

Decolonizing the Urban Space in Duncan Mercredi's Selected Poems

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Abstract:

In both the settler colonial and the Indigenous decolonial discourses, Turtle Island, Canada occupies a central position. Settlers sought to claim ownership and control over Indigenous land by turning it into a colonial urbanized space to erase the Indigenous peoples and their cultures. On the other hand, Indigenous Canadian writers, including Duncan Mercredi, aimed to reclaim their indigenous space by dismantling the colonial space through different strategies. However, disrupting the colonial urban space in Mercredi's selected poetry in the light of Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's concept of Biskaabiiyang to reclaim an Indigenous space through cultural resurgence is not yet approached. Thus, this article aims at investigating the decolonizing processes through which Mercredi creates an indigenous space of resistance, resurgence and emergence. The article applies the ideas in Simpson's *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Recreation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence* (2011), specifically the concept of resurgence through *Biskaabiiyang* which she literally defines as "returning to ourselves". The article concludes that restoring the Indigenous space is achievable by reconnecting the Indigenous peoples to their land through cultural resurgence which involves revitalizing elements of Indigenous culture such as storytelling, the concept of kinship, drumming and dancing in order to put an end to colonialism.

Keywords: *Biskaabiiyang*, colonial space, Duncan Mercredi, resurgence, storytelling.

إنهاء استعمار الحيز الحضري في قصائد دنكان ميركيري المختارة

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الملخص:

في كلا الخطابين الاستعماري الاستيطاني وإنهاء استعمار السكان الأصليين، تحتل جزيرة السلاحف (كندا) موقعاً مركزياً. سعى المستوطنون إلى المطالبة بالملكية والسيطرة على أراضي السكان الأصليين من خلال تحويلها إلى مساحة حضرية استعمارية لمحو الشعوب الأصلية وثقافتهم. من ناحية أخرى، سعى الكنديون من السكان الأصليين، بمن فيهم دنكان ميركيري، إلى استعادة حيزهم الأصلي من خلال تفكيك الفضاء الاستعماري باستخدام استراتيجيات مختلفة. ومع ذلك، فإن تفكيك الفضاء الحضري الاستعماري في أشعار ميركيري المختارة في ضوء مفهوم "العودة إلى أنفسنا" لدى الكاتبة ليان بيتاساموساكي سيمبسون لاستعادة مساحة السكان الأصليين من خلال الانبعاث الثقافي لم يتم التطرق إليه بعد. وبالتالي، يهدف هذا المقال إلى استقصاء عمليات إنهاء الاستعمار التي يخلق من خلالها ميركيري للشعوب الأصلية مساحة للمقاومة والانبعاث والظهور. يطبق المقال الأفكار الواردة في كتاب سيمبسون "الرقص على ظهر سلحفتنا: قصص عن إعادة خلق النيشنابيج والانبعاث والظهور الجديد (2011)"، وتحديدًا مفهوم الانبعاث من جديد من خلال مفهوم "العودة إلى أنفسنا". ويخلص المقال إلى أن استعادة مساحة السكان الأصليين يمكن تحقيقها من خلال إعادة ربط الشعوب الأصلية بأرضهم من خلال الانبعاث الثقافي الذي ينطوي على إحياء عناصر من ثقافة السكان الأصليين مثل سرد القصص ومفهوم القرابة وقرع الطبول والرقص من أجل وضع حد للاستعمار.

الكلمات المفتاحية : "العودة إلى أنفسنا"، الحيز الاستعماري، دنكان ميركيري، الانبعاث، سرد القصص.

1. Introduction

Duncan Mercredi is a Cree/Métis writer and storyteller. He was born in Misipawistik, later known as Grand Rapids, Manitoba. From a young age, Mercredi was chosen and trained by his kokum (grandmother) to be “the storyteller or, ..., the keeper of the fire” (Mercredi, 2014, 18). In his own words, he “spent those early years learning from [his] kokum. The stories were both real and imagined, never knowing where reality and fantasy started or ended” (Mercredi, 2010a, 125). His grandmother’s stories and those retold by other Indigenous people in his community informed his writings and shaped his Indigenous identity and relationship with the land.

Another formative force which went into the shaping of Mercredi’s poetry and effected his community and land was the damaging impact of settler colonialism that was symbolized by the construction of the Grand Rapids Dam in 1960. Mercredi witnessed the destructive impact of the construction of the hydro dam on the Saskatchewan river and eventually on his community because, according to him, “when the river slowed down, our life slowed down,” (Sabiston, 2013, 66).

In 1970, Mercredi moved to Winnipeg where he experienced alienation and racism. Yet, he developed ways of confronting cultural uprootedness. He found home in this city which reasserted his connection to his Indigenous culture and land. Despite its urban character, Winnipeg was lived by the poet as another wilderness (Sabiston, 2013). Speaking about his movement from the reserve to Winnipeg, Mercredi declares: “The city, to me, was no different than growing up in Grand Rapids in the '50s... To me the wilderness had just been moved in to the heart of the city” (qtd. in Sabiston, 2013, 53). Envisioning the city as a wilderness underscores the poet's decolonizing rearticulation of the colonial city as a decolonized space of cultural presence and continuity by confronting and disrupting the colonial dichotomous

division between the settlers and the Indigenous people, and between the city and the reserve (Lewis, 2021).

For Mercredi, one way of reconnecting with Winnipeg as a decolonized space is walking its streets. For him, Winnipeg is a repository of voices and stories to be discovered through the practice of walking it. This act of walking the city and searching for voices and stories is “connected to the traditional hunting and harvesting activities” (Cariou, 2020 b, 7). This reasserts Mercredi’s Indigenous relationship to the land. However, Mercredi acknowledges the destructive impact of colonialism on his culture. This impact is deeply felt in his encounters with the colonizer on the city streets. Therefore, in his poetry, Mercredi’s vision of the urban setting is complex. In some remarkable poems like “this city is red,” he envisions the city as the post-hydro landscape which is connected to the colonial legacy of displacement, residential school trauma, and environmental damage. However, the city is also reconfigured as a site of Indigenous resistance, cultural revitalization, kinship and belonging. This decolonizing spatiality of urban space will be investigated by applying the decolonizing discourse articulated by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson in her book, *Dancing On Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re- Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (2011).

2. Decolonization and Resurgence in Simpson’s *Dancing On Our Turtle’s Back*

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson is a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg story-teller, scholar, and activist and a member of Alderville First Nation. *Dancing On Our Turtle’s Back* is her critical intervention with colonialism through resistance and resurgence which she articulated from her Nishnaabeg culture as a decolonizing process (Simpson, 2016). In the book, Simpson documents the Indigenous people’s struggles against the destructive impact of colonialism and cognitive imperialism, and seeks to develop modes of resistance and resurgence. She speaks about a procession of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg communities who walked down the main

street of Nogojiwanong on June 21, 2009 (2011, 4). Simpson states “we wove our way through the city streets, streets where we had all indirectly, or directly, experienced the violence of colonialism, dispossession and desperation at one time or another” (2011, 9). This quote highlights the Indigenous people’s response to their lived experiences of racism, injustice and colonial rejection in urban settings. However, Simpson expresses her strong connection to her Indigenous land by referring to it with its Indigenous name, Nogojiwanong, which refers to the Native territory of her Anishinaabeg people who are “a group of Indigenous people comprised of the Ojibwa, Odawa, Potawatomi, Chippewa, Mississauga, Algonquin, and Delaware communities who controlled the Great Lakes Basin since the late 1600s” (<https://www.trentu.ca>). Thus, she reasserts her presence along with her Nishnaabeg people on urban streets of a land which still belongs to them.

It’s important to note that Simpson’s attachment to her Indigenous culture and land forms the core of her modes of resistance and resurgence that aim to confront and unsettle the colonial modes of normalized dispossession.

In *Dancing On Our Turtle’s Back*, she centers her decolonizing method on her Nishnaabeg intelligence, Creation and Recreation stories, land-based and creative practices. In other words, she aims to reconnect the Nishnaabeg intelligence, knowledge systems, languages, traditions, creativity, and spiritual world with the indigenous land to reenact decolonizing resurgence. To do that, she invokes Gzhwe Mnidoo, which is Nishnaabeg term translated as "Great Spirit" or "Great Mystery.” This force of creation is pivotal in Simpson’s notion of resurgence and emergence because Nishnaabeg people “use the creative, innovative intelligence imparted to [them] by Gzhwe Mnidoo to create and voice [their] truths, to strategize [their] response, and ultimately to act in creating new and better realities” (Simpson, 2011, 105). It means that Simpson’s decolonizing framework centers on Gzhwe Mnidoo as the source of Nishnaabeg intelligence, knowledge and creativity which form the core

of resurgence. According to Simpson, the body of Nishnaabeg knowledge provided by Gzhwe Mnidoo should be accessed through Indigenous cultures “by singing, dancing, fasting, dreaming, visioning, participating in ceremony, apprenticing with Elders, practicing our life ways and living our knowledge, by watching, listening and reflecting in a good way (2011, 46). Resurgence should be achieved by reviving the Nishnaabeg Knowledge through creative practices such as dancing, singing, drumming and storytelling. Simpson named this decolonizing process of cultural revitalization as “Biskaabiiyang”, which she literally translates to “returning to ourselves” (2011, 57). For her, Biskaabiiyang “is a process which requires the Indigenous people to decolonize the settler colonial space by “pick[ing] up the things we were forced to leave behind, whether they are songs, dances, values, or philosophies, and bring them into existence in the future” (Simpson, 2011, 54-55). Here, Biskaabiiyang serves as a decolonizing mode of dismantling the colonial spatiality. By returning to creative practices which are communal, Biskaabiiyang creates individual and collective Indigenous acts of resurgence and ‘mobilization’ which challenge the invisibility of the Indigenous people in the urban space. Thus, the colonial city is transformed into a decolonized space of Indigenous presence (Simpson, 2011). This spatial decolonization also subverts the colonial discourse regarding Indigenous history which is seen as dead and irrelevant, by stressing the indispensability of the Indigenous ancestors in preserving their culture for future generations. Simpson affirms that “Biskaabiiyang does not literally mean returning to the past, but rather re-creating the cultural and political flourishing of the past to support the well-being of our contemporary citizens” (2011, 56). Biskaabiiyang acts as a decolonizing process because it resists the colonial distortion of Indigenous past. Simpson opposes the logic of colonialism and cognitive imperialism which seeks to sever her people from the teachings and the resurgent lifestyle of their elders and ancestors. She reconceptualized her elders, not as victims, but as the “...strongest

visionaries [who] inspire [the Nishnaabeg people] to vision alternative futures” (2011, 22). Her ancestors are instrumental in her anticolonial discourse of resurgence and new emergence. Simpson’s ideas on Biskaabiiyang as a decolonizing mode of resurgence through revival of the communal creative and land-based practices find their perfect application in Duncan Mercredi’s poetry about the Indigenous people’s lived experiences in the urban settings.

3. Decolonizing the Urban Space in Duncan Mercredi’s Selected Poems

From the very beginning of his poem, “this city is red” (2020), Mercredi acknowledges the Indigenous peoples’ experience of living in the city. Based on his personal and immediate experiences and his deep and thoughtful observations of the lived experiences of the Indigenous peoples in the city, Duncan’s poetry serves as a truthful act of witnessing and documenting the unjust and destructive legacy of colonialism on Indigenous peoples and their cultures (Cariou, 2020a). In his description of the city, Duncan writes:

Built on the bones of a thousand generations, this city is main street, each generation with its own stories told in back alleys and city core, hells kitchen, little chicago, with cracked blood filled sidewalks tell tales of broken bodies and defeated minds, nightmares released with each bottle emptied, inhaling a bag full of poison with visions, just to live another day, muting out the voices that hold your memories and enemies, this city is red, north end country song red, a promise followed down from a northern road, seeking a dream armed only with hope, walking down portage to wolseley to st. james then north again, with the same answer, no room, no job, don’t bother me, I’ll call the cops, shoulders lowered we carry on, finding solace in a pipe full of dreams, watching a liquid filled needle enter vein, fill with blood then empty again, spinning, spinning, always out of control, the room

goes round and round, it doesn't seem so bad now, there's always
tomorrow, a brighter happier day ahead, these are only dreams, we can't fly,
this city is red, full of lies, deceit and false promises, ... (1-15).

Mercredi's vision of the urban city is both "ugly and beautiful/ at the same time..." (21-22). Despite Mercredi's portrayal of the city as a hostile place where Indigenous people experience alienation, colonial discrimination, racial violence, poverty, drug addiction and hatred, the city also serves as a site of Indigenous resistance and resurgence (Cariou, 2020a). This double vision of the city is highlighted in the title of the poem. The color 'red' refers to the racial violence experienced by the Indigenous people in contemporary urban settings. It also refers to their identity as resilient and autonomous. This complex experience of the city as a site of both marginalization and belonging, suffering and resilience, invisibility and resurgence is also highlighted in the poet's reference to 'the bones' in the first line. The word 'bones' does not only connote colonial violence against the Indigenous people. According to Emma LaRocque in her book, *When the other is me: Native resistance discourse, 1850-1990*, Indigenous people's bones shape their resistance, not their victimization (2010). The poet continues his exploration of the complex character of the urban space. He writes:

...pure white snow of winter hides the needles and the pain,
sound of the drum, muted by the walls, regalia of colour flash across a
gymnasium floor, the song echoes off the walls, slips through the crack of
the door, the song echoes off the walls and travels down main and selkirk,
..., this city is red, ceremony red, silent
witness to the past, held in darkness, rattling the bones that hold memories,
(22-31).

In the quote above, Mercredi mentions cultural elements which are essential to the preservation of Indigenous cultures. Elements such as the 'drum', 'regalia', 'songs',

‘ceremony’, ‘bones’, ‘memories’ and ‘ghost dancer’. For the Indigenous peoples, the drum occupies a pivotal position in their culture. The drum is associated with their singing, dancing and ceremony. It is endowed with religious and spiritual significance as a sacred being and a relative which must be treated respectfully. It is also seen as a divine gift and a living force which maintains a spiritual union between the singers, the drummers, the dancers, the ancestors and their land. The drumbeats connect the heartbeats of the Indigenous peoples with the heartbeats of the earth (Nadeau, 2020), thus reclaiming Indigenous people’s kinship with their land.

Fast contends that the drum also

evokes memory and life itself; the rhythms of nature and spirit, and of the songs and stories that voice and connect them; the world of communal relationships in which the drum sounds and which is the ground of Native people’s resistance and their continuance, their survival. Other poets, too, evoke the drum’s rhythms to remind us of the power of spirit and the hope for continuity” (1999, p. IX).

The drumbeats encapsulate the Indigenous people’s resistance, resurgence and their communal sense of belonging which encompass their land, culture and nations. The drum serves as a means of cultural continuity and transmission. In his truthful and immediate manner, the speaker of the poem depicts the psychological impact of colonialism on the Indigenous peoples living in the city:

this city is red, I can walk it at
night, hidden in shadows, my footsteps echo yours, you walk/run to avoid
your fear, that fear is me, daytime finds me invisible, you see what you only
want to see, venting your rage in the local rag, haven’t we paid enough,
what more do they want, get a job, work like everyone else, an eyesore,
better dead than red,... (pp. 67-68, 31-36).

The speaker feels unable to navigate the urban street where white people view him as a menace. In the expression “daytime finds me invisible”, Mercredi heightens the speaker’s sense of detachment and physical and cultural invisibility. The speaker experiences feelings of being bodily and culturally rejected in the colonial urban space where his physical and cultural invisibility are created by the colonial power structure. In the urban space, the speaker finds himself

.... colour divided only by imaginary
borders afraid to cross, hiding our faces into ourselves, but some of us
sneak across those invisible lines, we tell stories, we laugh, we cry, we heal,
we dance, we sing, our heartbeat is the drum, we wake the bones that rattle
your hate, this city is dirty, but it’s far more dirty, blowing in from the
prairies,... (36-41)

Here, applying the concept of Biskaabiiyang challenges the colonial production of urban spatiality that aims to erase the indigenous peoples from their lands. For Simpson, returning to the Indigenous culture through Biskaabiiyang which involves the revitalization of the Indigenous creative practices of singing, dancing, drumming, storytelling and ceremony becomes both an individual and a collective process of contesting colonialism through cultural resurgence leading to transformation, renewal, healing, and liberation (Nadeau, 2020). In “this city is red”, these resurgent practices of cultural expression reassert the Indigenous peoples’ sense of autonomy and self-determination, and maintain their unbreakable ties with their land and culture. This helps dismantle the colonial discourse which aims at separating the Indigenous peoples from their land. Therefore, Indigenous cultural continuity and presence is validated through Indigenous cultural resurgence which reasserts the connections between the Indigenous histories, traditions and communities (Truemner-Caron, 2016).

According to Lewis, unsettling the colonial narrative of normalized dispossession forms the core of the Indigenous decolonizing land politics. This results in reasserting the Indigenous presence through Biskaabiiyang and its reclamation of Indigenous land-based practices and knowledges which engage in a politics of space-making that counters the colonial practices of spatial domination aiming at the Indigenous peoples' removal from their land. Despite acknowledging the destructive legacy of colonialism which made the Indigenous people as "part of a forgotten story, / one line in the pages of this city's past, filed away as a statistic, an/ unfortunate ending to a heartbeat," (48-50), the speaker foresees the disappearance of the colonizers who will "become dust," (51). Therefore, the speaker manages to challenge the colonial myth which renders the Indigenous people as dead. He will reemerge as empowered and free to "... dance on your/ ashes, when the seed of a new flower blossoms, after your ashes have/ settled becoming one with the soil, I will dance again (51-53).

In the extract above, the speaker highlights the ongoing struggles of the Indigenous peoples to maintain cultural revitalization and spatial reclamation by confronting and dismantling the destructive forces of colonialism. To use Simpson's words, Mercredi seeks to "dance a new world into existence" (77).

Dancing reconnects the dancer with his land, thus liberating it from the colonizer who is eventually turned into dust which will fertilize the land. Rather than being subsumed by colonialism, the indigenous land will replace the colonial urban spatiality. In this way, dancing and other creative and land-based practices "transform the colonial outside into a flourishing of the Indigenous inside" (Simpson, 2011, 15). They serve as decolonizing practices which reassert the "emplacement" of the Indigenous peoples on their lands against their "replacement" by the settler colonial spatial practices of control (Lewis, 2021).

Thus, Biskaabiiyang involves deconstructing the colonial spatializing of the Native people and their land as part of "the imaginative geographies of empire" (Lewis,

2020, p. 151) by emplacing the Native bodies on their land. Employing the natural imagery of ‘a new flower’ reasserts Simpson’s conceptualization of Biskaabiiyang “as a visioning process which acts to create new and just realities and spaces, [and] grounds resurgence or decolonization as a “new emergence” (Simpson, 2011, 57).

This “visioning of new realities” (Simpson, 2011, 37) unsettles the colonial claim and authority over the land as an urbanized colonial space, and restores the Indigenous kinship relations with the land. The speaker’s dance reenacts his embodied resistance, grounded resurgence and continued presence (Simpson, 2011). Despite being connected with the colonial narrative of cultural erasure and land dispossession, the city is still envisioned as Nishnaabeg land that carries the seed of the Indigenous resistance and resurgence.

Like many Indigenous writers, both Simpson and Mercredi stressed the pivotal role of dreams and visions in shaping the ‘new realities’ of Indigenous resistance and resurgence. For Simpson, “dreams and visions propel resurgence because they provide Nishnaabeg with both the knowledge from the spiritual world and processes for realizing those visions. Dreams and visions provide glimpses of decolonized spaces and transformed realities that we have collectively yet to imagine” (2011, 37). They serve as the conduit that connects the Indigenous people with their spiritual world, thus inspiring them to

.... rise above the stink and smog
with self induced visions
one can see the distance without borders or horizons
leaving reality unimpeded
we walk the silent streets after the city sleeps
we sing
this city is red
this city is red (pp.69, 89-96).

Mercredi's insistent repetition of the present tense in the line "this city is red" indicates the ongoing struggle of Indigenous people to maintain their bond with their land and culture. In the extract below, the speaker uses verbs such as "hear" and "listen" to reassert his embodied interconnectedness with his Indigenous history and culture that are engrained in his land. This sense of interconnectedness will shape his land's decolonized future. The speaker is still able to trace

the trails hidden beneath the concrete paths

i listen carefully

when the moon is full

i still hear its heartbeat

and the chant is never forgotten

the old ones never left

they never stopped dancing

that beat that lies beneath the soil

is slowly waking

red city (97-106).

Mercredi decolonizes the urban space by reconceptualizing it as an Indigenous space. He emphasizes his strong connection to his Indigenous culture and land, which is depicted as a living force. 'The trails', the 'heartbeat' of the land which the speaker still hears, 'the chant' and "that beat that lies beneath the soil" align with Simpson's belief that "every piece of North America is Indigenous land regardless of whether it has a city on top of it, or it is under threat, or it is coping with industrial development" (195). Mercredi combines the personal pronoun 'i,' with the collective expressions 'trails,' 'chant' and the 'old ones' with "...the beat that lies beneath the soil," to create individual and collective modes of resistance and resurgence that mobilize the colonial space.

The continued presence of the “the old ones [who] never left/ [and] never stopped dancing” (102-103) and their preservation of their Indigenous culture for future generations is decolonial because it deconstructs the colonial history which renders the Indigenous peoples, including their ancestors as weak, illiterate and dead. According to Simpson, her ancestors:

...resisted by simply surviving and being alive. They resisted by holding onto their stories. They resisted by taking the seeds of our culture and political systems and packing them away, so that one day another generation of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg might be able to plant them (13-14)

The Indigenous ancestors serve as keepers of Nishnaabeg culture which is the core of Indigenous resistance and resurgence. Through Biskaabiiyang, the colonial distortion of Indigenous past is challenged and subverted by revitalizing the Nishnaabeg ‘cultural and political flourishing’ with the aim of creating a “politically vigorous and ethically instructive visions of place” (Lewis, 152). Therefore, the slow waking of the city through singing, drumming, dancing and storytelling represents the new decolonial space of nation-building (Charlton, 2018) because “these acts of Indigenous creativity mobilize the Indigenous peoples to restore the sense of solidarity and connection to community (Simpson, 2011, 10).

Although at the beginning of the poem, Mercredi depicts the city as an urban space associated with the Indigenous peoples’ alienation, struggles, and poverty, and as the repository of Indigenous blood and bones that are the result of colonial racial violence, at the end, he confidently addresses settler colonizers, and foresees an Indigenous future free from their colonial domination.

Decolonizing the urban space by unsettling the colonial spatial politics is also reinforced in Mercredi’s poem, “racing across the land” (2020). Contrary to some of

his city poems that acknowledge the presence of the destructive forces of colonialism, this poem starts by establishing the erasure of colonialism and its urban space. Unlike the titles of poems such as “this city is red” which directly engages with the urban space, the title “racing across the land” celebrates the re-emergence of a future indigenous space which reasserts the presence of the Indigenous peoples and their transformative and liberative relationship with their land. In the title of the poem, Mercredi employs the word ‘racing’ which shifts the speaker’s relationship with the land. Contrary to the sense of alienation, wandering and lack of direction felt by speakers in poems such as “this city is red,” freedom and strong ties with the land are reasserted by using the word ‘racing’ in the title. Additionally, the unbreakable ties between the Indigenous people and their land are reinforced by employing the mnemonic device of repetition which adds to the oral quality of the poem (Minor, 2016). The speaker repeatedly and directly addresses the colonizers telling them that:

long after you are gone
i will be here
long after you are gone
i will remain
spirit will dance again
in spruce and muskeg
winds will whisper our names
while yours will be silent
no sign of you will be found (2001, p. 209, 1-9).

Such use of the technique of repetition enables Mercredi to contest the colonial discourse of spatial control, Indigenous dispossession and erasure by reclaiming a decolonized space of Indigenous presence and colonial removal. The repetition of the line “long after you are gone” envisions a decolonized future space in which colonialism is “a temporary incursion into a continuous relationship between

Indigenous people and the land” (Cariou, 2020b, 8). The speaker defies the settler colonizers by prophesying the end of colonialism as “the cities [they] have built/ hoping to leave as [their] legacy/ will crumble and fall/ becoming dust on the land” (11-14). After the crumbling and the fall of the colonial cities and the subsequent end of the system of settler colonialism:

...the prairie grass will bend
to the wind once more
and my spirit will join
the buffalo
racing across the land
our dance pounding across the land
long after you are gone (16-22)

The Indigenous land and culture will survive and reemerge through the Indigenous land-based worldview which subverts the colonial discourse of dispossession and control over the Indigenous bodies and lands by reestablishing the Indigenous embodied resistance and grounded resurgence through the relationality of the speaker’s ‘spirit’ with ‘the buffalo’ and the land.

Instead of asserting the erasure of the Indigenous peoples, the city will be transformed to an Indigenous space reclaimed through the removal of the colonizers. Therefore, instead of being a colonial space which asserts the colonial control, the Indigenous absence, invisibility and erasure, the city will be transformed by the Indigenous peoples into a decolonized space of Indigenous kinship, presence, autonomy, self-determination, cultural continuity, resurgence and emergence.

In Mercredi’s “A Remembering Smile” (2020), the speaker expresses his personal and lived experiences of the city streets which are hostile because they are “full of strangers with eyes distant / unseeing” (2-3). Despite the feelings of urban hostility

and alienation, the speaker is “still hearing the river / the river wild and free / alive” (12-14). By reconnecting with his childhood memories, the speaker reconnects with the river which was a living companion and a source of the Indigenous peoples’ freedom (Cariou, 2020a). Here, memory is a decolonizing process because it reasserts the presence of the Indigenous land and river in the urban setting (Simpson, 2011).

Although he struggles on the city streets, the speaker smiles because of the healing potential of memory. According to Simpson, “the only way to find healing is through memory and the reclamation of what has been lost” (2011, 40). Here, Simpson links Biskaabiiyang with memory and healing. Memory is one way of reclaiming Indigeneity. Therefore, healing takes place when Indigenous people reclaim, through memory, their kinship with their land, feel cultural pride and maintain autonomy. In this way, memory subverts the colonial discourse regarding the Indigenous people’s past, and unsettles the colonial urban space by reconfiguring it into an Indigenous space of empowerment and healing.

In “yesterday’s song” (2020), the speaker expresses his wish to be transported from his urban setting to a previous time and place so that he can reunite with his Indigenous land and pre-colonial past (Minor, 2016). He yearns to “slip into muskeg and spruce encircling [himself] with northern lights/ wolf songs and night hawks rustling the underbrush” (1-3). The speaker does not long to escape to the past, but rather he seeks to return to it so as to restore his kinship and relationality with the land and the animals through ‘muskeg and spruce,’ ‘wolf songs’ and night hawks’. He acknowledges the urban influences on him. Because of the impact of the urban space, his “feet are concrete hardened” and his “spirit tells stories of neon and blues” (5-6). However, despite these urban influences, the speaker is still “the son of muskeg and spruce / [he] still dance[s] to the music of yesterday” (7-8). Here, Mercredi reasserts the presence of Indigenous culture, its continuity and resurgence (Minor, 2016). By reasserting the vitality of his people’s traditions and by celebrating his

Indigenous culture, the speaker resists the negative impact of the urban space. He also resists his colonized condition by rejecting the internalization of the colonial discourse which seeks to make the Indigenous peoples ashamed of their cultural identity. In other words, the speaker manages to decolonize his mind by feeling cultural pride (LaRocque, 2010). In *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back*, Simpson made a powerful statement about colonial shame by stating:

“We are not shameful people. ... Shame can only take hold when we are disconnected from the stories of resistance within our own families and communities. ... shame [is] an insidious and infectious part of the cognitive imperialism that was aimed at convincing us that we were a weak and defeated people, and that there was no point in resisting or resurging” (12)

Thus, Mercredi aims at countering colonial shame caused by cognitive colonialism and imperialism through Indigenous presence and resurgence. Resisting colonial shame is a decolonizing act because it unsettles the logic of settler colonialism which employs shame as a strategic tool to force dispossession on the Indigenous people (Charlton, 2018). Thus, Mercredi's decolonizing method aims not only at the subversion of the colonial stereotypes, but also on the reclamation of the Indigenous peoples' humanity by reasserting their moral, emotional and intellectual agency (LaRocque, 2010). Despite the feelings of alienation, hate, poverty, racial violence and invisibility experienced by the Indigenous people on the city streets, Mercredi manages to decolonize the urban space by deconstructing the colonial spatialization of the urban streets and turning them into sites of Indigenous communal resistance, resurgence and cultural presence.

Conclusion

Like many indigenous Canadian writers, Duncan Mercredi is concerned with the destructive impact of colonialism on his culture and land. Reasserting the resistance, resilience, and survival of his Indigenous people and their cultures serve as the core of Mercredi's anticolonial stance. His poetry is informed by the Indigenous people's struggle against racial violence, poverty, marginalization and alienation. These experiences are part of his complex vision of the urban space which is also envisioned as a decolonized space of embodied resistance, grounded resurgence and new emergence. This decolonial spatialization is articulated by applying Simpson's concept of Biskaabiiyang. The concept stresses the relationality of the Indigenous peoples and their land by reclaiming their creative, land-based and communal practices such as storytelling, dancing and drumming. These practices unsettle the colonial narrative of land control and normalized dispossession. Through these practices, Mercredi transforms the colonial space which centers the settler colonizers and their cultures and seeks to erase Indigenous cultures. Therefore, Indigenous cultures are recentered, celebrated and liberated from the colonial discourse which renders them as invalid and dead. By returning to their Indigenous knowledge, intelligence, traditions and art, Indigenous people confront colonial shame with cultural pride and resurgence. They also challenge the colonial distortion of their past by reasserting their inseparability from their land and celebrating the pivotal role of their ancestors in shaping their resisting and resurgent practices. This leads to a new vision of decolonized space that reaffirms the presence, resilience and autonomy of the Indigenous people.

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