



# Projecting Decolonial Love

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by Natalie Harkin

In 2013 Leanne Simpson, Nishnaabeg writer and activist-educator, wrote a book *Islands of Decolonial Love* – a collection of short fictionalised gems including prose, poetry and songs imbued with characters who, as described by ARP Books, *confront the often heartbreaking challenge of pairing the desire to live loving and observant lives with a constant struggle to simply survive the historical and ongoing injustices of racism and colonialism*. This book is accompanied by a stunning [online soundtrack](#) of instrumentals and spoken word poetry; poignant, cutting and astute, and surrounded by oceans that connect and beckon us to dive deep and dip shallow into her worlds. Leanne Simpson inspires me to attempt something new: to curate my words into a different kind of sound-bite prose – loving reminders that we are sovereign, complex beings with multiple subjectivities and histories – to float between, to step ashore, and that dare us to sink or swim.

In September 2015 I was part of the 'SPRING to Action' event conceived and facilitated by digital/print media artist, writer, activist-theorist and friend Dr Teri Hoskin. Teri curated this community arts dialogue in response to the Venice Biennale's *Creative Time Summit* held just one month earlier; I loved the concept of grassroots presenters from around the world live-streaming ideas, programs and successes to transform and negotiate local and global neo-liberal mine-fields. Their stories were spatially distant yet intimate and connected, akin to Leanne Simpson's *islands of decolonial love* – a showcase of strategic people-power through the arts for environmental, socio-economic and cultural survival. It was indeed nourishment for the heart, mind and spirit – one of those small yet potent events that linger.



For this Adelaide *Summit* I presented with mixed-media artist, cyber-fem activist and writer, Dr Francesca da Rimini – an interactive to-and-fro poetic-prose consideration of the archives we live in, and in-between, and those archives we actively create and re-invent in response to State power. The forum space and place was particularly relevant. The Radford Auditorium is a small heritage building built in 1867, located behind the Art Gallery of South Australia and part of Adelaide's North Terrace 'cultural-precinct'; a boulevard of iconic cultural institutions that celebrate South Australia's colonial history, and are promoted to be 'as rich as the collections they hold'. The Auditorium was associated with the Mounted Police and used as a military store by early Colonial and Commonwealth forces, as well as the State's archive repository and keeper of Aboriginal records. It was an interesting time to be presenting there as I was in the final stages of writing my thesis – an archival-poetic interrogation of the State's colonial archives, including records from these very institutions.

There is a suppressed implicit violence underpinning this cultural-precinct that resonates in particular ways for Aboriginal South Australians. The buildings include: the Museum of South Australia, built to replicate the Natural History Museum in London; the Mortlock Library; the Mounted Police Barracks and Armory complex, that also housed gallows and a small morgue; the first Aboriginal School, Destitute Asylum, Chapel, Lying-in Home and Girls Reformatory; a Rations Depot, and the Aborigines Protectors Office, now the Migration Museum. Across the road, imposing sandstone walls surround Government House, and a steep parkland slopes into the Parade Grounds where Adelaide Writers Week is held. This was in fact the old limestone quarry, located on a significant Kurna 'Red Kangaroo' dreaming site. I'm not Kurna, and this is not my story to tell, however our elders tell us that this site is sacred and important, and it is partially documented for the public record. The site was mined as a limestone source for buildings within this precinct, including the adjacent gothic landmark, St Peter's Cathedral. The racist irony is not lost here, as one sacred place was built at the expense of another.



I remember that perfect Spring Adelaide satellite *Summit* morning. I arrived early enough to meander through the precinct and to be still with these limestone–sandstone buildings. I took photos of the walls, and pressed my cheeks against them. I traced the mortar with my fingertips. I stared into the tiny gaps and cracks and searched for counter–narratives. Teri Hoskin began the event by acknowledging country and I read some work, including a reflective rant–come–poetic–narrative tracing some of this history, simply titled ‘[Cultural Precinct](#)’. The participants knew little about the site. They hadn’t had to think critically about the colonial archive or archiving processes, such as who consigns and classifies the archive, or who determines what is left in and out, and from whose perspective. They hadn’t had to negotiate these institutions to access family records, and they weren’t aware of the insurmountable data that had been collected and contained within them. The South Australian Museum boasts the largest collection of

Aboriginal records, artifacts and human remains in the world, thanks to

ABORIGINAL RECORDS, ARTIFACTS AND HUMAN REMAINS IN THE WORLD, THANKS TO the *Board of Anthropological Research* expeditions comprising interdisciplinary teams of ‘experts’ in biology, anthropology, pathology, physiology and psychology. They ‘set up camp’ outside our communities around Australia to take photographs, measure facial features, take blood and hair samples, record genealogies and stories, make plaster body and face casts, collect skulls and bones, and so much more. The *Spring to Action* participants, on that beautiful Adelaide day, hadn’t really considered the kinds of dehumanising acts that had taken place within the confines of these sacred-rock walls, or confronted the will of the State to eradicate the ‘Aboriginal problem’ through past measures that controlled and determined the lives of the living, and the remains of the dead.

This cultural-precinct is clearly no easy place to navigate. One month after this *Spring to Action* event, I was projecting poetry, images and short videos on these very walls with my *Unbound Collective* sisters for ‘[Sovereign Acts – Act 2](#)’, in the Tarnanthi Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art. This *Unbound* artistic collaboration with Ali Gumillya Baker (curator), Faye Rosas Blanch and Simone Ulalka Tur, actively disrupted this precinct in unanticipated ways. As Ali states: *The work traces ideologies and representations of colonisation, eugenics, assimilation, collections, race, ethics, storytelling. It asks questions of our capacities as Aboriginal peoples to move beyond ambivalent colonial constructions of identity. It asks, what are the ethical conditions of collective freedom?*

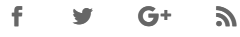
Ali's original vision for *Unbound* was to curate a body of experimental work *to explore complex ideas of being both bound and free; what we are bound to historically and, as sovereign people, what we choose to (un)bind ourselves to and from, both now and into the future.* We walked silently between these buildings to project our work on the limestone and sandstone walls with handheld projectors. It was one way to repatriate love and agency back to our families and ancestors who were trapped in the confines of these walls, and as Ali says, *in the process of these Sovereign Acts we transform ourselves and our worlds.*

This *Collective* has allowed me to act on my desire to work affectively with space and time in this cultural-precinct public space; to make apparent and instigate the haunting of the haunted spaces and buildings, and to collectively conjure memories and experiences, through all the senses. Something profound occurred in those performative moments, like we left an indelible imprint on those limestone walls – projecting new narratives beyond its established meaning; our *islands of decolonial love.*

*we are your blind spot the invisible made visible*

*the absent made present with love we are on Kurna land.*

– Unbound Collective, [Sovereign Love Poem #7](#)



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