RESURGENT WATER IN ANISHINAABE STORYTELLING: LEANNE BETASAMOSAKE SIMPSON'S "SHE SANG THEM HOME" AND "BIG WATER"

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Indigenous resurgence, the regenerative movement that revitalizes languages, traditions, and cultures while aiming at pan-Indigenous sovereignty, this paper focuses on Nishnaabeg resurgent advocacy and aesthetics. The Nishnaabeg (Ojibwe, Michi Saagiig, Chippewa, Algonquin, Salteaux, and Odawa) are a transnational Indigenous people whose ancestral land spreads across the two sides of the US-Canada border. Due to the several freshwaters that cross Nishnaabeg land, colonial dispossession and extractivism in this region have systematically affected bodies of water. Water symbolism is also present in the *aandisokaanan*, the traditional creation stories of the Nishnaabeg inspired by the land and revived through land-based practices. Finally, the Nishnaabeg resurgent advocacy is deeply soaked into water, as evidenced by the Mother Earth Water Walks (MMEW) movement. Inspired by cultural reinvigoration and political advocacy, Nishnaabeg artists continue to generate *dibaajimowinan*, new stories of resurgence, in which water still constitutes a *fil rouge*. Given these premises, this paper presents two Nishnaabeg water stories by Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer, and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who contributed to the resurgent scholarship by theorizing Radical Resurgence (2017a). Engaging with water symbolism, the first section analyzes Simpson's song "She Sang Them Home" published in her debut collection *Islands of Decolonial Love* (2015). Focusing on the author's use of code-switching, whereby the Nishnaabeg language is inserted without translation in the poetic flow, this section meditates on resurgent "storied waterscapes" (Oppermann, 2023). Adopting a hydrofeminist perspective (Neimanis, 2017), the second section presents Simpson's short story "Big Water" from the collection *This Accident of Being Lost* (2017b). Reflecting on Nishnaabeg ecofeminism, ethical human/non-human relationships in the story are thus framed as "bodies of water" (Neimanis, 2009; 2017). Proposing an alternative to the anthropocentric dominant discourse about wet matter, Simpson's fluid poetics suggest an alternative ethical relationship with water to envision new livable futures.

Keywords: Nishnaabeg storytelling; resurgent water; Blue Humanities; settler colonialism; Anthropocene.

INTRODUCTION

> Power moved, and some pieces became the first seals. Power moved, and other pieces became walruses. Power moved, and still more became the whales.
> —Qitsualik-Tinsley et al., *How Things Came to Be: Inuit Stories of Creation*

> I am a bigger threat to the Canadian state and its plans to build pipelines across my body, clear-cut my forests, contaminant my lakes with toxic cottages and chemicals …
> —Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*

In *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence* (2011), Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson compares resurgence to throwing a stone into water. "The stone makes its initial impact in the water, displacing it and eventually sinking to the bottom" and, while the act *per se* ends as the stone disappears in water, the aftereffects of that initial throw remain on the surface in the form of concentric circles for a much longer period of time (Simpson 2011, 145).

Water imagery has historically and symbolically shaped the resistance enacted by the Nishnaabeg, the Indigenous people that reside around the Great Lakes and in the Boundary Waters region across the Canada-United States national border (Johnston 2006, 5). If Boundary Waters refers specifically to the area between Ontario and Minnesota, Nishnaabeg land encompasses also southern Manitoba in Canada and northern Wisconsin and Michigan in the US and is covered by the 1923 Williams Treaties (Simpson 2011, 14).[1]

In North America and worldwide, Indigenous people have resisted through centuries of colonial dispossession, extractivism, and cultural genocide. As a territory gifted with several rivers, lakes, and wetlands, in Nishnaabeg land colonial and neocolonial violence have systematically passed through water. Ongoing hydrocolonialism (Hofmeyr 2021) in this region was originally instantiated in the 1830s by the Trent-Severn Waterway, an ambitious hydrographic project aimed at facilitating transport between Lake Ontario and Lake Huron, including several freshwaters in the area (Angus 1988, 9). Recognized nowadays as a massive failure of colonial engineering, the Trent-Severn Waterway altered the delicate ecosystem of the Great Lakes region, leading to salmon

[1] Nishnaabeg (along with its variants Anishinaabeg, Anishinabuek, etc.) as a term refers to the Ojibwe, Michi Saagiig (Mississauga), Saulteaux, Algonquin, Odawa (Ottawa), and Chippewa. Often broadly addressed as "Ojibwe" (or "Ojibway") due to a historical mistranslation, the Nishnaabeg encompass several nations politically organized in a doodem system. In 1923, Canada coerced the First Nations of the Chippewa of Lake Simcoe and the First Nations of the Michi Saagiig of northern Ontario into signing the William Treaties, resulting in the loss of hunting and fishing rights. Although dispossession and extractivism had been ongoing for over a century, the William Treaties ultimately terminated Nishnaabeg right of sovereignty on land. On doodem political system, see Bohaker 2020; on the William Treaties and Nishnaabeg land, see Blair 2008; Williams 2018.

extinction and wild rice beds destruction, thus provoking famine among the Nishnaabeg (Whetung 2016, 65).

Influenced by the geographical composition of their land, Nishnaabeg oral storytelling is deeply soaked into the territory's wet matter. One famous example is the (re)creation story of the great flood, transcribed by Ojibwe Elder and knowledge-keeper Edward Benton-Banai (1988, 30-34). According to this *aandisookaan* (traditional story), after the Creator sent a purifying flood upon the planet to wash away evil sentiments and riots, Waynaboozhoo[2] and the animals joined their forces to create Mother Earth anew. After various attempts, the muskrat eventually managed to grab a handful of mud from the bottom of the sea, which, once placed upon the back of the turtle, created Turtle Island as the Nishnaabeg land that is known today.

Through repetition and cross-generational transmission, Nishnaabeg "poetics of water" (Mentz in Oppermann 2017, 13) serve as a counter-narrative to imperialistic and individualistic approaches to wet matter and the Anthropocene,[3] which conceive of bodies of water as doomed. In Indigenous resurgence—the regenerative movement of cultures, languages, and traditions that aspires to Indigenous sovereignty—the act of telling stories is political before cultural. As carriers of ancestral knowledge, creation stories preserve traditional teachings from the effects of cognitive imperialism (Simpson 2011, 32) and provide "the ontological and epistemological framework" for political advocacy (40). Retrieved from sacred stories, symbols, and meanings of water interweave Nishnaabeg culture and politics as "interdependent, cogenerators of knowledge" (Simpson 2017a, 20), and continue to generate new stories.

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[2] Waynaboozhoo, also addressed as Nanabozho or Nanabush/Nanapush, is a well-known spirit in Nishnaabeg creation stories often associated to the folkloristic archetype of the trickster. In storytelling, Nanabush is often depicted as a humorous being who creates problems or engages with the rest of creation to give birth to Indigenous worlds. As a co-creator, Nanabush was sent to the Earth by Gitchie Manitoo to name all the plants and the animals. Although typically addressed with masculine pronouns (he/his/him), Nanabush is a gender-fluid figure and a shapeshifter. For reference and Nanabozho stories see Johnston 1976; Benton-Banai 1988; and Simpson 2011.

[3] Proposed in May 2019 by the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) as a distinct geological era instantiated by the Great Acceleration following World War II, Anthropocene emphasizes the catastrophic effects of human activity on the planet leading to ongoing pollution and species extinction.

Alongside *aadizookaanan*[4] (traditional legends and ceremonies), Nishnaabeg scholar Wendy Makoons Geniusz defines *dibaajimowinan* as "teachings, ordinary stories, personal stories, histories" (2009, 11). Both terms refer to the realm of storytelling but differentiate between the collective and the individual, sacred and daily dimensions. According to Simpson (2011), rather than being in opposition to one another, *dibaajimowinan* are "an echo" of *aandisookaanan* (46). Since theory and praxis—stories and advocacy—are deeply entangled, *dibaajimowinan*—personal, everyday stories of resurgence—encompass both contemporary histories of political engagement and modern storytelling.

Water protection is a central feature of Indigenous resurgence in North America. In 2019, the Yurok Tribe (California) legally granted the Klamath River personhood rights. Their example was followed two years later by the Innu Council of Ekuanitshit, which formally bestowed personhood rights upon the Magpie River in northeastern Ontario. In British Columbia, the Wet'suwet'en are opposing the Coastal GasLink Pipeline (CGL), which was approved without considering Indigenous sovereignty and constitutes a new environmental threat. In North Dakota, the Sioux of Standing Rock have established a social movement to oppose the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) (Dennis & Bell 2020). In the Great Lakes region, pacific water protection is represented by the Mother Earth Water Walk (MEWW). Founded by late Elder Josephine Mandamin in 2003, MEWW is a women-led social movement that seeks to attain global attention on ecological damage while revitalizing the role of Nishnaabeg women as water protectors (McGregor 2015). Mandamin's mission is continued by her niece, Chief Water Commissioner Autumn Peltier, who has advocated for water rights since 2016, when at the age of twelve she publicly confronted Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau about his support for pipelines. In Nishnaabeg resurgent advocacy, water symbolism finally shapes also commemorative ceremonies for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous

[4] *Aandisokaanan* in Simpson 2011.

Women (MMIW),[5] where copper water pots are distributed to acknowledge water as a witness of violence.

Inspired by the revitalization of cultures, languages, and traditions and by the political advocacy, Indigenous writers and artists are continuing to generate new artistic configurations that echo creation stories and amplify Indigeneity in the present. Given the extraordinary value of water symbolism in Nishnaabeg culture and colonial history, contemporary storytelling uses water meanings to expose the replication of hydroimperialism (Hofmeyr 2017) in settler colonial societies. Contributing to the deconstruction of anthropocentric narratives of wet matter, Nishnaabeg "storied waterscapes" (Oppermann 2023) propose a decolonial alternative grounded in ethical relationality and minobiimadiziwin—the good life (Simpson 2011).

Given the above, this paper presents two works drawn from Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's fiction that play with water meanings in Nishnaabeg tradition and aesthetics. Engaging with the resurgent political agenda, these storied waterscapes expose Canada's complicity with ongoing hydroimperialism, and propose Indigenous internationalism (Simpson 2017a) as a networked ethical relationality with the human and non-human world. Published in the collection *Islands of Decolonial Love* (2015), the first storied waterscape is Simpson's poem "She Sang Them Home" in which the author switches between English and Anishinaabemowin (the Nishnaabeg language) and uses salmon symbolism to confront questions such as sovereignty, ethical relationality, and (re)mapping (Vizenor 1999). Shifting genre, the second storied waterscape is Simpson's short story "Big Water" from *This Accident of Being Lost* (2017b). Drawing on Neimanis's hydrofeminism (2017), this analysis reflects on the traditional connection between *nibi* and *kwe*—water and femininity—in Nishnaabeg culture.

[5] Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW), also referenced as Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), and Two-Spirit people (MMIWG2S) is a pan-Indigenous social movement sparked across the Americas, New Zealand, and Australia in response to the waves of gender violence against Indigenous female and queer bodies, an ongoing phenomenon which stems from settler colonial history. The expression refers both to gender violence and to the relevant advocacy. For reference see Deer 2015; Lavell-Harvard & Brant 2016; Hargreaves 2017; and McDiarmid 2019.

To be sure, understanding Nishnaabeg ecocritics along with its ecofeminist tradition presupposes internal positionality. As a White European researcher, I cannot claim full comprehension of Indigenous worldviews and aesthetics because of our different histories, knowledge systems, and geographical contexts. Some feminisms, for instance, are particularly critical of the femininity-nature knot, which in Nishnaabeg resurgent practices and artistic configurations emerges as both shared destiny and gendered responsibility. Nonetheless, Nishnaabeg ecofeminism does not align with an essentialist view of gender difference; nor has the conceptualization of the femininity-nature nexus anything to do with the "ecological Indian" stereotype (Krech quoted in Neimanis 2017, 174). Rather, gendered responsibility here translates into the revitalization of women's centrality within their community (McGregor 2015, 73).[6] By restoring their role as water protectors, Nishnaabeg women rescind their colonialist and patriarchal relegation at the edge of society and re-appropriate political advocacy. Occupying the frontline of resurgence, Nishnaabeg women and girls revitalize culture and tradition, while continuing to generate new Indigenous storied waterscapes.

(RE)BIRTH BY WATER

Mixing poetry and prose, song, and essay, in *Islands of Decolonial Love* (2015) Leanne Betasamosake Simpson creates a Nishnaabeg universe in which spirits, animals, bodies of water, and ancestors negotiate their existence through ongoing violence, threat, and dispossession. Traveling back and forth between cities and reservations, paddling canoes across flowing rivers, and populating also digital environments, the spirits make their return from the precolonial past bringing exterminated species along with them and re-establishing Turtle Island in the present. Included in a fourfold section entitled *nogojiwanong* ("place at the foot of the rapids," the Anishinaabe name for the city of Peterborough), "She Sang Them Home" is an ode to water voiced by the first salmon who returns to Nishnaabeg land. Alternating between English and Anishinaabemowin,

[6] See Simpson 2017a, 95-118.

Simpson describes the salmon's reversed journey along the waterway in a *crescendo* that marks the fish's resurgence along with the liberation of the distressed freshwaters.

Embedded in the hydrocolonial history that has afflicted Nishnaabeg land since the construction of the Trent-Severn Waterway, salmon is a recurring figure in Nishnaabeg storytelling. According to Simpson (2011), "there is a convergence between the complex ways Nishnaabeg and salmon organize themselves, govern themselves, and mobilize" (87-88). Mobilization, intended both as physical migration and political advocacy, is the resilient approach which has enabled Nishnaabeg people and culture to survive the most catastrophic phases of the Colonial Age. In particular, the Great Migration is recounted in an oral story known as The Seven Fires Prophecy. According to this *aandisokaan*, seven prophets came to the Nishnaabeg in a time of flourishment, bringing prophecies about the future and a warning against the coming white people. They predicted an epic migration that would take over five hundred years to complete, and that would stretch Nishnaabeg ancestral land from the east coast of Turtle Island to the western shores of the Great Lakes.[7] This epic mobilization, whereby Nishnaabeg nations were spread across a much wider territory, stands as a testament for survival.

Similarly, salmon's migration involves overcoming predators, dams, and natural barriers in their upstream route to find their natal grounds. Hatching in freshwater streams and migrating to the ocean to ultimately return to their spawning streams, salmon stands as a symbol of the metaphorical cycle of life, death, and re-birth, embodying Nishnaabeg resurgence. Kinship emerges from the first stanza of the poem, in which the poetic voice embodied in the salmon salutes the river as a newfound friend:

> bozhoo odenaabe
> shki maajaamegos ndizhinaakaz
> it's been a long time. (124)

[7] The big Nishnaabeg migration is referenced in a famous sacred story known as the *Seven Fires Prophecy* (Benton-Banai 1988, 90-94 and Simpson 2011, 65-66).

At the core of the Trent-Severn Waterway, the Otonabee River runs for fifty-five kilometers from Rice Lake to Katchewanooka Lake in Ontario, embracing the landscapes that inspired Susanna Moodie's colonialist depiction of the wilderness in her 1852 memoir *Roughing It in the Bush*. As Simpson (2011) explains, Otonabee is the English translation for *Odenabe*, a term that refers both to *ode* ("heart") and *odemgat* ("boiling water"); other interpretations lead to *oodena* ("city") and *Odaenauh* ("nation"), hence describing "the place where the hearts gather" or "our nation as an interconnected web of hearts" (94).

From the Otonabee river, in the midst of the waters constricted by the locks of the waterway, the journey begins. Accompanied by Cris Derksen in the instrumental version, the song is a stream of consciousness that blends English and Anishinaabemowin. The internal narrator is the first salmon returning to Nishnaabeg land guided by *nibi*—the water. Saluting the river in Anishinaabemowin, the narrator presents herself with her Nishnaabeg name—shki maajaamegos ndizhinaakaz, "my name is new trout that leaves (salmon)" (2015, 126). Hence, she proceeds by telling the river, her interlocutor, about her ancestry:

> my kobade told her daughter about that feeling
> my great grandmother told her daughter
> my kookum told her daughter
> and my doodoom told me. (124)

Lineage is central in Nishnaabeg resurgence. As a regenerative movement that seeks answers "from within Nishnaabeg thought" (Simpson 2011, 31), resurgence is grounded upon ancestral teachings which, carried by *aandisokaanan*, are updated to the present time. As theorists of resurgence often remark, the revitalization of Indigeneity comes with land-based practices, and, as such, requires land. Dene scholar Glen Coulthard expresses the connection between land and knowledge as "grounded normativity" (2014, 13), i.e., the set of land-based instructions that are intergenerationally transmitted, thus ethically informing human/non-human relations. Analogously, Simpson's (2014) "land as pedagogy" (11) suggests that Nishnaabeg knowledge is built "through a compassionate web of interdependent relationships" between bodies, land, and spirits. In the same

concern, Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred presents a cultural restoration plan which promotes "experiential learning over a sustained period of interaction on the land" through practices such as "water, fishing, and the use of the river" (141).

The fourfold articulation of "told" in the stanza emphasizes the act of transmitting teachings from one generation to the next. This imagery is reinforced by the cadenced rhythm and the verb's cyclic repetition in each verse, further facilitated by the reiteration of "daughter." In Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg tradition, the intergenerational transmission of knowledge is a gendered process, to the extent that the Seven Grandfather Teachings are called "'Kokum Dibaajimowinan,' *Grandmother* teachings" (Simpson 2011, 125).[8] Besides "daughter" the actors in the stanza are all feminine figures: "great grandmother," "*kokoom*" ("grandmother"), "*doodoom*" ("mama" or "my breastfeeder"), embraced by "*kobade*" at the beginning of the stanza, which roughly translates into "lineage" (Simpson 2015, 126).

Therefore, both knowledge transmission and resurgence are represented as entirely feminine processes. While the gender of the narrator (the salmon) is never disclosed, the logical *consecutio* of the stanza depicting a fully feminine lineage ("great grandmother" – "grandmother" – "mother" – "daughter") suggests that a woman is speaking. Instead of venturing in speculations on salmon biology, the gendered narration possibly mirrors the author's own gender through a narrative device that is typical of Indigenous storytelling. As Simpson (2011) explains, personal stories—*dibaajimowinan*—reflect and echo stories of creation—*aandisokaanan*. When a story is told, "we are taught to insert ourselves in the story," so that the narrator is "not just any 'First Person,' but [...] me, or you" (40-41).

bubbling
beating
birthing

[8] In Anishinaabe spirituality, a set of instructions that lead to *mino-bimaadiziwin* (the good life). Stemming from a traditional story, these teachings are often associated to dodemag as follows: Wisdom (Beaver), Love (Eagle), Humility (Wolf), Respect (Buffalo), Bravery (Bear), Truth (Turtle), and Honesty (Raven). For reference see Benton-Banai 1988; Simpson 2011; and Simpson 2017a.

breathing (124)

As acknowledged in postcolonial studies, "polydialectical writers" resort to code-switching to revitalize their endangered language by "installing cultural distinctiveness in the writing" (Ashcroft et al. 2022, 71). Besides maintaining "the writer's resistance to English as the only public language" (Bidwell 2010, 290) by subtly inserting Anishinaabemowin in the narrative flow, the author recreates a sense of community and defines her audience. Cherokee writer Thomas King, author of *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), refers to this device as "Rez English" (English from the reservation) and defines "interfusional literature" as narrative that blends oral and written culture (1990, 192). Admittedly, Simpson's work is always addressed first and foremost to Nishnaabeg people (Simpson 2017a, 35) because language revitalization is more an indication of a political transformative project than it is an act aimed at cultural reinvigoration (50). Strengthening one's sense of community through language, thus, means to reappropriate identity and to envision independence, with the aim of ultimately regaining sovereignty.

While "selective lexical fidelity" (Ashcroft et al. 2002, 63)—the act of leaving untranslated words in the text—is common in Simpson's writing, including the song under analysis, the quatrain above restores Anishinaabemowin without breaking from the linguistic frame. In her etymological exploration of Otonabee (*Odenabe*), Simpson (2011) defines the river as a "bubbling" and "beating heart" in connection to its Anishinaabe name (*Ode*—"the heart") (93-95). Therefore, the ritualistic repetition of "bubbling" and "beating" in the stanza ultimately discards the settler colonial landscape, thus restoring the river's original name and identity. Opened by the onomatopoeic "bubbling" and "beating" the four alliterative diameters additionally describe the salmon's (re)birthing process underwater. Rhythm and repetition, further reinforced by the reiteration of the quatrain (twice in the poem and eight times in its musicalized version), sharpen the idea of echo and circularity introduced in the previous stanza through lineage.

Once Odenabe's identity is restored, the narrator proceeds on her journey along the waterway and renames all the freshwaters, echoing Nanaboozhoo's creation of the world. The first stanza describes salmon's traditional journey along the waterway, departing from Chi'Nibiish (Lake Ontario), passing through Trent River and Rice Lake to

end up in Otonabee River, thus swimming up to Katchewanooka Lake and Clear Lake to finally reach Asin Saagegun (Stoney Lake) in Peterborough County. Through naming, the narrator liberates the troubled freshwaters from the locks imposed by the Trent-Severn Waterway. Hence, the stanza is repeated, this time in a reverse order, to suggest a new journey forward into the future. Using "land as pedagogy" (Simpson 2014), the salmon retrieves Anishinaabemowin along with grounded normativity (Coulthard 2014), and is thus able to travel forth towards resurgence:

> chi'nibiish
> saagetay'achewan
> pimadashkodeyaang
> odenaabe
> kitchi gaming
> atigmeg zaageguneen
> asin saagegun
>
> asin saagegun
> atigmeg zaageguneen
> kitchi gaming
> odenaabe
> pimadashkodeyaang
> saagetay'achewan
> chi'nibiish (125)

Following Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman (2013) and Chippewa writer Gerald Vizenor (1999), Simpson (2017a) defines (re)mapping as refusal of colonial spatialities and continuation of Indigeneity through storytelling (195-96). Intended as the restoration of Indigenous nomenclatures and negation of colonial borders, (re)mapping is made possible by aandisookanan that have transmitted ancestral knowledge to the present generations, and which are further echoed and reinforced by the ongoing generation of dibaajimowinan. Hence, stories that question water meanings—"storied waterscapes" (Oppermann, 2023)—serve as a channel for Indigenous counter-narratives which, once surfaced, can deconstruct ongoing hydroimperialism (Hofmeyr 2021), and lead to a resurgence that involves everyone—humans, animals, spirits, and water.

The second storied waterscape is Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's short story "Big Water," published in her collection *This Accident of Being Lost* (2017b). Fictionalizing her radical resurgence[9] project, already theorized in *As We Have Always Done* (2017a), the collection reproposes the revitalized universe introduced in *Islands of Decolonial Love.* Interweaving poetry and prose with fierce sarcasm, the author's lyric voice ironizes over White upper-middle-class culture and blows up the literary canon to unset the power-structure and re-affirm Nishnaabeg aesthetics. Included in part two, "Big Water" presents a meditative romance where sadness and pain are screamed solely via text-messages, while life proceeds in apathy.

Developing across three paragraphs, the story revolves around the relationship among three women. First, the narrator is the Nishnaabeg storyteller, who interprets meaning while telling the story. In the traditional practice of telling stories, the storyteller is endowed with a hermeneutical function, and is thus simultaneously narrator and commentator. Her role is not limited to the etiological function of connecting causes and effects while leading her characters across the designed route. Rather, she pauses to interpret meanings and symbols, engages the audience, and comments on facts to criticize or support her heroes. As Tedlock (1983) explains, such a dialectical relationship between text and interpretation creates an effect that is specific to Indigenous storytelling, and that can be defined as "hearing hermeneutics" (236). Enacting a trans-mediation of the typical hermeneutical narration device into written storytelling, Simpson obtains the double effect of reinforcing grounded normativity while amplifying Nishnaabeg aesthetics onto the wider literary stage.

[9] Drawing on Glen Coulthard's grounded normativity (2014) and on Audra Simpson's politics of refusal (2014), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017a) theorized Radical Resurgence as a project which "uses Indigenous interrogation, critique, and theory, and the grounded normativity these systems generate" (34) to recenter Indigeneity in response to Reconciliation. In her words, Radical Resurgence "begins from a place of refusal of colonialism and its current settler colonial structural manifestation" and acknowledges the centrality of storytelling by employing "Nishnaabeg story as algorithm" (ibid.). Simpson further clarifies her use of the modifier "Radical" not to intend violent, but rather to suggest that cultural revitalization must go hand in hand with political autonomy (49).

Secondly, Niibish is the central character of the story, as also indicated by the title. "Big Water" is the English translation for Chi'Niibish, the Nishnaabeg name of Lake Ontario which we have already encountered in the previous storied waterscape. Addressed with an affectionate nickname, Niibish is the narrator's friend who is going through an existential crisis. Emerging as a moody, noisy, and somewhat obnoxious character that breaks into the narrator's routine with insisting text messages, Niibish is dealing with anxiety and depression due to ongoing pollution "that washes into her no matter what" (Simpson 2017b, 66). In deep contrast with Niibish's rattling notifications and screaming pain, Kwe is the third character of the story. She is the narrator's lover who appears solely in the opening scene, although her name often recurs in the considerations made by the narrating voice. As a silent character, Kwe's role seems relegated to that of a companion, only portrayed in the act of sleeping or waiting in bed for the narrator to come home. From the narrator's commentary, though, we learn that Kwe is dealing with an urgent crisis that is strictly connected to Niibish's:

> Niibish wants to know where I am, why I'm not up yet, why I'm not texting her back, and she'd like my opinion on the stories in the Toronto Star and Vice this morning about the flood. "ARE THEY GETTING IT?" is the second-last text. The last text is another "Where are you? Ffs."
> Niibish is mad at me for making her text me instead of doing things the old way and she's right and I promised it's just a tool and that we'll still do things the right way once this crisis is over. (65)

In the opening scene of the story, the narrator is waking up in her condo in Downtown Toronto where she lives with Kwe, a recurring character in Simpson's production often identifying a spirit.[10] Still half-asleep, she checks her phone and finds unceasing notifications on a private message application called "Signal" coming from her friend Niibish. Niibish is upset about the flood news on the two most famous Canadian newspapers and reproaches the narrator for not doing things "the old way." Since Niibish's identity

[10] Introduced in the poems and stories of *This Accident of Being Lost* (2017b), Kwe is a fictional character dear to the author, appearing also in her novel *Noopiming: The Cure for White Ladies* (2020). The Anishinaabe word *kwe* is roughly translatable as "woman" and indicates femininity within the broader gender spectrum (Simpson 2017a, 29).

is still concealed, the passage could simply describe a banal situation between two friends who have not seen each other for a long time. As a *leitmotif* in Nishnaabeg (re)creation stories, though, the word "flood" rings a bell, and immediately transports the reader into the typical death-rebirth loop. This circularity effect is further exacerbated by "crisis" in the following passage. Stemming from the ancient Greek κρίσις ("decision," "discrimination," "crisis"), the term indicates in a more figurative sense also "a turning-point" and "a state of affairs in which a decisive change for better or worse is imminent" (*Oxford English Dictionary Online* n.d.). Thus, taken in its metaphorical meaning, "crisis" conveys the two-fold effect of introducing resurgence, while echoing and amplifying aandisookaanan through traditional cyclic symbolism.

In Nishnaabeg flood stories, water rush always comes in response to human misbehavior, as also evidenced by the creation story mentioned in the introduction (Benton-Banai 1988, 30-34), and this story is not different. Lake Ontario/Chi'Niibish is overspilling and threatens to drink up the city of Toronto and its inhabitants. As it is often the case in flood stories, the people gather and use their best skills to solve the imminent crisis. And, as it turns out, settler colonial solutions are not sustainable because they are based on the ongoing colonial relations to land.[11] The settlers interrogate forecasts, hysterically read through data, and proudly display math results because "math is always confident, even when it's dead wrong" (Simpson 2017b, 66). Caught up in their inner dialogue, they forget to listen to Niibish and reach the wrong conclusions. Alone and unheard, Niibish meditates on how to communicate her discomfort to the settlers—"ARE THEY GETTING IT?"—but is ultimately left distressed, grappling with anxiety and depression.

As Oppermann (2023) notices, water symbolism always fluctuates between "life-giving and life-threatening" (52). By centering on human necessities, this ideology results in an endless commodifying loophole that exploits bodies of water. In the story, the settlers' reaction to the imminent flood is coherent with the dominant hydro-

[11] For an extensive discussion on unsustainable settler relations to land, see Liboiron 2021.

imperialistic discourse. Replicating the power structure within cognitive imperialism (Simpson 2011, 32), journalists, scientists and politicians evaluate the possibility of raising walls, placing new locks, further distressing the lake, who painfully ravels in her sadness and runs over her options with Binesiwag (the thunder).

In contrast to the objectifying hydrocolonial narrative, which has transformed freshwaters into "the Anthropocene's postnatural sites" (Oppermann 2023, 42), the caring relationship between the narrator and Chi'Niibish provides a fictionalized embodiment of "watery thinking" (Oppermann 2023, 40). Grounded in ethical relationality, the "thinking with water" paradigm stemming from the aquatic turn in environmental humanities has always been the norm within Nishnaabeg mino-bimaadiziwin (good life) and, more broadly, within Indigenous philosophies. Reflecting on the revitalization of mino-bimaadiziwin, Simpson (2017a) suggests Indigenous internationalism as a transnational network that fosters ethical relations between Indigenous peoples and "with plant nations, animal nations, insects, bodies of water, air, soil, and spiritual beings" (58). Since oceans, seas, and freshwaters are alive beings in Nishnaabeg worldview, it would be incorrect to define Niibish as a personification of Lake Ontario. Rather, Niibish is precisely Lake Ontario, a body of water (Neimanis, 2009, 2017) endowed with a spirit, a physicality, and even an iPhone, pictured along her own journey to resurgence:

> We call the lake Chi'Niibish, which means big water, and we share this brilliant peacemaker with the Mohawks. I call her Niibish for short and I'm the one that got her the iphone and taught her how to text. I look out the south-facing window of the condo and see her dense blue. She is full, too full, and she's tipsy from the birth control pills, the plastics, the sewage, and the contraband that washes into her no matter what. She is too full and overflowing and no one saw this coming like no one saw Calgary flooding, even though every single one of us should have. (66)

In Simpson's production, spirits and bodies of water are often portrayed as masters of technology. Arrogantly looking down on the fragilities of modern people, they sit on the passenger's side and demand to pick the music (2017b, 81-84). Settling onto social media, they chaotically spread hashtags and emoticons to coordinate the advocacy. As a body endowed with a spirit and a voice, thus, it should not be surprising that Lake

Ontario knows how to handle an iPhone and how to send text messages to her human friend. Mingling tradition and contemporaneity, Simpson shapes a heterogeneous universe in which past, present, and future coexist. This time-collapsing process, which Simpson (2017a) identifies with the Anishinaabe term *biskaabiiyang* (2011) or *biiskabiyang*, creates an a-temporal dimension that resembles a decolonial present.[12]

Defined as "an individual process of decolonization and resurgence" and literally translated as "the process of returning to ourselves" (Simpson 2017a, 17), biiskabiyang offers the vision of an alternative future rooted in the recovery of ancestral traditions to sustain Nishnaabeg ways of being in the present. As "an unfolding of a different present" (Simpson 2017a, 18), biiskabiyang resists nostalgia for an idealized pre-colonial past, and rather focuses on the present and future of Indigeneity. As for the hermeneutical function of the narrator discussed at the beginning of this section, time-collapse is a rhetorical device of Indigenous storytelling, both in its oral and written forms. Tedlock (1983) defines as "frame-breaking" the approach whereby the time of the plot and the time of the story are paired by the storyteller by inserting elements of the present in the past (292). Similarly, Clifford (2013) notices that in Indigenous storytelling "the past, materialized in land and ancestors, is always new" (25). And in this alternative Nishnaabeg world where spirits meet social media, Chi'Niibish recovers her identity as a "body of water" (Neimanis 2017).

Drawing on Haraway's cyborg theory (1985), Neimanis (2017) introduces the concept of "body of water" to emphasize our "more than human hydrocommons" (2). Discarding the phallogocentric viewpoint that portrays *man* as self-sufficient, Neimanis underlines how human bodies are dependent on bodies of water for their life, and thus intrinsically connected with the destiny of planetary waters. Since the biological composition of human bodies primarily consists of wet matter, "we are bodies of water" or, as Neimanis (2017) asserts following Virginia Woolf, "there are tides in the body" (1-2).

[12] Grace Dillon similarly theorized this time-collapse as "Indigenous slipstream", intended as "viewing time as pasts, presents, and futures that flow together like currents in a navigable stream is central to Native epistemologies" (Dillon 2012, 345).

Moreover, bodies of water are the watery relations that we necessarily establish with the fluid world. Drinking, leaking, weeping, birthing, bleeding, among other human activities, make us bodies of water that grow symbiotic ties with other bodies of water. Through Neimanis' hydrofeminist view, the relationship between Chi'Niibish and the narrator, unfolding via text messages and deep care, can be understood as a body of water itself.[13] The core of the story is precisely constituted by positive and negative human-water relations, and the binary opposition siding the Nishnaabeg narrator on the one hand, and the settlers on the other, is sharp and definite.

> She's not angry even though she looks angry. She is full. She is full of sad. She wants us to see her, to see what we're doing to her, and change. That's the same thing that Kwe wants, so I know both the problem and the solution, and I know how much brave solutions like these require. (66)

The passage above constitutes a clear example for the narrator's hermeneutical voice, interpreting and explaining meanings as the story unfolds. Commenting on the settler approaches to the incumbent flood, the narrator interprets Niibish's feelings along with the ecological causes behind the crisis. Amplifying the voice of the lake, the narrating voice takes up her role as water protector and speaks up to the wider audience inviting a change in our watery relations. Thus, the natural stream of her consciousness brings her to compare Niibish's existential crisis to Kwe's own sufferance, in a parallelism that binds together two ongoing plights.

It is not by chance that, in analyzing Nishnaabeg artist and performer Rebecca Belmore's 2005 video installation *Fountain*,[14] Neimanis (2017) mentions that art too can be a body of water (153). Deconstructing those "Enlightenment figures of coherent and masterful subjectivity" (Haraway 1992, 48), artistic and literary bodies of water boost ethical alternatives to our fluid relations that the dominant discourse has deliberately

[13] The relationship among the three characters (human-spirit-lake) could be tackled also through the lens of queerness, a question which was deliberately not addressed here in coherence with the selected approach. For an extensive discussion on the topic see Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson 2010.

[14] Leanne Betasamosake Simpson celebrates Rebecca Belmore both in her *As We Have Always Done* (2017a, 203) and in her poem "smallpox, anyone" (2015, 33-36).

marginalized and excluded. Drawing on the connection between femininity and water in Anishinaabe worldview, Neimanis (2017) concludes that in Nishnaabeg art "watery relations are also gendered" (173). Stemming from ancestral teachings and carried along by specific responsibility within the community, Nishnaabeg women's role as water protectors also emerges in the contemporary resurgent advocacy.

In her sacred walks around the perimeter of the Great Lakes with the other MEWW water protectors, Elder Josephine Mandamin fostered the sacred bond between women and the earth in Nishnaabeg worldview. Associated to Mother Earth for their reproductive abilities, women are the only ones who carry the copper water pots in the ceremonial walks. Stemming from aandisookanan and transmitted across generations from grandmother, to mother, to daughter, the bond between women and land was further reinforced by colonial history. As Simpson (2017a) explains, the settler conquest of Indigenous land came with the raping and murdering of Indigenous women and girls, instantiating the waves of gender violence that continue to this day (88). While Indigenous bodies in general were an obstacle to the colonial extractivist project due to their spiritual attachment to land, female bodies were particularly targeted as the first enemy. Seen through the lens of patriarchy, Indigenous women were the life-givers able to replicate Indigeneity, giving birth to Indigenous nations and maintaining traditions across generations and, as such, the first enemy to remove.

The connection between environmental violence and gender violence becomes even more obvious in the case of the Wet'suwet'en activists in British Columbia. Fiercely opposing the ongoing construction of the CGL Pipeline, which cuts into the reservation disrupting the community, Wet'suwet'en matriarchs are at the front line in the blockades for water protection. At the center of a sequence of events that has brought to continuous confrontation with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and mass-arrests, Wet'suwet'en women are facing a double threat. On the one hand, the chemical toxins stemming from industrial development are incessantly tossed into bodies of water, thus also jeopardizing the residents' health. On the other hand, gender violence flows undisturbed across several workers' camps that are situated along the pipeline construction sites, resulting in increasing cases of rape, murder, and human trafficking.

The gendered dimension of Indigenous water advocacy further resonates with Neimanis's hydrofeminism. In "Big Water" the three Nishnaabeg women embodied in the storyteller, the lake, and the spirit/lover constitute three bodies of water that walk through a common resurgence while nurturing positive relationships. Echoing the famous *aandisookan* about the first big flood which, despite its initial catastrophic premises eventually led to a period of stability among the Nishnaabeg, this *dibaajimowin* envisions a new emergence of Indigeneity toward new livable futures for Niibish and *kwe*. Proposing a positive watery relation through the caring connection between the narrator and the lake, alongside the silent bound between Niibish and Kwe, Simpson's second storied waterscape suggests a counter-narrative to the Anthropocene's "doom-soaked stories" (Solnit quoted in Oppermann 2023, 40).

CONCLUSION

As fluid poetics, "She Sang Them Home" and "Big Water" by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson introduce readers to a Nishnaabeg decolonized universe in which our watery relations are questioned and reproposed in an alternative and ethical vision. The first section of this paper "(Re)birth by water" has provided an analysis of Simpson's song "She Sang Them Home" (2015). Building upon aquatic symbolism and radical refusal of hydroimperialism, the author imagines the first salmon who returns to Nishnaabeg land when the locks of the fatal Trent-Severn Waterway will be finally released. Echoing Haraway, the second section of this paper ("Fluid Manifesto") has analyzed Simpson's short story "Big Water" as a contemporary piece of storytelling which translates specific rhetorical devices into the written medium to amplify Nishnaabeg culture.

With the aim to deconstruct individualistic and exploitative narratives around wet matter, the ongoing conversation in the Blue Humanities encourages new stories that address water beyond the Anthropocene paradigm. Refusing Western extractivist approaches, Indigenous art, fiction, and advocacy reinvigorate that "relational thinking" (Chen et al. quoted in Oppermann 2023, 12) with bodies of water that stems from ancestral knowledge and traditional land-based practices. Both the two storied waterscapes analyzed in this essay build upon (positive and negative) relationships, whereby

locks and walls are politically and artistically opposed through care, song, and kinship. Through art and literature, "storied water reveals itself to the world" (Chen et al. quoted in Oppermann 2023, 49), shifting focus from the human to the non-human.

Interlacing English and Anishinaabemowin, "She Sang Them Home" describes a double journey, back to tradition and forward into the future, in a *crescendo* that culminates in resurgence. Through the Anishinaabe language, the distressed freshwaters are liberated from their status of placeless, dispossessed "modern water" (Neimanis 2017, 19) and reconstituted as kin, spiritual entities. Weaving the relationship between humans and non-humans in the form of a body of water (Neimanis 2009, 2017), "Big Water" presents an instance of care, love, and friendship between the Nishnaabeg storyteller and Chi'Niibish/Lake Ontario. Retrieving flood narratives from traditional storytelling, the story deconstructs hydrocolonial conceptualization of water "as spaces for aesthetic and spiritual contemplation, or as unpredictable, formidable enemies that need to be subjugated" (Oppermann 2023, 6). Adopting a hydrofeminist (Neimanis 2017) perspective, the story ultimately connects ecological crisis and gender violence as one unique plight.

Given their capability of acting as counter-narratives to water-related dominant discourses, Nishnaabeg storied waterscapes contribute to the blue turn in the environmental humanities. Engaging with the Anthropocene paradigm, which emphasizes the catastrophic effects of human activities on the planet, the Blue Humanities question how literature and the arts can suggest alternative and ethical ways for our watery relations (Neimanis 2017). The mission of the aquatic turn, thus, involves liberating water imagery from Anthropogenic "doom-soaked stories" (Solnit quoted in Oppermann 2023, 40), which replicate a victimizing representation of waterscapes as destined to perdition. Conversely, Nishnaabeg fluid poetics give voice to Indigenous traditional ways of "thinking with water" (Oppermann 2023, 40), hence proposing a lively alternative to individual narratives. Providing an example of ethical relationship with planetary waters, Nishnaabeg storied waterscapes help envision livable futures for humans, animals, and bodies of water beyond Anthropogenic pessimism.

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