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Interviews

'Rehearsal for the World-Building Outside of Colonialism': a Conversation with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Billy-Ray Belcourt

[Nisha Ramayya](#)

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Nisha Ramayya

The first question that I would love to ask, in a general and expansive sense, is how you think of and practise translation in your work and in your everyday lives.

Billy-Ray Belcourt

To talk about translation, I have to begin with mistranslation. Treaty 8, signed by my ancestors on the shores of Lesser Slave Lake in north-west Alberta in 1898, was intended to function as an ethical agreement so that Cree people and settlers could cohabitate and sustain generations to come. Much was lost in translation and deliberately mistranslated, however, and so now we make reference to the 'spirit and intent' of Treaty 8, which is not codified in the legal text. What was codified was a cessation of land and, with that, a transformation of land into property and Indigenous peoples into subjects of the state.

It was not just that two languages failed to be rendered clearly to one another, but also that the ethico-philosophical tenets of the Cree language exceeded the ethico-philosophical possibilities of English. One was buoyed by a politics of generosity and futurity, the other by a desire for conquest, a grim kind of futurity. To evoke the spirit and intent of Treaty 8 is thus to do a kind of translation, the effect of which is a refusal to be consigned to the state of the dispossessed. I live and make art now animated by this subversive form of translation.

NR

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Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

I share time, space, and land with an endless number of life forms — trees, plants, animals, rivers and lakes, birds, insects, and many different peoples. There are many organising principles in Nishnaabewin, but one that is often talked about is mino-bimaadiziwin, the good life, the art of living in a good way, or, as Winona LaDuke translates it, 'continuous rebirth' (128). This means living things, whether human or moose, are supposed to live in a way that brings forth more life by being in reciprocal, responsive relationality with all of the life on the planet. This to me is a sort of embodied, practised translation in which there are kinetics connecting the present to both the past and the future. This orientation refuses racial capitalism, and forecloses the world it builds, because it is one that ends life. Mino-bimaadiziwin refuses dispossession in favour of a deep attachment to other forms of life. It normalises difference as a communal strength.

NR

I'm wondering if this idea of translation as kinetic relationality, as a refusal of the structures that condition life, death, and relationships, plays into your work, too, Billy-Ray.

BRB

Well, to approach the question of translation from another angle, it is not my job to make legible to a settler public the emotional textures of Indigenous life and death. Settler publics examine us and our art using a grammar of despair and deficiency

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systems analysis that lays blame on what and who perpetuates colonial violence. In my last book, *A History of My Brief Body*, I implicate white readers in the culture of reading that allows them to pick up our books and put down carcasses. More importantly, though, I seek to show how beautifully and rebelliously we practise freedom, build new worlds.

BILLY-RAY BELCOURT. © JAYE SIMPSON.

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as well as resistance, refusal, and rebirth?

LBS

I think my answer to this is my *Noopiming* project, which was meant to be a site of Nishnaabeg living, a gathering piece and a series of iterations across different media and formations of artists. I think of this work as a web or a network or an ecology. In Nishnaabemowin (the Ojibwe language), 'Noopiming' means 'in the bush'. The bush as a gathering site of many different kinds of trees, plants, animals and people, soil, insects, water. In *Noopiming*, I was interested in removing power from the colonial and immersing it once again within the biosphere of Nishnaabeg caring. I was interested in making *Noopiming* an immersive, communal engagement in meaning-making, where together we're continually asking ourselves, what does it mean to be immersed in Nishnaabeg living?

I wasn't interested in *translation*.

I released a series of iterations of this project — *Noopiming: The Cure for White Ladies*, which is a novel. *Noopiming Sessions* is a collaboration with my sister, singer-songwriter and composer Ansley Simpson, and new media artist Sammy Chien and the Chimerik collective, and it features a short film and a series of readings from the book enmeshed with electronica.

The next iteration was *Theory of Ice*, the album, which takes the poetry in the mid-section of the novel and converts it to sound, bringing it into conversation with my band and a host of other musicians, producers, and sound engineers. This was

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of short films/music videos from the tracks of *Theory of Ice* in collaboration with Black and Indigenous filmmakers, by Sandra Brewster, Asinnajaq, Caroline Monnet, Amanda Strong, and Lisa Jackson. And finally, the last iteration, which will take some time to make, is a feature-length stop-motion animation, also by Amanda Strong.

These iterations move the stories and theories embedded in *Noopiming* across media, through different collectives and artistic practices, and place meaning-making amongst artists and thinkers from different nations, communities, and struggles. It is a way of witnessing the work travel, watching as certain aspects of the work become more legible while others become less so. It is a practice of finding shared and disparate meanings alongside each other. It is a practice of recoding and reordering and layering meaning. The idea of translation seemed too simple to me, something that underestimates the ability of capitalism to consume, thief, and manipulate.

NR

I can see a resonance with what Billy-Ray talked about with regard to contesting certain modes of legibility, instead focusing on the multiple ways to 'practise freedom, build new worlds'. Is this kind of rebellious world-building also a feature of your work?

LBS

In my own work, Nishnaabeg practices require full engagement with one's body, intellect, emotions, and spirit. They are done in reciprocal and responsive relationality in commune with other living beings. Done well, Nishnaabeg practice

present and presence — as a Nishnaabeg study of life. And here, I am using the term 'study' in a related way to Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in *The Undercommons*:

We are committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion of a rehearsal – being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory – there are these various modes of activity. The point of calling it 'study' is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present. (110)

When I think alongside Moten and Harney about 'study' in a Nishnaabeg way, I think of people living in encampment communities in cities sharing everything they have with each other. I think of abolition organisers studying with incarcerated peoples and mobilising with migrant peoples. I think of language nests and freedom schools; Indigenous theatres and friendship centres. I think of Anishinaabe Health's mobile healing unit in Toronto. I think of Dene people setting nets, calling moose, and harvesting spruce gum. I think of Nishnaabeg tapping trees, harvesting rice, and making canoes. I think of Trans poets breaking open language and building new possibilities. I think of Inuit musicians performing on Zoom through the pandemic. I think of beavers and moose and pickerel and strawberries. I think of the sound of ice breaking up, geese migrating south, and rivers bubbling over rocks. I think of

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Making. Action. Kinetics. Embodiment. Movement. Practices. And that doing takes place *with other people*, and in my thinking *with other forms of life*. Study is not an individual pursuit because Indigenous life is not an individual pursuit. Our studies must include and interrogate all of the mutually interlocking and reciprocally constructive systems that deplore difference, diversity, and self-reliance and entrench hierarchy. Nishnaabeg practices – this study, these rehearsals – generate new knowledge.

I'm reminded of this when I'm making dry fish with grandparents who share stories about their precious times away from residential schools that were full of joy and where they felt free. I'm reminded of this when hunters in the north worry about their caribou relatives in the face of mining, and oil and gas exploration. I'm reminded of this when sitting around a fire, and someone takes a muskox rib off the fire and passes it to me, then passes me a knife, and shortly after that a saltshaker. These moments are tiny bits of poetry doing the work of the otherwise, building tiny worlds, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore reminds us, 'where life is precious, life is precious'. Black Life. Indigenous Life. Asian Life. Trans Life. Black Spruce Life. Beaver Life. River Life. Mountain Life. Glacier Life.

And so, because our creators made us makers, in our studies, we aren't only concerned with thinking. We are concerned with thinking in a way that is mutually interlocking and reciprocally constructive with action, with spirit, and with commune.

We are concerned with studying by building immersive decolonial spaces where we can plant the seeds for the making of alternative worlds.

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And, as all the performers and musicians in the audience know too well, this is what rehearsals are for. This space, where deep listening is a cherished practice. Where possibility exists. Where mistakes and missteps are correctives and opportunity. Where repetition is simultaneously relentless and generative. Where performativity moves away from empty gesture and back to a practice rooted in action. Where the right people in the right room at the right time can produce magic.

The practice of translation must be relational, embodied, a rehearsal for the world-building outside of colonialism. It is a practice of thinking, feeling, and studying alongside each other and other forms of life.

It is a reminder to approach each day, to approach my study of Nishnaabeg presence and present, as a learner, as someone who continually has the capacity to gain new insights and to transform. I learned this idea from Robyn Maynard.

In *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Robin D G Kelley writes that 'making a revolution is not about a series of clever maneuvers and tactics, but a process that must transform us' (xii).

All of this is to say that translation, when done well, in reciprocity and relationship, must be transformative and a world-building exercise. I'm drawn to the idea of thinking with, thinking through, and thinking alongside rather than the idea of translation. The practice of thinking alongside is for the purpose of revolutionary transformation. It is for the purpose of generating the kinds of skills and knowledges we need to build different worlds.

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have to be touched and moved by others (via Hortense Spillers); the shifting interactions between historical and spiritual movements that structure thought, embodiment, and the conditions for living and dying (I'm thinking very much about 'grounded normativity' here, Leanne) – what does translation make possible and what does translation foreclose? Or, simply, what do metaphors of translation make possible and foreclose?

BRB

I keep thinking about the impossibility of translation. I only know fragments of my language, and so I do not have a mother tongue. A mouth without a mother tongue speaks in echoes. In a new poem, I wrote: 'Please do not ask me to define love/all I have is a second language.' There's a fundamental rupture from the past and my culture that I live with. And so, to paraphrase the poet Solmaz Sharif, I have to make do in a language that is the source of my dispossession. I do not think this is a death sentence. I can use English against itself, expose how unstable its ontological ground is, show that it does not shape reality. In the spirit of the great José Esteban Muñoz, I can disidentify with the terror that my speaking English represents and use it to imagine otherwise possibilities. Perhaps that is itself a kind of translation.

NR

Metaphor seems to hold so many of poetry's possibilities, from its traditional rhetorical and literary senses of substitution, transaction, and defamiliarisation, to its social and conceptual applications in terms of Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*:

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conveyed and translated, Glissant teaches us to be wary of scale itself, for its potential inseparability from the judgement of the imperial subject, from that subject's demands for transparency and reduction ... From metaphor to this refusal of transparency and reduction, how do you negotiate opacity in your work?

LBS

In the fall of 2021, I was invited by poet Canisia Lubrin to participate in an online gathering celebrating the twenty-year anniversary of Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return*. The list of invitees to the gathering was staggering in its geographical and disciplinary breadth, and in its sheer assembly of Black brilliance, and it was reflective of the monumental contribution to literature of Brand in general and *A Map* in particular. Over the course of the four-day gathering, I was struck by how each scholar, writer, or artist from all over the world related to itineraries of *A Map* — thinking with, thinking through, thinking inside and outside metaphors and scales. Moving seamlessly through the intimate to the global and back to the intimate again. There were certainly echoes of Glissant. There was most certainly revolutionary transformation.

There is a chapter in *A Map to the Door of No Return* near the end of the book entitled 'Pinery Road & Concession 11'. It tells the story of Brand, living in the bush outside of Kinmount, Ontario, Canada, writing and living. In this particular chapter, Brand's car breaks down on a rural road, and this leads to her considerations of place, belonging, property, foreclosure, home, and diaspora.

What was particularly interesting to me about this chapter was that the corner

As a writer and an academic it would have been easier, much easier, to just read the chapter in my home, and think alongside Dionne there. Nishnaabewin, though, is land-based. It is embodied. It is practised. It takes place with those other forms of life, and so I knew that travelling to the corner, sitting in the same place that Brand had sat contemplating two decades earlier, would bring me a different understanding of the work than just engaging with intellect.

And so, on a cool fall day in September, I drove my car from my house to the corner that had inspired Brand more than twenty years earlier to think alongside the bush, as a gathering piece, as a way of collapsing the piece across scale and back to the intimate, this time, my Nishnaabeg intimacies. I decide to immerse myself in Brand's metaphor, a metaphor that was not meant for me, but that was also perhaps meant to be legible to me as an Indigenous woman. I went to see what I could learn. I went as a study, alongside. I went to struggle, alongside.

This would be the first of three trips to the corner of Pinery Road and Concession 11. I would consider place, belonging, diaspora, property, and foreclosure in my own Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg homeland and in my own life by placing a time-lapsing surveillance camera on the dashboard of my car as I drove to the corner and then stayed at the corner for several hours to record the movements of settlers, birds, animals, and the weather. I tried to visibilise in careful and coded way the erasure of Black and Nishnaabeg presence from the present at this particular white, rural corner in central Ontario. I re-ordered. I recorded my thinking through and spoke over the images. I paired this with my sister Ansley Simpson's drone-like instrumental from my track 'Solidification'. 'Pinery Road & Concession 11', then, is a

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, Ontario. This is how I negotiate opacity in my work. I learned from Brand.

NR

What have you learned about translation, opacity, and instability, as expressed in your poetry, Billy-Ray, in the years that you have been sharing your work with the world, performing, publishing, and teaching?

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one another in a language that we define and invent and reinvent. I bank on the hope that, even if someone can't quite grasp the full meaning of what I'm writing because they do not have the same critical language as mine, an emotional truth will reverberate. I don't think anyone's language ever neatly syncs up with another's. Our indeterminacy is something we can be serious about.

NR

Returning to the notion that translation and metaphor both make things possible and foreclose possibilities, how might we think about this in relation to sociality and solidarity? Does thinking about translation in an expanded sense help us understand solidarity across difference (eg race, political struggles, national borders — an endless list!) and perhaps even do solidarity differently? (After Glissant, accepting that we might not know or understand the other, but we must accept and love them in all their otherness, and struggle with/for each other from within our entanglements.)

Or: who has informed you fundamentally; who are you learning from and studying with right now; what connections and entanglements do you think with and feel? I'm partly thinking about how the global pandemic has made so much intelligible about our mostly crushing but sometimes beautiful interdependencies — relations that were always true, but neglected or denied, eg the development and distribution of vaccines, medical staff, and resources. I am also curious to hear about your teachers and experiences of study as a social practice.

LBS

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letters as we think with and alongside each other, with a foreword by Ruth Wilson Gilmore and an afterword by Robin D G Kelley.

The process of letter writing to Robyn and the communities she is a part of were a tremendous source of learning for me through the pandemic. We started the project at the beginning of the pandemic and wrote through the global uprising for Black life. Our letters expand and contract across scales, schools of thought, and the events we were witnessing and a part of. Robyn has this incredible work ethic, and so during that first part of the pandemic when things were shuttering, we had this private space to write and think and feel our way through the world together. It was a very embodied 'thinking alongside', and it's one of the most important collaborations of my life because it brought me so much joy, hope, and transformation. I think this 'rehearsal' with Robyn was exactly what Moten is talking about when he writes about study as a social practice. It was rigorous. It required an epic amount of reading. I had to think outside of the constructs I normally think within. We did solidarity differently.

BRB

I think that our incommensurabilities make metaphor necessary. Metaphor can be a way to hold difference in a single frame without subsuming it. It even invites particularity. I did a reading on Vancouver Island last summer and was asked by a woman of colour if there was something ethically suspect in her desire to find emotional clarity about survival in my work since we do not occupy the same racial identities. On the contrary, I said, poetry can be where the fact of our survivability is not under siege and therefore can create a context for shared struggle and

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Sharpe sent me to Dionne Brand and Saidiya Hartman; my reading of Moten sent me to the Afropessimists. Tiffany Lethabo King sent me back to Audre Lorde. Lorde reminded me of the 'revolutionary desire' that brought me to poetry in the first place. Revolutionary desire is what Indigenous and Black communities have in common.

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