

In Conversation with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

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Interview by Jessica Johns

Photo by Zahra Siddiqui

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson is a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer, and artist and a member of Alderville First Nation. Her debut collection of stories and songs, *Islands of Decolonial Love*, was chosen by Thomas King for the 2013 RBC Taylor Emerging Writer Award. The collection also includes a nine-track album of poetry and music. *This Accident of Being Lost* was published in April 2017 and is also accompanied by an album, *f(l)ight*, which was



released in 2016 with RPM records and includes collaborations with many other Indigenous and non-Indigenous musicians. Her latest book, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*, was published in this month by the University of Minnesota Press.

After falling in love with *This Accident of Being Lost* this past summer, and then quickly devouring almost everything else she's published, Jessica Johns jumped at the chance to chat with the award-winning writer prior to her trip to Vancouver for this year's Writers Fest. Here, Leanne Simpson talks about interventions in writing, taking care for Indigenous audiences, and her advice to the community to lift up, listen to, and support Indigenous emerging writers, particularly the two-spirit queer and trans writers.

Jessica Johns: Thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview for *Room*. I'm really honoured to be the one to do it. I really admire your work as a writer and scholar. Also congratulations on being shortlisted for the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize!

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson: Oh, thank you. Thank you. And thanks for interviewing me. *Room* magazine is one of my favourites.

JJ: They're pretty great! I want to first of all mention that I'll be saying "narrator" while talking about *This Accident of Being Lost* and *Islands of Decolonial Love* but that's mainly for brevity's sake. I felt many different voices throughout these texts, so I'm not assuming or suggesting there's only one dominant speaker.

I would say the same about the narrative or narratives throughout *This Accident of Being Lost*. There isn't really a dominant one, and the fragmented sections vary between lyric songs, poems, and prose. While each section can stand on its own, every part kind of speaks to and informs one another, which is a miraculous feat to me. What do the different forms offer to you, both on their own and in how they intersect?

LBS: My background is in Anishinaabe storytelling, so that's the rich, creative space that my writing comes from. So when it's me and my desk and my pen or computer, I'm not really thinking about genre. I'm thinking about story and I'm thinking about the layering of stories, that is such an important practice in Anishinaabe storytelling and many different Indigenous storytelling practices. So I really like to have that multiplicity of narratives coming in. But I also like to have that interconnection particularly in a book collection, so I wanted to have that interconnection that you so generously said is miraculous, but that was something that I set out to do.

JJ: Thinking about tone a little bit too, I think that people sort of assume a more melancholic tone when a work involves serious or important subject matter, but there are parts of *This Accident* that are just so funny. They often occurred after something serious or a little bit more heavy, which made it almost stick more. For example, in "22.5 Minutes," topic one is "Kate Middleton" and topic two is "Getting Old." Was this pairing intentional and what kind of role does humour play in your work?

LBS: Yeah, I think everything in my work is intentional and is often an intervention, but this part with the humour is just simply a reflection of the Anishinaabe community that I come from and the family that I come from. Also in the broader Indigenous community. Humour is a really important part of my culture, and it's been a really important thread of resistance. I think Anishinaabe people have been really, really good at not just surviving genocide and dispossession and all the the violence that that entailed, but also figuring out ways of thriving, and humour is one of those mechanisms that's really been important and is important in my life.

JJ: It was really wonderful and really moving to read. I think particularly because in my family as well—I'm Cree from Treaty 8 territory in Northern Alberta—it was so nice to see humour represented in Indigenous literature because it's is such a big part of my family and my life.

LBS: Cool, thank you. That's a very beautiful territory that you're from. And when I was writing I didn't particularly think "oh, this is really heavy, now I need a joke." It was more an organic reflection of what is really embodied in my life and happens really naturally. So in my head when I'm writing, I'm picturing Anishinaabe people, my friends and family, reading [my work], and I'm trying to keep

my inner critic and the audiences who might not be so warm towards my work out of my head. I'm trying to make that group of people laugh.

JJ: That seems to be achieved, in part, in the very conversational style to this collection. There's this really genuine voice. It's so inviting as a reader to be let in, and I tried to imagine what it would have been like to write because it feels so vulnerable. Like there was a breaking down of this barrier between writer and reader. Did it feel that way to you?

LBS: Well I feel like as an Indigenous writer, I know enough. I've learned not to be vulnerable in public life in Canada. I think it's not a safe place, particularly for Indigenous women, so in the creative phase I'm trying not to censor for that. But it's something that I'm always aware of, particularly in the editing phases. So again, it's an intervention and I've done it on purpose and it's coming from Anishinaabe storytelling practices that are very intimate and very personal. When an Elder or Auntie tells you a story there often isn't a big production. It isn't "oh, I'm going to tell you a story, gather around." It's very unassuming and very intimate, so I wanted to have that conversational tone in my work, because I wanted to really connect with Indigenous readers.

There's so much shaping that goes on in Indigenous writing from the publishing industry. There's so much care taken for white audiences, and I really wanted to take that same care for an Indigenous audience. I think I've grown up liking reading, but I was really a disappointed reader because I never saw my life, the life of my sisters, my family, and my community reflected in writing, particularly in the 70s, 80s, and 90s. We have a beautiful community of Indigenous writing now, so that's not so much the case for my own kids, but I really wanted to write something that I would be able to see myself and my life experiences in. I would be able to see myself in the work. Again, that's a really important part of Anishinaabe storytelling: you want the person you're in relationship with, or the person that's hearing your story, to be able to insert themselves in the story, carry that story, and find some meaning in it. So that came out of that approach.

I also think I had to be sort of brave, well I know I had to be brave because I was anxious. Some of the humour and some of the flippant-ness of some of the conversations [in *This Accident*], my sisters and I would have similar kinds of conversations amongst ourselves, but probably not in front of white people and probably not in public. So I wanted to affirm that our lives are valuable and beautiful and funny, and have other Indigenous people be able to see that love and intimacy in the work.

JJ: I appreciate how you mention that you didn't see your experiences represented when you were growing up. I think about the Indigenous writers I get to read right now: you, Layli Long Soldier, Katherena Vermette, Alicia Elliott. I think of music like A Tribe Called Red. Magazines like *Red Rising* that show such talent and perspective from great Indigenous artists. Do you see a change in how Indigenous experience, especially female Indigenous experience, is being represented in art now?

LBS: I started to think about this a couple of years ago when there was an Indigenous writers gathering in Toronto. I was part of the honouring for Lee Maracle and Thomas King, and they were both taken aback. They found it very meaningful that a community of Indigenous writers existed now to even honour Indigenous writers. This was sort of the first time that this had happened.

I'm coming from the Academy and I wrote my PhD in the 90s and there was hardly any Indigenous writing at that time. But there's been this massive explosion over the last twenty years, where now it's possible to write a dissertation and almost only cite Indigenous writers, and that's amazing to me. So

there's certainly been a change in that way. That change, I've come to understand through talking to this Elder generation of Indigenous writer/artists. That [change] was very deliberate on their part. So in addition to writing, the women particularly spent a large amount of time building an Indigenous writing community and having these gatherings, building schools, building publishers, and mentoring young writers.

So in a sense, I've come to be a writer because of women like Maria Campbell, Lee Maracle, Jeannette Armstrong, and Louise Halfe trailblazing ahead and creating this situation we have right now where four or five Indigenous women were nominated for major writing awards in Canada. I think that's really, really amazing. And that, to me, is not because we're better writers than those other women, it's because those other women did this incredible amount of movement building and community building. Now we have Indigenous writers on the juries, and there's a community advocating for Indigenous writing.

While that part of it has changed, it's still extremely difficult for two-spirit queer writers, for trans writers, it's difficult for black writers in Canada. So we still have a lot of work to do to better support these writers that are existing on the outside of the power structure of what CanLit defines as CanLit.

For me, that started to come out a little bit in the editing process when I had an editor who was fixing my sentence structure and fixing grammar. Mostly around sentence structure. I was reading the first story that she had done a really hard edit on and I was like "this is reading very CanLit-y, like it sounds like I'm a real writer." But then when I looked at the characters I was like "actually, no Indigenous person would have this come out of their mouths. We don't say things like that." So I do have the ability to write like that, but I'm actually making an artistic choice here in terms of sentence structure, because I want that intimacy and I want that connection with my community. So there's still a lot of advocating to be done in that area. The publishing industry is still very male, very straight, and very, very racist and we still have a lot of work to do for younger writers.

JJ: So with that in mind, can you unpack what you mean by using these tools as interventions?

LBS: Well, I feel like I have things to say and how the world is unfolding is not okay with me. Because I write non-fiction and academic work, I have the ability to spread those [thoughts] out in an academic or in a really logical way, which is, of course, based on what's come before in the literature. But in my art, in the writing and the music, it's an extension of those same kinds of politics, but more focused on building different worlds, building Anishinaabe worlds, and escaping into those worlds. That, to me, is the larger theme of intervention for *This Accident of Being Lost*. I didn't write this book to make money or to win awards, I wrote it exactly so that it would resonate with a Cree reader from Treaty 8. To me, that's the best feeling, to have my work resonate with Indigenous people.

JJ: I appreciate that you mentioned Louise Halfe before. You give emotions a certain kind of space, which is reminiscent of some Halfe poems to me. For example, you talk about Sad and Proud—I'm thinking specifically about in "Brown Against Blue" but it occurs in other parts as well—as if they're their own character or tangible thing. You make these invisible things, like emotions, quite visible and give them their own agency. Do you think that emotions occupy this kind of space in reality?

LBS: I think that emotions can become really big, overwhelming, and out of control for people who have survived genocide, and who have to live with the amount of trauma that I think Indigenous people in 2017 are living with. One of things that I like to do in my work is to separate the person

from those emotions as a way of getting a little bit of distance and a little bit of perspective. So in both *Islands of Decolonial Love* and *This Accident of Being Lost*, I was interested in that sort of reality that I live in and that my family lives in, and not shying away from talking about the difficult things, but trying to talk about the difficult things in a way that doesn't re-traumatize Indigenous readers. So I thought a lot about that, actually, when I was in the creative phase of the book.

JJ: That reminds me of the part in *Islands of Decolonial Love* where the narrator says, "vulnerability, forgiveness, and acceptance are privileges." I saw that in *This Accident* consistently as well. Letting people in or accepting someone comes with work and self doubt a lot of the time, because of this pervasive trauma and violence.

LBS: Yeah, and I think that comes from having to survive and thrive in context of trauma and violence, which Indigenous women and two-spirit and queer Indigenous people in Canada are constantly facing. I wanted to be able to acknowledge and affirm that reality, but also see ways out of it.

I think for white people, being vulnerable as a prerequisite to intimacy and love is something that I don't think most people even think about, but for Indigenous people because a lot of the violence has been emotional, sexual, physical, and very personal and very intimate, connecting to the people and to the places that we love can be really quite challenging and difficult. I didn't want the characters in the book to be victims. Because I don't think Indigenous people are victims, and I don't see victims in the Indigenous community, although we're cast like that by mainstream media and by Canada quite a bit. I wanted to have that love, that brilliance, that genius, and that strength really shine through despite and in spite of the context that we are living in.

JJ: Is that what you were pointing to with the mention of edges in *This Accident*? Because that is something that really stayed with me. The amount the narrator talks about edges: being at the edge of herself, being at the edge of other people, at the edge of space. But it wasn't negative. Often they were pushed to something that was really hard, that edge, but that necessitated a lot of strength from the character.

LBS: That's right, and sometimes holding onto the edge is what Indigenous resistance or Indigenous resurgence looks like. So I wanted to put a light on that and think of it in the context of this beautiful Indigenous relationality, because if we're in relationship to everything that's living then how are we ever at the edge, right? There's this beautiful, invisible, multidimensional net of relationships, including our ancestors and those that are not yet born that wrap around us. So I wanted to, again, affirm that feeling, because I think that that's a pretty common feeling for people who are living with colonialism: that you're on the edge. But then also have a little reminder that from the perspective of our ancestors and our world, we're meshed in this universe of relationality and love.

JJ: There's a lot of different forms of communication happening in *This Accident*. In "Brown Against Blue" the narrator communicates with Moose in her dreams, and then in "Big Water" the narrator communicates with Lake Ontario through texting. It was cool to see such a variation in communication, especially because we give such weight to contemporary forms of communication now.

LBS: Yep, I wanted to think through how we're using technology. There's a narrative coming out of Idle No More that social media and cellphones have really supported and helped create that movement. While I certainly saw the utility of the internet, cellphones, and social media, in particular

context, my experience was that this was coming with a lot of other costs. I wanted to think about the internet in a different way and challenge its ubiquitous nature and how we've adopted this technology en masse without a lot of critical thought.

So that was one place where my critique of social media in these stories was coming out, and the other was this idea that I don't think of my ancestors in the past and my grandchildren or great-grandchildren in the future. I think all I have is this present moment. They're all right there in this moment and we're working together, along with the plant nations and the animals nations and the lakes and the rivers, to give birth to the next moment. So I wanted the book to feel like it was taking place in the present, and it was a reflection of our reality. I was thinking a lot about ceremony and the protocols around ceremony and what's acceptable in terms of technology in our communities and what's not, and I came up with this idea that if you're a lake and you have a spirit, you're magic, and you're powerful, why wouldn't you be able to text? That idea was interesting to me, and I wanted to play on this idea of connection and relationship that's mediated through technology, for better or worse, as a way of making us think about how we're relating to each other.

JJ: Absolutely, I see that same sort of consideration in *This Accident* with how the narrator accesses information: checking Urban Dictionary, digging through Instagram to create these logistical charts which was just brilliant, the smartberry™ tracker in "Airplane Mode," and the whole hashtag culture commentary. Same thing with the humour, it was relieving to see this interplay because it was just like "this happens, this is a thing people do."

LBS: It surprises a lot non-native interviewers that an Indigenous writer would be using technology. At first I was like "well, my community uses all that technology. All of this is happening every day. We're engaged with it." But then I realized that there's such a stereotype around Indigenous people with technology and how we use it. It was more novel than I was expecting it to be.

JJ: So in both *Islands of Decolonial Love* and *This Accident of Being Lost*, there's a fragmented narrative, the characters, Sabe and Kwe, come back and are more fleshed out, and both works have accompanying music albums. Did *This Accident* grow out of realizing you weren't done with those characters and stories from *Islands*, or did you always intend to write a second work that spoke to it?

LBS: Every time I write a book I think it's a fluke and I think it's the last time I'll ever be able to pull it off [laughs]. So after *Islands of Decolonial Love*, it didn't occur to me that a second book would happen. And then when more stories started to come, Kwe moved from being something that we call each other in my community, to becoming a fluid character that shifts in time, and then I really, really liked the interaction between Kwe and Sabe. I thought it was a really rich space because how Canadians conceptualize Bigfoot is so different from how Anishinaabe people conceptualize Bigfoot. So I wanted to think, again, in the present: what is it like to have these beings walking amongst us and helping us? I really did, and I still do, find it possible for those characters to come back in another book. I think about it a lot. I think as the characters are still living in me, and I'm carrying them around in my day to day life, I can see them getting into some more antics in the future. Maybe.

JJ: Do you think that writers ever get rid of characters or ideas? Like, do you ever think that you'll write something and then just be like "ok, I'm done with you now," or are they there forever?

LBS: I don't know sometimes I write things and I'm done with them, but there's something about those two particular characters [Kwe and Sabe], concepts, and ideas that I'm not done with yet,

because I'm still thinking about them. There's certainly things I'm done with, but not those two.

JJ: Well I'm happy to hear that because I'm not done reading about them. At first, I kept wondering whether or not Sabe was real. But he was always the one checking in and caring about Kwe, and that sort of reassurance for Kwe was as real as anything, so it didn't really matter for me, in the end. I loved that.

Something that was different, though: in *Islands* you provided the English translation for the Anishinaabemowin words at the end of the sections, but in *This Accident* you didn't. Why did you make that decision?

LBS: With all my books, I've actually had to advocate for the Anishinaabemowin not to be in italics, then I had to advocate for not having to translate the word right in the text, but have it at the end. And in this book [*This Accident*], my editor asked me how in a dream world I would want to deal with this issue around language, and I said I would like to deal with it like all the European-based writers that write words in Spanish and don't translate them. She then asked how the reader would know what the words mean, so I went through the book and I made a list. Then I went online and googled the words, and there's a couple of really, really great Ojibwe online dictionaries. Within two or three hits I could get a basic definition of the word.

I wanted, again, to connect with Anishinaabe readers. When you don't have the translation there, you assume that your reader can understand the words and you're assuming a certain audience. I wanted to welcome Indigenous and Anishinaabe people into this space and reaffirm that I've written this book for them, not for a white audience, and I'm going to assume that you know what makwa is, and those of you that don't I'm going to assume that you know how to find out.

There's been a lot of interesting discussions. For instance in Peterborough, we've now been living together for 400 years, how is it that Canada doesn't know miigwech means thanks? The other thing is that fluent language speakers, or people who are more fluent, will understand that there will be a deeper meaning that's communicated through the Anishinaabemowin conceptually, and I think that's kind of cool too. So then the stories are layered and they're reaching multiple audiences, which is again coming from Anishinaabe practices.

When you come to our ceremonies, there's something that people who are unfamiliar with our culture will get something out of it, and elders who have been immersed in the culture for seven generations will also get something out of it, because the teachings are layered and they're speaking to multiple audiences. I wanted that reflected in the book, and one of the ways it got reflected was through the language.

JJ: Yeah, and I think that italicizing something in another language does this kind of othering. It's a physical change of something to indicate it as other, and that can be a detriment as well.

LBS: For sure, and it's just really common. It's a convention in publishing and editing that if it's a foreign language, it's going to be in italics. I think one of our jobs as Indigenous writers right now is to challenge some of those conventions in order to make room for Indigenous brilliance.

JJ: *This Accident of Being Lost* is a wonderful title, just in general, and also for the things that follow in the work. It's also the title of the titular song in the book, which appears on your second album,

f(1)ight. How did you decide on the title and why did it stay with you?

LBS: The poem came first, so the lyrics of the poem came first and then the song. I think one of the feelings of being colonized is feeling lost, and I wanted to point out that you don't set out to get lost. Indigenous people are not lost because of its efficiency in us, it's because of this tremendous violence that we've lived through, and that we've thrived through. I felt like over the course of putting together the album and the book, that was one of the concepts that was a thread through all the narratives.

JJ: The music video is also lovely, it's so beautiful.

LBS: Thank you.

JJ: Making music videos and making music is such a collaborative art form and you did so with so many different artists. What was the difference in that type of artistic practice, one that involved so many different minds working together?

LBS: I really love that part of the music and performance, because writing is very solitary. With writing, you're not with your audience when they're reading the book, so you don't know if they're laughing at your jokes or you don't know if they're thinking you're insane [laughs]. You're not watching them read, so there's this separation. In performance, you don't have that separation, so you can tell by that look on the audience's faces whether they're connecting to the work or not. There's this real-time relationship and energy between the performers and the audience, and I found that to be a really powerful space. I really liked collaborating with Indigenous and non-Indigenous musicians, and having a different space than the solitary, isolated writing space.

At the beginning of this, I was talking about how Indigenous women writers have created this community, and I think that now I'm inheriting those responsibilities or we're all inheriting those responsibilities. I wanted to really, as much as possible with the music videos, give emerging Indigenous filmmakers the chance to make a music video and to interpret my work in any way that they wanted to interpret it. I had a grant so a lot of people suggested I make one really good video, and spend the money on one video rather than split it up, but I wanted to see how these stories travelled through our communities. Having different artists from different disciplines, different nations, and different geographies interpret and layer different meanings, sometimes meanings that I didn't intend and sometimes meanings that were very intentional, onto the work gave me the opportunity to see how these stories live and breathe in the world.

JJ: So there's a kind of different fulfillment there?

LBS: For sure. There's more connections and I think connecting with people and making things collectively is a really important part of our culture, and Indigenous art is a really excellent opportunity to engage in that.

JJ: That's wonderful. You have another book coming out this month *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*. Is that more academic?

LBS: It's non-fiction, and I think my academic work has always stretched the bounds of what is considered academic work. It's being marketed as a trade book as well as an academic work, but it's fair to say that it's a more academic work than *Islands* and *This Accident of Being Lost*.

JJ: Well I have a review copy coming my way so I'm excited to read it. I just have one last question for you: do you have any advice for emerging Indigenous writers and artists?

LBS: My advice is for the rest of the community. It's to support and lift up and listen to Indigenous emerging writers as much as possible, particularly the two-spirit queer and trans writers. If I look at the Indigenous writers that have influenced me, every time the spotlight is on them, they're also holding someone else coming up with them. So I really like this idea of holding each other up and us being a part of this community. I don't think that I have any words of wisdom, but I think that believing in yourself and what you're doing and not settling for what writing programs and what the publishing industry is telling you is legit writing is a really valuable tool. Build a community around you, find people that support you and that will read your work. A lot of times what Indigenous writers need, certainly what I needed, is not critique, but encouragement and support. Our writing looks different than CanLit and that's a beautiful thing because our brilliance is coming from a different place. So seek out people who will support you.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson will be appearing at the Vancouver Writers Fest "Original Inhabitants, Original Voices" panel on Wednesday, October 18. Tickets are \$20 or \$15 if you're under 30 years old, and they're available [here \(http://writersfest.bc.ca/author/leanna-betasamosake-simpson/\)](http://writersfest.bc.ca/author/leanna-betasamosake-simpson/).

If you want to read more about *This Accident of Being Lost*, read Jessica's article "[6 Reasons Why Reading \(http://prismmagazine.ca/2017/09/28/editors-pick-leanne-betasamosake-simpsons-this-accident-of-being-lost/\)](http://prismmagazine.ca/2017/09/28/editors-pick-leanne-betasamosake-simpsons-this-accident-of-being-lost/) *This Accident of Being Lost* (http://prismmagazine.ca/2017/09/28/editors-pick-leanne-betasamosake-simpsons-this-accident-of-being-lost/) Will Have You Openly Weeping in Coffee Shops and Ignoring Cute Dogs at the Farmers Market." (http://prismmagazine.ca/2017/09/28/editors-pick-leanne-betasamosake-simpsons-this-accident-of-being-lost/)

Jessica Johns is a writer of Cree ancestry and a member of Sucker Creek First Nation. She is the Executive Editor of Promotions for *PRISM international*, living and working on the unceded territories of the Musqueam, Skwxwú7mesh, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations. She placed second for the 2017 *Glass Buffalo* Poetry Contest, and was the winner of *Saltern's* 2017 Short Forms contest.

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