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Dancing the Waterways in Leanne Simpson's she sang them home

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Article abstract

Inspired by essay films meditating on time, travel and ceremony and informed by cinematic cartography, my short dance film, *she sang them home* (2020), travels the specific bodies of water that form the route that Atlantic Salmon once journeyed as they migrated to Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg territory. Rooted in Nishnaabewin and Indigenous food sovereignty, toward a vision of the collective continuance of Michi Saagiig aki miijim, the film uses movement to activate sites in and on the shores of these lakes and rivers in the present while remembering the past and future of this waterway and her kin. This photo essay documents the film's journey and invites you to consider the making of this dance film as a prayer for the salmon to return.

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Dancing the Waterways in Leanne Simpson's *she sang them home*

Cara Mumford

Inspired by essay films meditating on time, travel, and ceremony and informed by cinematic cartography, my short dance film, *sing them home* (2020), travels the specific bodies of water that form the route that Atlantic Salmon once journeyed as they migrated to Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg territory. Seven specific bodies of water along the route are the sites of exploration of the vision offered in song by Dr. Leanne Simpson (Alderville First Nation) in *she sang them home* that the salmon will return one hundred years from now. Rooted in Nishnaabewin¹ and Indigenous food sovereignty, toward a vision of the collective continuance² of Michi Saagiig aki miijim,³ the film uses movement—a duet between dancer and camera—to activate sites in and on the shores of these lakes and rivers in the present while remembering the past and future of this waterway and her kin.

I am a Métis/Chippewa Cree writer and filmmaker of Anishinaabe descent. “Chippewa Cree” is a reference to my family’s migration route after the Riel Resistance at Red River, down through North Dakota to Montana, where we became known as the Landless Chippewa Cree, a group of Cree, Anishinaabe, and Métis families who had been displaced from our homelands. I moved to Peterborough, Ontario, in 2010 to help my mom, who teaches at Trent University.

I created the film in collaboration with dancer and scholar Dr. Jenn Cole, of mixed Algonquin-Anishinaabe ancestry, our fourth collaboration so far. Jenn’s research incorporates site-specific dance as a methodology for remapping her home territory of Kiji Sibi/Ottawa River, layering back the stories of the lands and waters and the vibrancy of Indigenous presence, documenting the difficulties of doing so in the aftermath of colonialism.

I have been incorporating dance in my films since 2007, even before I recognized the connection to the Anishinaabe Seven Fires of Creation Story. The final fire of creation is the first human, the first dancer, lowered to the earth with pointed toes so as not to disturb a blade of grass. In *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, Leanne Simpson wrote about the Creation Story as told to her by Elder Edna Manitowabi, who tells us to insert ourselves into the Creation Story. She stated that after Gzhwe Mnidoo (Creator) lowered her to the earth,

Gzhwe Mnidoo put her/his right hand to my forehead and s/he transferred all of Gzhwe Mnidoo’s thoughts into me. There were so many, that the thoughts couldn’t just stay in my head, they spilled into every part of my being, and filled up my whole body. Gzhwe Mnidoo’s knowledge was so immense from creating the world that it took all of my being to embody it.

This tells us that in order to access knowledge from a Nishnaabeg perspective, we have to engage our entire bodies: our physical beings, emotional self, our spiritual energy, and our intellect. Our methodologies, our lifeways must reflect those components of our being and

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the integration of those four components into a whole. This gives rise to our “research methodologies,” our ways of knowing, our processes for living in the world. (Simpson 2011, 42)

I see dance as an act of survivance—Gerald Vizenor’s concept that combines survival and resistance—that shares embodied Indigenous knowledge through movement. According to Vizenor, “sovereignty is the right of motion” (1998, 182)—this includes the right to move where we want on the land and how we want in our ceremonies—and that the “sovereignty of motion is survivance” (183).

When movement is connected to a specific site, it includes our embodied relationship with that place (Mojica in Lachance 2018, 100). By remembering that the land is our archive and the body is a source of knowing,⁴ the dancer learns “both *from* the land and *with* the land” (Simpson 2014, 7), and together they create meaning from the past, present, and future of human and nonhuman relationships with that place.

Site-specific dance is the best way I know to celebrate and communicate the significance of the land with which I am connected. As Tomson Highway once said, “Dance is a metaphor for being . . . if we cannot dance, we cannot pray” (in Hodgson 1999, 2).

I invite you to consider the making of this dance film as a prayer for the salmon to return.

sing them home*

In June 2012,
the summer before the Winter We Danced,⁵
Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and storyteller Dr. Leanne Simpson
performed what would later be titled, “she sang them home”
behind the Art Gallery of Peterborough,
on the shores of Little Lake.

The song is about the first salmon
returning to the territory
one hundred years in the future.

And I began to think about the future I want
rather than the future I fear.

*Aside from journal entries, what follows is the transcript for the short dance film *sing them home* by the author. The film will be available on caramumford.com after January 2022.

Today I take a road trip with dancer and scholar Dr. Jenn Cole
 of mixed Algonquin-Anishinaabe ancestry,
 To visit each body of water listed in Simpson's song.

Chi'nibiish
 Saagetay'achewan
 Pimadashkodeyaang
 Odenaabe
 Kitchi Gaming
 Atigmeg Zaageguneen
 Asin Saagegun



Map. Film still: Cara Mumford.

It rains on our drive south,
 predictions of thunderstorms looming over our trip.

Jenn and I both remember water offerings we've made in the past
 followed by downpours of rain,
 as if the sky is saying,

“that's not a water offering...
 THIS is a water offering.”

Journal entry 1: We drive to our first destination on the shore of Chi'nibiish (Lake Ontario) near the entrance to the Bay of Quinte⁶ that leads to the mouth of Saagetay'achewan (Trent River). It's an extra hour of driving than the closest access to Lake Ontario, but we are both site-specific land-based artists, and the extra hour of driving is worth it for us. Both Jenn and I consider land-based work and site-specificity an extension of land as pedagogy since the land is both classroom and teacher—context and process—for Indigenous ways of knowing.



Jenn Cole dancing in Chi'nibiish (Lake Ontario). Film still: Cara Mumford.

*boz'hoos odenaabe
sbki maajaamegos ndiz'hinaakaz
it's been a long time.⁷*

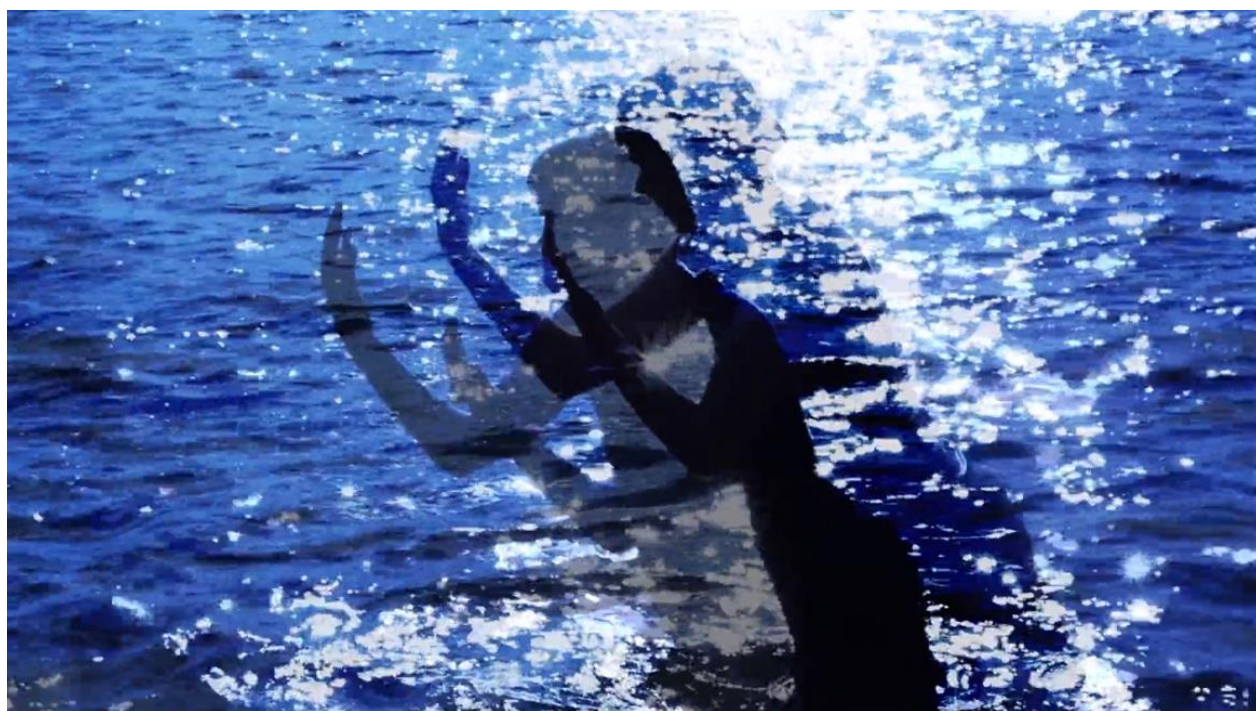
We had planned for our next stop to be at one of the locks but they're still closed to the public because of COVID-19. I sneak under the warning tape but realize there is no access to the river anyway.

Jenn jokes about banging her head against the lock in the way we've seen images of salmon throwing themselves against dams, but we remember that we are trying to imagine before and after the existence of the lock system, so we drive up river and find access at a boat launch instead.

Jenn tells me about the dam that came down on the West Coast
and how the river and salmon came through at the same time
and showed each other where to go.

Journal entry 2: I realize here that my thesis for the film is essentially Simpson's thesis for her song: 'The locks must come down. At some point, I would like to learn the detailed consequences of removing the lift locks. I would like to research the range of opinions regarding full remediation (which has been extremely successful in restoring waterways and bringing back plant and animal species that were thought to be lost to those regions) versus modifying the locks to provide effective fish ladders. I want to learn about the perspectives of Michi Saagig geographers, ecologists, historians, and futurists on what should happen to these bodies of water. The resulting information may end up in a future, longer version of this film or in the future history of the Red Card world (an ongoing Indigenous Futurisms project of mine). One day I hope those with the knowledge and the power will be able to apply this research and finally restore this essential migration route.

*don't worry odenaabe
your wounds from the shackle locks
from the dams
they'll heal now they're gone*



Jenn in Saagetay'achewan (Trent River). Film still: Cara Mumford.

I'm entranced by how the sunlight plays on the water,
which feels completely different from how it felt in Lake Ontario.

Mumford

Our next planned stop is at Hiawatha First Nation on the shores of
Pimadashkodyaang,
known to the settlers as Rice Lake.

Sadly, there is no wild rice growing on Rice Lake anymore
because of the lock system flooding the lake,
destroying a delicate ecosystem,
drowning

the food that grows on the water.

We wonder if Hiawatha is still closed to outsiders because of the virus.
There is a sign on the road in saying that businesses are open between 10 and 6
but that public places are closed.
We wonder if the point of land we are aiming for is considered a public place.

To me it's ceremonial
because I have memories of water walks
starting and ending there.

We drive there and no one stops us, so we film.
Rice Lake has a gentle rhythm that always lulls me into a peaceful trance
and it is through that trance that I film.



Jenn on the shore of Pimadashkodyaang (Rice Lake). Film still: Cara Mumford.

*it's this way, i can feel
my lateral line drawing forward
let me let me let me
taste you*

The Otonabee River.

Odenaabe.
The river that bubbles like a beating heart.
Jenn says it feels like home.



Jenn in Odenaabe (Otonabee River). Film still: Cara Mumford.

*bubbling
beating
birthing
breathing*

This territory feels like home to me, too, but it's not.
I am Métis of Anishinaabe descent.
Red River Métis by way of Montana and Alberta.
I am not from here even though I feel connected here.
I am visitor and guest, cousin and kin.

Insider, outsider.

I connect to the land.
Through the land.

Outside in.

Journal entry 3: When reading Trinh T. Minh-Ha's writing on her film, *The Fourth Dimension*, her mention of her insider/outsider status as a Vietnamese filmmaker in Japan resonated with me. As a Chippewa Métis writer and filmmaker whose family settled in Alberta after the Resistance, I feel a similar insider/outsider status in this community. Before becoming familiar with Trinh's work, I struggled to succinctly describe my intention not to speak about or on behalf of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg communities or knowledge keepers; I have now found the language to say it is my intention to speak nearby them.

Katchewanooka Lake

Who does that name come from?

Because the Michi Saagiig I know call it

Kitchi Gaming.

Jenn says her movements feel freer here.



Jenn in Kitchi Gaming (Katchewanooka Lake). Film still: Cara Mumford.

*my kobade told her daughter about that feeling
my great grandmother told her daughter
my kookum told her daughter
and my doodoom told me.*

it was better than they said.

*i've never felt like this
this is the perfect place
it's easy here*

We drive around trying to find public access to Clear Lake
Atigmeg Zaageguneen

Google maps failed me here.

The waterfront is all private property: cottages, marinas and massive estates.

We find a claustrophobic access between a house and a boat house
just past the lock near Young's Point.

Jenn says she feels blocked in her movements.

I also feel blocked having only one direction to point my camera.

We drive around some more but find no other easy access

so Jenn says maybe she just needs to lie in the water to see what the lake has to say.

I apologize to the lake for not understanding that she had lessons to teach us.

I try my hand at slow cinema.



Jenn in Atigmeg Zaageguneen (Clear Lake). Film still: Cara Mumford.

*careful with me odenaabe
i'm not strong like those old ones.
they fasted and swam up here every year
this is my first time
weweni odenaabe
weweni*

We encounter the same lack of access at Stoney Lake.
Asin Saagegun

Jenn knows a public beach on Upper Stoney but it's 20 minutes away.
The sun is almost gone so we race to the beach,
chasing the light.
We miss the beautiful sunset but arrive in time for dusk and mosquitoes.



Jenn in Asin Saagegun (Stoney Lake). Film still: Cara Mumford.

There was bounty here,
sustainable, life sustaining bounty.

 Salmon and Rice,
 Berries, Leeks, Asparagus, Fiddleheads,
 Maple Syrup,
 Medicines,
 and Clean Water.

 Some of it is still here.
 All of it could be here again.

My future includes

 a sustainable sovereign future in this territory
 under Michi Saagiig governance.

My future includes

 tearing the locks down
 so the salmon can return.

It won't happen all at once,
but it I believe this homecoming will happen, must happen.

If we restore the waterways,
the water will sing them home.

Reflection

Now that I have introduced myself to the bodies of water along the migration route, now that I have waded into each of them, sat in them and let the water move my camera as it responded to Jenn's duet with each lake and river, I feel connected to them in a way I never did before. I find myself wanting to journey the waterway by canoe next to get an even better sense of travelling the water along the migration route that the salmon will take.

The certainty with which I state that the salmon will return to this territory may be seen as naïve or a utopian dream, but utopian dreams serve a practical purpose. When Argentinian filmmaker Fernando Birri talks about utopia, he describes it as being on the horizon: "I will never reach it because if I walk ten steps toward the horizon, the horizon moves ten steps further, and if I walk 20 steps toward the horizon, I will be 20 steps further away. The reason we believe in utopia is because it makes us walk" (quoted in Manrique 2001, 58).

Birri's words make me think of the "long, slow, painful crawl" offered by Elder Shirley Williams as the translation for "Chibiomoodaywin"—the word that Elder Eddie Benton Benai uses for the Anishinaabeg Migration that led to the food that grows on the water (Simpson 2011, 67).

The intersections of these concepts are fundamental to my approach to Indigenous Futurisms, which is integral to looking at the past, present, and future of this waterway. Rooted in culturally specific, site-specific knowledge and driven by a desire for sovereignty and sustainability, my film work pursues that utopia with the hope of inspiring others on the long, slow crawl toward the same horizon.

Notes

1. In “Land as Pedagogy,” Leanne Simpson explains that Nishnaabewin (a word she learned from Doug Williams) “is a broad term that in my mind encompasses all that is meant by the term Nishnaabe intelligence” (2014, 8).
2. I am using Kyle Whyte’s concept of collective continuance here to describe a society’s adaptive capacity with regard to food systems based on our relationships and responsibilities to human and nonhuman kin.
3. Aki mijim literally translates to “land food” and refers to locally harvested food that can be considered representative of Anishinaabeg identity (Pawlowska-Mainville 2020, 62). In this region, two of the most important harvestable foods historically are manoomin and Atlantic salmon, but the salmon no longer travel these waterways.
4. “Remembering the Centrality of Land” and “Remembering the Body as a Source of Knowing” are among the Indigenous Ways of Knowing that form the foundation for Native Performance Culture (Brunette 2010, 150–51) as conceived by Floyd Favel (Cree)—based on teachings by Edna Manitowabi (Anishinaabe)—and Monique Mojica (Kuna/Rappahannock).
5. The Winter We Danced refers to the #IdleNoMore movement (winter 2012–13), a response to Bill C-35, Stephen Harper’s omnibus bill that removed protection of 99.9% of waterways in Canada.
6. The salmon migration route and place names in the language used in the song were taught to Simpson by Elder Doug Williams. Unfortunately, the song did not include the Anishinaabe name for the Bay of Quinte—perhaps because it is Mohawk Territory, or perhaps because Simpson only wanted to list seven locations, given that seven is a significant number in Anishinaabe culture. I have yet to ask her.
7. These are the opening lines of Leanne Simpson’s song “she sang them home.” The lines from the song that were included in the film are woven throughout this piece with Leanne’s permission.

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