalism, kinship, and different forms of nativism. Third, I examine the limitations of the futures imagined in this context. Looking at Marin in particular, I consider the risks of telling short, evocative stories that lack specificity. In the settler colonial context, this strategy too easily emulates colonial erasures of Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, the lack of specificity for racialized refugees from an Islamic country also participates in the blurring of the place-based relationships of the Indigenous peoples of Western and South Western Asia. They too easily become the fleeing brown masses from a destitute geographical, social, spiritual, and political landscape with nothing to lose and everything to gain from other peoples' lands and societies. There is nothing to anchor the diversity and history of the peoples in the region and their long-standing relations to Euro-Western (neo)colonialism and intervention. Despite such limitations, I argue that *Exit West* traces the relationships between skylscapes and landscapes—the celestial and the terrestrial—to reorient refugee narratives.

## Light, Darkness, and Nature's Balance

Darkness is your candle.

Your boundaries are your quest.

...

You must have shadow and light source both.  
Listen, and lay your head under the tree of awe.

—Rumi, “Enough Words”

At a notable moment in *Exit West*, Saeed and Nadia sit together on her terrace and find themselves “glimpsing occasionally a gash of moon or of darkness, and otherwise seeing ripples and churns of city-lit gray” (46). At the same time that light pollution from the city obscures the light from the moon, and presumably the stars, it also obscures the darkness of the sky. Apart from the glimpses of natural light, the sky is a “city-lit gray,” which describes the luminescent night sky—the sky glow—caused by artificial light. The light that pollutes the sky not only blots out the potency of the stars but also the power of natural darkness. Still, under these conditions (and perhaps under the influence of the drugs he has taken with Nadia), Saeed’s gaze descends from the night sky to see his surroundings through a relational prism. As his gaze lowers, Saeed is overcome with a

feeling of awe ... with which he then regarded his own skin, and the lemon tree in its clay pot on Nadia’s terrace, as tall as he was, and rooted in its soil, which was in turn rooted in the clay of the pot, which rested on the brick of the terrace, which was like the mountaintop of this building, which was growing from the earth itself, and from this earthy mountain the lemon tree was reaching up, up, in a gesture so beautiful that Saeed was filled with love, and reminded of his parents, for whom he suddenly felt such gratitude, and a desire for peace, that peace should come for them all, for everyone, for everything, for we are so fragile, and so beautiful, and surely conflicts could be healed if others had experiences like this, and then he regarded Nadia and saw that she was regarding him and her eyes were like worlds. (46-7)

I quote at length because the twists and turns in Hamid’s logic are not legible without consideration of the full passage. Here, Saeed’s feeling of awe as he looks down from the sky and at “his own skin” and then to Nadia’s beloved lemon tree echoes the metaphorical “tree of awe,” of which Rumi, the Islamic, Sufi poet and philosopher, speaks. He asks listeners to lay their heads under this tree and contemplate how the interdependent relationship of light and



darkness is a necessary guide and teacher. Though subtle, this moment in *Exit West* echoes Rumi's contemplations that I provide as an epigraph to this section. Saeed is overcome with "love" for this tree and sees a shared ontology between himself and its "rootedness" in the earth and its "reaching up, up" towards the sky (46). The tree is literally rooted by its physical appendages to the earth by way of the soil, then the clay pot, and then the brick building "growing from the earth itself" (46).<sup>119</sup> Saeed sees himself rooted to this same earth by way of his parents or kinship and through his embodied connection to place.

In this way, Hamid traces lines between the astral bodies, the tree, the earth, Saeed's own body, and his family; together, they form individual entities that collectively tell a story of relationality. Reflecting on this principle, Saeed longs for a "peace" to come for "everyone" and "everything." Peace, then, is a balance achieved when people live in accordance with this philosophy, which holds love at its core. To disregard this fundamental precept is to break or obstruct peace and produce "conflicts." Like the sky glow I discuss earlier, these conflicts can be conceived of as forms of pollution or human-induced imbalance in the natural world. The inter-being linkage Saeed sees is then extended to Nadia and then expanded within her as he sees that "her eyes were like worlds" (47). The individual can be part of a constellation while also embodying constellations. As Rumi, a figure evoked in the novel through the figures of the tree and the universe—both of which are frequent motifs in Sufi poetry—observes, "What is the body? That shadow of a shadow of your love, that somehow contains the entire universe" ("Where Are We?" 15). Light, shadows, and darkness are valued elements of the universe and the human body and experience. This perspective contrasts with dichotomous Western notions of darkness as something to be driven out or dominated by light. In Sufi cosmology, Rumi further expounds that, "The universe is a form of divine law, your reasonable father ... Make peace with that father, the elegant patterning, and every experience will fill with immediacy" ("Father Reason" 145). The natural relationships between light and dark would then be part of the sacred order or law of creation that conveys spiritual realities. To have peace is to achieve immediacy or live in proximity to the divine laws of the natural world.

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<sup>119</sup> Bricks have been used for 1000s of years in South and West Asia, having originally been made from clay-rich earth and sun-baked. Thus, they are not only figuratively "earth."

While Sufi teachings are spiritual, what Saeed observes in Nadia, a character who views the world from a secular lens, shows that these teachings do not exclude those who do not participate in Sufi theology or spiritual practices. As astrophysicists note, and Sufis have long attested, the universe is in all beings in a literal sense, for we are all made of the stars or stardust. Moreover, the components that make up our bodies have been a part of creation since before our birth and will continue to be part of the earth and incorporated into other beings and systems after we die.<sup>120</sup> We are thus constellations both with others in creation and within ourselves. At the same time that Saeed experiences the beauty of these astral relations, he recognizes their fragility. Peace or living with the divine law of the universe in a way that maintains its “elegant patterning” is disrupted by varied forms of conflict, such as the pollution discussed above.

Hamid’s novel conveys a sense of relationality that subverts the dominant Western aesthetic and cultural binary, which conceives of darkness in negative terms compared to light. In contrast, the portrayal of darkness and blackness in *Exit West* is based on a value system that recognizes the interdependent nature of light and dark; one cannot exist without the other, as Sufi cosmology asserts. Within *Exit West*, however, a dichotomous understanding of light and dark also manifests in other kinds of conflicts. A Eurocentric worldview not only considers darkness as lack but also as a metaphor for ignorance and evil, which is other to the moral superiority of European enlightenment and civilization. This binary helps explain ongoing critical discourses that construe black vestments worn by women as symbolizing Islam’s sinister qualities (a topic I return to shortly) and the Orientalized dark body as the depraved, intuitive savage against which whiteness defines its state of enlightenment and rational civilization.<sup>121</sup>

At the start of the novel, Hamid establishes the importance of considering darkness or blackness in terms of cosmologies beyond Judeo-Christian Eurocentrism by emphasizing Nadia’s robe. This depiction of darkness necessarily disrupts Manichean binaries for reimagining the Other in

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<sup>120</sup> For those who do have a spiritual perspective of life, the physical implication is that the individual does not need a medium—for example, clergy—to have a connection to the divine but rather, by virtue of being a spiritual entity, has the capacity within themselves to pursue the Beloved. Sufi relationality is premised on the idea that all individuals have an unmediated relationship with their Creator.

<sup>121</sup> As Edward Said has famously argued in *Orientalism*.

an ethical way. Debates on Islam in the West have long been preoccupied with women's vestments, whether in the form of the hijab or, as is the case with Nadia, the black abaya-like robe. Nadia's attire is the first obvious reference to Islam in the text. The reader and Saeed, the only other character in the opening chapter, are left to interpret Nadia's religiosity from this presumably conservative symbol. Saeed's interpretation and practice of his Muslim faith, we are quickly told, is personal and nonjudgmental; it guides his understanding and provides motivation for living. Although he assumes that Nadia's black covering signals her strict religiosity, to his, and perhaps the reader's, surprise, her decision to wear this robe has nothing to do with her faith. Rather, she wears the black robe in her country, where such a covering is not mandatory, so that, as she explains: "men don't fuck with me" (17). She continues to wear the robe in Europe and the U.S. for similar reasons. Moreover, this robe conceals her body and Nadia only ever covers her hair and face when she wears a helmet while riding her motorcycle. Instead of symbolizing gendered oppression—a commonplace interpretation of Western-based feminists and non-feminists alike—the black envelopment attests to Nadia's autonomy. By shielding her from unwelcome attention, she uses the garment to empower and liberate herself from "men" who would "fuck with" her.

The novel further subverts both dominant Western and Eastern associations of gender and sexuality with such coverings. Far from oppressing Nadia's sexuality or preserving her chastity, the black robe actually plays a critical role in creating the conditions for the development of Nadia and Saeed's romance. In their Islamic country, gendered ideologies about kinship and propriety deem it unseemly for unmarried and unrelated men and women to spend time together in close quarters; such acts are even considered punishable offences. In order to visit Nadia in her apartment, Saeed disguises himself as a woman, by donning a black robe himself, and uses the cover of dark to move through her neighbourhood and enter her apartment. Thus, their relationship emerges in darkness, just as atmospheric darkness enables us to see the stars.

Hamid's description of the novel's mysterious doors also invokes and contests the hierarchization of the duality of light and dark. Significantly, these special doors differ from ordinary ones because of their darkness. Indeed, the impenetrable darkness of these doors and the tremendous gravitational pull they exert on those who pass through them are reminiscent of black holes in outer space where light, dark, movement, and time behave differently than on

Earth. The first door we encounter is in Surry Hills, Australia; significantly, it is in the bedroom of a sleeping white woman. Though the room is “bathed” in the artificial light of a router, “the closet doorway was dark, darker than night, a rectangle of complete darkness” (8). The artificial light from the router cannot illuminate the doorway. The exceptional strength of “gravity” (8) against which a man pushes himself through this door is evident when he is described as finally “trembling and sliding to the floor like a newborn foal” (9).

Just as significant is the obviously racialized description of the door, which the narrator likens to “a rectangle of complete darkness—the heart of darkness” (8). While this invocation of heart of darkness self-consciously evokes Joseph Conrad’s famous novel about white European colonialism in the Congo, the inclusion of the em-dash here functions subversively, as is the case with many other instances in the novel (as I discuss in detail shortly). *Heart of Darkness*, though indisputably critical of imperialism, hardly humanizes African peoples and societies, but instead grapples with colonialism’s impacts on European society and identity while largely ignoring its impacts on the Other, the Black African,<sup>122</sup> an ideology of anti-Blackness that persists to this day. *Exit West* deliberately draws on these racist sentiments in this passage, which describes how a man, with “dark skin and dark, woolly hair” (8) emerges from this portal, this “heart of darkness,” while a “pale-skinned” (7) woman sleeps alone. A few lines later, the narrator begins a series of observations in concatenating sentences that undercut one another. After pushing out of the door and onto the floor, the dark-skinned man rises, and the narrator observes that,

His eyes rolled terribly. Yes: terribly. Or perhaps not so terribly. Perhaps they merely glanced about him, at the woman, at the bed, at the room. Growing up in the not infrequently perilous circumstances in which he had grown up, he was aware of the fragility of his body. He knew how little it took to make a man into meat: the wrong blow, the wrong gunshot, the wrong flick of a blade, turn of a car, presence of a microorganism in a handshake, a cough. He was aware that alone a person is almost nothing. (9)

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<sup>122</sup> One important difference is that in Orientalist discourse, this binary served to vindicate white European society while Conrad’s book uses the binary to critique it. However, Nigerian author and critic Chinua Achebe argued that simply using this binary mode to critique Europeans still dehumanizes Africans and denigrates African societies.

The first two, short sentences: “His eyes rolled terribly. Yes: terribly,” explicitly evoke Conrad’s description of Africans as masses of whirling limbs and rolling eyes (32), which Nigerian author and critic Chinua Achebe condemned as dehumanizing (“Out of Africa”). The narrator offers this rendering of events then instantly negates it through the concatenation of alternative suggestions: “Or perhaps not so terribly. Perhaps they merely glanced about him” as he looks for a way out of the room (9). The man’s eyes are not demonically rolling; they are looking around him for passage. In fact, seeing the sleeping woman only triggers in him a kind of empathy about the “fragility of his body” and the awareness that “alone a person is almost nothing” (9). The text does not provide a full account of what the man has endured, of what has driven him to make use of this door, thereby denying the kind of manufactured, exploitative confessions or testimonies institutionally demanded of refugees.<sup>123</sup> All the audience is offered is that the circumstances of the man’s life were “not infrequently perilous,” meaning that death could come from “the wrong blow, the wrong gunshot, the wrong flick of a blade ... a cough” (9). *Exit West* provides a suggestive sketch that protects the intimate details of this man’s experiences from the West’s voyeuristic appetite for refugee stories while providing enough information for complex and nuanced critiques of imperialism, migration, and displacement.<sup>124</sup>

Moreover, by describing the man’s home circumstances as “not infrequently perilous,” Hamid builds that same nuance or subversive structure into the novel’s distinctively sardonic phrasing, characterized by winding sentences interrupted and delayed by undercutting subclauses. The negative “not” may seem redundant when preceding the negative prefix “in-” that modifies the

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<sup>123</sup> For example, in Canada, those seeking asylum need to fill out *Basis of Claim Form* with detailed events including ways they have “been harmed, mistreated or threatened,” and the corroborating dates, names and places as well as written testimonials from others (2). Through the process, it becomes clear that the more horrific the accounts of one’s life and home the stronger the case for permission to stay.

<sup>124</sup> Though beyond the scope of this paper, this door alone offers the opportunity for deeper constellational readings that account for settler colonialism, racism, gentrification, xenophobia, and horrendous treatment of asylum seekers in Australia. For example, Surry Hills is part of the Australian settler state which occupies the land of Aboriginal peoples. Moreover, Hamid contextualizes the white woman’s habitation in the suburb as “gentrification” (7). From this vantage point, a Black body slips into a space occupied by a white body—whose presence in that space represents the displacement of racialized and white working-class bodies and the ongoing colonial displacement of Black Aboriginal bodies from their lands. This evocative potential for analysis is presented with each door-created vignette, such as the Filipina girls in Japan (29-31), which necessitates a long look at the reasons for emigration from the Philippines, (neo)colonialism in the Philippines, as well as the impacts of European imperialism on Japan and the historical colonial relationship between Japan and the Philippines.

adjective, frequent. Put simply, this sentence construction makes the phrase cumbersome. However, the sentence structure also counters the assumption that the place a refugee flees from must be perilous, allowing for complexity in the man's life experiences. By extension, if alone "a person is almost nothing" in that s/he can be made into "meat" (9), whether dehumanized or more vulnerable to death and violence, then this man must also have had some notion of community, humanity, and life. Through the possibilities offered in this concatenating statement, Hamid offers a humanizing, if spare, sense of interiority to this Black male character we meet so briefly within a single chapter. Furthermore, he is able to make the case for this man fleeing from danger without condemning the entire society from which he has come, avoiding the binary between refugee-producing and refugee-receiving countries, between darkness and light. The dark Congo River that European colonizers found so unsettling and is central to *Heart of Darkness* thus holds a different meaning in *Exit West* and contributes to the novel's portrayal of light and dark as duality. The Congo River is so dark because it is the world's deepest river. Before Nadia and Saeed ever arrive in Europe and before a "dark London" exists, Hamid hints that darkness does not always mean less light from above but, like the ocean, can also mean significant depth from below, something profound. In a passage that undermines numerous Manichean binaries, the comparison of a dark-skinned man to a foal can also, then, be recognized as part of the novel's propositions that human beings are not outside the natural world but are part of it.

Another moment that confirms this analogy takes place when electricity is cut off from the mansion in London where Nadia and Saeed temporarily live with other refugees, prompting people there to largely relocate and reassemble by nationality. Shortly after a nativist riot leaves Nadia, Saeed, and the other refugees bloodied and battered, and military personnel and vehicles surround the areas inhabited by asylum seekers, the protagonists witness a moment of humanity as they anticipate the next blow in the mounting violence. The narrator suggests that, while this may be referred to as "the calm before the storm," it is actually "the foundation of a human life ... when we are compelled to pause and not act but be" (138). The refugees are once again confronted by imminent death at the hands of aggressors. They recognize the "ebbing and flowing" rhythm of such violence (138). In a moment of respite between the ebb and flow, they are reminded of a rhythm of a different order. The natural pulse of the seasons arrives in London through the explosion of white cherry blossoms on the trees of the Palace Gardens Terrace—a

street in refugee-occupied London. In addition to the white petals in the trees, “there were now dark bodies too, children ... like little monkeys” (138). Presumably these children are from all over the Global South as the houses at this point are still heterogeneous, populated by people from diverse nations.

Here, darkness signifies racialized people in general—an extension of the scene where the emergence of a Black man in a white woman’s room defuses an overdetermined sexualized and racialized moment. Hamid introduces this racist trope in the middle of a paragraph-long sentence. Through its distinctive rhetorical structure, the narrator unravels the racist trope through a cascade of subclauses, which complicate both racism and the man over nature oppositional binary. The comparison of dark children in trees to monkeys is explained as follows:

not because to be dark is to be monkey-like, though that has been and was being and will long be slurred, but because people are monkeys who have forgotten that they are monkeys, and so have lost respect for what they are born of, for the natural world around them, but not, just then, these children, who were thrilled in nature, playing imaginary games, lost in the clouds of white like balloonists or pilots or phoenixes or dragons, and as bloodshed loomed they made of these trees that were perhaps not intended to be climbed the stuff of a thousand fantasies. (138-9)

Hamid attacks the slur but does not take the position that racialized people are just as human as white people and thus also superior to nature. Instead, he takes issue with a view of the world that denigrates alignment with the natural world. In fact, these children pause in the affirmation of their humanity in the calm between the ebb and flow of violence, “as bloodshed looms,” by respecting and embracing that they are “born of ... the natural world.”

Additionally, it is a reminder that even an urban center is still part of the natural world. Palace Gardens Terrace is known for landscape design that incorporates natural elements. It is a cherry-tree lined street, and even though these trees may be landscape features, “perhaps not intended to be climbed,” they are living entities that are part of the Earth, like the city bricks that Saeed had recognized as “earth,” and respond to the natural rhythm of the seasons. The manifestation of spring in their boughs somehow beckon the children who recognize them as kin, much as Nadia

and Saeed do with respect to the lemon tree on her terrace. It is telling that the children's immersion in their own humanity, which is taking their place in the natural world, creates a haven for their imaginations and fantasies despite the humanmade devastation and uncertainty that surrounds them. The children's imagination transports them into the clouds or sky in a manner that calls to mind the telescope on Saeed's balcony. This is an important comparison because Hamid's novel does not denigrate human innovations and technology. After all, the children imagine becoming balloonists or pilots. Moreover, their environment also facilitates their play within various mythologies and ancestral stories as symbolized by phoenixes and dragons.<sup>125</sup> As was the case with his critique of anthropogenic light, Hamid highlights that losing respect for the balance, dynamics, and power of the natural world and denying or forgetting our place in it risks damaging our world to the point where it will impact our ability to conjure our ancient beings and stories or bring our imaginations to life through creative innovations.

Misconstruing the potential of darkness, the government attempts to make the refugee-concentrated areas of the city unlivable by depriving its dwellers of resources such as electricity, running water, and public transit. In so doing, the government divides the space in two: "light London" and "dark London" (146), imposing in so doing, the binary thinking that the novel seeks to subvert. But the refugees reap unexpected benefits from these dark nights. Light London is so named because it maintains a steady stream of resources denied to dark London and continues to be "bright as ever ... glowing up into the sky and reflecting down again from the clouds" (146). Here, Hamid again plays with popular notions of light. Having access to electricity in this moment can mean visibility, safety, connection to other people, and ease of movement. But in light London, excessive use of light at night when the natural state of the landscape is darkness, creates an unnatural glow, the sky glow also seen in Saeed and Nadia's city, which both disrupts the circadian rhythm of life and cuts Earth's inhabitants from visual connection to the sky and universe.

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<sup>125</sup> Ancient stories of birds that are comparable to the phoenix exist for peoples from North Africa all the way to East Asia. The name "phoenix" is also often used as a translation of Simorgh, which is an ancient mythological bird significant to the Sufi tradition.



While the government does not wholly deprive dark London of modern technology, it deploys this technology violently. Military and paramilitary forces flood dark London with their weapons and armoured vehicles to contain, control, detain, and, ultimately, deport or dispose of migrants. At night, when the sky is not filled with light pollution, it is dotted with “drones, helicopters, and surveillance balloons” (146), technologies deployed to watch, police, and threaten the refugees. Under cover of night, dark London also “sometimes” experiences incidents of violence not officially at the hands of the state such as murders and assaults, although it is unclear if these are the actions of the migrants or nativists (146). This is an important consideration in a novel concerned with relationality. A constellational perspective reminds us that relationality involves multitudinous entities and elements in the universe participating in the balance of divine law. It is not enough for the natural balance of light and dark to be restored for all forms of conflict to subside. Various forms of conflict continue to be expressed in violence in dark London.

Hamid does not allow for a definitive delineation between light and dark people as he goes beyond simply flipping a binary opposition that favours the dark-hued Others. Just as Hamid’s portrayal of light and dark neither villainizes nor valorizes either attribute or state, all shades of people have their place in the balance of the universe. It is only in human behaviour in relationship to the power of either that good or harm unfolds. White supremacy and racism are human invention that conflict with universal balance and are a form of pollution counter to peace.

Beyond intermittent violence, the darkness in dark London creates the atmosphere for profound, significant occurrences much like “blackness in the ocean suggests not less light from above, but a sudden drop-off in the depth below” (Hamid, *Exit West* 146). First, it dampens the capabilities of state surveillance—helicopter spotlights and geothermal technology are no replacement for fully lit streets. Darkness does more than impede reconnaissance. At the same time that darkness makes celestial bodies visible from the Earth, it also creates the conditions for networks of human relationships and communities to form on the land.

In this chapter, where state violence and xenophobia bifurcate the land, Hamid is careful to complicate notions of easy division such as nationality, religion, positionalities (native vs refugee). One of the profound realignments that begin to happen in the relationships amongst

refugees, catalyzed by the changes set in motion by the government's severe actions, is that they begin to arrange themselves in groups or embodied constellations on the ground. In this environment of heightened precarity, some grow suspicious of communities from different places in the world and begin "reassembling themselves ... superficially" by nationality (147). Nadia and Saeed remain in the mansion, but as people move in and out, "reassembling," the demographic profile changes and it "becomes known as a Nigerian house" (147), presumably because most of the occupants are from Nigeria. Soon, the elders of this and two other "Nigerian Houses" form a council that tends to resident, community, and inter-house relations, a governance structure that function like guiding lights to help the broader community work towards collective wellness and balance. Nadia becomes the only young person to attend—having been silently vouched for by a trusted matriarch. She also thinks she is the only non-Nigerian and the only one who is not fluent in English. But just as familiarity with an assembly of stars means recognizing the distinctness of each star, Nadia's involvement in the elder's council gives her discernment and clarity about the groups' composition and her place in it. The narrator discloses that,

[i]nitially Nadia did not follow much of what was being said, just snippets here and there, but over time she understood more and more, and she understood also that the Nigerians were not in fact all Nigerians, some were half Nigerians, or from places that bordered Nigeria, from families that spanned both sides of a border, and further that there was perhaps no such thing as a Nigerian, or certainly no one common thing, for different Nigerians spoke different tongues among themselves, and belonged to different religions. (148)

It is amongst this assembly or gathering of bodies in collaboration on land, "over time" and with attentive listening, that "she understood more and more" that Eurocentrism misconfigures both identity and language. Nadia comes to see that the Nigerians "were in fact not all Nigerians ... and further that there was perhaps no such thing as a Nigerian" (148). Of course, there are people who identify as Nigerian and/or have Nigerian citizenship. However, this chain of commas complicates this identity and brings attention to the borders of the modern Nigerian nation-state and the communities that they transgress or are transgressed by them. By inference, we know that Nigeria's borders have been influenced by a history of the colonial slicing and distribution

of Africa. Through Nadia's experience with the Elder's council, or in deeply committed relation with this particular community, the reader is confronted with the constructedness of national identity and borders as they are fashioned by or in response to European imperialism.

Indeed, to emphasize this critique of imperialism, the narrator again employs a rhetorical strategy of concatenation. Through a series of subclauses, Hamid repeatedly complicates and undercuts the original assertion that the houses in dark London were comprised of Nigerians. Nadia can discern the specificity of relationship only within the formation of this assembly or constellation of diverse people. It is only in the act of community building and care that the homogenous mass is humanized in its diversity and distinct positions. Similar to how a constellation becomes legible through the relationality between stars and those on the land, the features of the council become discernable only through consideration of the distinct historical, social, political, and cultural contexts each person comes from, together with their relationships to the place where they meet to strategize community needs regarding scarcity and potential responses to amplifying state violence. Moreover, Nadia's initial fear regarding her lack of fluency in English is transformed with the realization that council members do not speak a uniform English but conversed in "different variations of English, different Englishes" (148). These languages have been constructed only in part from what may be considered the "native" tongue of England and its descendants. Conceivably, this signals that each of the spoken "Englishes" is born from different peoples and places, which Nadia, significantly, learns are not Nigerian. This comforting insight lends Nadia the confidence to contribute her voice. In this human constellation that forms in dark London, languages function across difference to tend to community needs and consider a collective future in the face of imminent violence.

At the same time, Hamid's novel is careful not to present an optimism that collapses differences. The council generally tends to the "mundane" of quotidian human concerns and disputes and their process is "often slow and cumbersome" (148). What Nadia enjoys about attending the council meetings is that they represent "the birth of something new" (148). In dark London, where the natural balance of light and dark is somewhat restored, the night sets the scene for some communities to come together and create new ways of caring for the collective. In addition, Nadia feels both a familiarity and unfamiliarity with the people of the council and the house. Part of this something new is Nadia's own place within the familiar and unfamiliar as

“she found their seeming acceptance of her, or at least tolerance of her, rewarding” (149). Hamid conveys a sense of how the heterogenous experience and positionality of refugee does not rob human beings and communities of their agency and capacities to participate in community-making and contribute to innovative modes of working towards peace and balance.

## Kinship, Tribalism, and Forms of Nativism

Although the novel offers sparse details about many of the peoples and places it features, it is interested in forms of collective belonging, and, as such, examines different approaches to tribal communities and identities that nurture or impair people’s ability to live in accordance with relationality. Indeed, *Exit West* evokes the diversity of refugee experiences through Nadia and Saeed’s negotiations of belonging at the intersection of gender, nationality, tribal identity, language, and diverging forms of nativism. Notably, Nadia’s hopefulness and interest in the community at Nigeria House are contrasted with Saeed’s, who feels “seldom fully at ease” (150) in the new constituency of the house and attributes this to gender and “something tribal” (149). The practice of sizing each-other up amongst the Nigerians is similar to Saeed’s own culture; however, feeling outnumbered and “alone.” Such interactions “evoked tension and a sort of suppressed fear” (149-150). Saeed’s discomfort, it turns out, is largely rooted in his notions of masculinity as they are entangled within group identities.

Although the lack of specificity, which I mention earlier, creates its own problems, details in the novel can convey how gender and different forms of collective belonging nuance refugee experience. For example, the novel does not clarify which tribes or ethnic groups Nadia and Saeed are from—or if they are even from the same one—and they come from drastically different homes and families. Nadia grew up in a pious household where her “constant questioning and growing irreverence in matters of faith” ultimately resulted in estrangement (22). Saeed, in contrast, is close with his parents, for whom religious commitment has little to do with social convention, as is evident in Saeed’s father accepting Nadia, an unmarried woman who was not their kin, into their home. Moreover, in London, Saeed prefers to spend time with a house occupied by refugees from his homeland where, during communal prayer, he “feel[s] part of something, not just something spiritual, but something human, part of this group” and, moreover, where he is reminded of his father and a man unknown to him calls him “brother” and offers him tea (152). As described in the novel, a tribe is a group of people that share kinship ties

and collective traditions and practices. The evocation of kinship ties, as the embodied act of communal prayer, evidently reminds Saeed of his father and he is referred to as brother, and the collective traditions of prayer and the offering of tea as a recognizable gesture of hospitality, that Saeed recognizes this community as a tribe—as his tribe.

However, Nadia feels no such affiliation to that community and refuses Saeed’s invitation to move into their house. Their dialogue on the matter illustrates the novel’s bigger proposal about tribal identity.

“Why would we want to move?” she said.

“To be among our own kind,” Saeed answered.

“What makes them our kind?”

“They’re from our country.”

“From the country we used to be from.”

“Yes.” Saeed tried not to sound annoyed.

“We’ve left that place.”

“That doesn’t mean we have no connection.”

“They’re not like me.” (153)

The root word for “kind” is “kin,” and when Saeed’s appeals to ancestry is not welcome by Nadia, he brings up another important element of tribal identity, a longstanding connection to place. Nadia refutes this too because for her, in this moment, leaving is a cutting from. The importance of the two-protagonist lens in the refugee novel comes to play as Nadia and Saeed convey their divergent positions on belonging. Whereas Saeed finds connection and spiritual grounding, which are essential when surrounded by uncertainty and the threat of physical extermination, Nadia feels confined and alienated by inherited forms of tribalism, which are the last things she needs when trying to survive in the states of urgency. By extension, the novel recognizes the power of tribal social organization, but it also argues for the need for some people

to create or find belonging in new communities. It also condemns the use of tribal identity as the premise for conflicts or separatism. Tribalism, as enacted in this last way, could be conceived of as belonging to the same realm of conflict as nativism and light pollution.

Notably, the names “light London” and “dark London” reflect the racial valence of nativism in this European context. The refugee migrations of masses moving from the Global South into the seats of empire, such as London, complicate the diaspora-native binary. Taking the example of Britain, Avtar Brah acknowledges that while the term native, or (I would include) diaspora, may not be explicitly claimed, they remain “an underlying thematic of racialised conception of Britishness” (187). Implicit in the concept of diaspora is a reference to “the people who are presumed to be indigenous to a territory. The ways in which indigenous peoples are discursively constituted is, of course, highly variable and context specific” (Brah 190). Brah refers to the pejorative connotations of the word native in the context of the colonies where it is deployed in reference to racialized Indigenous peoples, where it is “code for subordination” (190-1). But she explains how the term is “turned on its head” and becomes redeemed in the seat of the empire to assert white superiority over racialized migrants and refugees who were negatively labelled “native” in a different geographical context (191). In *Exit West*, Hamid plays with the term “native” and its associated tropes to point to this turn that accompanies the change in location.

As part of the diasporas in London, the refugees are portrayed as the threat against British natives, although they were the natives in their own lands who often themselves received diasporas from adjacent lands. Brah’s term *diaspora space* is helpful for sorting out these shifting positionalities depicted in the novel. Brah defines diaspora space as “a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes ... includ[ing] the entanglement, the intertwining of the genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put’ ... where *the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native*” (205). In the context of both London and Saeed and Nadia’s home country, Brah’s diaspora space helps make sense of how racialization and empire are entangled with shifting definitions of “native” and the xenophobic meaning of nativism. It is not until Saeed and Nadia enter Marin, California that the narrator takes a new look at the term “native,” though nativism is not reconsidered. Though I discuss this at length later, it is important to note the difference between nativism and the variability and specificity around discourses of Indigeneity. Brah suggests that, when taken up by

Indigenous peoples of previously colonized states (e.g., Pakistan) or present-day settler-colonial occupations (e.g., the U.S.), “the native positionality becomes the means of struggle against centuries of exploitation, dispossession and marginality ... It is important, therefore, to distinguish these claims from those that go into the constitution of structures of dominance” (191). There is overlap here with using a relational reading methodology because multiple positionalities must be considered in relationship to the land. Moreover, Brah argues that “[o]ppositional politics from a subaltern location must contend with all manner of contradictions.” One such problematic she offers is, “How do subaltern indigenous peoples place themselves vis-à-vis other subordinate groups in a locale?” (188). I would suggest that Simpson’s response would be that Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island should include other racialized subaltern peoples in their “constellations of coresistance” for visioning and creating alternative modes of living. Daniel Coleman offers a critique of diaspora which notes that, despite the call for contextual specificity, “abstract diaspora space runs the risk of colonizing literal Indigenous place” (68). Citing Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe scholar Vanessa Watts’s term “Place-Thought,” Coleman asserts that, “The abstraction of places into ‘space’ obscures the kinds of responsibility to specific places that are central to Indigenous ‘place-thought’ and to ecologically sustainable relationships more generally” (68). By contrast, a constellational analytical and reading practice both at the rhetorical as well as methodological level demands place-based understandings of relationality, as I discuss in more detail shortly.

Later, I will discuss the limits of *Exit West* in tending to locality in the Marin chapters; however, here I examine the successes of the novel in drawing attention to the violence of nativism when the flow of human movement changes tide towards the metropole from the periphery. While the novel does not deny the existence of people of colour, it emphasizes the fact that the most vocal nativists, who are white, dominate London. By contrast, dark London consists mostly of dark-skinned foreigners seeking refuge and/or safe passage, though the narrator acknowledges the smaller presence of “light-skinned” refugees. Making note of this signals how race is not a fixed category but one that has shifted through history, nor are those categorized as dominant society’s others always phenotypically differentiable.

The reality of refugee existence reveals that conflict and violence can or will impact life regardless of one’s intentions and actions as historic and contemporary forms of Euro-Western

imperialism and capitalism continue to shape and/or effect global human movement. In London, as violence escalates and the Elders's council advises patience while the youth want armed resistance (154), "Saeed wondered aloud once again if the natives would really kill them" (163). Saeed's concern is an inversion of the racist trope of the savage natives that accost European explorers for human sacrifice or cannibalistic ritual. The bloodthirsty "natives" in this story are the white people in the seat of "civilization." Here, the novel interrogates the "turning on its head" that Brah articulates about the term "native" in the European landscape. The contemporary iteration is one rooted in white supremacy and xenophobia. For emphasis, Saeed expresses disbelief that they are facing such a prospect as "millions arrived in [their] country" and they did not slaughter them (164). But Nadia suggests that this was because as a "poor" country they didn't "feel [they] had as much to lose" (164). Arguably, England and other European metropolises have much to lose because they have built wealth from their colonial exploits. Indeed, the novel reveals how both the migration of peoples and their reception and accommodation is impacted by how colonialism and capitalism frame human interactions with the natural world as resources for extraction. Human beings, as part of the natural order, move in response to devastating circumstances that result from human activities that disregard relationality, whether that be severe drought, war, or toxicity.

Ultimately, the nativist forces pull back and electricity is restored, but the novel leaves the reasons open for interpretation. Through a series of qualifications—the narrator invokes the term "perhaps"—the novel offers a number of possibly overlapping or entirely independent motivations, including that the nativists

had understood that the denial of coexistence would have required one party to cease to exist, and the extinguishing party too would have been transformed in the process, and too many native parents would not after have been able to look their children in the eye ... Or perhaps the sheer number of places where there were now doors had made it useless to fight in any one. (166)

While the novel is careful not to dehumanize those in power, it also creates room to question the efficacy of empathy and compassion to respond to what is in wealthy Western nations often



called “the refugee crisis”—which, in the European context for example, Xavier<sup>126</sup> Alcalde reiterates “is not actually a crisis of refugees” but, among other things, a crisis of European humanitarian policies and values (“Why the Refugee Crisis Is Not A Refugee Crisis”). However, it is partially the failure of empathy and compassion, and the West’s tendency to overemphasize the correlation between the arousal of these affects in their citizenry and the creation of solutions in their societies that respond to the refugee plight. Questioning the plausibility of the very notion of empathy, Slavoj Žižek calls for the West (Europe in particular) to “cut the link between refugees and humanitarian empathy” (61) as a viable impetus for a response to refugees and further argues that it elides the more difficult and necessary work of addressing the global capitalism that produces refugees and in which the West is culpable. By constellating diversity of experiences and histories, *Exit West* emphasizes the need to untangle the causes and contingencies to which these migrations are responses as doing so illustrates the limitations of trying to affectively internalize another’s experience and identity.

### The Limits of *Exit West* and Settler Colonial Spaces

In the tenth chapter, tucked into the second move of the first chapter in Marin, Hamid’s narrator, who has up until this point referred to nativist xenophobia and racist violence in Europe, troubles the term for the first time—tellingly, in a land under settler-colonial occupation. He does so by constellating three different demographics and their unique conceptions of nativeness. The opening sentence is structured like the revealing statements to which the reader has now grown accustomed:

In Marin there were almost no natives, these people having died out or been exterminated long ago, and one would see them only occasionally, at impromptu trading posts—or perhaps more often, wrapped in clothes and guises and behaviours indistinguishable from anyone else. At the trading posts they would sell beautiful silver jewelry and soft leather garments and colorful textiles, and the elders among them seemed not infrequently to be possessed of a limitless patience that was matched by a limitless sorrow. Tales were told

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<sup>126</sup> Although it appears in this spelling in this document, his first name is most often spelled Javier.

at these places that people from all over now gathered to hear, for the tales of these natives felt appropriate to this time of migration, and gave listeners much needed sustenance. (197)

The narrator makes what appears to be a simple claim only to undermine it by a series of subordinate clauses and the occasional em-dash, which, as noted above, functions like a typographical wink that accentuates how the initial phrase should be viewed with suspicion. Specifically, the narrator claims that there are “almost no natives” in Marin because they had “died out or been exterminated long ago” (197). If the reader missed the cue to contemplate the contradiction between almost none and the totality of extermination, the narrator reiterates the point that these people would be seen “occasionally.” Arguably, if there are enough of them to be seen occasionally, then to say there are almost none is just as inaccurate and absurd as asserting that they have been exterminated.

Here, Hamid places the citing of such a colonial myth of the vanishing “Indian” in a stereotypical place of post-contact, “the trading post.” Now that the racist trope that serves settler colonial fantasy is placed within a set colonial venue, Hamid’s em-dash undercuts the whole scenario with speculation: “or perhaps more often, but wrapped in clothes and guises and behaviours indistinguishable from anyone else.” This suggestion is, to an extent, effective at countering the idea that “natives,” or Marin’s Indigenous people, would somehow be identifiable by some stereotypically anachronistic markers or mannerism. The narrator elides, however, the fact that the Indigenous people of what is called Marin City and the surrounding area are the Coast Miwok (Sokolove et al.). While minimizing details in other locations operates positively in calling for a careful reader who re-examines their own position with respect to relationality through a critical engagement with the text, in the settler colonial context, this omission acts as an elision that disappears the Indigenous people of this region. Just as importantly, the narrator’s emphasis on the indistinguishability of Indigenous peoples runs the further risk of obscuring the unique relationship that Indigenous peoples have to land occupied by settler states. Such omissions can too easily slip into justifications for the continued displacement, dispossession, and genocide of Indigenous peoples.

The Marin of the novel is described as full of refugees from all over the world while also serving as home to a substantial Black American population. Thus, the Indigenous inhabitants of Marin might be “indistinguishable” in that their everyday attire and interactions within the city are just as diverse as anyone else’s. However, this reflection also prompts the question, to whom might they be indistinguishable in clothing and guises? As the next paragraph suggests, the narrator has wandered into Saeed’s mind as he contemplates the multiple claims of nativeness in the land he has recently arrived. Therefore, to this one recently arrived refugee, at first glance Indigenous peoples are indistinguishable from others. However, strangely, Hamid’s narrator continues to materialize the presence of this community within the space of trading posts wherein Indigenous peoples sell art, jewelry, and handmade textiles and where their elders possess the stereotypical qualities of both “limitless sorrow” and “patience.” Readers awaiting a subversive subclause, present elsewhere in the novel, will be disappointed, for there isn’t one here. In this regard, the novel falls short of its ambition to unsettle critical commonplaces about refugees as exceptional to, rather than constitutive of, modernity. In these telling moments, the novel ends up affirming myths of the disappearance of Indigenous peoples that the narrator had initially sought to trouble.

And yet, while non-Indigenous peoples often flock to gift shops on reserves to consume Indigenous culture, these trading posts also function as places for “people from all over” to gather and listen to the “tales” of the Indigenous people as told *by* them. Western scholars have long been appropriating and stealing Indigenous peoples’ stories. Additionally, non-Indigenous writers and artists have continued this theft, subsequently building wealth, careers, and reputations out of stories that they have exploited, in ways that often disrespect their sacred functions. Moreover, settler society constantly denies and erases the stories of Indigenous peoples that attest to their experiences of conquest and settler colonialism. Still, the space of the trading post is transformed from settler-curated nodes of exploitation and commerce to a gathering place where people from all over the world living on Indigenous lands come to listen to Indigenous people and all of their “tales”—the stories, histories, legends, and personal accounts—that they choose to share.

The narrator offers two reasons as to why the refugees and migrants gather to listen. The first is that the stories of Indigenous peoples “felt appropriate at this time of migration” and the second

is that they gave the “listeners much needed sustenance.” Without more context, it is difficult to discern what about these stories made them appropriate for this time of migration, especially since the previous chapter describes as a time when “the whole planet was on the move, much of the global south headed to the global north, but also southerners moving to other southern places and northerners moving to other northern places” (169). Is it because these Indigenous people have certain traditional stories about migration? Does it have to do with the Indigenous peoples’ accounts of the various waves of newcomers, colonialists, settlers, and migrants? Or perhaps resonant experiences of displacement and dispossession? These details would be helpful to answer questions about the second reason regarding sustenance. What about these stories sustains the displaced and dispossessed? The novel raises these questions without providing place-aware answers or information that can nurture relationality.

Moreover, the narrator’s decision to position Indigenous peoples as the nourishers of other communities is troubling, as it is akin to racist conceptions of Indigenous people as spiritual shamans towards whom white culture turns for enlightenment—a trope other racialized people are themselves terribly familiar with. But the novel offers the reader no details that can support a countercurrent to the dominant discourses of settler colonialism, just as it does not provide answers to the troubling questions it sparks. Lastly, while the stories shared by Indigenous peoples sustain those who gather to listen, it is not clear what the new arrivals offer by way of relationality and/or acknowledgement of the original inhabitants of the land and the rightful human governance of the territory. Of course, these observations are not meant to be critiques of refugees, who often carry trauma and live in precarity. Rather, these aspects of the novel suggest the limits of Hamid’s otherwise nuanced literary understanding of the complexities of refugee experiences.

After this brief paragraph on the Indigenous peoples of Marin, though it is critical to say that Hamid never uses the term Indigenous, the following paragraph transitions into troubling the notion of nativism. The narrator suggests that there are two other “layers” (198) of “natives” to consider in Marin. One layer consists of those who claim nativeness by birth, either their own or their traceable lineage going several generations back to those who “had been born on the strip of land that stretched from the mid-northern-Pacific to the mid-northern Atlantic” (197). The second layer consists of those Saeed notices as those who fit this category and are the most

ardent in claiming “nativeness,” those he says resemble the “light skin” “natives of Britain” and further resemble the British in their disbelief and anger at the mass arrival of refugees from around the world (198). Compared to the first natives that the novel describes, this light-skinned demographic make a claim of belonging not to a local place but to a massive swath of land whose parameters at the mid-northern Pacific and Atlantic coasts are established through the wars, coercions, and negotiations of European and settler colonial states. Arguably, the expanse of land they feel is their inheritance by Doctrine of Discovery, theirs by way of Christianity and whiteness, is just as much theirs as Europe belongs to white Europeans.

The third layer of “nativeness” that Hamid conceptualizes is entirely different from the others; specifically, it refers to the descendants of Africans forcefully brought to the Americas via the transatlantic slave trade. Like Jodi Byrd’s use of the term “arrivant” and Iyko Day’s “alien,” the novel conceives of diverse peoples and positionalities beyond a dichotomous arrangement. Saeed, a foreign onlooker, a new arrival uninvited by any form of governance—be it an Indigenous authority or the settler state—experiences and observes critical differences between these three spheres of claims to nativeness or originary belonging. Saeed states that this layer of nativeness is not as “vast in proportion” (198) as the others, suggesting that this claim is more to belonging than Indigeneity (an ancient, enduring relationship to place) or European claims to Race-based dominion over the entire Earth. Though this demographic may not be vast in proportion, Saeed recognizes them as “vast in importance” because society in this part of the world had been “shaped” by it and “unspeakable violence had occurred in relation to it” despite which this group had “endured, fertile” (198). There is no doubt that the enslavement of Black people in America and the various other forms of anti-blackness that followed, such as Jim Crow laws, ongoing police brutality and the over-incarceration of Black people, are forms of unspeakable violence. However, the narrator uses the term “exterminated” where “unspeakable violence” would also have been apt in the discussion of the first layer of nativeness, or the Indigenous peoples of the Americas in general and the Coast Miwok specifically.

Saeed’s interior reflections as he attempts to relate to this three-noded constellation offer clues regarding why the portrayal of Indigenous experience is not as easily relatable to his current situation. In this moment when the extensive migration of human beings has become so massive that it appears to match, perhaps for the first time in human history, the volume of peoples who

stay within their traditional territories, Saeed is one of the drastically displaced, having traversed oceans and expanses of land. In this drastic displacement and experience of racialization and xenophobia, Saeed sees a connection with the Black descendants of the enslaved and is thus drawn to them. He describes their displacement to North America not as an uprooted people but as “a stratum of soil that perhaps made all future transplants possible” (198). Instead of a plant that is removed from a matrix of relationships from which it originates and is transplanted or tossed onto another’s soil, Hamid conceives of them as living soil. They embody the relationships European imperialism attempted to sever and, in so doing, destroy. Importantly, this analogy suggests that the other stratum of belonging still exist (e.g., Indigenous and European-descended settler). Here, Hamid emphasizes that the waves of racialized diasporas that followed and continue to arrive in the U.S. have themselves been able to “transplant”—to root, to grow—only because of the enduring and nourishing labour of Black people and communities.

Not unlike the community and comfort Saeed and other refugees experienced in the storytelling of the Indigenous orators, Saeed finds solace in the sermons of a Muslim Black American clergyman whose words were “full of soul-soothing wisdom” (198). And although Saeed goes on to forge a romantic relationship with the clergyman’s daughter, who, like all the other characters except Nadia and Saeed, is unnamed, the novel avoids romanticizing this solidarity by depicting Saeed’s varied relationship with members of the Black community. Though he earns some of its members’ trust by working alongside this community (219), some continue to feel “unease” about his relationship with the woman while others merely “tolerated” it (219). The work to constellate with this community continues with Saeed and the unnamed daughter of the preacher. That is to say, they are animated by a principle of relationality that recognizes the distinct positionalities within communities as well as between them. She is drawn to Saeed’s “attitude of faith” and his “[expansive] ... gaze upon the universe, the way he spoke of the stars and of the people of the world” (220). She is drawn to what I describe above as Saeed’s vision of Sufi relationality. The young woman’s attraction to Saeed’s expansive view and his love of collectives of stars are perhaps what draw him to her, someone whose expansive worldview moves her to mobilize collectives of people.

The relationality, or spiritual reality, that Saeed sees in the stars and their relationship to the Earth and its inhabitants is something that this woman works to make a reality in the physical

world. This is exemplified in her own involvement with the local “plebiscite movement” that aimed to give each person in the Bay Area a vote, regardless of citizenship, through “the creation of a regional assembly” that would “speak for the will of all the people” (220) in an effort for “greater justice” (221) for all the area’s residents. The vote symbolizes a voice or agency, the existence of one’s humanity regardless of state recognition. This fantasy is tempered with the admission that “How this assembly would coexist with other pre-existing bodies of government was as yet undecided” (220). Recalling the triangulated constellation of the beginning of the Marin storyline, it may appear to be a recognition of the primacy of Indigenous law and land stewardship in the Bay Area, but the next sentence makes it clear that Hamid’s novel is only talking about settler colonial “entities” (221). While Saeed’s expansive vision of stars and people may be impressive, the novel’s vision falls troublingly short in a settler colonial context. This also marks the possible limits of the novel’s constellational thought or cultural production, as it can be easy to emphasize positionalities that are most similar or perceived to be most proximate to one’s own while not accounting for those that seem so different or distant that they are omitted from depiction. Indeed, this approach is only effective if it includes the positions most disparate from one’s own when seeking to both reveal the mechanisms of Euro-American imperialism and guide human movement towards respectful models of coexistence.

The issue of migration thus holds potential for reconsidering settler colonialism, but it must do so without privileging diaspora at the expense of Indigenous experiences. Discourses of migration have been weaponized by colonialism against Indigenous people. For example, applications of the Bering Strait theory have been purposed to somehow support a justification of European conquest since in the Americas everyone is supposedly a proverbial “immigrant” anyway. Despite this, there is also great potential for pairing migration alongside settler colonialism to reconsider its violence; indeed, contrasting Indigenous living practices that account for natural order with Indigenous displacement or forced migration, such as was done via the Trail of Tears, or forced immobility, as has been done via reservation systems. There is a need to develop such linkages further in accordance with relationality to engender visions of a future that nurture honourable, life-sustaining motion.

## Coda: Moving on and Staying Put

At its core, *Exit West* is a novel concerned with human motion that complicates dominant notions of the nature and relationship of both time and space. Looking at instances where characters are portrayed as still, as not moving offers insights about the elements of human existence that have been disavowed, resulting in the crisis-induced forms of mass migration we witness today. Saeed's father, an elderly woman of Chinese descent in Palo Alto, and an older "maid" in Marrakech do not use the doors. For Saeed's father, staying in his homeland is itself a form of time travel mitigated by relationships. By staying in his land, he is able to give life to the past in the present through his deceased wife, both physically by visiting the earth where her remains rest and relationally through the stories of her that are shared by his friends and family. Staying also facilitates a sense of future because he feels by sacrificing his spatial closeness to Saeed, he increases the chances of both of their survival if he avoids the trials of the migration. In one of the final chapters, in which we encounter the woman in Palo Alto, Saeed reflects on his relationship to his parents. In Marin, he experiences prayer as a kind of portal that evades a linear notion of time and a purely physical notion of place. Though Saeed had always prayed, while he is far away from home and his people, witnessing the possibility of a future for humanity to live in peace, Saeed begins praying "fundamentally as a gesture of love for what had gone and would go and could be loved in no other way" (202). Prayer becomes a way to touch those "who could otherwise not be touched," such as his mother, who was in the spiritual plane or his father who is physically distant (202). Prayer also becomes more than this. In prayer, "he touched a feeling that we are all children who lose our parents, all of us...and we too will all be lost by those who come after us, and this loss unites humanity ... the temporary nature of our being-ness...and out of this Saeed felt it might be possible, in the face of death, to believe in humanity's potential for building a better world" (202-3). Prayer collapses the connection to include those who are on the other side of the Earth but also all those he has never met, who have already passed, or are yet to be born, thereby facilitating the multi-dimensional movement of relationality.

While Saeed has moved across the earth and sees prayer as a kind of time-travel—as his father believed that star-gazing constituted a kind of time-travel—the old woman in Palo Alto sees herself as another kind of time traveller. She has remained in the same house since she was a baby, while the inhabitants of her house have come and gone and the composition of the



neighbourhood changed drastically. Witnessing the changes in her neighbourhood, it crosses her mind that she has also migrated in a way; she notes, “[w]e are all migrants through time” (209). In the American context, it is a bit troubling in that it echoes the “nation of immigrants” and “melting pot” ideas that erase the specificity of Indigenous belonging that the settler state needs for legitimacy. It is also a sentiment that romanticizes migration while simultaneously conflating the various modes and motivations for it. It becomes an erasure of another kind for refugees. But the statement is not that we are all migrants but more specifically that we are all migrants through *time*. The world around us has always and will continue to shift and change. The woman’s account of being born and growing old in one place, this single house, has not only involved her seeing the neighbourhood change but also seeing her own body change. Moreover, it has involved her family; in her granddaughter, her only faithful descendent, “she thought she saw what she would have looked like had she been born in China” appearing to look even “more ... Chinese” than the old woman herself (208). The old woman sees her ancestors in her progeny such that encountering her kin prompts its own kind of migration through time wherein the past travels through blood and manifests in the present. We have it in our blood, in the reality that the world and its people have always been and continue to be in motion. Thus, the old woman’s observation suggests that we don’t need fantastical portals to challenge notions of the linearity of time. It evokes the image of Saeed’s dream of going to the Atacama Desert to lay on the sand where the human population and light and air pollution are so low that one can see the stars in the Milky Way “slowly move. Because the Earth is moving. And you feel like you’re” also moving (25). The novel suggests not only that motion is a part of the laws of nature but also that human movements motivated by domination (such as war and colonialisms), necessitated by strife, and caused by war and/or environmental devastation, are signs of the violations of our relationship to the natural world.

Lastly, the middle-aged, mute woman in Marrakech asks us to consider demographics of people for whom flight is not a possibility. She is nameless, like all the others in the constellated stories, but she is referred to repeatedly as “maid,” which speaks to her class position and economic vulnerability. The narrator says that she “could not speak and, perhaps for this reason, could not imagine leaving” (223). In addition to issues of class, the woman is faced with the precarity of living in an ableist world, all of which is compounded by her being a woman. Her daughter, who has taken a door to build a life in Europe, constantly asks her mother to join her. However, the

“maid” prefers to stay because “she had a sense of the fragility of things, and she was a small plant in a small patch of soil held between the rocks of a dry and windy place, and she was not wanted by the world, and here she was at least known, and she was tolerated, and that was a blessing” (224). Her sense of the fragility of life recalls the first door from the novel and the dark-skinned man’s humanizing contemplations. In her concern for being seen as worthy of a place in the world is an acute worry for being “known.” This particular figure points to an important element of the refugee narrative and its implications for relationality. Since receiving nations often demand a payment from an asylum seeker through the currency of language in the form of their stories, those who cannot or refuse to articulate a story are excluded. But, in addition to that, some choose not to flee not because they do not live a life of precarity, in conflict or in danger. They do not seek refuge elsewhere because there is no elsewhere with the potential of being less precarious. Refugee narratives, then, are implicitly suggestive of the stories of those in the Global South, or in other places, without representation in news media and dominant discourse who “stay put” and yet must also be accounted for in constellational thinking and creation. Put in another way, the refugee narrative always has a counterbalance narrative of those who could not or would not flee. Regardless of whether they are explicit in a refugee narrative, these experiences must be afforded space in constellational thinking just as Hamid’s novel includes the character of the mute woman. The stars do not only reveal themselves in the developed world or to wealthy nations. The elegant patterning of the universe’s divine law that Rumi writes of must also be honoured across the entire Earth for balance and peace to be made a reality. The novel suggests that we must imagine a world that even the most marginalized can participate in constellating into being.

Instead of binary oppositions and submissions to dominant discourse, then, Hamid conceives of the world in terms of balance and openness to the historical contexts and lived realities of diverse people and communities, from those with whom we are kin to those we may not even know exist. This is the constellational relationality evoked from the iridescent, stellar speckled patterns on the book’s deep blue and purple cover, to its storytelling structure, to the modes of human collective mobilization and creativity imagined in the novel. A constellational method involves opening one’s field of view to include even, or especially, the positionalities that are the most disparate from one’s own within a collective vision and movement toward liberation and peace. Together, these diverse experiences and cosmologies help all people to reconsider the diverse

and complex ways in which we are interconnected as human and non-human beings and create networks of solidarity that honour relationality. Hamid's novel visions this, offering a strategy based in Sufi notions of relationality that resonate with conceptions of relationality from within the field of Indigenous theory.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have drawn inspiration from Anishinaabe thinking to develop a situated critique of settler colonialism that reckons with the varied forms of complicity in which racialized diasporas are implicated and, just as importantly, to suggest the potential of relationality in activating global networks of affiliation and solidarity that might advance Indigenous resurgence. The two sections have drawn particular attention to two of the most compelling aspects of relationality, decolonial love and constellational thought, as represented in the works of select Anishinaabe and diasporic writers. This two-part structure and paired approach is meant to actualize a method that I unfold as “reading for resonance,” an approach that is akin to critical refugee studies scholar Y  n L   Espiritu’s concept of “critical juxtaposing” (21), a method of conceptual constellating that eschews the reductiveness of comparativeness. To read for resonance is to attend to alliance without conflation, to provide an unflinching reflection of one’s own complicities as a first step towards establishing the conditions for a future beyond settler colonialism, and to establish honest and trusting solidarities. In my close readings of the works of *Beastgirl and Other Origin Myths* (Elizabeth Acevedo), “nogojiwanong” (Leanne Betasamosake Simpson), *Hirshima Bugi: Atomu 57* (Gerald Vizenor), and *Exit West* (Mohsin Hamid), I hope to have modeled this practice of reading for resonance, in a manner that gestures towards the critical potential of the concept of relationality.

I want to conclude by turning to one more pairing expanding on my literary analyses to consider resonances in visual culture. Here, I turn to Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore, whose sculpture *Biinjiya’iing Onji* I consider alongside Kurdish-Iranian writer and filmmaker Behrouz Boochani’s and Arash Kamali Sarvestani’s documentary, *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*. I highlight these works because they provide thoughtful and profound ruminations on the possibilities and limits of relationality.

Rebecca Belmore’s sculpture, *Biinjiya’iing Onji (From Inside)* faces the world’s powers with their roles in the displacement and dispossession of Indigenous peoples and refugees (see fig. 9 and 10). “Biinjiya’iing Onji” was her 2017 contribution to the renowned art exhibition, *documenta*. The marble sculpture is a hand-carved, domed tent described on Belmore’s website

as “increasingly a long-term home for refugees and migrants ... a testament to what, for many, is a state of perpetual emergency” (Hopkins).



**Figure 9:** *Bünjiya'iing Onji (From Inside)* on Filopappou Hill, Athens, Greece (Belmore).



**Figure 10: *Biinjiya'iing Onji (From Inside)* on Filopappou Hill Athens, Greece, opening to the Acropolis (Belmore).**

The sculpture was first mounted on Filopappou Hill in Athens, facing the Acropolis. Belmore's use of local stone orients perspective to the local context by situating the sculpture on another elevated point in Athens and positioning the opening of the tent to face the Acropolis. At the same time, the piece is grounded in Anishinaabe culture and cosmology because, as Belmore states, the shape is "reminiscent of the wigwam dwellings that are part of my history as an Indigenous person" (Hopkins). Traditionally, wiigiwaams are made with materials local to Anishinaabe territory—saplings and birchbark. On Belmore's website they are called an "ingenious solution for ... a people who were in constant motion" (Hopkins). The very much stationary Acropolis comprises four monuments made of limestone and marble and is the symbol of western civilization and architectural excellence. Belmore's tent, a single, comparatively small monument, aligns Anishinaabe and refugee experiences and embodies what western civilization's self-ascribed superiority does to the world of human motion and creativity. The colonial and capitalist spread and ecological consequences of the west's brand of civilization have impacted human movement on major scales. For the wealthy minority of the world it has meant travel and tourism while for the subaltern masses it has resulted in displacement and containment.

This sculpture is an important counter-monument because it invites viewers to contemplate the how value is attached to different forms of human innovation and movement.

Casting a wiigiwaam in stone makes a statement about Anishinaabe architectural achievements as well as the constrictions of colonialism. The wiigiwaam is an innovative form of architecture whose design and construction speaks to an understanding of human movement as a life-sustaining practice that responds to and respects the natural world and the prophetic.<sup>127</sup> Carving it in the material of so much revered European history and accomplishment is an assertion of Anishinaabe history and accomplishment. With the onslaught of European conquest, the wiigiwaam as a mobilizing dwelling had to also be used as a strategy for survival against settler encroachment and other colonial assaults such as war, forced displacements, and the containment of the reserve system. However, a stone wiigiwaam that has to be moved via crane or airlifted ossifies the ingenuity of the architecture and suggests a stagnation in life-making under foreign conditions.

Although *Biinjiya'iiing Onji* does not gesture towards any specific refugee peoples or their cosmologies, the gaping entrance invites the audience in to see the land, as the title signals, “from inside” the tent and the sky and celestial bodies through the opening in the roof. It holds open the possibility of imagining the kinds of human movement and social orders that western imperialism has disrupted only to replace it with other forms of horrific migration and desperate attempts at home-making. A stone tent defies the purpose of a semi-permanent abode. It is a daunting statement on the potential permanence of states of displacement that will continue to mount if the Acropolis—the vaunted seat of modern civilization—does not face and reckon with the domed tent and all its implications.

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<sup>127</sup> The Anishinaabeg have traditionally moved across their vast territories in accordance with seasonal changes. Moreover, their history also includes a massive, centuries unfolding migration westward in response to the “Seven Fires Prophecy” which Simpson discusses as a pre-emptive protection that anticipated European conquest (*Dancing* 65).

Where Belmore sees aligned struggles for freedom and peace in the shape of a tent, Bahrouz Boochani, journalist, novelist, and filmmaker, hears it in the name and song of a bird, the Chauka—a species unique to Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. Imprisoned in an Australian-run detention center on the Island from 2013 until 2017,<sup>128</sup> Boochani made this film with “clandestine” (*Chauka*) cell phone footage<sup>129</sup> from within the prison in collaboration with Netherlands-based Iranian director Arash Kamali Sarvestani. The documentary is entitled *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* in honour of the bird and the Manusian peoples whose identities and culture are closely tied to this bird and on whose land the Australian center was built (see fig. 11). Given the Manusian reverence for the bird, it is disturbing that the prison within the detention center should be called Chauka, a distortion and dishonoring of the place and the beings that have lived there long before the Australians arrived. Boochani’s framing of the film and his experience of displacement and incarceration in the Manusian context conveys a passionate call for the world to bear witness and respond to the intertwined plight of detained asylum seekers and Manus’s Indigenous peoples. Moreover, through the layering of three types of songs—by the Kurdish detainees, by the Chauka bird, and by the Manusians, *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*, intones love and honour for cosmologies that are often drowned out by dominant discourse.

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<sup>128</sup> Although the detention center was officially closed in the fall of 2017, Boochani, like other refugees, continued to live in a state of precarity and to be targeted by authorities. In November 2019, Boochani arrived in New Zealand where he was granted refugee status in July of 2020.

<sup>129</sup> It also includes footage taken outside of the detention center, not by Boochani, with Poruan Malai and another Manusian in conversation with Janet Galbraith (Australian) and other scenes such as Manusian celebrations of Papua New Guinea’s Independence Day.





**Figure 11: A still from *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time* in a scene where a black butterfly struggles to get through a detention center barrier.**

The director-cameraman, Boochani, grounds the film in his personal and cultural matrices. Regarding perspective, the filmmaker says, “the camera is my eyes.... I have lived with these shots for years and they are my understanding about life” (Boochani). Indeed, the documentary is profoundly informed by Boochani’s Kurdish-Iranian roots. While it’s beyond the scope of this project to examine this at length, it is important to note, given the significance of language and memory throughout this thesis, that while in this film most of the internees featured speak in Farsi, the songs they sing that score the film are in Kurdish. Significantly, about a third of the way into the film, a young refugee begins to sing a Kurdish song, a lament for Kurdistan, his kin, and his beloved. He sorrowfully chants, “Wherever I go is ruined / I am scared I may die somewhere far away from home ... My heart is full of sadness and that is why I sing this song ... I wish I were a dove to fly over to you ... I would fly all across the world ... I would call on you just like old sweet days” (00:31:51-00:33:09).<sup>130</sup> Such songs are not uncommon in Kurdish repertoires as they are a Middle Eastern people with a long history of (often armed) struggle to maintain and/or assert their autonomy against different empires or nation-

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<sup>130</sup> This is the translation as it appears in the subtitles.

states in the region. Their land is divided by Turkish, Iraqi, Syrian, and Iranian borders. Kurds and their leaders have faced various kinds and degrees of oppression and violence at the hands of each of these nation-states and their predecessor Empires. This song connects the current wave of Kurdish refugees and their detention and torture under Australian authorities to a history of displacement and incarceration under Imperialist regimes.

As the man sings, footage of Poruan Malai (Manusian) picking up Janet Galbraith (Australian) and showing her around the island foreshadows the film's revelation about Australian neocolonial aggressions. The Kurdish song finishes and (presumably)<sup>131</sup> a Chauka begins its song over a scene of the prison barricade. The film then cuts to Hatam Yekta, an internee who earlier shared his experiences of being tortured in Chauka for days. He says that in the evening of one of those days, when the mood was particularly "sombre" and "melancholic" (00:35:09-00:35:14),<sup>132</sup> a Chauka bird came and sat on a tree facing the Chauka prison and began to sing at length. He expresses how in that atmosphere it made him feel like "nothing else existed for [us] in this world" (00:35:48-00:35:51)<sup>133</sup> and he receded into his thoughts until the shouts of the guards shook him from his reverie out of the song of the Chauka bird and back into the hell of Chauka prison. From Kurdish lament, to Chauka song, to Chauka prison, to Chauka song, and back to the prison, Boochani's scores a narrative that contrasts the power and beauty of subjugated peoples to the appropriation of these peoples' lands and cultures for the purposes of exploitative, repressive nations.

Malai and another local man show great pride in expressing that Chauka is Manusian identity. While space limits mean that I cannot contemplate the depths of this statement, I wish to underscore that it conveys how integral the Chauka is in its relationship to the Indigenous peoples. When they learn what the Australians have named the prison-within-

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<sup>131</sup> I am not an expert but based on Malai's imitation and a youtube recording it sounds like the Chauka.

<sup>132</sup> As translated in the subtitles.

<sup>133</sup> As translated in the subtitles.

the-prison and the conditions of torture experienced by the asylum seekers, Malai's brow furrows in concern and he says, "it's so frustrating...they are abusing that name, Chauka" (01:06:05-01:06:45). Offering a little more insight into how Chauka is their identity, Malai asserts that "Manusians "are like that [the Chauka]. Small province, but it can talk loud" (01:09:23-01:09:28). He follows this assertion by voicing a concern about the locals working in the detention center, asking: "Since they're using that name Chauka, why can't they [the Manusian guards] speak out" (01:09:36-01:09:40)? The treatment of the refugees is also disturbing to Malai who contrasts Manusian worldview against Australian actions when he states, "it is our culture to look after them" (01:19:21-01:19:23). As the two Manusians and Australian try to sort out Australia's motives for their treatment of asylum seekers and Manusian culture, land, and peoples, the tension between Manusian customs and the behaviour of the local guards and the Papua New Guinean government is revealed to be a matter of economy and power. While many of the guards are Manusians, the highest-ranking guards and officials are white Australians. Moreover, Manus is an island of little economic opportunity—a condition that no doubt has precipitated from the history of European colonialism in Papua New Guinea and the naval occupation of Manu by the Australians before World War II, followed by Japanese and then American occupation during the second World War.

Boochani and Sarvestani are tremendously sensitive to the circumstances and culture of the Manusians and the film never portrays them as the oppressors of the detainees (though we learn of the brutality asylum seekers experience are at the hands of local and Australian guards alike). The documentary holds colonialism and capitalism accountable, for both are systems of oppression that have imposed on the island island such conditions of economic precarity that locals are compelled to work in detention centres despite their cultural incompatibility with such treatment of people in need of help. Their predicament exemplifies what I mean by looking at systems of oppression and asking how we are made differently complicit in them.

Boochani attacks systems of domination and dehumanization and, in his respect for the Manusian Peoples and refugees around the world, demonstrates how even those in dire positions, far from their homes and peoples and without the protections of civil society,

such as refugees, have agency and can use their voice like the Chauka to call out oppression and like the dove over the mountains of Kurdistan to call on their kin and ensure that the world does not forget them.

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the Neighbours*. E-book, Penguin, 2016.

## Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Maral Moradipour

**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** University of Guelph  
Guelph, Ontario, Canada  
2002-2006 B.Sc.

York University  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
2009-2010 M.A.

The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2015-2020 Ph.D.

**Honours and Awards:** Province of Ontario Graduate Scholarship  
2016-2017, 2017-2018

Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)  
Doctoral Fellowship  
2018-2020

**Related Work Experience**

Teaching Assistant  
The University of Western Ontario  
2015-2018

Research Assistant  
York University  
2009-2010

**Publications:**  
Moradipour, Maral. "Constellating Co-resistance." *States of Refuge: Keywords for Critical Refugee Studies*. Edited by Peter Nyers for the Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition, Sept. 2019, pp. 12-17, [globalization.mcmaster.ca/research/publications/working-papers/2019/working-paper-sep-2019.pdf](http://globalization.mcmaster.ca/research/publications/working-papers/2019/working-paper-sep-2019.pdf). Accessed 7 Aug. 2020.