



WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



Reviving Indigenous Spaces: Echoes of a Native Spirit. An Interview with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

Sayan Dey and Jonnelle Walker

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson is an indigenous (Mississauga Nishnaabeg) writer, musician and academician. She is notable as the author of several books and papers on Indigenous issues in Canada, and for her work with the 2012 'Idle No More' protests. Leanne released her first album of poetry and music, Islands of Decolonial Love, in conjunction with a book of poetry and short stories of the same name in 2013 with ARP Books. She signed with RPM Records, the first indigenous contemporary music label in June 2016, and her second album Flight released on September 30, 2016. Simpson is a member of Alderville First Nation. She writes about contemporary indigenous issues and realities, particularly from her own 'Anishinaabe' nation, across a variety of genres. Simpson has collaborated with a variety of indigenous and non-indigenous musicians to record and perform stories as song. She regularly performs live with a core group of musicians consisting of Cris Derksen, Nick Ferrio and Ansley Simpson. In this interview she talks about the importance of preserving and reviving indigenous geo-political spaces to decolonize the global contemporary patterns of knowledge production.

Dey and Walker: Hello, it is such a great privilege for us to converse with you on the diverse perspectives of de-colonial thinking and doing. So, do you think that the protection of the indigenous, native lands is a crucial way to prevent this loss and recuperate the traditional past?

Simpson: Miigwech for your kind words. Indigenous peoples must have self-determination over our homelands and our nations. Land is the sources of everything meaningful to us and these relationships are our worlds.

Dey and Walker: One of the many remarkable aspects about your academic engagements and your performances – they are not cloistered within specific disciplines. So, do you share the

myths and folklores of your community, which you have learnt from your parents and your grandparents, through the current patterns of your work?

Simpson: Colonial disciplines and genres don't resonate with me, nor do they fit well within indigenous intelligence. Colonial institutions by design are machines that replicate capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and white supremacy and for the most part they create generations of individuals that not only do not question or critique these systems, but are unable to imagine anything else.

Folklores and myths are not the right terms for Indigenous intelligence because of how colonisers have used these words to position Indigenous peoples as unintellectual. You wouldn't use these terms to refer to post-colonial theorists for example. Indigenous intelligence is first and foremost for Indigenous peoples, and I've shared what I am comfortable sharing in my published work.

Dey and Walker: Decolonial Love— this phrase is not just a part of one of your books, but it also figures in different ways, directly and indirectly, through your talk shows and musical videos. Can you further elaborate, why do you associate de-coloniality with the notions of love and how both of them are related to each other?

Simpson: Decoloniality isn't enough. Indigenous peoples have to reimagine and then rebuild our systems and our worlds based on our own intelligence and our own practices. We have to embody, both individually and collectively these processes in order to actualise the alternative. Our ancestors were very good at this, and for me, I understand them as seeing love not as just an emotion, but a practice of respect, reciprocity, consent and humility.

Dey and Walker: Shattering the ethical fetters of Western and Western-privileged Universalisms appears to be a very prominent theme in your works. For instance, the traditional manner in which you commence your talks, the musical style of narrating stories as in *How to Steal a Canoe* and *Under your Always Light* and combining poetry with songs as in *The Basement Revue*. Being a woman and discarding the globally established, West-centric, hetero-normative and patriarchal hierarchies must have invited a lot of controversies and criticisms. Does it affect you?

Simpson: Yes, of course, there are lots of controversies and criticism because everything I do is an intervention. The process is the meaning in my work. So I have a practice, whether it is academic or artistic, of refusing colonialism, and living Nishnaabeg intelligence to the best of my ability. Speaking directly and unapologetically to an Indigenous audience and then across Black and Brown audiences. Refusing to abide by the practices that generate colonial recognition. Refusing to centre whiteness. My people have been doing all of this for a very long time, so I don't see this as new or innovative. We ignore the controversies and the criticisms. I don't make work for the western world. I don't exist for the pleasure or critique of the western world. That's irrelevant to me.

Dey and Walker: You have always stressed the fact that it is important to protect the elders and the knowledge holders of the Indigenous communities and create opportunities for the children

to learn from them. So, is the present generation from your community interested in preserving and practicing the Indigenous traditions?

Simpson: My generation, as our previous generations does everything possible to ensure that we thrive as Indigenous peoples and nations. For some, that means physical survival. For others it means connecting youth to land, language and culture. Indigenous peoples have always been contemporary – our brilliance is always present – sometimes it is hidden, sometimes it is coded, but it is always there.

Dey and Walker: Thank you very much once again for reflecting on the importance of conserving indigenous lands and the knowledges.

Simpson: Thank you.



***Sayan Dey** is a Visiting Faculty at Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University, Noida and Research Scholar at Department of English, Banaras Hindu University in Varanasi. Belonging to the 'Bangal' community of immigrants, his area of research interest lies in decolonising the post-colonial historical gazes of India from both inside and outside the national geo-political space.*

***Jonnelle Walker** is an American Studies student at the University of Minnesota. As a biracial 'Ojibwe' and white woman, she focuses on the hybrid's place in the decolonial revolution and utilises Marxist and decolonial theory to engage in the importance of decolonial praxis in the education system and physical environment.*

