

BURY MY HEART
AT KING AND JAMES

DANIELLE BOISSONEAU

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n'miigwechawendam
I am grateful

The land, water and people that have been core to my experiences.
I am grateful for all the experiences that shaped my life as an urban
Anishnaabekwe.

Home.
I am so grateful for home, the places my ancestors roam.

My family.
Thank you, my beautiful children, for listening to me go on about these
poems, for helping with dinner while I wrote, and for everything it means
to be part of our family <3

Urban Indigenous Peoples in Hamilton.
You're all beautiful.

A Note on the Title

The title of this collection is based on the title of Dee Brown's book *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (1970). For me, these string of words have represented the power in unapologetic reclamation. Wounded Knee, South Dakota, is the site of the massacre of nearly 300 Lakota people, mostly women and children. Brown's book helped to raise awareness of the atrocities of Settler Colonialism across the Americas.

I switched it up. Not because I think that King and James is comparable to Wounded Knee, in any sense. Rather, to highlight the relationships between Indigenous peoples and the land on which they live. Sometimes, when I'm crossing at King and James, I think about all the land underneath the concrete, so when I say "Bury my heart at King and James", I'm saying that it's a place where I grieve sometimes.

Grief and forward-moving action are substantial takeaways from the massacre at Wounded Knee—it ignited and reminded our people that we are capable of fighting back, despite the death, fear and displacement. Being Anishnaabekwe in so-called Hamilton, Ontario has given me the drive and determination to recreate those connections with the land and water—they cannot hold us down forever.

Dee Brown's struggle was not with colonization. My struggle is not with gentrification.

Gentrify My Heart

The topic of gentrification hasn't interested me, I'll be honest. Maybe it's because I live in an area of the city that's not particularly affected by this modern phenomenon. (But do I really though?) As I make my way downtown on the city bus, I wonder how the land and people used to relate with each other before systemic violence stole land for roots. Maybe I am numb to displacement. (It's easier not to feel sometimes). I've been invited to attend an event on this topic and to write my thoughts in reflection. (Let's check it out, I love a challenge).

I sit with these thoughts and live in the contradictions that an urban Anishnaabekwe usually does. Truthfully kind—kind of connected through the waves of grey cement and mostly loving, with a lust for sovereignty and freedom. The city bus roars through the streets of downtown Hamilton. Reflections from puddles of rain are the reds and oranges draped across the skyline of a rapidly changing city. If anything is constant, it's change.

When I listen to the pain from others, often well-loved friends, about the loss of the commons and the loss of their homes, I kind of nod and follow along. It's not like I don't feel this pain in my heart already. I get it. These places will be stolen over and over until the land reclaims itself. I feel compassion for the dear friends that I've made in this ever-changing city. The commons are plagued by common pain.

I'm kind of like, "you too?" I struggle, you struggle. (But do you really though?) I know through ancestrally-coded methods of care and kinship that we take care of each other and we move through the cement-covered land towards liberation always. This is what I feel, anyway. I also feel the anger, the dignified rage. I don't live there though. I'm urban Anishnaabekwe, perpetually-colonized yet always decolonizing, I know it starts within.

One way we can understand it—they tried to gentrify my heart. They tried to colonize my most sacred spaces and fill them with fear and anger.

However, as an always evolving urban Anishnaabekwe, I know who I am and where I come from, and this reminds me that I have better things to do than be afraid. My heart becomes filled with love for my people, the land and the water. It's a balance requiring my consistent focus. I'm not perfect, though, and I get tired, but here we are talking about it anyway.

Tonight, the air feels crisp and the sun is shining after rainfall. Trains of tiny white dogs make their way through the commotion. It's Art Crawl, a regular event in Hamilton that touts the soundbyte "Art is the New Steel." Artists selling their paintings, jewelry, photography... Their work is beautiful. I wish I had more money to support them. James Street North is a strange contradiction of fancy smoothie stores and worn down buildings—the street as both home and destination.

This dystopian reality never fails to puzzle me. I try to imagine the area before it was colonized, because I remember the area before it was gentrified. At one time, the water in Hamilton Harbour was drinkable, before industry and waste water run-off polluted it. We don't really think about that anymore, because our water comes from bottles now.

Depressing times make for depressing poems. (It's tough not to wallow in it). We arrive at the venue, this beautiful spot at the intersection of Cannon and James in downtown Hamilton. Lights are strewn across the skyline, and there are all kinds of people everywhere. Shadows and zines and art-lined walls are bursting with hope and camaraderie. We are all here because we know that these times are a perfect catalyst for transformation, in a search for constant change.

And so, I present this suite of poetry as related to my experience as an urban Anishnaabekwe living in the constantly colonizing city now known as Hamilton, Ontario. These poems were born out of a search for meaning within this contradictory context. I became interested in the spaces between gentrification and colonization, and how better to articulate some experiences of hope and rebirth amongst ever-crumbling systems. They tried to gentrify my heart. It didn't work. Here are some poems about that.



Avocado Toast

Unless you have chickens laying eggs in your backyard
(Not in My Backyard)

To go with the avocado imported from Puerto Rico
(Definitely not your backyard)

Compost the peel, that is so eco-friendly
Friendly neighbours that moved here
for the galleries and gritty communities
that have been built on generations
of convocations from age to age—
displacement, dignified rage

Buy the bread from the bakery
down the gentrified street, the colonized land
beside the obnoxious “art is the new steel”
sign of the times, times when authentic brown women
make authentic brown bread
and sell it for \$4.99 to people
people who can pay five dollars for bread
Five dollars for bread when youth
are hungry and they use art to
strategize where to eat good food
for affordable prices in unaffordable homes

Food mirage, culinary barrage
unaffordable food that is better for you
It is local and vegan,
gluten-free too. Wait till after 5 for the sales at Nations
Nations of people who were displaced from the land
to make room for the industry, colonial infantry
made room for the workers, stole the places we ran
to get avocado on sale, 99 cents
so much cheaper than gentrified rents

We bake our own bread for over-ripe avocado toast
toast because when we remember the most
We remember the days, the plays,
The arts, untamable hearts
And I imagine the days
When there are no backyards
Chickens can roam and we don’t eat avocado anymore

City Blocks

Square route lines these lines are everywhere they're straight and boring like the stories they are telling about why we need to embrace their straight boring lines.

The people who live on these city blocks kick rocks and ask for change outside the places they once called home. Now we navigate these straight, boring lines to buy expensive coffee from people that used to live in Toronto.

They try to plant trees and I think I applaud the effort but I feel sorry for these little saplings that have nowhere to lay their roots forever. Soon they will be asked to move too.

Sometimes on these city blocks you meet some fantastic people who blow your mind with kindness and care and even though they don't have anything they would give you everything. I think you can tell by their smile.

I smiled and waved at a barber who had a really great mustache and he looked at me like he thought I was there to cause trouble. Maybe I was because I was just looking for someone who could give me a good fade.

The economy has a funny way of declaring something important. The renaissance of poor city blocks into rich city blocks removes all the fun ways to be authentic. To them, authenticity matters when it's marketable. To us, it's how we survive.



Defaults

Clover fields, wider than the streets can see
Water, fresh flowing through complex systems
Trees, thick with age reaching the sky
Heights, limestone ridge telling stories only ancient rocks hold
Air, breath fresh like the tops of mountains on breezy days
Land, expansive and empty but not like terra nullius

Land, resources to drill and mine for economic growth
Air, absorb the pollutants so the people can breathe
Heights, buildings intrude and scrape the sky
Trees, cut down and scattered
Water, grey stagnating and waste
Clover fields, only stories see you now



Give Each Other Plants

Displacement, replacement, reclaim.

There's no stigma, no shame

In the liberation from stagnation

Of disconnection

Reconnection

Break through, grow

Know what you know

Reap what you sow

The plants that grow

Through the cement

And break the pavement

With consistent movement

Because they know there's more to life
than this

Break the cycle while you cycle down the one way streets

Take back the spaces where community meets

Or even where they don't

Cuz they won't

Oversee the way we reclaim our lives

At the intersections of love and rage

Stand tall, take back the stage

Tell the truth, through the roof

Tops of mountains, the geography

Sometimes decides what is of more value

We know the cartography, the maps in our hearts even through the cement

Because underneath it all, the land is still alive

Breathing and surviving

Just like us

So seek justice, not just for us

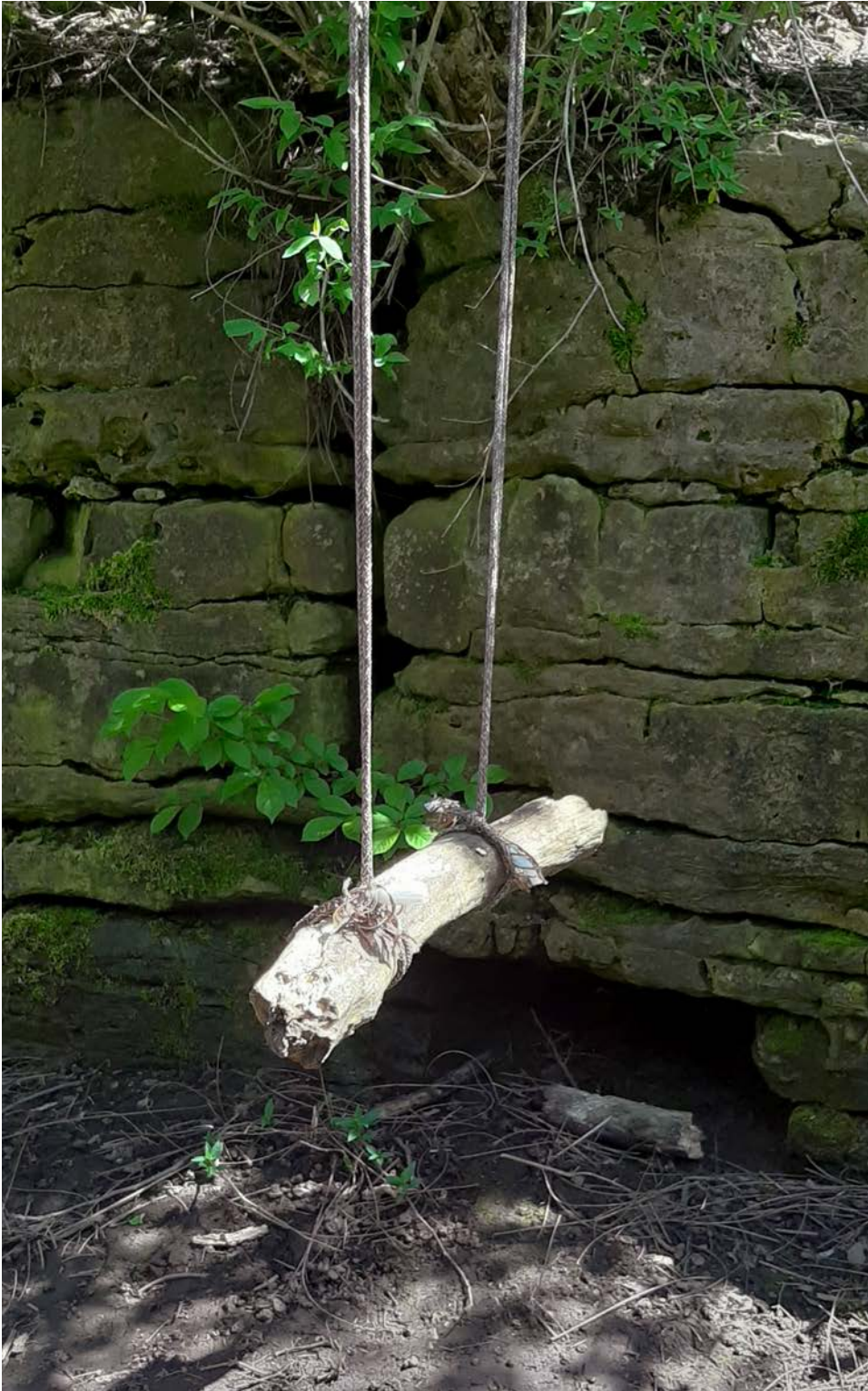
But for the plants and for the land

Love it out loud, all over the ground

Recover connections, backward reflections

Give each other plants, give each other care

Plant your resistance all over, everywhere



Leverage

Talking back without words
Curious gaze, dark eyes
Undiluted surprise
Heart songs truly heard

Yet uprooted from the places
While we watch each other leave
Whole communities grieve
The herstory that this erases

Leverage x force = movement, of course
Least of all, change in some way
Grey skies overshadow sunny days
Have we put the cart before the horse?

Where is their soft spot?
How do we break them?
Uncontrollable mayhem?
Uncontrollable thought?

So where is our power?
Wrapped up in resistance
Semi-conscious distance
Colonialism devours

Take it all back, stand with pride
Leverage the places
The spaces
They think we'd hide

Inside our gardens, the soil, the land
Learn new skills
Give them chills
Find your place to stand

Land Back

Free the land, free land, manifest destiny
Historical tendencies to retell the stories
to shape the way we see the world.

Liberation on the streets
Under the streets, over the streets

Land becomes a resource
bought, sold
mined for gold
nickel and ore
mineral stores
Not like the gentry on the streets
that gentrify the land
The places my ancestors would stand.

Rent went up since 1764*
don't let your chin hit the floor
It's been a long time
Things haven't been great
Since we've been displaced

It's not you, it's me
So we're gonna have to take
Land Back.

Reclaim and store
Create something more than reparations and healing nations

Land Back is the new steel

*Referencing the Treaty of Niagara, 1764.



The Commons

Water is a life source that reminds me of what we have in common as human beings. Whether you gentrify or get gentrified, water is essential for over-priced bougie coffee as much as it is for the tap water filling reusable water bottles. This is the commons.

Upon examining our interconnectedness, perhaps it's easier to have compassion. Upon examining our differences, perhaps it's easier to be more accepting. Water accepts us, loves us, and nourishes us despite the overt violence that we impose upon this precious life source. From start to finish, every single day. This is the commons.

But I get it, trust me. Dignified rage has fuelled my activism for over a decade. Being Anishnaabekwe means having resistance coded into my DNA—it means surviving genocide, but it also means having the courage and tenacity to build something different. Water reminds me of this truth. This is the commons.

Whether water forms a torrential tsunami or laps quietly on decolonized shorelines, it's our responsibility to decentre ourselves. As humans, we are the visitors here. Here are the commons. The land and water have been commodified, turned into property, turned into resources. Here is the resistance, here is the struggle. When we remember the commons.

But I get it, we aren't there yet. There's a lot to be angry about. I've survived and will continue to survive because that's what we do. Dignified rage and the collective storm fuel action and create change, but it doesn't sustain the long term (r)evolution. Anger is overdone (there, I said it), overcooked like the chicken that's been baking in an oven owned by people from Toronto who actually don't know how to prepare authentic, culturally-appropriate food. Still developing, steady stealing, and always displacing. We still have a ways to go.

I offer unity as a pathway tread with humility and community care. A unity that holds people accountable, a unity that is rooted in a deep love

for the land and the water, a unity that dispels the notion of property and ownership. Everything else will fall apart, because unless we learn to live together outside of the structures that colonialism and capitalism have created for us, we will only replicate these systems once they fall.

What does unity look like to you? How will you say thank you to the land and water for giving you life? Where can we build a confident and unified community inside the commons, motivated by anger and fear, sustained by love and action? Who will join us in building a new future outside of these systems? I know people like to fight, but I've got better things to do. You can catch me in my garden learning to grow different kinds of food, because this is where I find my joy. It fuels my energy, my heart, so when I choose to protect life sources like water and the land, I'm sustained by the commons for the commons.

Unity in our pitiful existences as humans who are utterly dependent on water for life.



HAMILTON ARTISTS INC.

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In April 2019, Hamilton Artists Inc. organized *Pressure Points*, a two-day event exploring the intersection of art and gentrification. Danielle Boissoneau was invited as a speaker at the event, and then as a writer in residence. She was asked to write openly and creatively about, around and beyond her experiences with gentrification in Hamilton. This publication contains the suite of essays and poetry Danielle produced during her residency between April to August 2019.

Danielle Boissoneau is an Indigiqueer Anishnaabekwe from the shorelines of the Great Lakes. Published in various magazines from across the country, she sees her words as tools to rebuild possibilities. Danielle is a mother, a writer, a seedkeeper, waterwalker and according to her daughter, quite infamous. She loves the land and the water.

Connor Jessome (editor) is a queer historian, film programmer, and musician born and raised in Hamilton. They are currently the Marketing & Visitor Services Coordinator at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, as well as an organizing member of the AGH's Close-Up Film Committee.

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