



Islands of Decolonial Love: Stories & Songs

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

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In her debut collection of short stories, *Islands of Decolonial Love*, renowned writer and activist Leanne Simpson vividly explores the lives of contemporary Indigenous Peoples and communities, especially those of her own Nishnaabeg nation.

Found on reserves, in cities and small towns, in bars and curling rinks, canoes and community centres, doctors offices and pickup trucks, Simpson's characters confront the often heartbreaking challenge of pairing the desire to live loving and observant lives with a constant struggle to simply survive the historical and ongoing injustices of racism and colonialism. Told with voices that are rarely recorded but need to be heard, and incorporating the language and history of her people, Leanne Simpson's *Islands of Decolonial Love* is a profound, important, and beautiful book of fiction.

Islands of Decolonial Love: Stories & Songs Details

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Author : Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

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From Reader Review *Islands of Decolonial Love: Stories & Songs* for online ebook

Jacob Wren says

I wrote about it here: <http://lemonhound.com/2015/04/22/jaco...>

And then three passages from *Islands of Decolonial Love*:

etienne gets out the lines and in two minutes we know we're on the school because we're pulling in mackerel easy. he watches as i hold the hook and snap the fish into the garbage pail, which is my reveal. it's sunny and it's windy and it's perfect and the arms of the day are wide open and no one has to be anywhere. i see a northern gannet and i love gannets because they can disconnect their wings before they plummet into the sea after a fish. imagine disconnecting a body part! the gannet swims over to the boat smelling the fish blood and etienne hands the gannet a fish and says "the bird is my family, all of this, the fish, the seals, the water – this is my family," which is his reveal.

our eyes meet because now he has my attention. i walk over and hug him and he is the kind of person that can give and receive a real hug and i'm not one of those people because my alarm system goes off when people touch me and I freeze up and shut down. this time that doesn't happen. i decide to kiss him and it's perfect and easy and we make out void of awkwardness but with a clearly defined beginning and a clearly defined ending, then he drives back to shore while i gut the fish in the back of the boat using his terrifyingly sharp knife, feeding the guts to the gulls and the gannets. he drops me off on the dock. we thank each other. we say goodbye and i pay attention to each step, instead of looking back.

...

old lady levi then asked ira to speak and tell them about the project. he lit a cigarette and he told them three things. first, that the band council had asked us to help the elders document all the ways they related to the land in the past and in contemporary times. second, that throughout the project, the elders would be in charge. they would make all of the decisions because as far as he was concerned, they were the experts. and third that the final document could be whatever they wanted.

then he sat down.

old lady levi stood up, thanked us and asked us to leave. she opened the living room door, watched us as we passed through it, and then told us to wait outside until she reappeared.

we did. for probably two hours.

we heard a lot of talking. some praying. some singing. some more talking.

ira smoked. i drank watery maxwell house out of a styrofoam cup, and then bit teeth marks all around the top

edge, wondering what was going to happen to me when i hit the end of the prozac prescription no one was monitoring.

then we heard old lady levi's footsteps. she paused on the other side of the door. i imagined her hand on the handle, hesitating and then opening it.

we stood up.

she looked through us and said, "come back next month, maybe a monday next time. monday is better." she went back into the room and shut the door.

ira lit another cigarette, did up his coat, and walked outside, remotely starting the car on the way. it was nearly four, and the sun was sinking below the stand of black spruce out my window. we retraced our morning's steps back to thunder bay. a month later, this time on a monday, we went back, and we kept going back for two years, sometimes moving the meeting twice a month.

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 lines
how to live as if it mattered

...

bringing up trauma from my life made therapy-lady cry, especially if it was "aboriginal" themed. she said "aboriginal" a lot, and i knew she was trying to be respectful so i planned on letting it slide until the breaking point and then i was going to let her have it in one spiralling long manifesto. therapy-lady liked to compare my life to refugees from war-torn countries who hid their kids in closets when airplanes flew over their houses. this was her limit of understanding on colonized intimacy. she wasn't completely wrong, and while she tried to convince me none of us had to hide our kids anymore, we both knew that wasn't exactly true. i knew what every ndn 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.

lucy says that I made a critical mistake on my first day of therapy. "you have to lay all of you indian shit out on the first day, drug abuse, suicide attempts, all the times you got beat up, all of that shit. then you sit back and watch how they react. then you'll know if they can deal or not." lucy had a social work degree but she didn't buy it, which is always useful.

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Katie says

Leanne Simpson writing thrills me like sliding down a too icy hill, like methodically making a cup of tea, like kissing and warmth and yelling loud and long and clear into a devouring summer evening. Her story telling has taught me a great deal, and I think it has the power to teach you, too.

Tori says

this book came into my life exactly when i needed it to. i'd been honing the craft of writing love letters to myself these past couple of years, and i bought this book at the abolition convergence in mnisota. how could i not fall in love with its title?

i read the first short story, and it explained everything i've ever felt about love and fear and the summer sun and could never tell anyone because a queer femme(ish) person of color with ptsd doesn't just wear their heart on their sleeves like that. but simpson, without even knowing me, just poured into my heart. and when i wanna feel held and seen, it would serve me well to think of that ~5-page story.

this book contains short stories, songs and poems with many different characters, moods, experiences, and tones. i'm convinced that she's everyone she's writing about because she writes them. so well.

i think of this book and i think of very specific people in my life who could read this book and feel seen, the way i did. i think of this book and have a sweet n quiet n electric moment - the kind you have when you have a crush on someone truly spectacular and you're not ready to share it with anyone quite yet, but it whispers out of every inch of you. yeah. that.

Carol Tilley says

painful, lyrical, beautiful, haunting

Hannah says

how do we get free? in this book are a thousand stories that offer a map, not the kind that is measured and charted but the kind that is sensed the kind that makes your bones say o yes the kind that is knowing right and good and kind, yes.

right now in my life i am trying to heal some particulars of whiteness: the coopting of sensation/emotion/feeling into logic/reason/argument. the immense pressure to know it all and do it right *now*. the paradoxical & squeezed place of committing to anti-racist and decolonial existence as a white person when whiteness itself exists only by way of racism, white supremacy, and colonization. this book was not written to heal me or to heal whiteness, but what leanne simpson has written here helps me to find paths for that healing. i will come back to this over & over, with gratitude for those who keep helping to show me how to be by way of their own existence, creation, healing.

Ivan Roberts-Davis says

such a great read! highly recommended! thank you leanne simpson.

H says

So happy books like this exist.

Kate says

I want to rip apart every chapter of this book so they stand alone and put them randomly in my house so I can stumble across them at different times of the day and re-read them all again. Or put them all in different orders. Or stack them together in various formations. Put one chapter in every bag or backpack that I have. I finished reading this book and then flipped back and re-read the stories and poems that I loved the first time. This book is good. Of course, you have to listen to it here as well. You don't even need to have the book to listen to the poetry and songs on that website so go do it!

CaseyTheCanadianLesbrarian says

Beautiful, powerful, challenging, inventive. A collection of poems, songs, stories that are unlike anything I've ever read before. A book to read (and listen to, since it comes with digital access to some poems recorded with also beautifully done music) again and again.

Amélie says

J'ai beaucoup aimé ce livre. Leanne Simpson y raconte des histoires & des poèmes-chansons qui fessent dans le tas & qui, plus que de décortiquer l'expérience autochtone, sont entièrement immergées dans la vision nishnaabeg du monde. C'est poignant, souvent drôle. Il y a des passages d'une beauté délicate, comme suspendue de façon précaire au-dessus des mots. Le poids du colonialisme est présent partout ; il donne lieu à une colère salutaire. Mais, comme le dit la phrase de Lee Maracle placée en exergue : *still, I am not tragic*.

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Mila Menna says

Stylistically I didn't like reading this book because there was often no context or specification of who the speaker was. It was more so feelings and snippets of life like poetry than a cohesive story so it was hard to follow. But respects to Leanne for expressing her experience in Indigenous communities and with white people. I loved how animals were personified as well as Mississauga showing how the entities around us have personalities. Lots of literary devices but I probably wouldn't read again since it was confusing most of the time.

Michael Bryson says

Fragmentary in structure and written without the standard capital letter at the start of sentences, this book is what it proclaims to be in its title. Some of the pieces present as short stories, some present as poems. There is an audio component, which can be found at the publisher's website.

The pieces frequently make use of Indigenous words, which are translated in footnotes. The overall experience is one of entering the colonial space that is being deconstructed by storytelling, or maybe just call it the reality of Indigenous Canada.

"right off the bat," begins the story *buffalo on*, "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."

Many of the pieces are as short as a couple of pages, some a bit longer, but not much. Love and the search of intimacy between people is a frequent concern. Though (obviously) written, many of the pieces are examples of oral storytelling, and include a diversity of voices presented on the page.

There is much complication here, much intensity, even in the relative simplicity of the pieces themselves. The focus is not just interpersonal, it is, as the quotation above suggests, the legacy of the past on the present and pressures on people to live well, thrive, and sustain communities and places.

Hooray, Leanne Simpson. Check out her other work!

Samantha says

This is the kind of thing you feel like you need to immediately reread so as to not let go of it.

“dudley george is the first aboriginal person to be killed in a land rights dispute in canada since the 19th century.

i guess that’s right, if you don’t count suicide, cop killings, cancer, diabetes, heart disease, violent deaths, deaths from poverty, deaths from coping and deaths from being a woman.”

//

it takes an ocean not to break

"the mother in me has to believe that i can heal you by loving you, because no one actually believes that, except for mothers.

fuck. why was the universe trying to destroy you? why didn't you get some say? sometimes people's lives are just shit through no fault of their own and not even fucking oprah's cash and her tool box of privileged platitudes can fix it. sometimes people just drown in their own heads for no particular reason. sometimes people are just sad. you know, if it had worked, i would still have respected you. i would have respected your decision, and i would have missed you and loved you the same as i do now."

J. says

"i don't get it. i can see them. i know them. i can think like them while still thinking like me, but nothing i do stops them. nothing i do disrupts it." - p. 110

This is one of the most beautiful books I have ever read. I think it will be added to the few that I keep close to me, and I find myself wanting to give everyone a copy. Her words are so poignant and powerful in the way that they unearth the pain of seeing and feeling the cruelty of the world around us. She speaks to the hole of loneliness that I carry around me and the desire for finding ways to fill it. She plants some seeds of hope and creates visions of the Turtle Island without colonization. I really appreciated the firmness of her words, the unwillingness to tone down or sugar coat.

Maia Caron says

This is a powerful book--an evocative mix of both poetry and prose. So many humourous moments, the kind I like--self deprecating, yet poignant at the same time. A hard mix to get right, but Simpson manages to make it pitch perfect. I wish I had gone to her reading in Toronto a few months ago, just to hear these words come out of her mouth. I have heard her speak them to music on her website--worthwhile to give a listen.

The author opens little windows into her life affected by colonialism. She has brought what many only feel as abstract feeling into raw, concrete thought, expressing it beautifully with prose that empowers indigenous peoples by poking holes in the vague seemingly all powerful structure that is Canada's colonial legacy.

But this book is also about the human journey. Anyone can recognize their own struggles and triumphs in her prose. I tried to classify the genre in my head as essay or memoir, as stream of consciousness prose, but this book, this piece of art defies these kinds of classifications and invites you to lay yourself as bare as Simpson did writing it.

I think of how many of my own people (the Métis) have been marginalized by colonialism. I can recognize myself and my ancestors in this book. They were silenced and pushed off their land, they died keeping the secrets of shame and grief over their own identity as First Nations. Simpson expresses the angst, the secrets, for generations of indigenous people. And yet, at the end of this book, we are not left with a sense that these are hopelessly broken individuals. Lee Maracle's quote, which is included in the preface, is a valuable lesson to take away.

"Still, I am not tragic."
