

AN URBAN COYOTE CURRICULUM

In this article, Aubrey Jean Hanson juxtaposes three narratives: (1) a contemplation of the importance of writing to her “wellbeing;” (2) her reflection on “how urban Indigenous presence is enacted and theorized;” and (3) a consideration of an “encounter with a coyote during a daily walk;” the three narratives “brought together through a textual weaving or *métissage*.”¹ It is “through this interweaving, and by enacting place-based, relational storytelling” that Hanson undertakes a “curricular inquiry into presence and presencing.”² This is, she continues, a form of “contemplative inquiry,” inquiry that “emerges from a particular time and place: from deep in the second winter of the COVID-19 pandemic, from my positionality as an urban Indigenous person, and from my day-to-day existence as a scholar and human being.”³

After providing this abstract of the article, Hanson specifies her Indigenous identity – she is an “urban Métis woman” – and informs us that the COVID-19 pandemic brought her “attention back to the urgency of my daily writing practice.”⁴ Her encounter with a coyote – apparently a female – encouraged Hanson to “meditate on how her presence is entangled with mine.”⁵ Then, she continues, “I sit with recent theorizations of Indigenous resurgence to consider urban Indigenous presence.”⁶ She will “work to understand how my story, as an urban Métis woman, comes to be shaped in relation to the lives of others—and through the meaning-making work of writing.”⁷

“As a scholar in Indigenous education and Indigenous literary studies,” Hanson writes, “I find myself continually drawn to the writings of Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson⁸,” a woman with a “fierce mind, rigorous logic and quiet refusals,” a woman “who has been articulating challenging and inspiring visions of Indigenous resurgence for more than a decade.”⁹ “Particularly compelling for me and my work right now,” Hanson acknowledges, “is her notion of presencing,” a “notion [that] arises in the context of bringing Indigenous knowledges and traditions, or ways of knowing-being-doing, into the present tense and into action.”¹⁰ Hanson explains that “Indigenous languages are verb based; the world in Indigenous knowledge systems is shaped by webs of inter-relationality and interdependence between animate beings.”¹¹ She asserts that “Indigeneity is not just a state of being, but rather one of doing.”¹² From Simpson’s perspective, Hanson writes, “Indigenous knowledges and lifeways ... are kinetic,” changing the noun – presence – into a “gerund, into ... an ongoing state of doing: presence-ing.”¹³ Hanson thinks that “presencing ties the past and the future together with the present into an eternal stream of continuous Indigenous presence: here on the land, in relation to our Peoplehood, in relation to our self-determination.”¹⁴ Indeed, the “resurgence of Indigenous lifeways is about the continual assertion of Indigenous presence.”¹⁵

There is a blurring of presence as physical and presence as cultural and political – subjective presence might be implied but not named – when Hanson reminds that “Indigenous Peoples have been and continue to be here,” adding: “We live out our lives through our ways of understanding the world, our ways of governing ourselves, and our ways of living in relation with other beings.”¹⁶ She reiterates: “Indigenous Peoples are present, presencing. We are still here, living as we always have, despite centuries of attempted genocide and erasure. We are still here and going about our Indigeneity,”¹⁷ (quoting Simpson) “as we have always done.”¹⁸

Hanson’s conception of presence is derived from Simpson, and Simpson’s “notion of presencing is heavily influenced by the thinking of Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard.”¹⁹ Hanson mentions that Coulthard works from Fanon – Coulthard is critical of Fanon²⁰ – to take a “materialist-informed approach to understanding Indigenous resistance,” focused especially on “notions of recognition for Indigenous Peoples, such as those provided through the mechanisms of the state,” from which “Coulthard advances the contention that Indigenous Peoples instead need to be rallying for resurgence.”²¹ Hanson cites Coulthard’s discussion of “recent movements like Idle No More” to assert that “grounded normativity, then, is the everyday, place-based practice of resurgence in Indigenous lives.”²² What does that look like? Such practice of resurgence “means living out each day through Indigenous lifeways, seeing the world through our own lenses, shaping our actions through, and in the service of, Indigenous self-determination, in relation to land.”²³

Referencing again her encounter with that coyote, Hanson asks: “How could I know what home meant to that coyote?”²⁴ That is, apparently, a rhetorical question, as Hanson moves to state the “central thread of my current research, which I am undertaking with Métis scholar Vicki Bouvier, pursues the misconception that Indigenous people are out of place in Canadian cities, by looking at how Indigenous artists are expressing their creativity and presence in urban spaces.”²⁵ Hanson reports that she and Bouvier are “looking at how Indigenous arts might unsettle the settler colonial city, reasserting that this has always been, and continues to be, Indigenous territory, and that Indigenous people belong here, integral within the webs of relationships that make up contemporary urban life.”²⁶ Hanson asserts that “urban Indigenous Peoples are, of course, not the same as urban wildlife,” adding: “But still why had I had viewed my friend the coyote with the assumption that she did not know her way around my neighbourhood?”²⁷

Hanson then references Métis writer Katherena Vermette’s²⁸ novels and poetry, work set in Winnipeg, work that (in Hanson’s words) “foreground[s] very urban matriarchal kinships that enable Indigenous women to endure and transcend ongoing impacts of colonial violence.”²⁹ Hanson reports that “these everyday women are remarkable—they remind me of my mom and my maternal aunties, her five sisters.”³⁰ She judges that “the work of these artists unsettles the colonial city,” i.e. “sites where

Indigenous Peoples are thought to be out of place—because Indigenous Peoples are supposedly part of a long-lost past, or because they allegedly live elsewhere on distant reserves,” then referencing “Lenape³¹ and Potawatomi³² scholar Susan Dion,” or “because they have apparently assimilated—Indigenous artists are unraveling those untruths.”³³ Moreover, Hanson continues, “Indigenous people are mobile and adaptable and resist the static understandings of urban versus reserve or remote.”³⁴ Invoking again the concept of presence, Hanson explains:

Through our everyday acts of being here, Indigenous people are undoing the narrative that we do not belong in urban spaces. We are living out our lives here, carrying on our lifeways. We are already here. And when we tell each other our stories, show each other our paintings, see each other’s bodies in motion and listen to each other’s voices in song, we are engaging in that urgent, resurgent work of presencing.”³⁵

Blurred again are any distinctions among physical, psychological, cultural and political presence. Being present physically does not necessarily translate into being present psychologically. And being present in an urban area does not necessarily translate into being present culturally: severed from the land – literally living in/on concrete – and forced to speak in non-native languages would seem to preclude Indigenous peoples from being present culturally, would it not?

Hanson focuses on the “immense task of dismantling the colonial structures that restrict Indigenous well-being,” a task that “requires a range of tools: the pen of policy; the seat of negotiation; the blockade of refusal; the oratory of community engagement; as well as the bead, sinew, brush, paint, body in motion and voice in song of Indigenous arts.”³⁶ “Bringing the theory and practice of grounded normativity” – here Hanson is citing Coulthard’s concept – “into action through everyday presencing” – here she is citing Simpson again – “is a powerful process of Indigenous love and brilliance.”³⁷ How? Because “we so love the brilliance of our ancestors and of our great-grandchildren to come that we continue to tell the stories of our people” – “storywork” is central to Indigenous culture, as Archibald explains³⁸ – Indigenous peoples stay “grounded in the lifeways and knowledges of our nations, we carry forward who we are as Indigenous peoples and as individual beings in relation to other beings.”³⁹

Given its commodification and incorporation in capitalist culture, it is not immediately obvious how “Indigenous arts and creativity are undermining the colonial narratives that tell us we are not here, that we do not belong, that we have lost our languages, our knowledges, our kinship systems, our means of survival, our ability to govern ourselves,” although it is obvious that “Indigenous arts are, in fact, weaving together some very different narratives—narratives of Indigenous endurance, of Indigenous brilliance, of Indigenous resilience, of Indigenous resurgence,” narratives that constitute, Hanson suggests, a “curriculum of hope, of transformation, of possibility,” a curriculum “that it cannot only be our own people who are listening to

and lifting up these stories of Indigenous presence.”⁴⁰ Hanson concurs with “Cree scholar Dwayne Donald,”⁴¹ who, teaches that (Hanson’s words) “we must listen to what the beings around us have to teach us, and we must listen to each other. I am here now, sharing my creativity and aliveness.”⁴² Hanson concludes with a question: “Will you witness my presence and, in turn, enfold it into the web of relations that shapes your everyday lifeways?”⁴³

Does not such “enfolding” encourage cultural appropriation – or is cultural appropriation no longer an issue? Witnessing⁴⁴ Indigenous peoples’ presence – in curriculum studies at least - seems obligatory, as these research briefs document.

REFERENCES

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ENDNOTES

¹ 2023, 40.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ 2023, 42.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <https://www.leannesimpson.ca/>

⁹ 2023, 44.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

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- ¹³ Ibid. In Western traditions – think of academic psychology and educational studies – “doing” would be considered “action,” even behavior, and entire traditions and practices of psychology and education have been built on “behavior,” e.g. “behaviorism” In my own formulations of presence (Pinar 2023), behavior is relevant only as it prompts excavation of one’s past, registration of one’s future fantasies, and the self-understanding that can follow. Through self-understanding one can become present to oneself and others.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ 2023, 45.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Quoted in 2023, 45.
- ¹⁹ 2023, 46.
- ²⁰ See research brief #98.
- ²¹ 2023, 47.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/katherena-vermette>
- ²⁹ 2023, 48.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ <https://www.lenape-nation.org/>
- ³² <https://www.potawatomi.org/>
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ 2023, 49.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Archibald 2008; see research brief #41.
- ³⁹ 2023, 49.
- ⁴⁰ 2023, 49-50.
- ⁴¹ <https://apps.ualberta.ca/directory/person/ddonald>
- ⁴² 2023, 50.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Witnessing is a concept becoming key in curriculum studies in Canada. See, for instance, Eppert 2024.