

Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Rehearsals for Living*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022. ISBN: 9781642597363 (cloth); ISBN: 9781642596892 (paper); ISBN: 9781642597158 (ebook)

Last summer, I was wandering the Atlantic coastlines barefoot with my friend Megan. Our toes grazed the ocean's frigid waters as we walked the shoreline. It was late July, and the ocean was unnervingly icy: 12 degrees Celsius, the coldest July ocean in nearly a decade. A jet stream has been deflected, causing extreme heat somewhere else, and unusual cold here. Climatologists call these instances—where weather systems get stuck in place for extended periods of time—atmospheric blockings. As the globe continues to warm, these events will accelerate the premature death of the planet's most vulnerable communities. I experience a sort of paralysis. Perhaps you've felt something similar when confronting the magnitude and violence of climate catastrophe. How do we carry on when we are knowingly ending the world? *Rehearsals for Living*, Robyn Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's newest book, doesn't accept the nature and terms of a question like this. It refuses to see this world ending as uniquely contemporary, ecological, or as collectively caused. Instead, it confronts the multiple crises of our times on entirely different terms.

Written in epistolary form, *Rehearsals for Living* strikes an unfamiliar balance between dystopic and utopic, while remaining distinctly non-fiction. Maynard and Simpson do not conceal the stakes of their correspondence: "I am writing to you a letter at the end of (this) world", Maynard begins (p.15). The apocalypse is upon us, they concur; however, unlike climate catastrophe books like David Wallace-Wells' *The Uninhabitable Earth* (2019), Maynard and Simpson refuse to accept collective blame for food shortages, refugee emergencies, climate wars, and economic devastation. Referencing Sylvia Wynter, Maynard describes this posture as a refusal to be circumscribed within the bounds of the "referent we" that activists often use to obscure the real architects of climate catastrophe. Refusing to reside in dread, Maynard and Simpson focus instead on the vitality and resilience of their respective Black and Indigenous traditions, rejecting the dominant Western narrative that depoliticizes the racialized violence of climate catastrophe by bracketing it from long histories of settler colonialism, anti-blackness, and

racial capitalism. Writing to each other from the front lines of resistance, they commune, finding the courage to accept the ending of (this) world—and attend to life *otherwise* and beyond the murderous order of racial capitalism.

This posture is not to be confused with uncomplicated—or naïve—idealism. Maynard and Simpson sharply situate the geopolitical crisis of racial capitalism within intimate proximity to quotidian Canadian life. On a walking tour of Toronto, Maynard maps out the headquarters of resource extraction companies where, not far from her house in Yorkville, executives are drawing up plans for human and ecological destruction. Simpson recounts the multiple endemics that have repeatedly displaced Indigenous communities, including her own, and Covid-19 is no exception. Centuries of environmental racism and systemic neglect have left many Indigenous communities with precarious access to doctors, and with many immunocompromised members. During a national lockdown that pandered superficially to indiscriminate collective safety, Indigenous communities pleaded for the government to freeze mining, damming, and pipeline projects that placed hundreds of potential Covid carrying workers near their homes. In their accounts, Maynard and Simpson are direct and unwavering; Canada’s historical and contemporary existence as a nation-state depends on the displacement and exploitation of Black and Indigenous people. This is the state of the world that white supremacy builds, they repeat throughout these accounts; *we* are not in this together.

The book is uncompromising in its critique of the Canadian state, and the violent white supremacist systems that sustain it. However, what sets the book apart isn’t these critiques alone, but rather what encircles and flows between them. Throughout their 12 letters, Simpson and Maynard mix song, story, citations, analysis, collaboration, and reflection to join Black and Indigenous histories and futures. Their exchanges thus do more than expose the violence of racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and climate catastrophe; they grapple with the logics that underpin this violence and gesture towards radical alternatives. Put differently, their accounts of world ending are always simultaneously gestures towards worldbuilding. They speak of deep relationality, land outside of private property, the radical necessity of rest, and the emergent possibilities of learning from the land. Reading through their exchanges, their writing makes apparent that the vulnerable positioning of Black and Indigenous communities is no accident;

this climate catastrophe was caused by the slave plantation, the settler town, the reservation, and their afterlives. It is only through the undoing of these structures that life on earth will ever be rendered *livable*. So, they call upon us to embrace artist and activist Dionne Brand's commitment to *changing the air*. Which is to say, they commit to changing everything—all the structures and conditions that have created the crisis in the first place.

Ultimately, *Rehearsals for Living* shows the potential and necessity of Black and Indigenous solidarity and worldbuilding. Without shying away from the spaces where their histories diverge, Maynard and Simpson articulate how land-based politics and abolitionist organizing must play inseparable roles in any meaningful liberation movement. The power of this co-resistance is at its most convincing when their exchanges deviate from dense analysis towards tender reflection: critical analysis reveals its own indebtedness to intimacy. They confide with vulnerability and love. They delight in the words of their shared intellectual influences: the likes of Audre Lorde, Naomi Klein, and Fred Moten. They meditate on the reciprocity of parenthood, on how they are learning from their children and dreaming up better worlds alongside them. We learn of the first time they read each other, of the admiration they hold for one another. "Sometimes I think your letters are the only good thing in the world", Simpson tells Maynard (p.178). They confide and find refuge in their shared fatigue and in their shared rage. They discover they both turn to Star Trek when they can't fall asleep. These fleeting details feel like subtle gifts, to be coveted and contemplated. These moments reveal the ways Maynard and Simpson's own relationship—itsself a Black Indigenous communion—makes their lives more livable, and ultimately more joyous.

Ross Gay, the eminent poet of joy, writes of tenderness in unfamiliar places. Speaking from his perspective as a Black man in America, Gay's joy never stands in far proximity to despair. In his poem, "Loitering" (2019), Gay works to expose the term's pragmatic violence—loitering authorizes the criminalization of racialized bodies perceived in temporary unproductive movement—while insisting on loitering's joyous potential as non-productive delight. Evocatively, he contends that joy is misunderstood if we take it to be something easy; rather, joy is that which we must attend to, and cultivate, in the midst of unimaginable difficulty. Like Gay's writing, *Rehearsals for Living* reminds me of the exertion and resilience joy requires.

When I read carefully, I find the presence of joy sprinkled all over the work's pages. Far from the depression that frequently encompasses cultural ideas around radical organizing, joy is audible in the many voices of Black and Indigenous activists, organizers, scholars, and artists whose words and ideas aggregate this book. It is joy that sustains the radical practices of communities engaged ceaselessly in justice work, despite every imaginable reason to despair. It is joy that will change the air and open the portal toward a relational abolitionist land ethic of resistance. For joy might encourage something beyond all-encompassing despair when faced with icy toes from mid-summer waters.

References

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