

DECOLONIAL GESTURES IN CANADA'S SETTLER STATE: CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS WRITERS JORDAN ABEL AND LEANNE SIMPSON

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Abstract. This paper discusses the ways recent texts by two Indigenous Canadian writers, Jordan Abel's collection of conceptual poetry *Un/Inhabited* and Leanne Simpson's short stories and poems *Islands of Decolonial Love*, engage in what Walter D. Mignolo terms 'decolonial gestures' to expose the workings of contemporary settler colonialism and counter their effects. The theoretical section explains the specificities of settler colonialism that make decolonization in the sense of regaining freedom from the colonizers impossible; it then discusses the possibilities for decolonization that exist in settler countries, particularly those that refer to cultural and artistic practices. The analytical section focuses on the different strategies Abel and Simpson use in their work to enact what Mignolo calls 'epistemic disobedience.' Abel resorts to decolonial violence in appropriating selected texts of the genre of the Western and erasing from them to undo their loaded ideological messages. Simpson's work, marked by explicitly confrontational rhetoric, focuses on Indigenous characters and communities, foregrounding their colonial traumas and the role of traditional knowledge and cultural practices in healing them. The paper argues that the decolonial gestures Abel and Simpson undertake work to reject the mainstream rhetoric of reconciliation, inviting Indigenous people to recognize the workings of settler colonialism and look for ways of extricating from them.

Key words: settler colonialism, decolonization, decolonial gestures, epistemic disobedience, conceptual writing

INTRODUCTION

On September 25, 2009, at a news conference which marked the end of the G20 Summit in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, then Canada's Prime Minister Stephen Harper famously declared that Canada has 'no history of colonialism' (Harper, 2009, cited by Ljunggren, 2009). In 2012, among the slogans disseminated by the supporters of Idle No More, a Canadian grassroots social activist movement, was the urge to 'Decolonize,' which sought to bring to the foreground the fact that, for the Indigenous peoples of Canada, or any other settler country, colonization remains a daily reality rather than a past stage in the historical development of the country: as Mohawk political scientist Taiaiake Alfred has aptly put it, referring to the status of Indigenous Canadian peoples, 'We're

not Canadians. We are internal colonies of Canada.’ (Alfred, 2000, cited by Kostash, 2000: 184).

The focus of this paper is recent work by two Indigenous Canadian writers, Nisga’a conceptual poet Jordan Abel’s (b. 1985) poetry collection *Un/Inhabited* (2014) and Nishnaabeg scholar, writer, and activist Leanne Simpson’s (b. 1971) collection of short stories and poems *Islands of Decolonial Love: Stories and Songs* (2013). Using the method of close reading of selected passages, the analysis focuses on the different ways their texts address the complex condition of settler colonialism from the perspective of colonized Indigenous subjects and engage in what Walter Mignolo calls ‘decolonial gestures’ (Mignolo, 2014) to do that. The paper argues that these confrontational decolonial gestures work to reject the mainstream rhetoric of reconciliation, inviting Indigenous people to recognize their colonial wounds and look for new ways of healing them.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: SETTLER COLONIALISM AND POSSIBILITIES FOR DECOLONIZATION

The concept of *decolonization* has recently been prominent in critical and theoretical discussions which seek to address the various ways of responding to the conditions of coloniality and neocolonialism worldwide (see e.g. the scholarly journal *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* or the activities of the Transnational Decolonial Institute). In general terms, decolonization refers to colonized people’s struggles for independence from the colonizers and the ultimate removal of the latter from the colonized territories as, for instance, in the case of the liberation movements in Africa and Asia (Decolonization, n. d.). In *The Wretched of the Earth*, an early study of the processes and effects of decolonization, Frantz Fanon defines it as ‘quite simply the substitution of one “species” of mankind by another,’ which entails a fundamental reorganization of the social order created by colonization; Fanon then foregrounds violence as instrumental in challenging the colonial situation: ‘colonization or decolonization: it is simply a power struggle’ (Fanon, [1963] 2004: 1, 6–7, 23). Successful decolonization thus implies that at some point in time the colonized population is capable of accumulating power superior to that of the colonizers’, and a significant factor in this potential for power is the numbers of the colonized people, ‘the physical mass,’ as Fanon puts it (2004: 17), against which the colonizers, from the start, are a minority, which is, moreover, ‘vulnerably dependent’ on the labour of the oppressed majority (Wolfe, 1999: 1).

Such a description, however, grasps the situation only in the colonized places that are known as dependent or ‘franchise’ colonies (Wolfe, 1999: 1). A different type, settler colonies that ultimately become independent countries, such as the USA, Canada, or Australia, manifest a dissimilar case: here, ‘the physical mass’ of the colonized Indigenous populations is rapidly enough reduced to a small and hence insignificant – ‘radical’ (Coulthard, 2014: 189) – minority,

incapable of overpowering the colonizers. This is a consequence of a continuous influx of the latter that persists over time and is at later stages supplemented by imported slaves (e.g., the USA) and waves of immigrants from places other than the imperial centre. Therefore, even though many settler colonies eventually progress to construct new nation states and extricate themselves from the imperial centre, as in the case of the aforementioned former colonies of the British empire, their declarations of independence mean independence for the settlers only: in the Canadian context, Alan C. Cairns accentuates the difference between 'empire (and its ending) abroad from empire (and its ending) at home' and explains that '[t]he end of the Canadian version of empire over Aboriginal peoples, accordingly, could not mean independence for the colonized or the departure of the colonizers' (Cairns, 2000: 26, 28). For this reason, settler countries are now frequently labelled '(post)colonial,' where the brackets are used in order to foreground the situation of their Indigenous peoples, who continue living 'in a state of colonization as direct and coercive as prevailed two centuries ago' (Razack, 2002: 134; see also Mawani, 2003: 100–102). The condition of (post)coloniality thus inevitably implies ongoing tensions between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples of the settler state, further complicated by the presence of numerous and diverse immigrant groups, all of whom need to share the same territory.

To underscore the complexities involved in the relationships between the Indigenous peoples of Canada and the rest of the country, Alfred has referred to them as essentially 'international' (Alfred, 2000, cited by Kostash, 2000: 183). His statement foregrounds the refusal of the Indigenous peoples to both fully identify with the settler state and accept the status of an ethnic minority, as well as insistence on distinct nationhood and self-government. Moreover, Alfred's statement implies that the relationships have a distinctly spatial expression, as 'international' entails processes extending across the border and thus presupposes demarcated territories as well as politics and practices of border control and border crossing. The emphasis on the spatial dimension of settler colonial relationships is not accidental: settler colonialism is first and foremost driven by the goal of appropriating new lands and 'render[ing them] productive' through agriculture and industry (Wolfe, 1999: 164; see also Wolfe, 2006: 392, 395–96; Harris 2002: xviii), which leads to inevitable and continuous redistribution and reorganization of the territory to accommodate the waves of newcomers, and, consequently, to the dispossession of the Indigenous peoples' land. As Patrick Wolfe puts it, settler colonies are 'premised on displacing indigenes from (or replacing them on) the land' to facilitate the new settlers' access to it and their subsequent establishment of permanent residence, based on the European concept of private property (Wolfe, 1999: 1, original emphasis; see also Cairns, 2000, Harris, 2002, 2004, Blomley, 2003, 2004, Wolfe, 2006, Coulthard, 2014). Important, too, is the aspect of temporal continuity, foregrounded by Wolfe's emphasis on repetition in 'replacing.' Wolfe emphasizes that settler colonialism – he also uses the term 'invasion' – is not an isolated 'event' rooted in history,

but a 'structure,' whose 'history does not stop' but develops continuously, adapting to changing circumstances (Wolfe, 2006: 392, 399, 402), and is 'relatively impervious to regime change' (Wolfe, 1999: 163; see also Mignolo, 2014). Drawing on Wolfe, Dene political scientist Glenn Sean Coulthard, too, underscores the aspects of repetition and continuity inherent in the structures of 'domination' as well as their flexibility (Coulthard, 2014: 138–39, 161; see also Coulthard, 2007: 439). Thus, settler colonialism should be seen as 'territorially acquisitive in perpetuity' (Coulthard, 2014: 139).

Within such a regime, Indigenous territories progressively and inexorably contract to make space for the settlers; this is a result of various colonial strategies, which amount to what David Sibley terms 'spatial purification' (Sibley, 1995: 26, 77). In the British settler colonies, later countries, an ultimate product of the process is the Indian/Aboriginal reserve ('reservation' in the USA), created to confine the Indigenous peoples to delimited spatial segments, frequently displaced from and smaller than the traditional territories, isolate them and 'purge' from the newly created settler space, rendering them invisible beyond the reserve border: leaving the reserve could be regulated and allowed only with a special permission from the Indian agent (Hanson, 2009, McMillan 1995: 314). These 'most basic colonial spaces' in the settler landscape (Harris 2002: xxi), sometimes referred to as racial 'enclaves' (Cairns, 2000: 155, Flanagan, 2000: 195), are thus an acute example of how an unequal relationship between two social groups, the settlers and the Indigenous peoples, is articulated spatially, ensuring the marginalization of one and the disconnection between the two: as Sherene Razack puts it, the reserves 'facilitate the nearly absolute geographical separation of the colonizer and the colonized.' (Razack, 2002: 129) This allows a degree of freedom for the residents of the reserves to practice their traditional lifestyles, even if the space is shrunk and bordered, but also, through the lack of contact with the outside, begets stereotypes. Seen from the outside, even today when the reserves no longer function as an imposed restriction but rather as the only spaces over which communities of Indigenous people have control, they are often regarded as anomalous spaces, incompatible with the social order of the rest of the country:

Alternately seen as the spaces within the nation that reflect a more authentic, traditional way of life, or as backwards worlds steeped in superstition and frozen in time, the reservation is an enduring reflection of larger dynamics. In more extreme versions, reservations were and are understood as havens of socialist value; as threatening spatial anachronisms. (D'Arcus, 2010: 1246)

The impulse behind the spatial and thereby ideological separation of Indigenous spaces – and bodies – can be explained by what Wolfe terms 'the logic of elimination,' an 'organizing principle' of settler colonialism, which 'destroys to replace,' to create a new social structure (Wolfe, 2006: 387–88, 390, 393). For this project, the Indigenous presence is an obstacle, and, therefore, '[in]digenous

people must be erased, must be made into ghosts' (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 6). Erasure does not necessarily have to be enacted through physical elimination, such as killing or confinement. According to Wolfe, biocultural and social assimilation ('social engineering,' achieved, for example, through education, or intermarriage. (Coulthard, 2014: 184)) as well as discursive practices, for instance, renaming and stereotyping are effectively part of the same project and foreground the adaptability of settler colonialism to changing circumstances and ideological climate (Wolfe, 2006: 402–403). Thus, for instance, assimilation policies typically intensify 'with the closure of the frontier,' that is, after the territory has been appropriated and reorganized more or less fully, and the Indigenous people have been (often repeatedly) removed into allocated reserves (Wolfe 2006: 400). This is when the frontier becomes 'coterminal with reservation boundaries' (Wolfe, 2006: 399), and now it is reserves, just as original Indigenous settlements before, which impede the settlers' access to more land. The implication here is that reserves were not meant as permanent constructions of isolated difference: their other mission was to assimilate the Indigenous peoples into the new society and eliminate them as a distinct culture; for this end, for example, after Canada adopted assimilation as an official Indian policy, new reserves allocated were small and where possible in close proximity to white settlements in order to 'force' Indigenous people into the Canadian job market, to 'mingle with other labour and become civilized' (Harris, 2002: xxviii; see also Dickason, 1992: 253). Failure or refusal to assimilate would result in social stigmatization, whereas 'romantic' stereotyping would be used to 'eliminat[e] large numbers of empirical natives from official reckonings and, as such, is often concomitant with genocidal practice.' (Wolfe, 2006: 402, Wolfe 1999: 179–82)

Consequently, 'the logic of elimination' behind settler colonialism does more than dispossess Indigenous peoples of their land and deprive them of social influence. As Alfred contends, colonial structures shape-shift, turning into a 'fluid confluence of politics, economics, psychology and culture' (Alfred 2005: 30, cited by Coulthard 455–56; Alfred and Corntassel, 2005: 597–98), to pervade and affect all aspects of human existence. Fanon was among the first to analyse the psycho-affective dimension of colonization and to demonstrate that '[a] drama is enacted everyday in colonized countries' (Fanon, 1967: 145). More recently, Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez speak of 'the wound of coloniality' (Mignolo and Vazquez, 2013), and, in the context of settler colonialism specifically, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue that removal of Indigenous people from their territories as well as other forms of the disruption of their 'relationships to land' manifest 'a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence,' which is 'reasserted each day of occupation.' (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 5) Implicit in the latter statement are the effects of cultural disconnection and loss, since Indigenous cultures and identities tend to be rooted in particular territories, and displacements sever these points of attachment and the narratives embedded in them (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 5–7, Alfred and Corntassel, 2005: 598). More generally, the 'wound of coloniality'

is a product of colonial racism, which ‘ranks’ peoples and regions to ‘disqualif[y] the minds and bodies of color [...] and regions as “falling behind” modernity’ and to deprive their systems of thought of validity (Mignolo and Vazquez, 2013). Contemporary studies have shown that the disproportionate rates of destructive and self-destructive behaviour as well as mental health issues among, for instance, Canada’s Indigenous population are strongly related to their social and historical context. Laurence J. Kirmayer, Caroline L. Tait, and Cori Simpson maintain that, apart from ‘the corrosive effects’ of poverty, stereotyping as well as social and political exclusion and marginalization, certain traumatic experiences, typically related to the colonial assimilation practices, such as residential schools for Indigenous children, have transgenerational effects (Kirmayer, Tait and Simpson, 2009: 3, 13–14, 19, 27). Amy Bombay, Kim Matheson, and Hymie Anisman, too, discuss ‘intergenerational transmission of trauma’ in Indigenous communities to emphasize ‘cumulative assaults’ against Indigenous peoples as a group over generations, rather than isolated traumatic events experienced by separate individuals; they argue that such assaults frequently result in what has been termed ‘historical trauma’ (Bombay, Matheson and Anisman, 2009: 15–17, 22, 23). Therefore, for them, even in contemporary times, ‘perceptions of discrimination act as a reminder of historical trauma and loss, and culturally shared stressors experienced, leading to adverse outcomes’ (Bombay, Matheson and Anisman, 2009: 24).

Decolonization, then, could be seen as ‘a process of recognizing the colonial wounds that are historically true and still open in the everyday experience’ of those affected by colonization, and as a ‘possibility of healing’ (Mignolo and Vazquez, 2013). In contemporary multicultural settler countries, though, decolonization in the form defined by Fanon, of physically substituting one social group by another and then fundamentally rearranging spatial and social order (Fanon, 2004: 1), is utterly impossible in practice. As a result, the prevalent tendency here, mostly on the part of the dominant society, is to understand decolonization metaphorically. This, however, as argued by Tuck and Yang, ‘makes possible a set of evasions [...] that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity’ (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 1). They see such moves as part of the same colonial logic:

The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation. When we write about decolonization, we are not offering it as a metaphor; it is an approximation of other experiences of oppression. [...] Decolonization doesn’t have a synonym. (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 3)

Thus, for Indigenous peoples, even in settler contexts, the idea of decolonization does, first and foremost, refer to ‘repatriation of Indigenous land and life’; this does not mean the removal of other people, but the reinstatement of property rights and political authority (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 1; see also Coulthard, 2014: 178). As early as in 2002, relying on the term ‘postcolonial’ rather than ‘decolonial,’

Cole Harris similarly espoused the politics of acknowledging Indigenous people's distinctness and argued that 'such a politics, honestly pursued, entails the return of a good deal of land (resources), and a fair measure of local Native government' (Harris, 2002: xxx, 293–320). In 2016, however, Leanne Simpson writes:

I'm from the so-called Williams treaty area. We have almost no land. We've been engaged in a civil suit against the province of Ontario and Canada for years now. Drop the case. Respect our rights. [...] In fact, dropping the billions of dollars worth of court cases Canada has against Indigenous peoples over land is a great idea. So is land restitution. Real change means we get land back. (Simpson, 2016)

Or, as Tuck and Yang put it, 'Until stolen land is relinquished, critical consciousness does not translate into action that disrupts settler colonialism' (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 19).

Mignolo underscores the 'confrontation with the "colonial" implicit in the prefix 'de' in 'decolonial' (Mignolo, 2014). He argues that the 'oppressive and condemnatory logic' of coloniality 'produces an energy of discontent, of distrust, of release within those who react against imperial violence'; this energy has a wide range of manifestations, from directly confrontational and violent, stigmatized as terrorism, to creative and artistic acts (Mignolo, 2011: 46; see also Mignolo and Vazquez, 2013). In the context of settler colonialism, critics such as Coulthard advocate Indigenous resurgence through 'direct action' rather than merely lawful negotiations, even if this includes 'less mediated and sometimes more disruptive and confrontational measures,' epitomized by the media as 'the typical Native "blockade." Militant, threatening, disruptive, and violent.' (Coulthard, 2014: 175–76). Typically, they are undertaken by Indigenous communities to protest contemporary attempts by the state supported capital to access Indigenous territories in order to extract natural resources or to launch major infrastructural projects, which can be seen as contemporary versions of the settler colonial 'logic of elimination' to replace (see e.g. Coulthard, 2014: 169–75). Such actions, according to Coulthard, are productive not only because they seek to and can succeed in challenging the power disbalance, which has persistently marginalized Indigenous populations, but also because they help 'build the skills and social relationships (including those with the land)' within and among Indigenous communities, particularly since such protests frequently last over extended periods of time (Coulthard, 2014: 176, 180). Important here is not only 'construct[ing] alternatives to the colonial relationship' (Coulthard, 2014: 176), but also the possibility of 'critical individual and collective *self*-recognition on the part of the Indigenous societies [...] with the understanding that our cultures have much to teach the Western world about the establishment of relationships between peoples and the natural world that are profoundly non-imperialist' (Coulthard, 2007: 456; original emphasis). Thus, for Coulthard, the process of confronting and challenging settler colonial structures is rooted in the reliance on and emancipation of Indigenous epistemologies and forms of community, rather

than merely in the release of what Mignolo calls pent up ‘energies of discontent’ (Mignolo, 2011: 46) or attempts at mechanical power takeover (see also Alfred and Corntassel, 2005: 613–14).

In a rather similar way, Mignolo makes a generalizing argument that ‘there is no way out of the coloniality of power from within Western [...] categories of thought’ and proposes the model of ‘epistemic disobedience’ as a way of disentangling from the colonial ‘matrix,’ whose logic and discourse still pervade and regulate social, political, and economic structures, systems of thought and art, and the experiences of individual beings, privileging those of the power groups and depriving others of validity (Mignolo, 2011: 45, 47–48). For him thus, the decolonial option necessarily begins with decolonial thinking, which ‘de-links’ from the various concepts and categories of Greek, Latin as well as the modern ‘imperial’ European languages, such as English, French, or Spanish (Mignolo, 2011: 46). Simply put, the claims of the colonized are not to be articulated in the jargon of the colonizer. Mignolo and Vazquez propose a close analysis of the various concepts and terms behind the Western categories of thought to reveal how they have worked ‘to erase, silence, denigrate other ways of understanding and relating to the world’: the decolonial option lies precisely in ‘opening to’ and recovering these erased and discredited ways (Mignolo and Vazquez, 2013; Mignolo, 2011: 45, 47–48; Mignolo, 2014). One of such concepts which Mignolo and Vazquez target is ‘aesthetics’; their analysis foregrounds how modern Eurocentred philosophy, with its roots in the 18th century, turned the term into a ‘key concept to regulate sensing the beautiful and the sublime,’ to control senses and perception, and to configure ‘a canon, a normativity that enabled the disdain and the rejection of other forms of aesthetic practices’ as well as other ways of sensing and perceiving; as such, the term became another tool of coloniality (Mignolo and Vazquez, 2013). Their proposition is to counter ‘aesthetics’ with the concept of ‘aestheSis,’ in which the ‘S’ is deliberately foregrounded to give emphasis to unregulated processes of sensing and perceiving, freed from the normativity of the neo/colonial canon, as well as to artistic practices stemming from said processes (Mignolo and Vazquez, 2013). As Mignolo puts it in a recent interview, ‘[w]hat decolonial artists want is not to create beautiful objects [...], but to create in order to decolonize sensibilities, to transform colonial aesthetics into decolonial aesthesis’ (Mignolo; cited by Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014: 201).

This last statement underscores artistic practice as action, not unlike Coulthard’s call for ‘direct action’ in Indigenous resurgence (Coulthard, 2014: 175–76). Emphasis on action presupposes physicality and embodiment, and resonates with what Mignolo describes as ‘decolonial gestures,’ that is, bodily moves and movements which ‘carr[y] a decolonial sentiment or decolonial intention’ and which make decolonial ‘attitudes, options, and turns’ directly perceivable (Mignolo, 2014). Given the confrontational implications of the ‘de’ in ‘decolonial,’ these gestures can be predictably provocative, disturbing, and unsettling, as well as deliberately difficult to ignore, such as the Native blockade,

analyzed by Coulthard (2014: 175–76), or various artistic manifestations. The emphasis on their bodily aspect underscores live individual experiences, making it harder to dismiss the issues brought up in this way as abstract. It is such artistic decolonial gestures that will be discussed in the rest of the paper, focusing on the recent work of two Canada's Indigenous writers.

DECOLONIAL VIOLENCE AND DECOLONIAL LOVE IN CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN INDIGENOUS WRITING: JORDAN ABEL'S AND LEANNE SIMPSON'S 'DECOLONIAL GESTURES'

Indigenous writers in Canada have actively practiced decolonial gestures as theorized by Mignolo. Some would straightforwardly set out to narrate various decolonial gestures as Brian Wright-McLeod does in his graphic novel *Red Power* (2011), centring on Indigenous activism and telling a story of a Native blockade, which seeks to protect a reserve territory from an invasion by corporate capital. Others would be engaged in revisionist undertakings, a project that critics such as Graham Huggan (2008) or Helen Gilbert (1998) have noted in much of postcolonial writing, when writers seek to reconsider the processes of constructing colonial space, and fiction is employed to undo the erasures and inscriptions of the colonial system. Indigenous writing, specifically, often seeks to 'undermine the legitimacy of white settlement and assert Other(ed) versions of history' (Gilbert, 1998: 53). For instance, in a provocative manifestation of 'epistemic disobedience,' as Mignolo would have it, the colonial encounter can be shown as an outcome of the doings of the mythological Indigenous trickster, who might have been seeking to educate and improve European culture gone wrong (Maracle, 1993: 191), or, in more extremely satirical versions, looking for a game partner to escape boredom (King, 1993: 50–52). Such revisionist rewritings of historical events can be seen as forms of subversive appropriation or parody of historical discourse, and such writers as Thomas King would frequently submit other grand narratives of the colonial culture to the same procedure (see e.g. King, 1993: 1–10, for a rewriting of the Genesis creation narrative, or King, 1993: 49–66, for a version of a science fiction narrative). The focus of this section is recent work by two Indigenous Canadian writers, Jordan Abel and Leanne Simpson, and the very different decolonial gestures they undertake in their texts.

Abel's poetry falls into the category of conceptual writing, which, albeit in a different way from subversive parodies, is grounded in the practice of appropriation. Conceptual writing exploits the contemporary accessibility and materiality of language, a result of its availability on the Internet, which has prompted writers to exploit texts found online in most diverse ways. Kenneth Goldsmith argues that the 'sheer quantity of language' on digital media makes users 'conceive of language in ways unthinkable just a short time ago,' as the computer encourages them 'to mimic its workings': '[w]ords

very well might be written not to be read but rather to be shared, moved, and manipulated' (Goldsmith, 2010: xviii, xxi, xix; see also Dworkin, 2010: xxxvi). The newfound materiality of language thus invites an approach that entails essentially physical acts, which Goldsmith calls 're-gestures,' such as sharing, re-blogging, re-tweeting, or re-posting (Goldsmith, 2010: xix). In the case of conceptual writing, these acts are organized by an appropriative 'procedure' such as 'transcription, citation, "writing-through," recycling, reframing, grafting, mistranslating, and mashing' (Perloff, 2012). The procedure does not 'substitute for the writing,' but works to coordinate it: the procedure a writer selects is determined by an underlying idea, the concept for a conceptual text (Dworkin, 2010: xxxvii). The focus on the concept and procedure behind conceptual texts tends to overshadow the textual product itself: as Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman contend, 'one does not need to "read" the work as much as think about the idea of the work' (Place and Fitterman, 2009: 25). Indeed, some texts labelled as conceptual, including chapters of Abel's *Un/Inhabited*, are intentionally unreadable in the traditional sense: for instance, a few pages of the book feature one or several narrow vertical strips of text, and in some strips a line sometimes contains only one or two letters, which do not form any coherent text (Abel: 2014, 178, 182–94). Thus the reader is invited to examine and engage in how the procedure selected has transformed the source text(s). For this reason, the writer's subjectivity and position in relation to the source material become central because it is they which guide his/her 're-gesturing' of the text and the procedure on the whole. As Marjorie Perloff reminds us, '[f]ormal choices are never without ideological implications' (Perloff, 2012).

Abel's most recent book *Un/Inhabited* (2014) is a collection of erasure poetry, a form of conceptual poetry whereby a poet literally erases passages of a selected text to come up with new connections between the words and phrases of the original (for a historical overview of the form, see Macdonald, 2009). In *Un/Inhabited*, Abel uses as his source material a collection of ninety one popular novels of the Western genre, all accessible on the Project Gutenberg, and relies on several forms of erasure to radically transform them. The choice of the genre is notable: the Western 'is grounded in, and reflects, the historical phenomenon of western settlement' and appropriation of Indigenous territories; operating within the frame of the colonizing culture, the genre produces, as noted by Jennifer L. McMahan and B. Steve Csaki, 'a polemical representation of the changing landscape of American political life,' a representation, which, 'captivat[ing] the popular imagination,' encouraged and fuelled the settlement ideologically (McMahan and Csaki, 2010: 7). The procedures to which Abel subjects the texts of the novels effectively re-enact the process of the settlement, which structures the genre. First, he copy-pastes the texts into a single file to come up with a bulk of text, obliterating the borders between individual works, and then uses the amalgam essentially as landmass, into which he pioneers, which he then maps, and from which he extracts, as suggested by the titles of the chapters of the book, 'Pioneering,' 'Cartography,' and 'Extracted.' The titles explicitly identify

the stages of the colonial settlement of the territories, progressing from venturing into and exploration, to surveying and mapping a reorganization of the territory, to, finally, appropriation and exploitation.

'Pioneering' consists of poems composed only of the sentences that contain the word used for the title of each poem. For this, Abel used a search program, copy pasted the sentences that contain the word in question, erased the word from each, retaining the gap, and formatted the compilation as a neat column, which he then placed on the right side of the page. The length of an individual poem depends on how frequently the word which makes its title is used in the novels. For instance, the first poem of the chapter, 'Uninhabited,' one of the briefer ones, begins as follows:

Changing horses frequently, one day out
 I had left Red River in my rear, but be-
 fore me lay an country, unless I
 veered from my course and went through
 the Chickasaw Nation. Out toward Bear
 Canyon, where the land to the north
 rose brokenly to the mountains, Luck
 found the bleak stretches of which he had
 dreamed that night on the observation
 platform of a train speeding through
 the night in North Dakota,—a great
 white wilderness unsheltered by friendly
 forests, save by wild things that
 moved stealthily across the windswept
 ridges. This done, they would lead the ship
 to an part of the shore, beach her,
 and scatter over the mainland, each with
 his share of the booty. How lonely I felt, in
 that vast bush! Except for a very
 few places on the Ouleout, and the Iroquois
 towns, the region was . This was
 no country for people to livein, and so far
 as she could see it was indeed .

(Abel, 2014: 13)

The layout of the passage is reminiscent of that of a poem: the text is broken into lines of identical length, which creates the impression of cadence, even if irregularly disrupted by numerous caesuras as well as the pauses caused by the erasures. But it is only due to the layout that this compilation of disparate sentences taken from different narratives morphs into a coherent whole. When it comes to the text itself, the unity disappears: the speaking voice keeps changing from the first to the third person narrator; each sentence introduces new characters, without building up any connections between them, their

actions, and the locations they find themselves in. The motif which could hold the text together is that of the landscape as many sentences offer descriptions of places. However, even this is not consistent: for example, the omniscient narrator in the sentence ‘This done, they would lead the ship to/ an part of the shore, beach/ her, and scatter over the mainland, each/ with his share of the booty’ focuses entirely on the actions of a ship crew; the sentence which follows introduces a lyrical voice, ‘How lonely/ I felt, in that vast bush!’, and a completely different location, as the seashore is replaced by the bush. Thus, one is to read the poem specifically for its disjointedness and for rather jarring moves from one sentence to another, uncharacteristic of texts labeled as popular literature, such as the Western. The sentences are further ruptured from within by the blank spaces from which the word ‘uninhabited’ is erased, defamiliarizing the original narratives even more.

The titles of the poems in the chapter ‘Pioneering’ comprise a series of ideologically loaded words, particularly in the context of the narratives of Western settlement; they are: ‘Uninhabited,’ ‘Settler,’ ‘Extracted,’ ‘Territory,’ ‘Indianized,’ ‘Pioneer,’ ‘Treaty,’ ‘Frontier,’ and ‘Inhabited’ (Abel, 2014: 13, 15, 35, 38, 58, 59, 81, 86, 120). These titles/keywords are all that remains of the Western as a genre in Abel’s book; the sequence implied in the progression from ‘Uninhabited’ to ‘Inhabited’ summarizes the general plot formula of the genre, simultaneously erasing individual plots and characters. Thus, the analysis which Abel undertakes in the chapter is one of the frequency and the contexts in which these words are used in the original texts. The impulse behind the process bears resemblance to the urge to dismantle colonizing Western concepts and terms, which Mignolo and Vazquez propose as a gesture of ‘epistemic disobedience,’ aiming to show how these terms have worked to impart and sustain colonial normativity (Mignolo and Vazquez, 2013). Abel does not engage in a thoroughly theoretical analysis Mignolo and Vazquez propose, but his erasures literally extricate these words from their contexts, and as a result, the sentences, divorced from their original contexts and now filled with holes, just lose their power.

Considering how Abel’s erasures work to create a deliberate parallel to the colonial ones, enacting a version of what Wolfe labels ‘the logic of elimination’ (Wolfe, 2006: 387–88, 390, 393) upon colonial texts is an obvious decolonial gesture as theorized by Mignolo (2014). It becomes particularly blatant in the other two chapters of the book, ‘Cartography’ and ‘Extraction.’ Here, the sentences, printed in smaller font, now fill up the pages, spilling over the margins, to resemble a mass of text, material substance, or, more precisely, landmass: on the second page of ‘Cartography,’ the textual landmass is overlaid with a blank shape, whose contour reminds of a shoreline and which erases part of the text completely (Abel, 2014: 126–27). Such erasures – or superimposition of different shapes – are repeated on each page of the chapter to make them look like maps (see also Ritter, 2014: xiii). In the context of the Western, though, the superimposed shapes might imply more than landforms: their different delineations on each page are also suggestive of a shifting frontier, which entails

the processes of venturing into Indigenous territory, claiming it, being pushed back, moving forward, removing, and settling. The last pages of the chapter feature merely several disparate fragments of text left, enhancing the impression of a fundamental transformation of the (textual) space.

In 'Cartography,' the reader is hardly invited to read the text, particularly as it is easy to recognize the same sentences already used in the previous poems, this time without any individual words erased. Instead, s/he is invited to look, and to share the vantage point Abel assumes in his reenactment of the process of mapping. This is looking from above and from a distance, which disentangles the viewer from the grasp of the structures, specificities, and complexities of a particular place and affords him/her what Michel de Certeau describes as the look of the 'totalizing eye' that transforms the place it views into a readable, graspable 'text' devoid of complexities, and creates an illusion of power (de Certeau, 1984: 92). Blomley specifically analyzes the practice of the colonial survey, which assumed such a way of looking to abstract colonized territories from 'lived relations and social relations' and to become 'a form of organized forgetting,' facilitating colonial acts of dispossession and displacement (Blomley, 2004: xvi, xx, 127, 112; see also Ashcroft, 2001: 125, 139). The novels Abel appropriates for his book are treated with the same totalizing look: he does not scrutinize the texts to erase in order to come up with new interpretations of particular passages, nor does he afford any subjectivity to the individual writers whose work he appropriates; their names and the titles of their novels are listed in the section 'Sources,' but within the poems their presence or individual styles are not acknowledged and effectively erased.

While appropriation as a literary strategy is not new, in Indigenous literature it has usually been used to create subversive parody. The texts which Abel produces in *Un/Inhabited* having appropriated a series of novels of the Western genre work in a different way. His erasures defamiliarize these pieces of popular fiction and render them largely unreadable in the traditional sense. Just as any other form of appropriating colonial texts, erasure poetry very explicitly manifests what Mignolo calls 'epistemic disobedience' (Mignolo, 2011: 45, 47-48). However, as a procedure, erasure also presupposes violence, which in this case can be seen as 'productive violence,' to borrow the phrase Julia Kristeva uses to describe 'gestures of confrontation and appropriation, destruction and construction' (Kristeva, 1984: 16). Wolfe identifies a similar paradox behind the 'logic of elimination' which drives settler colonialism, where elimination results in the creation of new social structures (Wolfe, 2006: 387-88); whether elimination is perceived as destructive or productive depends on one's subject position. Abel exploits precisely this paradox. Appropriating the colonial procedure of erasure, he, in a gesture of decolonial violence, effectively destroys the selected novels, depriving them of the original form and message, and placing them in a different ideological context. What he creates instead, though, is not an alternative ideological structure, but a process, an attempt of an Indigenous subjectivity to negotiate a place in the cultural space of contemporary North America.

While Abel engages in what can be labeled as gestures of decolonial violence, the title of Simpson's latest collection of stories and songs, *Islands of Decolonial Love* (2013), foregrounds the opposite. However, it does not promise easy reconciliation: Simpson's texts are unambiguous in making the opposition between Indigenous and white people blatantly acute, often heightened by images of military aggression. For instance, in the poem 'i am graffiti,' the speaker says of Indigenous people:

we are the singing remnants
left over after
the bomb went off in slow motion
over a century instead of a fractionated second (Simpson, 2015)

The passage identifies the characters central to Simpson's texts, contemporary people, who live at a temporal distance from the initial colonial encounter, but whose experience of colonial violence is direct, as revealed through presenting them as survivors of it. While foregrounding the persistence of colonial violence is nothing new in Indigenous texts (see e. g. Maracle, 1993, for the motif of rape, and Wright-McLeod, 2011, for a depiction of institutional violence), the image of a bomb explosion as a metaphor for colonization is unusual and quite radical, not the least because it does not have a direct historical referent. As an image, unlike, for instance, the motif of rape or murder, the bomb works to somewhat depersonalize the violence which ensues: this is due to the distance between the attacker and the attacked, as the attacker assumes the 'totalizing' look as theorized by de Certeau and Blomley, the way of looking which disregards the lived-in quality of the territory in front of the eyes and thereby makes acts of violence unproblematic (de Certeau, 1984: 92; Blomley, 2004: xvi, xx, 127, 112). However, the passage also emphasizes the bomb's function as a weapon of mass destruction, targeting Indigenous people as a collective over an extended period of time, as implied in the image of the explosion happening 'in slow motion', rather than being isolated in a moment of the past. Similarly, in the short story 'buffalo on,' Simpson employs the motif of an unending war between two sides of unequal power, a war which has become difficult to identify as such, but is nonetheless perceived as war: 'when you're raising someone to survive a war that the other side invests millions in convincing people it doesn't exist, you raise your army to be tough' (Simpson, 2013: 87). Such confrontational rhetoric is intentionally unsettling in the ways decolonial gestures as discussed by Mignolo are supposed to be (Mignolo, 2014). Simpson sums up its effects in the poem 'smallpox, anyone,' in which a stanza is constructed as a response to an article submitted by the poem's speaker. The reviewer says: '*your work is polemic. if you could re-write the tone of this article to avoid shaming Canadians into a paralysis of guilt and inaction we could move forward with the publication of your article.*' (Simpson, 2013: 34; original emphasis) The urge to 'avoid shaming Canadians' is precisely what Tuck and Yang mean when they speak of the tendency to dismiss decolonization as a metaphor, thereby further perpetuating the functioning of the settler colonial

structure (Tuck and Yang, 2012: 1, 3). Simpson's texts refuse to participate in such concessions. Their Indigenous characters clearly position themselves on one side of the white-Indigenous binary, without attempting to undo its rigidity and pointing to the incommensurability of the interests of the two sides, still caught in the matrix of settler colonialism. In 'i am graffiti,' the speaker says,

we have noticed
 you have a new big pink eraser [...]
 erasing indians is a good idea
 of course
 the bleeding-heart liberals
 and communists
 can stop feeling bad [...]
 and we can all move on
 we can be reconciled
 except, i am graffiti
 except, mistakes were made. (Simpson, 2015)

Graffiti, usually seen as vandalism, manifests the graffiti writer's defiance of the social and spatial order, which s/he pollutes with his/her visual signage. It is a provocative way of marking and claiming territory, and thereby asserting one's presence. In the poem, brought up four times in its refrain 'except, i am graffiti/ except, mistakes were made,' the intrusion of graffiti disturbs what could turn into an idyllic reconciliation if the wrongdoings of the past are chosen to be forgotten and Indigenous people no longer pose a problem, having settled for a compromise and been 'erased' from political agendas as a result. Instead, graffiti foregrounds the refusal of Indigenous people to disappear in the entanglements of political negotiations and a multicultural future; it also works as an insidious and unpleasant reminder of the 'mistakes,' the colonial crimes.

Having repeatedly emphasized the disparity between white and Indigenous people's experiences and interests, Simpson grounds her central motif, that of decolonial love, not in attempts to bridge the gap, but exclusively in the Indigenous community. The phrase is borrowed from an interview with Dominican American writer Junot Diaz, in which he asks, '[i]s it possible to love one's broken-by-the-coloniality-of-power self in another broken-by-the-coloniality-of-power person?' (Diaz, 2012, cited by Moya, 2012) Diaz speaks about recognizing the destructive effects of coloniality as a major condition for decolonial love. His focus, like Simpson's, is on the colonized people, but in the context of settler coloniality, under which both the colonizer and the colonized have to share the same space, Diaz's question would potentially imply that bridging the gap between the two would be possible only if both groups engaged in such processes of recognition and acknowledgment. In a similar way, Yomaira C. Figueroa defines decolonial love as 'a practice that bears witness to the past while looking towards a transformative and reparative future by unraveling coloniality, the matrix of power that is manifested in our contemporary conceptions of power, gender,

and bodies' (Figuroa, 2015: 44). This is very much akin to what such critics as Coulthard or Mignolo and Vazquez see as the function of decolonial projects, i.e., not merely a mechanical undoing of colonial structures, hardly possible in settler countries, but reinstatement and incorporation of Indigenous epistemologies and cultural practices in the discourse of any given society (Coulthard, 2007: 456; Mignolo and Vazquez, 2013). Mignolo has repeatedly referred to Simpson's earlier work as attempting exactly that, namely, Indigenous 're-emergence,' 're-surgence,' and 're-existence,' through the introduction of the systems of thought of Nishnaabe elders (Mignolo, 2014, cited by Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014: 204–205, 208, see also Mignolo, 2014). Some of Simpson's stories in more recent *Islands of Decolonial Love* straightforwardly engage in similar gestures of epistemic disobedience, relying heavily on Nishnaabeg mythology and the tradition of oral storytelling. For instance, 'for asinykwe' features a holy woman, who, seven generations after the colonial invasion, sets out to collect 'those things we had forgotten. picking up all those shattered pieces of nishnaabewin [the nishnaabe way of life] that had been taken from us, or lost or forgotten' to then share them with contemporary people and heal them (Simpson, 2013: 127–29). In 'gezhizhwazh,' an elder tells a story about a Nishnaabeg female spirit being who tries to find a way to counter the effects of colonization by infiltrating into and analyzing the system from within to understand its mechanisms and seek ways of countering them (Simpson, 2013: 110–12). More radically, in 'nogojiwanong,' another story told in the mode of oral storytelling, Indigenous people receive help from thunderbirds and an underwater lynx: possessing supernatural powers, they cause an implosion, completely obliterating white people's settlement, and the Indigenous community can resume their lives as they were before the arrival of 'the neighbors' (Simpson, 2013: 121–23).

Nonetheless, equally frequent in Simpson's collection are the motifs of contemporary 'disconnection, insatiable hunger and emptiness,' products of coloniality, as the narrator states in 'gezhizhwazh' (Simpson, 2013: 109). In several stories, she features characters marked by dysfunctional behavior patterns, parallel to those discussed as symptoms of intergenerational trauma as a result of 'cumulative assaults,' experienced by Indigenous people over an extended period of time (see Bombay, Matheson and Anisman, 2009, Kirmayer, Tait and Simpson, 2009). Coulthard points out with reference to Fanon's study of the colonized people's inferiority complex resulting from the effects of colonial regime that 'any psychological problems that ensue, although socially constituted, can take on a life of their own specific logics,' further fueled by contemporary 'debilitating forms' of colonial normativity (Coulthard, 2007: 448). In Simpson's 'buffalo on,' the narrator summarizes the situation as follows, pointing to its destructive effects even on most personal relationships, depriving them of trust and intimacy:

right off the bat, let's just admit we're both from places that have been fucked up through no fault of our own in a thousand different ways for seven different generations and that takes a toll on how we treat each other. it just does. [...]

her mom did not teach her how to accept a lover's caress, a kind or a helping hand. so instead we did shots of jameson and fucked every friday night in a bathroom stall in bar down the road by a lake, not too far from here.

that's how we were gentle. (Simpson, 2013: 85–87)

For a more unsettling example, 'giiwedinong' tells a story of childhood friends, who reconnect in the city and become lovers until once, during a walk, the narrator accidentally hits her partner:

i was explaining something using hand gestures, we can't remember what, when i mistakenly nicked the corner of giiwedinong's eye. a fraction of second later, i was collapsing off the curb, my shoulder feeling like it had exploded, dented with the impression of giiwedinong's fist, landing on my back in a lane of traffic. giiwedinong rushed towards me to help and apologize and help. i got up and then we walked home, through a long tunnel of suburban nothingness. (Simpson, 2013: 30)

giiwedinong's disproportionately violent reaction is automatic, an acquired reflex to respond to physical aggression and does not target the narrator personally. It, however, stands in stark contrast to the previous episodes of their past, when the two shared intense experiences, such as the sudden death of giiwedinong's father, but which were not marked by violence. The narrator does not develop the episode any further, nor does she provide information about whether or how giiwedinong attempts to explain his act. Interestingly, though, as Simpson explains in a footnote, 'giiwedinong means in the north; it also refers to a place that is home' (Simpson, 2013: 31). The fact that the violent incident, which ends their relationship, happens in the city seems to be suggestive of how being removed from home entails vulnerability, both the narrator's, but also giiwedinong's, whose act can be seen as a manifestation of desperation in response to overwhelming insecurity and anxiety.

For such characters, decolonial love promised in the title of Simpson's collection is possible through an effort to recognize what continues to fuel such dysfunctional behavioral patterns. Once again, she foregrounds the importance of reconnecting with traditional cultural practices and ways of understanding oneself outside the norms of the dominant culture. In 'it takes an ocean not to break,' Simpson tells the story of an unnamed suicide survivor, who attends therapy sessions led by 'a white 'therapy lady,' to demonstrate how their extremely different contexts and cultural codes prevent the sessions from amounting to intimacy craved by the Indigenous character, who is also one of the narrators of the story. The character says:

i knew what every ndn [Indian] knows: that vulnerability, forgiveness and acceptance were privileges. she made the assumption of a white person: they were readily available to all like the fresh produce at the grocery store. (Simpson, 2013: 80)

Critics have addressed the issue that ‘most measures of mental health are based on western conceptualization of illness and normalized against white middle class samples’; therefore, ‘assessments may be less reliable in diagnosing those from different cultural backgrounds’ (Bombay, Matheson and Anisman 2009: 27). Simpson’s narrator blatantly dismisses the therapist’s evaluation of her patient’s situation and the positivist approach she uses as ineffective: ‘therapy-lady was helping me “knit positive experiences into the fabric of my life.” that sounded like unattainable crazy talk to me, but I liked that she said *fabric*. everyone else I knew said material’ (Simpson, 2013: 80). The statement underscores the narrator’s analytic detachment, further intensified by the description how the sessions develop: ‘but now i was two years invested in therapy-lady and plus i liked to interview therapy lady about happy people like i was an anthropologist’ (Simpson, 2013: 81). Alternatively, the short story ‘lost in a world where he was always the only one,’ while it does not feature characters suffering from trauma, places them in an exchange of emotional intensity and one that teaches them relevant things. The narrator of the story, who is an Indigenous university student, and a Jewish professor come to a reserve on a project, which entails helping ‘the elders document all the ways they related to the land in the past and in contemporary times’ (Simpson, 2013: 58). What follows are regular visits to the elders on the reserve to record what they decide to share with the researchers. In a sequence, whose format is reminiscent of a poem rather than prose, the narrator says that over the course of the two years,

i redrew the maps those old ones kept tucked away in their bones.
i took these notes:

how to pluck the feathers off a goose
how to roast a duck on an open fire
how to block the cnr [Canadian national railway] lines
how to live as if it mattered (Simpson, 2013: 59)

While the maps and the notes are obviously part of the project in which the narrator is engaged, the way she interprets them shows emotional investment and sensitivity to the material at hand. She does not indulge in any critical analysis or evaluation, which her university education may inspire. Perceiving the Indigenous maps as the knowledge about the place the people keep ‘tucked away in their bones’ foregrounds a way of relating to the surroundings different in its intimacy from the one manifest in Western mapping practices, summed up in de Certeau’s description of the colonizing ‘totalizing eye’, which always looks from a distance (de Certeau, 1984: 92; Blomley, 2004: xvi, xx, 127, 112). In the notes the narrator takes, Simpson builds on the brevity of the list and the seeming incoherence between the items noted, none of which formulates what might be expected by the outsider who has set out to record ‘authentic’ ways the Indigenous group relates to the land and who may dismiss information about plucking or roasting birds as too banal and the reference to blocking railway lines as irrelevant in describing a traditional lifestyle. However, blocking the railway

lines is blatantly about the people's relationship to the land: the confrontational impulses behind blocking of the CNR lines hint at communal skills and actions, responding to how the railway lines 'dissect' the reserve (Simpson, 2013: 57), a reminder of the violence of colonial reorganization of appropriated space. Bringing up 'how to live as if it mattered' immediately after, while the phrase voices a degree of skepticism, still underscores how meaningful experiences for an Indigenous person are rooted in practices which connect one to the community and which are undertaken according to their systems of thought.

CONCLUSION

'I'm an Nishnaabekwe and so everything I do is political,' states Simpson in an interview (Simpson; cited by Winder, 2014), underscoring how one's status as an Indigenous person in a contemporary settler state is still complex and demands active engagement with its structures and its people. Emphasis on her nationhood further foregrounds how Canada's Indigenous people indeed perceive their relationship with the country as international, which presupposes a degree of tension and strife. In their texts, Simpson and Abel, albeit in very different ways express precisely such a position. Their provocative decolonial gestures, ranging from unsettling images to the rejection of Western systems of thought, to such violent procedures as erasure, to which colonial texts are subjected, manifest their refusal to be seduced by contemporary 'politics of recognition' and the rhetoric of reconciliation (see Coulthard, 2007, 2014), as exemplified in a passage from Simpson's poem, in which an Indigenous character is advised: 'and if you just take some of the things from settlers and some of the things from your ancestors, you'll find you can weave them into a really nice tapestry, which will make the colonizer feel ambivalent and then you've altered the power structure' (Simpson, 2013: 33–34). Both Simpson and Abel refuse to weave 'a really nice tapestry,' but engage in much more radical gestures to foreground Indigenous resurgence rather than assimilation or integration. The effect of these gestures is indeed to provoke and disturb, rather than reconcile, because making the colonizer feel 'ambivalent' is explicitly insufficient.

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