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Home Is Where the Wild Rice Is[1]

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Creation

In the stories of old we are bound to the land,
Creator's hand shaping us
to be *'adam* from *'adamah*,
earth-creature from the earth.
We image the earth
as much as we image our God,
a union of earth and Spirit,
the very breath of God,
filling shaped earth until it becomes earth creature.

In the stories of old the land is given as gift,
given in abundance for our hunger
and the hunger of other creatures.

In the stories of old the land is our teacher,
the forest and its creatures the ones we serve
with gratitude for all that they offer us:
food, medicines, shelter, clothing.

The land is our teacher:
in observing the creatures, the plants,
the relationships between them,

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and the gifts they offer each other and us
we learn patience, love, faithfulness, joy,
gratitude, self-control and compassion.
We learn that all of creation is sustained
by the breath of Creator,
as we are ourselves.
All of it a gift
from a loving, extravagant hand.
All of it a home
for joy, and abundance, and love.

In the stories of old, the people of the Michi Saagiig (Mississauga) Nishnaabeg[2] were guided to this land where I now live. Their prophecy had told them to continue west until they reached the place where the food grew on the water. Just to be clear, this is not my story, nor is this my place. I am an immigrant to Turtle Island, born to parents who were taken out of their homeland and their stories by their parents fleeing the trauma of war and the devastation of a destroyed land. I live here with my husband, Brian, a settler whose family has lived on Turtle Island for generations and to whom this book is dedicated.[3] Fourteen years ago we moved together to this place, now called the Kawartha Lakes. We left the geographies that had shaped us as children, and we entered the story of this land and the story of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg whose traditional lands these are and whose stories are deeply rooted in this place.[4]

I talk about the story of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg in an attempt to understand how it is that our stories have participated in the destruction of the people who were first in relationship with this land. I explore these stories in hope that reparations can be made. I tell this story in the hope that perhaps we can make home together. It is a tall order, and perhaps it will not be possible. But I believe that the story that has shaped me more than any other, the story that has given me home—the biblical story—has called me to this place. And so, with hesitant steps, in this chapter I will

2. I am following the spelling here of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson in her various works. The Nishnaabeg are also referred to as the Anishnaabek and the Anishnaabeg. In the past they were called the Ojibway by white colonizers. This chapter is a very brief description of the story of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg. There is much more to say about manoomin, the land, home and decolonization in Indigenous thought and practice than it is possible to include here. The footnotes provides helpful further reading.

3. Turtle Island is the Indigenous name for the land we now call North America.

4. By "this place" I am referring to what is now called The City of Kawartha Lakes (a large region) and the City of Peterborough (an actual city) nearby. The latter is called Nogojiwanong by the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg. The two largest communities of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg in this area are Curve Lake First Nation and Alderville First Nation.

reflect on small sections of two stories. One is the biblical story, which has shaped the home that Brian and I have been given. The other is the story of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg. How do these stories illuminate one another? Is it possible that in harmony they provide a vision for how home can be made together in this place?

In the stories of old, the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg were led to this place, where the food grows upon the water. The Nishnaabeg call that food *manoomin; s*ettlers call it "wild rice." Manoomin is the basis of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg life. Its health is important for all of the relations that share the waters: the many fish who live there; the muskrat and the beaver who use the fibres and eat the shoots; the redwing blackbirds, rails, pigeons, quails, herons, cedar birds, woodpeckers and ducks that eat the grain;[5] the frogs, turtles and insects that live in and amongst the rice stalks and provide food for the herons; the deer and moose that graze the foliage. According to James Whetung, who is working to restore manoomin in his traditional lands, "in this region the lake without wild rice is a desert; once the wild rice is established, everything just multiplies, from the bugs to the birds, muskrats, beavers, otters and fish. The whole environment benefits because wild rice provides safety and security to the swimmer, the flyers, the four-legged and to us the two legged."[6]

For the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg, as for all Indigenous peoples in general, the land is the place that gave them birth. The land is their teacher, the land and its creatures are part of a web of relationships that uphold and sustain them in the face of change and challenge. In addition, "the land records memories. There are sacred places in such lands—places of covenant with Creator, places of healings and miracles, places where ceremonies and traditions take place."[7]

Such memories and knowledge are deeply rooted in the ceremonies, rituals and practices that surround the manoomin harvest. From the thanksgiving that is offered to the Creator before the harvest begins, to the medicine rituals that are connected to it, to the deep traditional ecological knowledge that is necessary for building a canoe, shaping a paddle, finding an appropriate stick to knock the grain off the stalks, knowing when the rice is ready, building just the right fire for parching the rice, sewing the moccasins for hulling and dancing, making the baskets used for the winnowing, making the birch and cedar bark containers for storage, knowing how far down to dig and how well to wrap to keep moisture from the rice when buried in storage—for

5. Jenks, *Wild Rice*, 1027.
6. Anderson and Whetung, *Black Duck*, 23.
7. Woodley, *Shalom*,120.

all of this the stock of knowledge of plants, trees, weather, soil, and animals is extensive. For instance, there is no point in making a birch bark container if you don't seal it well with pitch, and there is no point in burying your cache of manoomin if a fox is going to be able to dig it up.[8]

But more than the deep and broad knowledge of this place and its plants and animals that are necessary for harvesting and storing the manoomin, the harvest of the rice is crucial for creating the bonds of kinship and community, for teaching patience, humility, cooperation, and respect, and for providing a basis for governance and community organization.[9] As Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg knowledge-keeper, artist, and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson says: "while each individual must have the skills and knowledge to ensure their own safety, survival, and prosperity in both the physical and spiritual realm, their existence is ultimately dependent upon intimate relationships of reciprocity, humility, honesty, and respect with all elements of creation, including plants and animals."[10] In the end, the wild rice harvest occurs in a context of love—for the land, for Creator, for all of the human and animal relations that are enmeshed in the life of manoomin.[11] And being rooted in such love enables the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg to know who they are and how they are to live in the world. They are a people who live in the land where plants grow on the water. And those plants, this manoomin, sustains them and gives them life.

Colonization and Resistance

They tell it briefly,
in the measured calm tones
that bureaucrats use to hide
policies of death and genocide.
These young Israelites are of royal and noble blood,
wise, strong, attractive,
self-confident and smart—
a little too smart, in fact,
a little too strong and self-confident

8. On the thanksgiving and medicine rituals see Vennum, *Wild Rice*, 71–19; on processing and storing see Vennum, *Wild Rice,* 138–146. On knowledge rooted in land see Grey and Patel, "Food Sovereignty as Decolonization," 436–437; Simpson, "Land as Pedagogy," 155–166.

9. Krotz, "The Affective Geography," paragraphs 8 & 22; Grey and Patel, "Food Sovereignty," 436–37.

10. Simpson, "Land as Pedagogy," 154.

11. Simpson, "Land as Pedagogy," 154.

in their identity as Israelites.[12]

Just a few small changes to ensure their obedience
to the empire that has captured them,
just a few strategies to discourage resistance:
they were to be taught the literature
and language
of the Chaldeans.
No longer are they to tell the stories of their homeland.
No longer are they to speak the language of their mothers.
The words that grew out of their homes,
out of their land.
The stories that bound them to their place
that wove deep tapestries of memory
about the hills they grew up in
the wadis of their valleys,
now to be replaced with new words,
new stories,
designed to dis-place them.

No longer were they permitted
to eat the food of their homeland.
Instead they were given the rich food of the empire,
royal rations of meat and wine,
imperial food,
seized from the labour of the poor.
The bread of injustice,
intended to dull their senses,
satiate their longing,
and complete their disconnection from the land.

All their lives, their food
had been given by the land.
The lamb had tasted of their hillsides,
the apricots and olives were from their trees,
the cheese from their own goats,
the spices gathered from their hedgerows
and dried in the rafters of their homes.

No longer were they permitted
to be called by the names that connected
them to their God:

12. The following paragraphs are based on Daniel 1.

Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah
were no longer worshippers of *el* and *jah*
but new names, strange names
that echoed strange gods
were used to summon and shape them.

No stories to connect them to the memories of home,
no language to connect them to the rhythms of their home,
no food to connect them to the seasons of their home,
no names to connect them to the God of their home.
But Babylon hadn't anticipated a counter-move.
Just a small resistance:
a refusal of imperial food.
A refusal of food disconnected from their land,
a refusal of food disconnected from their God,
a refusal of food that continued to sever them
from home.
Daniel (who, in this story, also retains
the name given him in his own language),
knows that eating is about connection,
eating is about building connections with home.
Our food feeds us with a story
and creates who we are.
And Daniel does not want to be shaped
into the image of the empire.

What do we do when the life that one people is living is in the way of *our* goals, *our* dreams, *our* comfort, *our* profits? The building of the Trent-Severn waterway had the goals and profits of colonizers at its heart. What did it matter if the locks and dams prevented the salmon and eels from migrating up to the lakes where the Nishnaabeg could eat them?[13] What did it matter that dredging the canal system destroyed the manoomin in its path? What did it matter that the deepening of the lakes drowned most of the shallow-rooted manoomin, and that invasive carp destroyed that which still survived in wetlands? What did it matter that the lakes were soon so polluted that the rice seed which remained could not grow, could not breathe in the death-giving waters under settler control?

How could the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg teach their children the rhythms of the wild rice moon, when there was no manoomin to harvest? How could they learn to judge the ripeness of the grains, the exact moment when the parching was enough? Why would they learn to make the birch

13. Simpson, *Dancing*, 87.

bark baskets and the dancing moccasins? How could the manoomin teach them? And how could they learn from the otters and the muskrat, the rails and the quail? Without manoomin, what would ground their ceremonies? How could they thank the Creator for a gift that had been taken away? About what would they sing? Over what would they dance? The manoomin grounded the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg in their place. Without it they were cast adrift.

The destruction of a foodway was, however, as in the days of old, just one way that the colonizers attempted to destroy this people that was so inconveniently in their way. If the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg children are removed from the land, forbidden to speak in their own language, given new names, and taught the stories and ways of the colonizers, they will never learn the ways of their mothers. They will never be able to remember the lessons taught to their people by the wild rice, by the salmon, by the maple syrup, by the strawberries.[14] "Unlike Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, the children in the residential schools were unable to refuse the imperial food systems, and were instead subjected to systems of cultural genocide enforced by the very people who were, theoretically, speaking in the name of the God of Daniel."[15]

And if the people who remain are forbidden from hunting, forbidden from fishing, and denied access to their lands, then their identity as a people will gradually disappear.[16] They will be gone, just like the manoomin.

Unless, of course, the manoomin begins to return. And some of the knowledge holders begin to share their memories of the harvest, the ceremonies they remember, the wisdom that had been passed on to them, the stories of manoomin. As the manoomin has begun to return to the less polluted lakes, the lifeways of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg have begun to come to life once more. Just like Daniel in the face of Babylon, some in the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg community are saying "no" to the imperial food the colonizers have offered them, "no" to the genocidal attempt to erase them from the land that they have lived in relationship with for thousands of years, "no" to the attempt to sever them from the land that has given them life.[17]

14. Daigle, "Tracing the Terrain," 302; Grey and Patel, "Food Sovereignty," 438; Simpson, "Land as Pedagogy," 153.

15. Verdun, *Imperial Food Systems*, 44.

16. On the suffering and starvation that resulted from the denial of access to hunting and fishing grounds, see Simpson, "Land as Pedagogy," 167–68.

17. See particularly the story of James Whetung in Anderson and Whetung, *Black Duck Wild Rice*; Jackson, "Canada's Wild Rice Wars"; and "Nourishing Communities." For other strategies of resistance and resurgence see Daigle, "Tracing the Terrain," 303–311; Simpson, *Accident*.

It is not surprising that the empire is striking back. At the heart of imperial control is always the desire of those with privilege, those with power, those with wealth, to ensure that their way of life, their comfort, their own flourishing be given priority over the flourishing of others. For the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg this is clearly evident in the insistence of those settlers who have purchased land on the shores of lakes that *their* leisure, *their* entertainment, and *their* interests are threatened by the presence of manoomin on the lakes. The conversation has many ironic twists. Cottagers complain that James Whetung, who currently holds the rights to harvest manoomin on many of the local lakes in Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg land surrounding the Curve Lake Reserve, has created a "farm" on the lake that they want to enjoy. The irony is that the Williams Treaty of 1923 made legal the seizing of communal Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg land so that settlers could establish *farms* on it. Cottagers profess a love for the creatures and plants on the lake, even the small wild rice patches that they allow near the shore, yet they do not have lifeways that promote the flourishing of those creatures and plants.[18] Cottagers also profess respect for Indigenous rights to harvest traditionally, yet every year large swathes of manoomin are sabotaged by motorboats with chains strung between them.

In spite of the fact that colonization continues to suppress the access of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg to manoomin, there are those who continue to resist. James Whetung, and his company, Black Duck Wild Rice, not only harvest and plant wild rice, they also lead groups of school children, Indigenous peoples, and allies out into the manoomin every year to learn traditional harvesting and processing techniques. Other Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg people also spend time harvesting manoomin, in spite of the fact that they often face threats and verbal abuse from settlers in the area.[19] They do so because manoomin is central to their identity as Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg. They do so because this is who they are. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson puts it, "They want a beach. We want rice beds. You can't have both. They want to win. We *need* to win. They'll still be white people if they don't have the kind of beach they want. Our kids won't be Mississauga if we can't ever do a single Mississauga thing."[20]

18. While this may seem like a blanket statement, all the evidence is that biodiversity declines and habitat for wildlife is deeply compromised as shorelines become occupied by settlers. Daigle, "Tracing the Terrain," 302, refers to this recent twist in the story as "cottager colonization."

19. For an account of such an event see Simpson, *Accident,* 75–78.

20. Simpson, *Accident*, 78.

Reparation

Some call it a pipe dream.
Others, unhistorical.
But the vision is unexpectedly clear
and detailed.

There are dates:
seven weeks of years,
seven times seven years,
on the tenth day of the seventh month,
the day of atonement,
the trumpet shall be sounded,
you shall hallow the fiftieth year.[21]

There are laws about the land:
return to your land;
charge only for the harvests on the land;
the land shall not be sold in perpetuity;
provide for redemption of the land;
the land shall be released in the jubilee,
and the property shall be returned.

There are laws about the poor:
you shall support your relatives who fall into difficulty;
do not take interest in advance;
let them live with you;
those who sell themselves to you
are to be freed in the jubilee
to return to their ancestral property.

There are laws that link God with this land:
I will order my blessing,
so that the land will yield for three years;
the land shall not be sold in perpetuity,
for the land is mine.

It only seems like a pipe dream
to those with tight fists,
those who wish to keep what they have amassed,
who wish to pass the land that they have bought
(as if it were a commodity),

21. This and the following sections are based on Leviticus 25.

on to their children
(that the father's sin of hoarding
might be passed on to their children
and their children's children).

But the vision
is simple.
After a generation
the land returns into the care and affection
of the first servants.

The vision is simple.
Too simple
for a country with genocide
in its history,
and invasion in its past.

And yet,
that didn't stop Zacchaeus
from practicing jubilee.[22]
Zacchaeus, visited by Jesus,
having heard the stories of Jesus' words
to followers, disciples, rich men and teachers:
"Go, sell all that you have and give it to the poor."

Zacchaeus knew that his salvation
meant righting wrongs,
making reparations,
restoring what he had taken;
in short, returning the land.
Land he had foreclosed on,
land he had taken in payment of debt,
land he had casually amassed
to pass on to his children.

Zacchaeus knew that when Jesus said,
"Sell all that you have and give it to the poor,"
that meant,
"Return the land that you have taken
that made men and women, children and grandchildren poor.
Restore them to their places,
their lifeways,
their homes."

22. The Zacchaeus story is found in Luke 19:1–17.

Zacchaeus knew that jubilee was not a pipe dream.
He knew that reparations were not a pipe dream.
He knew that only with reparations
was reconciliation possible with his neighbours,
with his God,
and with the land,
returned once more into the care and affection
of those who served it,
not as commodity
but as gift.[23]

Sometimes an aha moment can turn everything on its head. Like the moment when it becomes clear that the jubilee legislation in Leviticus 25 is not directed to the poor, or to those who have lost their land, but to the wealthy, to those with privilege. They are the ones who are reminded that "in order to create a shalom system of social harmony, no person could be oppressed for too long without hope of ease and eventual release; no family could remain in poverty for generations; no land could be worked until it was depleted and useless; no animals could go hungry for too long. Any of these violations of shalom that were left unmitigated for too long would upset the natural order of reciprocity fixed in all creation."[24]

Those who have benefited from past injustices are the ones called to restore relationships and provide release for the oppressed. Those who have profited from the poverty of others are to give up their wealth so that poverty ends with their generation; those who have gained control over the land are the ones who are to relinquish it into the care of those whose lifeways were rooted in it for many more generations; those who have gained from the destruction of animal habitats are the ones called to self-sacrificially restore such habitats for the flourishing of all of creation.

At its heart this call is rooted in a biblical understanding of land as *gift*, an understanding that the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg understand well. And this call is rooted in a certain understanding of power: the power of a God whose authority is seen in self-sacrificial, self-giving love.

Jubilee is at the heart of reparations: making it right, levelling the playing field. Such a re-balancing should be at the heart of reconciliation.[25] "Per-

23. I recognize that I have simplified a complicated story that itself included genocide and invasion in its narratives. However, I accept Norman Gottwald's depiction of ancient Israel as an alliance of Indigenous and Hebrew peasants who resisted larger imperial control. See Gottwald, "Early Israel as Anti-Imperial," 5–22.

24. Woodley, *Shalom*, 30.

25. Simpson, *Dancing*, 22.

haps this is where we need to consider reparations. If one of the harms done to Indigenous peoples consisted of stripping them of control over their own foodways, perhaps one way of enacting redistribution is to engage in reparations which restore those foodways. In some cases, this may look like the restoration of land. It may also look like restoring foraging rights in public lands and lakes, or like private landowners granting hunting and gathering rights to Indigenous communities."[26]

In the place where I live, at the very least this would mean honoring the rights of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg to harvest manoomin. However, having the right to harvest isn't enough, for such rights are meaningless if the manoomin has been destroyed, or if access to the manoomin beds are restricted, or if there are so few places to harvest that there is insufficient manoomin for the community, or if harvesting occurs in a context not of ritual and ceremony but surrounded by abuse, suspicion and distrust.[27] A context needs to be created where manoomin can flourish in such a way that the foodways of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg can be sustained once more in all of their richness. And once the manoomin can flourish, the people will be able to flourish as well.

For Zacchaeus to imagine reparations, however, he needed to enter into a different story. Zacchaeus had to recognize that the story of the empire, where land was a commodity to be accumulated, was hollow and did not lead to flourishing and to life. He needed to recognize that the land was a gift that he had wrongly grasped, and that he needed to treat it as gift by giving it away. By entering into a different story, Zacchaeus, ironically, was able to come home. It is clear from the the story that the other villagers viewed him with distrust and suspicion. Is it possible that, like the other tax collectors in the Gospels, once he had made reparations he was invited to share food with those whom he had formerly oppressed? Was it possible that they were now able to be at home together?[28]

Reparations for the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg will require the same relinquishment by settlers of the dominant narrative. The narrative that says that land is "mine" if my family bought it (even if it was only half a century ago). It will require relinquishing the narrative that privileges the needs of settler society, settler leisure, and settler comfort over the flourishing of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg.[29] It will require an attempt to enter into the story

26. Verdun, *Imperial Food Systems,* 53.

27. Whyte, "Food Sovereignty," 348–50, 358.

28. I owe this insight to Aileen Verdun, in private conversation.

29. Whyte, "Food Sovereignty," 358, describes how settler society seeks to strengthen its own collective continuance at the expense of the collective continuance of Indigenous peoples.

of the land, the long story, the story that this land has told for millennia, and explore how that story and the story of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg are entwined. What is more, it will require the attempt to envision a new future, where the story continues with the flourishing of settler and Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg people together where the plants grow on the water. For if all cannot flourish, none can be at home.

Hope

When the stories of old
dreamed of the future,
they dreamed of water
flowing through the center of the community.
A river of life.[30]
For how can a community have life
if it is not connected to the water?

They dreamed
of a tree on both banks of the river.
A tree nourished by the river.
A tree that gives life.
For how can a community have life,
without the
maple and birch,
cedar and pine,
basswood and oak?

They dreamed of fruit on the tree,
produced each moon,
according to the season.
For how can a community have life
without fruit, each according to its moon:
the maple sugar moon,
the strawberry moon,
the wild rice moon?

They dreamed of leaves
for the healing of the nations.
For how can a community recover,
how can a community become whole,
unless they allow the trees to provide their medicines?

30. This section is based on Rev 22:1–2.

And not just for physical ills,
but also for the trauma,
the abuses of the spirit,
the genocide.
Only if the settler-colonizers allow the trees
to teach them,
will they be healed of the greed,
the privilege,
the pride
that has bound them.
Only if the trees
are allowed to speak
will the nations,
the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg
who have been here from time immemorial,
the settlers who have been here for a lifetime or two,
the immigrants who have been here for the blink of an eye,
be able to learn the lifeways of this place.
Only if the water is allowed
to bear the fruit of manoomin in its moon,
will the nations be able to learn to live together
in health and in peace.

"In Nishnaabeg thought," writes Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "resurgence is dancing on our turtle's back; it is visioning and dancing new realities and worlds into existence."[31] Part of that visioning is telling the stories of old, and dreaming them into the future. I would suggest that such visioning, such entering into the story and daring to dream a new vision is also the call that is extended to those of us who are settlers, those of us who are immigrants, those of us who follow Creator.

What could such a vision look like? What would it look like for the place where the plants grow on the water to become home for the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg and the settler alike? Could it possibly look like a homecoming?

Coming Home

I pray that it will come with a song,
rising over the lake at dawn,
calling the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg
from the far corners of their territories,

31. Simpson, *Dancing*, 70.

calling settlers and immigrants
from the same places,
calling us all to the manoomin harvest
at the time of the manoomin moon.

I pray that it will come with thanksgiving,
with prayers in Nishnaabewomin and English,
in Tibetan and Arabic.

I pray that we will be willing to learn from the elders
how to tell if the grains are ready,
how to bend the stalks,
how to tell if the parching is complete
and how to dance the husks away.

I pray that the sound of the grains
hitting the bottom of the canoe
will be joined by the laughter of healthy children,
the learning of old ricing songs,
and the creation of new ones,
the stories of elders,
and the song of the birds.

I pray that after the harvest
all will be fed at the feast,
sharing together the good gifts
that have been given from the land that we all cherish.

I pray that all will depart with enough:
enough laughter, enough companionship,
enough love for the journey,
enough manoomin for the winter.

I pray that not only will the manoomin flourish,
but that we will all flourish,
as we make home together,
in the land of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg,
where the manoomin grows
and calls us home.

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