From the start this question has explicitly and implicitly in-formed our collaboration: What would become of thinking if guided by the elements? It has informed this series of filmic experiments, which explore what can only be described as a material aesthetics, which emerges as blackness guides our critical engagement with modern thought.

As a question (and the questioning of the Human it carries), it aims at nothing more than to unsettle the sensibility that supports the violations and violences that mark modern existence. As such, it guides wonderings about a sensibility—that is, a basis for knowing and existing—that is not guided by the metaphysics of separability.

Through visual and aural experiments that re/de/compose that which has sustained the total violence and indifference pervading global existence under all moments of state capital, in its economic (merchant, industrial and financial) and juridic (colonial, national and global) modalities.

How to introduce this question/ing that rehearses a philosophical theme on the aesthetic stage? How about recalling the versions we have tried out thus far?

A.

When asking the question about the human and the elements, what is implicit in it is something that our collaboration has foregrounded from the outset.

The questioning of value which targets how linear time disappears with colonial and racial subjugation, as if all the wealth acquired and accumulated thanks to the expropriation of Indigenous land and slave labour had vanished. That magical operation cannot be disconnected from how we understand value, both in the economic and ethical sense, and from the significance of how difference, which is central to the destination of value (symbolically) has the capacity to completely disappear with it (ethically). This has all to do with the ways in which expropriation (of energy), extraction (of minerals) and abstraction (the disavowal of matter), which correspond to apparently contradictory juridic, economic and ethic directives of liberal state capital.

For the impossibility of attending to how the terms of economic and ethic value are not the abstractions of modern thought but the means and mechanisms of extraction and abstraction has everything to do with the work abstraction has done for modern thought. A task which has been made possible by linearity, both in its spatial (which is how it allows for determination of what the line encloses and what it separates) and temporal (which is how it allows for the delimitation of that which persists while change) operations.
When asking what if time were imaged materially (the fossil) instead of immaterially (the numbers in the clocks or dates), we move to demarcate the abstract line and attend to the matter of value, to that which transforms, transitions and transmutes.

B. Imaging the temporal without the line becomes possible when one pursues the question of what has happened to the matter from which value was extracted. For this question foregrounds precisely that to which abstraction as a procedure is applied. Hopefully this is but the question of how to think: How to think without the line that separates and the line that encloses? How to think without a firm basis, a ground onto which to anchor, the necessary relations which is all that logical thought can do?

Perhaps the most crucial move when thinking proceeds without linearity and its abstraction is to consider the possibility of addressing what exists without having to presuppose relations. Without assuming that everything is or could be treated like a solid, something that occupies space, and cannot as such share its place with something else. This view of matter as a solidity is the first to go when existing things are not considered as substance (mathematical or logical form-matter) but as an instance (physical form-matter), which can take another form as its context (which means, all other things) also alters.

The element water obtains this possibility as it allows for two things to be thought at the same time: (a) that a thing, anything that exists or can come to exist is nothing more than a combination of the very same elements that enter in the composition of everything that exists, including the planet and (b) of how the change in the conditions—both the surrounding and the composition—of each existing thing leads to a change of its physical form. That is, water allows us to think of permanence in differentiation—as in Heraclitus’s except about the river. In doing so, it invites the possibility of thinking of what is similar and what is distinct without the line separating circumscribing and without the line of continuation and similarity. Water inscribes a thinking of existence without abstraction and the violence (the disappearance with which abstraction as a procedure is applied) that is inherent to this intellectual gesture. With water we can think of existence as a point of departure, what permeates: namely, that which is in, in between and all around every existing thing.

Knowledge that attends to water is knowledge of matter, it is about a sensibility that is not possible through an abstract order the mind presumes/imposes on things, but of a material plentitude of which mind-body and everything else is part. That is knowledge that pronounces implicancy, instead of separability.

C. How to image this ongoing cooperation between abstraction and extraction that has marked modern existence? How to hail a political response (as resistance, alternative or refusal and surcease) without immediately positing (as the locus of production, creation or articulation) an interior thing for whom the deadly cooperation (between abstraction and extraction) is not only given but also its conditions of possibility? Is it possible to conceive of a position of enunciation which is not already that from which all meaning emerges and to which all things return when their existence is under consideration?

Without lines of movement, development and dislocation, the thinking with matter opens up lines of interrogation regarding both the relation between the mathematical (logic and scientific), juridic and economic mechanisms and process that facilitate the capitalist (colonial, industrial and global) mechanisms of extraction, expropriation and exploitation as well as the ethical program that supports it, which is contingent upon the figuring of humans as humanity (abstract principle) and subjectivity (abstract existence).

When existence is conceived without presupposing such modes of presentation much becomes possible including a sensibility that finds humans as like everything else that is of the world, which cannot abstract their existence and for whom noxious extraction, that is, the abstraction of the efficient element would not be the mover for its attention. When vibration, that which signals the actual existence of matter and/or energy, instead of relation guides the approach to the manifold, there is no need for a point of origin, delivery or departure.

Each experiment and the questions that animated and emerged from our film works signal something that can be called an elemental aesthetic. Each does as it foregrounds echoes across, through and as episteme. Encountering what vibrates, that which permeates immediately, it recalls existence as movement without dislocation, as re/cic/composition, and all that it renders unimaginable, that is imaginable and thinkable.

After experimenting with the elemental for these many years, we take this moment to pause and reflect on our practice. Not an inward turn but as an outward reflection. For we know, in fact we bet on the ways that our films echo images, modes and practices of existence that are not informed by, that do not re-produce, the image of the human and the notions of nature and world it premises and produces that has prevailed in the past two hundred years or so.

With gratitude to our friends who gifted us with poetical and theoretical contributions which express and reflect Indigenous ideas, principles and practices of existing as humans, on this planet, otherwise, that is, in bended with (against modern capitalist’s extractive and expropriative violent and indifferent mechanisms and institutions.
WORDS TO A GRANDCHILD
Chief Dan George

Perhaps there will be a day
you will want to sit by my side
asking for counsel.
I hope I will be there
but you see
I am growing old.
There is no promise
that life will
live up to our hopes
especially to the hopes of the aged.
So I write of what I know
and some day our hearts
will meet in these words
— if you let it happen.

You are a person of little,
but it is better to have little
of what is good,
than to possess much
of what is not good.
This your heart will know,
— if you let it happen.

Use the heritage of silence
to observe others.
If greed has replaced the goodness
in a man's eyes
see yourself in him
so you will learn to understand
and preserve yourself.
Do not despise the weak,
it is compassion
that will make you strong.
There is good in everything,
— if you let it happen.

As I see beyond the days of now
I see a vision:
I see the faces of my people,
your sons' sons,
your daughters' daughters,
laughter fills the air
that is no longer yellow and heavy,
the machines have died,
quietness and beauty
have returned to the land.
The gentle ways of our race
have again put us
in the days of the old.
It is good to live!
It is good to die!
— This will happen.

An excerpt from Chief Dan George's 1974 poem, Words to a Grandchild, reprinted with permission from Kayah George.
Grandfather,
As we walk through this life
We walk with the gentle footsteps of our people
We walk so we don’t leave a footprint on our mother earth
Although I have never met you,
These are the things you have taught me
Throughout my life I have discovered there are ideas and ways of being that people now
call radical and new
But these ideas of compassion, tolerance and equality
You and I both know to be ancient
I have discovered, grandfather
That there is no extent to human cruelty
I have also discovered there is no extent to human kindness
Grandfather, there have been times where I sought out your counsel and wished for you
to be by my side to guide me
And so I pray and there you are
This is happening
I also can't ever sleep and sometimes I watch so much Star Trek that I start to refer to the characters as my actual friends. Miigwech for your last letter. Sometimes I think your letters are the only good thing in the world. I've started reading Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, alongside some N.K. Jemisin. Oh you are so right. We were warned. Octavia told us.

I also love the exchange you shared between Baldwin and Lorde—her flat-out rejection of the American dream. In the days since you wrote, I've carried her rejection with me. She was never part of the American dream. Indigenous peoples were never part of the American dream—our bodies and lands were the resources for white people to build their dream on. I'm trying to think through how Nishnaabeg elders would think about that dream—a dream that from this perspective is flawed from the beginning. Why would one work hard for their own individual benefit? How is that ethical? Doesn't Nishnaabeg ethics require everyone to work hard, not for themselves but for the collective web of life? How could a people be so broken that their dream of a better life focused only on their individual wealth—at the world-ending expense of so many other living beings? This is exactly Dionne Brand's question in the face of individual or even collective recognition: how do we change the air? That is such a profound attraction. How do we refuse the recognition, the invitations to perform, the individual validations, the crumbs, and change the thing nearly all living things require, the air?

I come from a society that, prior to colonialism, didn't have police or the practice of policing—not because we were primitive or simple or nomadic, or because our population was too tiny to need policing, but because Nishnaabeg society was structured and practised in such a way that, for the most part, the violence of policing wasn't required to maintain social and political relations. For me, the foundations of this way of collective living are spiritual and come from a belief that the spiritual world is alive and animated and interacting with the physical world. Each living being is responsible for its own path in relation to the other living things with whom we share time and space. This means that I'm responsible for monitoring myself and my own behaviours and actions within that matrix of relationalities. I'm not at liberty to interfere or judge or surveil the life paths of other living things. Nishnaabeg spiritual practices teach that everything alive also has a spirit, and that these spirits are in constant interaction with each other. This means that my ancestors are always around me, as are those yet to be born. This means that I have a relationship to the plants and animals I am dependent upon in the physical world, in the spiritual world. This becomes most prominent during our harvesting practices. In Nishnaabeg society, harvesting animals or plants first requires their consent, and we believe that if the animal appears, it is giving up...
Dear Leanne,

I understand this as an anti-capitalist society in a particularly Nishnaabeg formation. The practices of taking only what you need, using everything you take, sharing everything you have and giving up what you can to promote more life, created a bush economy that gave way to a very different relationship to land and water than the one dictated to us by racial capitalism. Systems of conflict resolution, repair, restorative justice, and building consensus were practiced to nurture balance and peace, amongst individuals and groups of people—and not just between and amongst humans, but amongst a diversity of living beings. The idea of authoritarian control in leadership or education was released and even rejected in favour of individual self-determination, consent, and non-interference. Labour, material goods, and the gifts of plants and animals were shared. Of course, things were not always perfect. Abuse, toxicity, and conflict occurred. We know because there are stories. Conflicts sometimes escalated, but the responsibility for creating safe and caring spaces didn’t rest on leaders or institutions; those responsibilities were carried by individuals and families as well as the larger collective. What I learn from the way my ancestors lived life collectively is that if you build systems based on relationality, reciprocity, consent and diversity, if you refuse hierarchy and authoritarian power in both collective and intimate actions, if “laws” are practices embodied in deep relationality rather than rigid authoritarian rules, if “justice” repairs and restores and if your practice of living is also a practice of consent, you eliminate policing.

What I learn from my ancestors is that if you have a profoundly different relationship with land, with the earth—one grounded in diversity and based on consent, sharing, rules, if “justice” repairs and restores and if your practice of living is also a practice of consent, you eliminate policing. If “laws” are practices embodied in deep relationality rather than rigid authoritarian rules, then the responsibility for creating safe and caring spaces didn’t rest on leaders or institutions; those responsibilities were carried by individuals and families as well as the larger collective. What I learn from the way my ancestors lived life collectively is that if you build systems based on relationality, reciprocity, consent and diversity, if you refuse hierarchy and authoritarian power in both collective and intimate actions, if “laws” are practices embodied in deep relationality rather than rigid authoritarian rules, if “justice” repairs and restores and if your practice of living is also a practice of consent, you eliminate policing.

Of course, in our current context we have additional challenges because we are tasked with remaking a world in a place still wholly invested in world-endings. We have been dispossession, and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism.

When I speak about Indigenous resurgence and Indigenous self-determination, my vision is to take wisdom and inspiration from my ancestors to actualize Nishnaabeg political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism. This means deep connections to land outside of political formations outside of nation-states, economies outside of extractivism and enclosures of racial capitalism.

The vision for the future in this way of thinking is not a fixed map, but a set of ethical practices giving way to continuous making and remaking practices without an ending. It is my understanding of Nishnaabeg origin stories; not even Gaia Manxiala knew how to build the world on their first try. It took many engagements in world building to get it right. The planets in our solar system are examples of their failed prototypes for the Earth. Of course, in our current context we have additional challenges because we are tasked with remaking a world in a place still wholly invested in world-endings. We have been both individually and collectively harmed by four centuries of oppression. There are huge losses in terms of land, knowledge, and practice, and of course not all Indigenous peoples agree, not all Nishnaabeg would share my interpretations or visions. I still find inspiration in my ancestors, and this inspiration only grows when I experience glimpses of this way of living.

Dear Leanne,

I’ve been delaying this letter because I was waiting for the right words to come my way. I was cooking, I was watching a documentary about Ousmane Sembène, the Senegalese anti-colonial novelist and film-maker. While I was cooking, I was watching a documentary about Ousmane Sembène, the Senegalese anti-colonial novelist and film-maker. While I was cooking, I was watching a documentary about Ousmane Sembène, the Senegalese anti-colonial novelist and film-maker. While I was cooking, I was watching a documentary about Ousmane Sembène, the Senegalese anti-colonial novelist and film-maker. While I was cooking, I was watching a documentary about Ousmane Sembène, the Senegalese anti-colonial novelist and film-maker. While I was cooking, I was watching a documentary about Ousmane Sembène, the Senegalese anti-colonial novelist and film-maker. While I was cooking, I was watching a documentary about Ousmane Sembène, the Senegalese anti-colonial novelist and film-maker. While I was cooking, I was watching a documentary about Ousmane Sembène, the Senegalese anti-colonial novelist and film-maker.

YouTube, but brilliant, nonetheless. Something that he said jumped out at me, made me pause, the scene closes. What more needed to be said, anyways?

After this, he gestures, silently. The interviewer, in turn, gestures silently. After a long silence, he asks, "Do you believe that Indigenous land-based struggles could/should/must be considered within what abolition demands of us. #LandBack. Land. Back. In this crisis of the earth’s habitability, your words are pushing me to think more extensively about abolition and land. About my own responsibility to you, to the place that I live. Your words are a necessary reminder that, in addition to the role of policing in enforcing Black people’s unfreedom and perpetuating an economy that relies on a multitude of unfreedom, policing has always served, and serves, to stoke Indigenous peoples from their lands, from non-capitalist ways of living to land and to all other human relations. That policing functions in the service of those who destroy the land. That one opposite of policing is Land Back, which is, after all, an end to the imposition of private property regimes and the carceral technologies developed to enforce them.

Everything they do is to destroy the land. Imrad: aren’t all carceral sites and technologies, at some level, really, about cementing the theft of the land, to consent to (purported) transformation into capital, for some colonizer somewhere? (\…) And so, as we enter a crisis of the earth’s vulnerability, I do not see a contradiction between Black led abolitionist struggles against carceral and the Indigenous struggle for white settlers to reclaim their purported ownership of land. Instead, I see a site where struggles can/should/must do overlap.

This is partly because within Turtle Island and across the Black global south, prison access, everywhere, among other things, toward the destruction of the land. For the colonizer, for the multinational corporation (these are not necessarily distinct in a meaningful way). Because not just settler colonialism, but all colonization was itself a project of land theft. As written in 1905 in the Cape Observer: “Terrible concessions of land in which there are any prospects of vegetable or mineral wealth, and oppressive Land Bills have left the Natives of the soil hardly any control over their ancestral possessions.” To hold and keep African territories and peoples under European control, colonizers built substantial networks of prisons, with technologies perfected in the coastal forts built for the slave trade, and with technologies of forcible confinement and constraint that were developed over centuries of Black enslavement. In Kenya, the settler colonial government, as part of a broader program of brutal and spectacular forms of violence, used detention to cement the process of massive land grabs that extended from 1890 onward. (And if you were wondering, this violence was tacitly and at times formally supported, as most global violences are, by Canada: former RCMP officer John Timmernor was the assistant to the chief of police during the anti-colonial uprisings.) This land theft continued into the so-called independence era, now at the height of the neo-colonial rulers. This practice was sanitized in a play (that took to task as well, other neo-colonial hyperpowers by the same name) and the prison continued to serve its same purpose: for levelling this critique, Thiong’o was duly placed in detention in the nation’s Kamiti Maximum Security Prison. They could not, however, hold his mind captive: he published a series of prison writings that would have him join the ranks of Wole Soyinka, George Simon Mwase, and J.M. Karuku, entering a tradition of incarcerated African radicals who would write freedom from prison.

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PORCUPINE II

my kôhkum’s rib cage plumage wrapped around a plum skeleton of barbed wire and electricity bomba that catch in the throat of those that wish any of her grandchildren ill cartilage that bends but doesn’t break bends and bends and bends until the slack tightens up and slaps white men in the face cumulus cloud that rumbles grey battering the side of houses gale winds that utter Cree like a caress and a threat (whisper like a brick wall) astam if you know what’s good for you
our apartment
smells like onions
in the way
a grandmother does,
like the back
of a prune soaked
hand—

a cartography
of swollen
lines and
depth

he stands
on his hind legs,
gulping, eyes
bulging, desperate,
communicating
the news cycle
is exactly that—
recursive, numbing.

headlines read:
"this world is one that insists
on constant bruising
and yet adamantly encourages us
not to be tender.
that is to say, it asks us to house
bruises, but not the way
a bruise feels"

a world unto itself, ignorant
a constellation collapsing, beguiled

i want more than
what
this world
can give me.
i want to flourish,
be fruitful, to burn
down a bank, hi

jack a Tesla,
predatory with
Elon Musk
in the passenger seat

as i swerve
into a rock bed
what does it mean to be tender?
desire, tentative:
to hear
your voice and
your voice
only

tender like your vocal cords
straining, stretching,
a voice overburdened,

the last time
i saw my grandmother,
we travelled
350 kilometres to
watch her die,
at
knowingly,
hers.

her body
in revolt,
with her
unable to
explain or
articulate
how or
why

a body tender and
still betrayal

the last time
i saw my grandmother
i could
see creases:
the world
nestled
in the back of
her hands,
layers

unfurling

like an onion

her cut
a map
of the world,
hers

the north
folding in
on itself

propped
on her elbow
at a forty-five degree
angle, stripping
an orange of its
rind,
at
once violent
and tender

on our
windowsill

sits
a succulent,

its stem

to swallow

the sunlight

bunched over,
desperate,

it leans toward

the glass,

hoped

to be filled

like a

Mason jar

before

the

water

rushes over

how wonderful

to be so

dependent

on another,

how

alarming, how

and yet,

what else is

there to do,

but to have

our beings

bound up

in others,

so restless, so

full

of

thirst

that

we might

spill over

our apartment
smells like onions
in the way
a grandmother does,
like the back
of a prune soaked
hand—

a cartography
of swollen
lines and
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folding in
on itself

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on her elbow
at a forty-five degree
angle, stripping
an orange of its
rind,
at
once violent
and tender
SMALL

i used to not
like to be made
to feel small

but now,
i like it down
here with

the mulch,
ladybugs,
loam; the sticks.
aphids in
arms, hand
in hand

with the mites
and gnats,
mycologist in
miniature,
Fungi my
Friends.

i’m happy,
now, in my studies,
to gaze upward,
to scheme,
plan tactics,
naive strategies,
to set the stage,
if you will,
for alimentary outbreaks.
mushroom and me
blueprints in tow,
tonic cocktails of altenius
at the ready.
yes, i don’t mind
feeling small
cause you can
see, and plot.
a lot from down here.

THE CREE WORD FOR
CAREENING

thin air during the day,
prior to 6:30 p.m.
i am a particle
dust dispersed,
stars the mother
i’ll never see again
diaspora my clinking bones

my teeth are
galaxies, asteroids
clambering together,
my molars the
afterlives of
solar flares

the freeing residues
of stars letting go
of being undone—
what else is there
to do when you’re
a star, but let go?
i am the rising
tides, the moon’s
orbit my waistline,
flooding is love
(to be) made in
overflowing, pipes
bursting

a comet
with no end.
in a word:
intergalactic;
a shooting
star crestfallen
and plummeting.
faint, fatigued
and regretful
but willing to fall
again
what’s the Cree word
for careening?
Freedom is selecting the premium cable bundle
even though you can’t
afford it,
and even
though all you
watch are the film
channels and TWC,
falling asleep to
John Hughes
movie marathons
or reruns of
90 Day
Fiance’

Freedom is when
the low fuel
light blinks
bright on
your dash-
board;
but you
drive
to work
anyway,
lifting your
foot off the
gas
pedal as
you careen
downhill,
momentum
carrying you
forward

Freedom is a phone
bill that will
never be
paid, but
you call
your niece
anyway;
to see if
she’ll come
over to visit,
gossip
and mop
your floors
for twenty
dollars

Freedom is a bingo
dabber that
never runs out,
because
when it
does
you remove
the top
and
pour
coffee in,
to mix
with
the ink

Freedom is a debt
you can’t escape
yet you charge
another Slurpee
to your overdraft
debt
card ’cause
it’s steaming
outside, and
blue
raspberry is
I’m holding a Flamingo feather in my left hand.
I light it.
While it smokes,
I sing.

Permission to be like Flamingos,
ancient lovers,
one leg in the water, one leg in the air,
in between states.

This humito is a smoke-song.
Here goes this humito.

Permission to be like Flamingos,
for me to be with you.
Gliding between deserts and peatlands,
joining Karukinka and the Collasuyo,
worlds apart.

Here goes this humito.

Permission to be like Flamingos,
by knotting your hair with this feather,
I ask permission from Isluga, the land of commitment,
unconditional, like the love of Flamingos.

Here I breathe this Flamingo Smoke
made of me.
May the combustion of these words plea for me,
for this contact to last.

The riddle emerges. It stretches across the continent, looking for answers, searching
for gaps, for watering holes, for feeding grounds, for transitory homes to soak one’s 
feet. Suddenly, or seemingly suddenly, like an aroma that’s been suspended in the air
for centuries, we enter a new era of dreaming; a series of pressure and temperature
changes make the dreaming unexpectedly land on your eyelids. I sniff your lashes,
and inhaling the sweet discovery I am overwhelmed with clarity. A flood of salty tears
break the dam. A cleansing.
I'm awake and wandering: I'm an island, a drift, you're a desert, sandy. There is a whole long country between us. It is not my country.

The ground jumps, jolting me into a deep trench, so deep it divides sonning from speech and I'm left muffling on the phrase water is not a metaphor.

There will be water between us, it is a consequence of archipelagic delirium. Another is the ineludable fact that the past is ahead of the future; a traffic jam in the making, a confusion waiting to happen.

Some cities go downstream defier.
SPIRIT AS AFFECTIVE ETHOS
Dian Million

“Unlike the maps that designate Indian land as existing only in certain places, wherever we went there were Natives and Native spaces, and if there weren’t, we carved them out.”

What if we took it seriously what our elders told us, everything is spirit? What would it mean for our Indigenous spirits to rise, as ethos? To make our relations, or presence and spirit permeate and move what is now only thought of as ineffable inert matter?

“Indigeneity is a viable tool toward transformation of the people-to-be into being part of the social order as tmixcen and to be a life-force in a life-force place rather than being part of the social order of depletion and destruction.”

the interview
I want to differentiate us as groups of people who have been racialized in the united states and in canada and all over the world and so while people might think of us as a racial uh group actually what we are is the myriad, myriad societies that once inhabited lands that have been subjected to settler colonialism for many hundreds of years at this point so whether or not the united states has made us into racial others meaning indian or aboriginal or whatever we see ourselves very differently we see ourselves as place based peoples so that when i introduce myself from a place we are ourselves very differently we see ourselves as place based peoples so that means we have been dispersed, everywhere—we’re in cities, we’re
Indigeneity is a global practice in living that is always potential, that our living lives “otherwise,” is witness and transformative, morphing, having effect on our own relations as well as on the relations of capital! I believe it is dangerous to imagine our presence in these “urban” places as solely corrupting, or corrupted, unable to acknowledge potentiality in what appears as concrete. We look to home, to land, to be the places of our heart, our spirit; I claim that anywhere we are—are already Indigenous place first. An Indigenous ethos rises when we take responsibility for where we are at, in the power and depth of our relations and responsibility to the Indigenous peoples of the place we are—to know and honor our ancient relations in that place. We have a responsibility to know the languages of these places and recognize them in the land, in their names for food and kinship. We need to honor and uphold these relations first, and to know that our Indigenous spirit reconnects any lands we are on, even, and especially when these lands appear to be encased in concrete. To remind, we already (RE)Indigenize these places by pointing out their considerable and continuing relations to spirits and Indigenous presence prior to any settler.

I think about flows, rivers, kinships and knowledges that do not create enclosure, but that create relations, help, support, other ways of thinking and moving concrete. There are familiar words now, relations, reciprocity, resurgence, but it is also our responsibility to look closely at what we practice bringing these into living acts of sovereignty. 4

I suggest that Indigeneity is foremost a practice of governance, ontologically and epistemologically lived within places that are not imagined as static—but it is not a mindless reflection of settler nationalism. Indigeneity is a global practice in living that liberal humanism / racial capitalism has tried to eradicate from the Earth for over 500 years. Indigeneity points ways of living that create governance that are never the same across places or times. Indigenous practices emerge specifically within a set of relations that are material, spiritual and dynamic. Indigenous practices form governance not nation-states. Our peoples have variously expressed their ontology, their premise for being as a set of relations where all are sentient and possessing agency. Indigeneity strives to create relations of care and reciprocity, understanding the interdependence of all in a “place,” with a shared goal of thriving in a place without destruction. This is governance that seeks to continue the conditions for all life. This is the core of what

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2 Stan Million, “Be like the wind—or better, like water, keeping racial and cultural integrity in times of war,” in A Ojibwe Reader: Notes for Anarchist Futures, eds. Alyxona Goldstein and Sim Goldstein, For Antifascist Futures, eds. Alyxona Goldstein and Sim Goldstein, Common Ground Publishing, 2020.
A SELECTION FROM
FROM THE POPLARS
Cecily Nicholson

From From the Poplars by Cecily Nicholson (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2014). Reprinted with permission from the author and publisher.

(... toward light
collecting light
pressure
a quip of skin
catches in the briars
bloody then freer
not your typical foment
the use of language past
winded bleached individuation
toward conscious listened horizon (...)

...

cut. securely ore
steel away Rosie
ain't I
closest on the train
the light bulbs, drops
my window
one-truck construction delay
thorns bloody gums

the greyhound quality of love
kept in the loop
each crooked strange fruit
every stoop (we had)
we were used to
denunciation and death

purpose

kept cages matched blue jack streets
come out of time for this turn
silent shore just a burb to poplars
wild cherry cottonwood English ivy
black willow empathy
great choiring branches far beyond
perches on the downed limbs
not a hand while it was writing
while there shifts they were family
figures with sloped shoulders sell newspapers
and bags of cherries on Jefferson Avenue
come out to Heidelberg Street for this sculpture
of stacked oil drums
"USA" stencilled on the side
partial sighs deep into patinas public purpose
open area strive starve up-and-come
zones to light across warm faces glassed-in places
all the vacant land the wide-open spaces we produced
every autonomy opposed and committed
~
birds kept off the crop
once harvest was done
harvest done worried some
worried men sing a worried song
songs common in the red humming
their whole lives prayers or persons likely to
become property spreading blacktop
master degrades the name
an owner tracked down and returned to the fields
"finance" is a slave's word
ima read
walk into any establishment
write your own newspaper
often hours rain curious converted speeches
on freedom's long road higher ground
rising wind dust began to rise again that wound
sucked ground rains a wind-funnelled lake
not enough and day after day
~
lands like galaxies tend to cluster
spiral to elliptical oscura poured fire
rational primes disposed to struggle
shoot you then remove the bullets silience
to all you out there on the land good morning
massa day done dreams run high got the long count counts marked wall beside blade beside take

rise on the stigmatic nature of bondage
benevolent abolitionists, remember your status early frontiers and all matters of transport
unemployed workers attack the thatchers
moments of embedded risk
the flag or which banner
rise river pit lined with cedar boughs
wait daylight hours and leave only to eat
sleep conflicting rebellion
by hand
curriculum who is classroom needle production transitive havenes
fresh lake walk wakes shoreline peppermint
tools under everything
anti-emblem entire freedom and any other light

prices will please the highest bidder the purchaser shall be entitled
and time shall be of the essence of the contract
when the cable snaps
found a few days ago
the side of the Serpentine
in an exhausted and helpless condition
he had dropped a bundle of blankets and body of acumen
the proceeds of the sale of said lands shall be applied
feet of frontage
the slash burned as a precautionary measure, under control at all times
spark from the old sound embers
as the shoreline of resuscitation. breath on tinder

hungry heavy equipment folds context
back into experience (then back out)
teeth make contact with the glass in the atrium
cracked and cut lips closest to you wood press back

the black square becomes interesting only in context
pointillism in the anarchistic notion of
a society freed from work

fabled books for so imaginative militancy
slices—rows and rows
Denise Ferreira da Silva:

*Capital is a Colonial Relation.* I would love to hear more of your thinking on how your formulation of capital as a colonial relation impacts political theorizing as well as historical materialism.

Glen Coulthard:

The relationship between capital and colonial dispossession always seemed obvious to me. It’s what also was so frustrating, historically speaking, with the gulf between western Marxists and Indigenous struggles against colonial dispossession in places like Canada and the US. If capital is under constant pressure to expand itself, then it is inherently colonial. This is why I returned to a reading of Section 8, Volume 1 of *Capital* in my first book, *Red Skin, White Masks* (RSWM). As a young adult, I was annoyed with the lack of concern regarding Indigenous struggles that many Marxists in BC (and elsewhere) exhibited, especially when Marx himself clearly outlined dispossession (in his chapters on ‘so-called primitive accumulation’) as a clear feature of the emergence of capitalism and its reproduction across the globe. So I figured he was as good a place as any to start. If the left won’t listen to me, then they sure as hell ought to listen to their hero.

The interesting part, though, is how all this theory stuff intersects with practice. The well-known anarchist, Peter Kropotkin, provides an early critique of Marx’s notion of primitive accumulation by suggesting that it is a process inherent in state formation. The consolidation of territory at the core of state formation always involves violently removing people from their autonomous livelihood and means of production—which, in our case, is still very much the land. This is, of course, a fundamental characteristic of capitalist states, but is also true of socialist ones. I don’t think my anarchist sympathies came out as much as they could have in that book. I don’t think the violence of states can be redirected or redeemed.

DFS:

*Ground Normativity and Global Indigenous Struggles.* It would be fantastic to hear you theorize and speculate about how ground normativity supports a theorizing of Indigenous struggles across the planet.

GC:

This is the subject of my new book. It looks at the internationalism that was at the core of Indigenous land struggles, particularly in Canada, in the late 1960s and throughout the 70s, both in theory and practice.

As you know, it’s difficult to cut a book off when you clearly have more to say. This was the case with RSWM. When the book hit the shelves, the Idle No More movement,
which was the largest pan-Indigenous expression of self-determination in Canada for at least 40 years, had all but dissipated and the Movement for Black Lives was moving into high gear. When I spoke about the book in cities or universities with a large Black presence, I got questions about the relationship between Indigenous and Black struggles, including my use of Franne Faith to theorize settler-colonial dispossession under the guise of recognition. I had incorrectly assumed that the theory had done the work in the text, when clearly it should have been contextualized more. Hence my new book explores the historical cross-fertilization that informed Red Power organizing in the two places I call home, and which stood as the unspoken political background or inspiration in RFWM—British Columbia and the Northwest Territories. In both contexts, Black and Indigenous freedom were understood as mutually constitutive—in Vancouver through organizations like the Native Alliance for Power and their working relationship with the Seattle Black Panthers, through the interior of BC and George Manuel’s friendship with Julius Nyerere, and in the Northwest Territories through the influence of Manuel, Nyerere, and Tanzania’s program of “socialism and self-reliance.” The articulation of freedom that Indigenous organizers had as a result of these influences was routed in land and place but also non-exclusionary; our land struggles had to facilitate the mutual self-determination of all oppressed people or else it would simply replicate another colonial hierarchy.

This is why Philip B. pursian’s work participant in the Berger Inquiry into the proposed Mackenzie Valley Pipeline in the 1970s, insisted that if the project were going to be built in such a way as to retribute the benefits and burdens so as to assist those struggling against, say, Shell in Nigeria, then we would be required to consider the venture as evil. But, of course, the corporate interests in the pipeline weren’t calling for that.

Or, a similar logic underscored the Native Alliance for Power’s analysis of the oil crisis of the early 1970s and the subsequent demand it created to increase colonial exploration and capitalist development in the Canadian North. They too suggested a link between the local and the global, essentially calling western imperialism’s continued wars in the Middle East as a source of the oil crisis, which resulted in the West’s simultaneous call for extraction projects that were more “suds for investment”—meaning more extraction at home. And, of course, similar dynamics remain at play today, which is clearly demonstrated in the resistance of the Wet’suwet’en and Secwépemc land defenders against the marked increase in proposed pipeline construction and liquefied natural gas development on their traditional territories, now being justified under the guise of reducing the West’s dependence on Russian oil.

DFS

Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning—Land-based education and decolonization.

Can you comment on the work done by Dechinta and how it has or has not changed your view around land-based education? What have you learned? What expectations have been met? What myths have been dismantled?

GC

Now, while it is true that Dechinta started as an “education” project, I say so somewhat hesitantly. From my perspective, at least, it was always supposed to be much more than this.

To put it bluntly, Dechinta was and is still ought to be about the liberation of our communities from the racist, heteronormative, economic and state discourses and institutions that have converged over now centuries to undermine our relationships with one another, to the lands that physically and spiritually sustain us, and to the other working, Black and communities of colour that have been forced to endure similar violences at the hands of similar enemies. It was in this context that “education” was broadly conceived as a vehicle for this anti-colonial project.

Education for me is nothing less than about fostering individual and collective empowerment for our peoples in the context of colonization in all of the forms it takes. Colonialism has functioned, in part, by deploying institutions of western education to undermine Indigenous intellectual development and community self-reliance through genocidal assimilation policies geared towards the theft of our land. The vicious pairing of colonial domination with western education has had a devastating effect on everyone in our communities, from elders to children, women and men, to queer, two-spirit and gender diverse members of our nations.

As Indigenous educators, then, it is our job to spend this situation and combat the ignorance that sustains it. It should be our aim, in other words, to sever the historical relationship between education and the ongoing colonization of our minds, bodies and land.

This is what the spirit of Dechinta and land-based education was always envisioned to do. To repair the violent rift that has been created within and between our diverse communities and the lands that sustain us.

DFS

Reconciliation and Resurgence. I’m curious about how you theorize these two concepts.

GC

I’ve always seen them as contradictory. Reconciliation—its twin concept of forgiveness—involves moving on from the past, especially from those practices that have injured us in some way. Whereas resurgence involves learning from the past in order to better frame our present and future by dismantling the structures that injure us. The rub is, when the structures that continue to injure us and the land is demanding that we forgive and “move on”—to reconcile—our unwillingness to do so gets blamed on us, as resenting, wounded subjects. This is what’s wrong with the statist discourse of reconciliation. It seeks to reconcile us with the structure of settler-colonialism.

My new project draws explicitly on movements of the past. For example, I look at the Native Alliance for Red Power’s adoption of the anti-revisionism of Maoist, which taken at face value involves a critique of Soviet Russia’s decision to “reconcile with the West” following the atrocities associated with Stalin. NARP’s anti-revisionism, however, was concerned less about the Soviet Union trading communist internationalism for “peaceful co-existence” with the capitalist West; that is, their non-reformist position was not a naïve reproduction of bilateral orthodoxy within their theory and practice—organizing. Rather, it was adapted and applied to a shift in the reproduction of colonial relations of power that began to consolidate in Canada in the late 1960s, from an openly repressive structure to one that operates through the carefully scripted recognition of “aboriginal rights.” It was this “co-existence”—the peaceful co-existence offered through a neo-colonial politics of recognition and eventually reconciliation—that they refused. NARP could be said, theorized and anticipated the “death of reconciliation” that has been declared in the bush and on the streets over the past couple of years.
Ferreira da Silva and Arjuna Neuman presented at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia, September 6–December 11, 2022. It was edited by Denise Ferreira da Silva and Arjuna Neuman with the production support of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery.

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