

“Presencing of the Present”: The Politics of Refusal as a Spiritual Practice

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This paper is an exploration of refusal. Refusal as a philosophy, a practice, and a politics, is a theme permeating a particular brand of Indigenous thinking (and living) regarding the “impossible but therapeutic fallacy of reconciliation”¹ in what is now Canada. It argues against reducing Indigenous visions of justice to state recognition. From the Eastern Canadian context, it is Audra Simpson’s biting analysis of Indigenous-settler relations that offers a way into this enquiry, and it is with her rejection of recognition as “the *sine qua non* if not the end point, the orgasm of justice today,”² that this paper will begin. Denying and transgressing the boundaries of settler-colonial logic, by which Indigenous subjects have been placed within certain histories and geographies created and maintained by state power, refusal becomes a new mechanism for “dismantling the systems of colonial domination.”³ Taking seriously Neal McLeod’s assertion that Indigenous dispossession through colonial presence is both a “spatial and a spiritual exile,”⁴ and Leanne Simpson’s insistence that land is “constructed and defined by our intimate spiritual, emotional, and physical relationship with it,”⁵ the following discussion will trace the spiritual dimension of refusal, in order to embed refusal in a broader set of spiritual commitments which ultimately tie this radical politics-as-presence both to the past – and to the imagined future.

1. Audra Simpson, “The Ruse of Consent and the Anatomy of ‘Refusal’: Cases from Indigenous North America and Australia,” *Postcolonial Studies* 20, no. 1 (2017): 23.

2. Simpson, “The Ruse of Consent,” 19.

3. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, in *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 176.

4. Neal McLeod, *Cree Narrative Memory: From Treaties to Contemporary Times* (Saskatoon, SK: Purich Pub., 2007), 55.

5. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 23.

The Politics of Refusal

Audra Simpson's *Mohawk Interruptus* details the politics that is lived and embodied by the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk community, through the persistent fact of their existence as Indigenous subjects, defying the colonial logic of exclusion. She sees this way of living as manifesting a *politics of refusal*: by refusing to disappear, or to “stop being themselves,”⁶ their lives and bodies themselves become sites that challenge the legitimacy of the Canadian state, and therefore destabilize the discourses and instruments of recognition which have historically been employed to define and delimit the terms of their identity. This is a piece of a broader antagonistic relationship between traditional and settler nationhoods and nationalities, in which the legal parameters of belonging set into motion by the Indian Act are rendered precarious by the “nested sovereignty”⁷ presented by Indigenous subjects and societies. This refusal is firstly a presence, and can therefore be understood on a temporal level as an immanent unsettling of what Simpson elsewhere refers to as the “settler present.”⁸ The logic of settler colonialism demands a certain fictional temporality, she maintains, in which the state both owns time (inasmuch as it neutralizes the present and narrates the past), and dispossesses Indigenous lives of their place in time by determining “what matters, who matters, what pasts are alive and when they die.” Living, and presenting themselves, in a powerfully present way, so as to push up against the boundaries of the “settler present,” Indigenous peoples become “reminders...of other orders, other authorities, and an earlier time that has not fully passed.”⁹ An Indigenous “presencing of the present”¹⁰ works to collapse a historical narrative that places injustice in the past, and to puncture the trajectory of any attempts at reconciliation that do not place Indigenous subjects at their centre.

6. Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 2.

7. Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 12. By “nested sovereignty,” Simpson means one sovereignty is embedded within another – which for her, entails that “one proliferates at the other’s expense.”

8. Simpson, “The Ruse of Consent,” 22.

9. Simpson, “The Ruse of Consent,” 22.

10. This wonderful formulation is from Leanne Simpson, in *As We Have Always Done*, 20.

Reconciliation, Recognition, and Time

The specifically temporal aspect of settler-colonial discourse on belonging is unpacked more precisely in Coulthard’s seminal *Red Skin, White Masks*, in which he argues that the project of reconciliation in the Canadian context is entwined with an ongoing and pernicious internal colonizing affected by the notion of recognition. Recognition is implicated in the work of reconciliation both in the *terms* of reconciliation – to the extent that it entrenches a particular power structure between the state and Indigenous communities even as it attempts to ameliorate the relationship – and in the *goal* of reconciliation politics, by which the justice aimed at is a form of state accommodation that amounts to, as Fanon formulates it, “white liberty and white justice: that is, values secreted by [their] masters.”¹¹ Coulthard sees Canada’s legal and political employment of the term ‘reconciliation’ to be essentially about reconciling state sovereignty with Indigenous assertions of nationhood, spinning therefore upon this discourse of recognition. The Canadian situation provides a problematic ground upon which to construct a reconciliation politics, he argues, because from a temporal perspective reconciliation is a mechanism of *transitional justice*, while Canada remains in a *nontransitional* context in which there is no clear transition from past to present relations of settler colonialism.¹² Reconciliation therefore entails a temporal element in Coulthard’s figuring, to do with confronting and overcoming a past wrongdoing or event – while the experience of Indigenous peoples in Canada is one of continual, present abuses from the colonial structure itself. We can therefore begin to see how the politics of refusal contains a temporal dimension, confronting a colonial narrative of the past and the present with an immanence and presence that

11. As quoted in Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 39. Coulthard’s book builds upon the framework established by Fanon, that exposes the way in which colonialism works to embed power relations to such a degree that the colonized comes to reify and embody the “externally determined and devalued conception of himself” (*Red Skin, White Masks*, 31).

12. Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 108. We are reminded here also of Patrick Wolfe’s formulation that settler colonialism is not an event, but a structure. See Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387-409.

becomes radical. Leanne Simpson's assertion that "if we want to create a different future, we need to live in a different present...if we want to live in a different present, we have to centre indigeneity and allow it to change us,"¹³ demonstrates how living in the present can take on a radical and resistant character.

Indigenous Presence and Spirituality

Asserting Indigenous presence, in the present, can be understood more clearly as a radical move by unpacking the ways in which the spiritual is implicated in time. A common thread running through many Indigenous spiritualities (limited for the purposes of this paper to Anishinaabeg and Cree contexts) is a dynamic engagement with creation stories, which lay out an ontological foundation from which Indigenous communities are impelled towards a continuous re-creation process. Both the content of the creation stories, and the significance of story-telling itself, combine to form a spiritual basis for what Leanne Simpson terms a "radical resurgence:"¹⁴ an embodied process of being present by "returning to ourselves."¹⁵ For the Anishinaabeg, creation stories beget a creative process that permeates all aspects of an individual's life, since just as Creation is an extension of the Creator who compels them to "create life and renew it,"¹⁶ so is all new created life an extension of the self. Creation stories thus become a personal theory for living well, and living well means "re-creating the good life in whatever forms we imagine, vision and live in contemporary times."¹⁷ For Simpson, Nishnaabeg resurgence is imagining and embodying new realities; it is *dancing on our turtle's back*.¹⁸ Wanda Nanibush's account of peaceful disobedience through the *Idle No More* movement¹⁹ also makes this ontological connection between traditional creation stories and the creative

13. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 20.

14. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 17.

15. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 17.

16. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Pub., 2011), 38.

17. Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, 68.

18. Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, 70.

19. *Idle No More* is a grassroots protest movement, founded in 2012, calling all people to "join in a peaceful revolution, to honour Indigenous sovereignty, and to protect the land and water." See <http://www.idlenomore.ca/>.

act of living, claiming that creation is fundamental to Anishinaabeg identity in part because of the integral and intrinsic relationship between peoples and the earth. Nanibush maintains that creation is an “act of futural imagination,”²⁰ wherein creative activity sustains both the earth and humanity, coupled as they are by the larger relational cosmology underpinning Anishinaabeg thought.²¹ This theme of (re-)creation offers a connecting thread between the past, the present, and the possible future, through the personal resurgent activity of the individual.

Storytelling to Decolonize

It is not just the narratives of the creation stories, but the function of storytelling itself as a decolonizing activity that makes creation stories inspire and drive resurgence. Leanne Simpson and Edna Manitowabi understand storytelling as fundamentally emergent and fluid, thereby transgressing the rigidity of colonial structures of identity and belonging, and as an example of a personal form of theorizing by which each Nishnaabeg communicates and negotiates their own knowledge. Storytelling, they say, “becomes a space where we can escape the gaze and the cage of the empire,”²² constructing for themselves an alternative narrative – and therefore an alternative future. There seems to be both a political and a legal component to escaping the cage through stories, the creative potential of which we can unearth by

20. Wanda Nanibush, “Idle No More: Strong Hearts of Indigenous Women’s Leadership,” in Angela R. Miles, *Women in a Globalizing World: Transforming Equality, Development, Diversity and Peace* (Toronto, ON: Inanna Publications and education Inc., 2013), 343.

21. In *Our Knowledge Is Not Primitive: Decolonizing Botanical Anishinaabe Teachings* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2009), Wendy Djinn Geniusz insists that the Anishinaabe cosmology is by its nature holistic and deeply relational, and, accordingly, that Indigenous knowledges cannot be understood without understanding the ontological commitments at the core of this cosmology. For example, the Winabojó, a part human, part spirit deity, is said to have helped to create the world and brought the Anishinaabeg many teachings. Without understanding the centrality of this figure, she argues, one cannot access or comprehend Anishinaabeg knowledge. (Note: The term “Anishinaabe” refers to a large cultural group of indigeneous communities, including the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Algonquian peoples. “Anishinaabeg” is plural, and has been used in this paper to connote collectivity).

22. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Edna Manitowabi, “Theorizing Resurgence from Within Nishnaabeg Thought,” in *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World Through Stories*, ed. Jill Doerfler, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, and Heidi Kiiwetinepiisik (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 281.

considering the relationship between storytelling and spirituality.

The political possibilities inherent in the act of storytelling are evidenced in Audra Simpson's powerful personal negotiation with her own identity at the end of *Mohawk Interruptus*. Interviewing a Mohawk man from Ahkwesáhsne, Simpson is forced to confront her conception of her Mohawk membership when he asks her, "When you look in the mirror, what do you see?" After faltering in "stupefied silence," she eventually offers him an answer: "I see a nice person, L."²³ This identification as self-narrated, rather than prescribed, spurs Simpson towards the possibility of re-articulating the notions of citizenship and nation through narratives of belonging as they are lived, spoken, and felt. Her political ethnography²⁴ suggests that there are different workings of citizenship, in the face of and despite the lack of recognition and the imposition of rules from the state. The citizenship she discovers herself living out she calls a "feeling citizenship," wrought through social and political interactions and through the continuous living, desiring, and affirming of "who we are." Feeling citizenships don't have any institutional weight, but they are recognized and understood in everyday community life and represent pieces of narrative knowledge against and beyond "colonial recitations of exclusion."²⁵

At a more institutional level, the capacity of storytelling to engender new and alternate understandings of identity and belonging has been used by Cheryl Suzack to argue for the legal significance of the figure of "the Aboriginal-woman-as-feeling-subject,"²⁶ whose narratives regarding their experience of discrimination under Indian Act amendments present a challenge to the law's epistemic authority. The affective character of the Aboriginal woman, whose subjectivity unsettles the objectivity of legal discourse, demonstrates for Suzack the role that narratives could (and should) play in facilitating new ways of understanding the implications of legal decision-making. John Borrows, in a more all-encompassing move, declares Canada's legal system as incomplete, and argues that the various

23. Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 168-169.

24. A project she labels herself as "imagining and writing the political ethnographically." See Simpson, "The Ruse of Consent," 23.

25. Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 176.

26. Cheryl Suzack, "Emotion Before the Law," in *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture*, ed. Cheryl Suzack, Shari M. Huhndorf, Jeanne Perrault and Jean Barman (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 128.

sources of law within Indigenous legal traditions should be more effectively embraced in order to expand and advance the legal system as a whole. These sources, he argues, include sacred stories and ancient teachings. In fact, for some Indigenous peoples, creation stories underpinned the very treaties that “brought Canada into existence within their territories.”²⁷ This means that according to these peoples, such as the Elders of Treaty Six First Nations, the treaties surrounding Canada’s formation were made with “the Creator as well as the Crown,”²⁸ and it is by paying attention to the function of narratives – including sacred stories and tales emerging from observations of the physical world wherein natural law is “literally being written on the earth”²⁹ – that we can comprehend and confront the full scope of Indigenous legal traditions.

The role of narrative as a mode of rethinking – and of (re-)creating – is brought to light most powerfully in Neal McLeod’s conception of Cree storytelling as a form of critical theory, which also emphasizes how storytelling from his Indigenous perspective has a significantly spiritual component. McLeod explains that storytelling, as a hermeneutical project, is a way of thinking beyond the boundaries of colonial theory – and that stories for the Cree are the embodiment of a spiritual history. Storytellers therefore become the link between a remembered past and an imagined future, and their task one of “narrative imagination.”³⁰ In fact, the telling of the most sacred stories often has a ritual purpose, and as Leanne Simpson reminds us, creation stories in their most epic and detailed form are traditionally told by Elders in particular ceremonial settings, making it ethically inappropriate for her to describe them fully in her own work.³¹ One important aspect of

27. John Borrows, *Canada’s Indigenous Constitution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 47. Borrows describes Elder Norman Sunchild of Treaty Six, who said that ‘When [Treaty Six First Nations] finally agreed to the treaty, the Commissioner took the promises in his hand and raised them to the skies, placed the treaties in the hands of the Great Spirit.’

28. Borrows, *Canada’s Indigenous Constitution*, 48.

29. Borrows, *Canada’s Indigenous Constitution*, 52. Here Borrows references his own mother’s stories about the natural world, and describes what they can teach us about natural law principles.

30. McLeod, *Cree Narrative Memory*, 100.

31. It is mainly for this reason (as well as limited space) that this paper will not be looking in detail at the particularities of any of these sacred stories, and instead draws upon the key themes and insights offered by various Indigenous commentators. For Leanne Simpson’s treatment of the matter, see *Dancing on our Turtle’s Back*, 35.

sacred stories, as McLeod describes, is their construction of time, which runs counter to a Western linear timeline. Within Cree spiritual histories, beings can persist across long periods of time, rendering relationships between the spiritual and the people as rooted in space rather than history, meaning that it is possible for the storyteller to be in relationship with these beings as the story itself unfolds. The holistic temporality of these stories provides an important hermeneutical tool for the purposes of this discussion, by allowing for an ontological framework in which the re-telling of a story, and the lived activity that it demands, can have a creative and resurgent force.

Indigenous Bodies and the Settler-Colonial State

Running alongside the temporal aspect of the politics of refusal, and in fact an integral connecting piece between the past, present, and future, is the fact of embodiment. Edna Manitowabi's assertion that "we wear our teachings"³² highlights the crucially embodied aspect of Indigenous experience, and the significance of Indigenous bodies in refusing the structures of settler colonialism. Indeed, for Mishuana Goeman, embodied experiences form the basis of her Native feminism, providing a powerful theoretical counter to settler-colonial theory written upon disciplined Native bodies. Goeman argues that the body can disrupt both the vertical and the horizontal scales of colonialism, by emphasizing the connections across history and between peoples that are captured in the body as a geography. While colonial logic requires such bodies to be either displaced or absent, for Goeman the assertion of an undisciplined and resistant body functions as a "living memory."³³ She injects a spiritual element into her argument by presenting Native bodies as "an integral part of creation,"³⁴ and embodiment therefore as a form of knowledge that places the subject within a web of relations spanning the human and nonhuman world.

This embodiment takes on a particularly politicized character in Indigenous women. Women in the Indigenous contexts addressed in this essay are inextricably tied to the land, making the settling of land

32. Simpson, *Dancing on our Turtle's Back*, 42.

33. Mishuana R. Goeman, "Ongoing Storms and Struggles," in *Critically Sovereign: Indigenous Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies*, ed. Joanne Barker (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 113.

34. Barker, *Critically Sovereign*, 120.

fundamentally gendered. Rebecca Tsosie elaborates upon the relationship between women and land in her discussion of Native women’s leadership, highlighting how the creative impulse of the female body imbues women with the essence of the Creator – they both embody this spiritual essence, wedded to the land, and are assigned the great responsibility of ownership of the land (an ownership that does not imply possession: the opposite of dispossession in Indigenous thinking, as Leanne Simpson clarifies, is not possession but connection).³⁵ Audra Simpson’s impassioned exposition of Canada’s response to Theresa Spence’s 2012 hunger strike³⁶ exposes and emphasizes the way that women’s bodies and the land are both reduced to “matter to be extracted from, used, sullied, taken from...something that is already violated and violatable.”³⁷ In response to the condemnations and ridiculing from various commentators that Spence’s fasting had had little impact on her weight, Simpson argues that the stubborn fleshiness of Spence’s body manifests a refusal to disappear, a defiant life in the face of the “sovereign death drive” of the state. Both in her embodiment, and through her fasting as an act of political compassion, Spence represents for Simpson a relationship with the spiritual and the natural world whose excesses spill over the boundaries of “settler statecraft.”³⁸

Beyond – or Before – Legal Rights

The ways in which land, body, and spirit figure in the politics of refusal also combine to offer an alternative framework for rights discourse amongst some Aboriginal rights theorists. This framework is derived from an extrajudicial commitment to the title of indigeneity itself, the

35. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 185.

36. In December 2012, Theresa Spence declared a hunger strike until the Prime Minister of Canada and the Governor General of Canada met with her to discuss treaties, and to consider the conditions of deprivation and oppression suffered by her community and the communities beyond. She received a negative response from many commentators. As Audra Simpson puts it, “She was drinking fish broth twice a day, and so, was ‘fudging’ things (so to speak). And in fact, you would think she was actually eating fudge, as irate Canadians ‘weighed in’ continuously on her insincerity, her avarice, her body, and in particular, her fat.” See Audra Simpson, “The State is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty,” *Theory and Event* 19, no. 4 (2016) <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/633280> (accessed February 15 2019).

37. Simpson, “The State is Man,” para. 16.

38. Simpson, “The State is Man,” para. 1.

significance of which is woven into the legal framework of Aboriginal citizenship in Canada through the 1973 case *Calder v A-G (B.C.)*, where the court recognized Aboriginal title as a justiciable right beyond merely moral or political questions. John Borrows describes this recognition as “momentous,”³⁹ since it suggests that the source of Aboriginal rights might lie beyond constitutional legal structures. We can see the importance of this notion in David Ahenakew’s exploration of Aboriginal rights, which he explains spin upon the primary and principle right of self-determination: a right that need not, and should not, be identified and defined in Canadian law since it is a right “the Creator gave to them when he placed them on this land.”⁴⁰ For Ahenakew, this right is therefore indivisible from the Aboriginal title, and the title cannot be understood as separate from self-determination. Echoing Coulthard’s seminal rejection of recognition politics, he grounds his move away from legally recognized rights in the argument that to identify self-determination as an Aboriginal right is to negate the fact that self-determination, rooted in connection with the land, is a pre-existing and inherent aspect of Indigeneity and the spiritual and philosophical traditions embedded in this title.

We see a similar spiritual piece emerge in Patricia Monture-Angus’ discussion of the complexity and paradox of the constitutional recognition of Aboriginal rights, although her analysis remains within a recognition paradigm (rather than pushing for a refusal politics). Monture-Angus claims that there is in fact a legal argument for the inherency of the right to self-determination provided by the Charter’s “solemn promise’ to ‘*recognize and affirm*’ [such] rights.”⁴¹ The words “recognize and affirm” in Section 35.1 suggests, she says, that these rights are pre-existing, rather than granted by the charter. For Monture-Angus, there might therefore be a way constitutionally to protect Aboriginal rights, if this inherency is understood not just as a human rights question, but as a spiritual, uniquely cultural issue

39. John Borrows, “Uncertain Citizens: Aboriginal Peoples and the Supreme Court,” *The Canadian Bar Review* 80, no. 1 (2001): 17-18.

40. David Ahenakew, “Aboriginal Title and Aboriginal Rights: The Impossible and Unnecessary Task of Identification and Definition,” in *The Quest for Justice: Aboriginal Peoples and Aboriginal Rights*, ed. Menno Boldt and J. Anthony Long in association with Leroy Little Bear (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 29.

41. Patricia A. Monture, *Thunder in my Soul: A Mohawk Woman Speaks* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 1995), 158.

of “Creator-given rights”⁴² independent of the Canadian state. While she does not argue for a refusal of state-sanctioned legitimacy, she does help us understand the extent to which certain Indigenous rights have a pre-existing, extra-legal, spiritual character. More aligned with refusal is Taiaiake Alfred’s push to transform and transcend the very notion of Indigenous sovereignty and rights, since for him even when Aboriginal rights are legally recognized they are still subject to state control, by the criteria demanded and identities assumed in the theoretical framework of rights legislation. “Not throwing indigenous people in jail for fishing is certainly a mark of progress,” he writes, “but to what extent does that state-regulated ‘right’ to fish represent justice when you consider that indigenous people have been fishing on their rivers and seas since time began?”⁴³ Uniting these approaches is an understanding that Indigenous rights, identities, and belonging are more than, and prior to, that which is recognized and legitimized by the state – and that to distinguish between indigeneity and rights to self-determination is to draw a line between body, spirit, and land in a way that is inconsistent with Indigenous subjectivity.

Spiritual Indecipherability: The Spirit will not be Colonized

The colonization of land, and simultaneously of bodies, is not the only mode of domination provoking the politics of refusal. Central to this refusal is an assertion that the reach of colonialism extends into the minds of the colonized, via an internalization through which the colonized subject becomes intellectually disciplined according to colonial systems of knowledge production and meaning-making. This is a concept established most powerfully by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who builds upon the Foucauldian notion of discipline to argue that intellectual disciplines themselves function as sites of enclosure, excluding, compartmentalizing, and essentializing Indigenous ways of knowing and believing. The deciphering of Indigenous knowing is, for Smith, a disciplining and dominating project – and therefore the way to counter domination is to remain, in some ways, indecipherable. This indecipherability she locates in traditional Indigenous spirituality being

42. Monture, *Thunder in my Soul*, 160.

43. Taiaiake Alfred, “Sovereignty,” in *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination*, ed. Joanne Barker (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 44.

“one of the few parts of ourselves which the West cannot decipher, cannot understand and cannot control.”⁴⁴ This is in part because of the way in which spiritual knowledge is figured ontologically in Indigenous thinking. Shawn Wilson argues that since this kind of knowledge is relational, it therefore cannot be gained and possessed so much as shared with “the cosmos...with the animals...with the plants...with the earth.”⁴⁵ Intellectual colonizing also includes a temporal element, by which Indigenous practices and knowledges are presented as features of the past, meaning for Wilson, and for Wendy Geniusz, that to continue to live by this spiritual knowledge reifies these beliefs, becoming another form of revitalization.⁴⁶

Practicing beliefs as a method of personal and political revitalization entails the everyday living of spiritual commitments, but can also be extended to conceive of ritual as rejection. James (Sákéj) Youngblood Henderson takes the specific example of ghost dancing as a discursive symbol of this idea, arguing that analyses of the ghost dance as a messianic ritual among North American Indians misunderstand the normative element of ghost dancing as resistance to colonialism. Ronald Niezen offers a reading of the ritual as messianic in his discussion of the Ghost Dance movement in 1890, the practitioners of which in South Dakota were victims of the Wounded Knee massacre.⁴⁷ The Ghost Dance ritual itself, he argues, surrounded a prophetic understanding that the whites were a spiritual punishment, but that deliverance was nigh – it was a source, therefore, of strength in the face of insecurity and oppression – but was taken by non-Aboriginal military forces and “Indian agents” as an act of insurgence. Henderson maintains that a description like this one is mistaken, grounding his analysis in a place of refusal that reads this ritual in terms of colonial struggle. He suggests that this ritual was in fact a move to release ceremonial spirits back into the safety of the Earth, removed from colonizing techniques, in order that they could revive the ecological forces capable of restoring traditional consciousness. Identifying within this hermeneutical gap the opportunity for resistance

44. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 143.

45. Shawn Wilson, “What is an Indigenous Research Methodology?” *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 25, no. 2 (2001): 178.

46. Geniusz, *Our Knowledge is Not Primitive*, 96.

47. See Ronald Niezen, *Spirit Wars: Native North American Religions in the Age of Nation Building* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 135-136.

and renewal, Henderson understands “postcolonial ghost dancing”⁴⁸ as any restoration of Indigenous knowledge systems and processes, and his own diagnosis of Eurocentrism as a reflection of this dance.

This move to politicize ritual and ritualize politics resonates throughout the more contemporary example of the *Idle No More* movement, clear even from the title of the book compiled by the Kino-nda-niimi Collective housing voices from the movement, *The Winter We Danced*. As Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs’ Grand Chief, Derek Nepinak, explained in an interview transcribed within this book, the natural laws of Indigenous peoples are understood and elucidated through “participation in ceremony” and “acts at a spiritual level.”⁴⁹ His commitment to *Idle No More* was therefore partly a spiritual obligation to the law of love – and indeed, the closing chapter of this volume begins and ends with Tara Williamson’s proclamation that “this is a ceremony.”⁵⁰ The ceremony of this activist movement is built upon a particular Indigenous ethos, which Nanibush describes as “post-Cartesian,”⁵¹ wherein the spirit is infused and engaged with the mind and body in the act of resistance.

“Grounded Normativity” as an Ethico-Political Framework

To live according to Indigenous practices and knowledge is therefore both always political, and always more than politics.⁵² Leanne Simpson and Glen Coulthard insist upon the ethical frameworks that spring from

48. James (Sákéj) Youngblood Henderson, “Postcolonial Ghost Dancing: Diagnosing European Colonialism,” in *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies*, ed. Jill Doerfler, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiiik (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 73.

49. Derek Nepinak with Leah Gazan, “Transforming Unity: An Interview with Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs Grand Chief Derek Nepinak,” in *The Winter We Danced: Voices From the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement*, ed. Kino-nda-niimi Collective (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2014), 87.

50. Tara Williamson, “This is a Ceremony,” in *The Winter We Danced: Voices From the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement*, ed. Kino-nda-niimi Collective (Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2014), 385.

51. Nanibush, “Idle No More,” 342.

52. Ryan McMahon, speaking as an activist involved in *Idle No More*, reminds us of his grandmother’s words to him: “Everything you do is political, you’re Anishinaabe.” See Kino-nda-niimi Collective, *The Winter We Danced*, 138.

a commitment to Indigenous forms of knowledge, rooted as they are in “intimate relationship”⁵³ both to other human and nonhuman creatures, and to the land from which they are generated and by which they are sustained. They refer to this ethics as “grounded normativity,”⁵⁴ seeing the reciprocity and responsibility demanded by Indigenous attachment as a starting point for a political solidarity. The interweaving of the spiritual and the political here is evident in the ethical imperative: grounded normativity entails using Indigenous relationships with the land to develop knowledge through which to practice respectful diplomacy with Indigenous and non-Indigenous nations. Simpson and Coulthard reference by way of example the diplomatic alliances constructed by the Mississauga Nishnaabeg, the Wendat and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, which they argue demonstrate how each nation’s relationship with the “physical and spiritual forces that connect them to...their place of creation”⁵⁵ generates a respect for the others’ governance. Spirituality as deep relationality therefore engenders cooperation and respect on the level of political relations, and becomes a tool for the reconceiving of nationhood and governance in nonhierarchical terms.

If we consider spirituality as integral to the reciprocity defining Indigenous intellectual and physical processes, we can conceive of it not just as a hermeneutical apparatus for re-conceiving the world, but as a way of living with transformative potential. Leanne Simpson argues that engaging with this way of living is the “how”: the process of living itself, in a deeply reciprocal manner, is a “theoretical intervention”⁵⁶ into the very notions of identity, belonging, and nationhood. In fact, the Anishinaabeg idea of nationhood as Simpson describes it is as much about inner Anishinaabe identity and spirit as it is about external territory, the two poles being knit together through the relationship with the land. “No matter how we speak it,” she asserts, “our nationhood is about land, culture, language, our bodies, minds and spirits....my nationhood doesn’t just radiate outwards, it also

53. Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Grounded Normativity/ Place-Based Solidarity,” *American Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2016): 254.

54. Coulthard and Simpson, “Grounded Normativity,” 254.

55. Coulthard and Simpson, “Grounded Normativity,” 249.

56. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 19.

radiates inwards.”⁵⁷ This means that nation to nation treaties that reflect this notion are understood in terms of friendship, as Wampum Belts seek to represent. For Nanibush, Wampum Belts embody the concept of treaty as friendship and demonstrate how this sort of contract is one that is to be lived, rather than written, in the “spirit and heart.”⁵⁸ This notion of friendship at the heart of Indigenous political solidarity, it seems, can be best appreciated if we take seriously the conception of Indigenous nationhood as having an inward trajectory.

Towards a “Decolonized Subjectivity”

Using spirituality to connect spirit and body, person and nation, might help us to further unpack the ways in which domination is conceived of within a politics of refusal. Returning to the theoretical framework established by Coulthard, Indigenous consciousness can have a politically transformative power by breaking down internalized colonialism and constructing a “decolonized subjectivity.”⁵⁹ By insisting upon Indigenous subjects and subjectivity as that which demands repairing, rather than the colonial relationship itself, this framework holds up refusal over reconciliation because the injustices wrought upon Indigenous peoples stretch beyond the socioeconomic into the subjective realm. This stretching of the analysis of injustice can be traced into Monture-Angus’ description of the intersectional ways discrimination is suffered by Indigenous peoples beyond that which the legal categories of equality allow. Monture-Angus argues that her experience of discrimination as a Mohawk woman cannot be captured by the terms of the Charter, because it does not make space for the sort of “discrimination within discrimination”⁶⁰ she has undergone on an intersectional level. “Who I am as a Mohawk woman does not stop at the end of this little brown nose....my difference is really about who I am inside....it is about what I believe and why.”⁶¹ For her, while she might be guaranteed equality *before* the law, the particularity of her experience means

57. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “I am Not a Nation-State,” accessed May 2018 through <https://www.leannesimpson.ca/writings/i-am-not-a-nation-state>.

58. Nanibush, “Idle No More,” 342.

59. Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 129.

60. Monture-Angus, *Thunder in my Soul*, 137.

61. Monture-Angus, *Thunder in my Soul*, 138-139.

that she does not enjoy equality *under* it. At the heart of this complaint, this discussion would suggest, is the key principle behind the politics of refusal: that seeking recognition from the state is not enough, and that in fact recognition works to perpetuate and reify a particular image of the colonized.

Conclusion: Self-Recognition, Refusal, and Responsibility

By way of tying these threads together, these final comments will consider refusal as self-recognition, and also the way in which this manifests the spiritual claims unearthed by the discussion above. Audra Simpson proposes that self-recognition is a way of denying the authority of the settler-colonial gaze, insisting that it is by refusing the systems and structures through which legitimacy is conferred by the state that new possibilities for citizenship, nationhood, belonging, and identity can evolve. That this is in part a spiritual claim is made evident in Leanne Simpson's analysis of this politics, which introduces the concept of relationality as mirroring. In Nishnaabewin, she argues, to be in relationship is to be a mirror, reflecting back upon another being their "essence and worth."⁶² This motion of mirroring is, of course, one of recognition, by which reflecting back upon another means recognizing who they really are. Leanne Simpson unpacks this idea by deconstructing the term *Aaniin*, a method of greeting amongst Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg, which can be used to mean "I see your light/ I see who you really are."⁶³ She argues that to greet another member of the community in this way is to make (self-)recognition an integral part of living in relationship, and renders the very use of the word *Aaniin* part of the process of this practice. It is recognition – internally, and reciprocally, within Nishnaabewin – that for Leanne Simpson underpins the political and spiritual systems at the core of their worlds. "Reciprocal recognition" both demands and commits to "Indigenous complex, nonlinear constructions of time, space, and place,"⁶⁴ embedded in the way they approach the spiritual, natural, and social world.

Tracing the role of the spiritual within the politics of refusal ultimately

62. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 180.

63. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 181.

64. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 182.

grounds refusing in responsibility. Eva Marie Garruotte, attempting to offer a definition of American Indian identities, links it to both being (in relationship) and doing (responsibility to reciprocity) underneath the broader notion of kinship, signifying that the theme of responsibility is foundational to understanding Indigenous ontological and epistemological frameworks.⁶⁵ Audra Simpson’s exploration of Mohawk citizenship, which formed the starting point for this paper, describes these “theaters”⁶⁶ of refusal as reflecting Mohawk responsibility to territory and towards each other, thereby weaving together the themes of refusal and responsibility in her very definition. The notion of responsibility has in fact permeated the above analysis: creation stories, as we have seen, place responsibility on the created to continue the cycle of recreation – a responsibility to listen and to live spiritual narratives as a way to access knowledge.⁶⁷ Indigenous rights entail a Creator-given responsibility to the land, while responsibility for the land was labeled as the driving force behind *Idle No More*. This paper has suggested that the link between refusal and responsibility is, ultimately, a spiritual one, with the spiritual being a deep relationality which connects the body with the land, the land with the nation, and the nation with life.

65. Eva Marie Garruotte, *Real Indians: Identity and the Survival of Native America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 99.

66. Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 157.

67. Leanne Simpson explains that embodied Indigenous knowledge is ultimately accessed “by watching, listening and reflecting...by the quality of our relationships, and the personalized contexts we collectively create” (*Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, 42).

