

## ISSUE NO. 12

## The NishPossessed: Reading Le Guin in Indian Country

**Grace Dillon**

*Transcribed by Fembot Collective members Carolyn Elerding, Robin Johnson, Tatiana Ades, Urszula Pruchniewska, and Nehal El-Hadi. Edited for publication by Alexis Lothian.*

*Aaniin!*

*Aaniin* is our word for “hello” in Anishinaabemowin. It literally means *I see the light in you*. And I see many lights today. So much that it is Sâgassige gisiss—*the sun has come out of the clouds*.

I’m Anishinaabe, “Nish” for short, and my family are from two nations, Bay Mills Nation and Garden River First Nation, along with many, many relatives—Saulteaux on the Canadian side, and all sorts. Once you proliferate, you proliferate. You move and relocate a lot.

Unlike adrienne, I cannot tell you that I grew up on *Star Trek*—because I lived in the woods. And by woods, I mean we lived in very simple ways. We had no plumbing; we had lots of candles, lots of fires. We lived very, very differently. At the time, I didn’t know that. My dad taught me to create the wiigwaas from birchbark, which is sacred to us. You can create birchbark canoes that really don’t leak. And when you develop that kind of talent or skill as an Indigenous person, it’s something that you want to pass down. Many of our relatives could work it out with a basket, but my dad could work it out with a canoe, only from birch material. We had no TV or theaters or anything where I could become connected to any concept of *Star Trek*.

So naturally, when I went out to school at UC Riverside, I was absolutely fascinated by all things popular culture because I’d had no background in it whatsoever. And people still to this day will throw out things and I’ll have this horrible “waaah, take notes, I don’t know” feeling. I didn’t know about The Beatles, Elvis Presley—all the things that people think are just a part of your DNA. Our DNA was quite different.

I grew up in what was a pacifist anarchist community and it was the reason why I was very attracted to the novel *The Disposessed*. It was native-founded and then we invited others in, because, as Anishinaabe people, that is our thinking. Simon Ortiz, who was Acoma Pueblo, talks about the word for “people” in his language as *hanoh*. But when he describes it, he makes it very clear that *hanoh* is not just for his nation. They’re very cognizant of self-recognition and being a nation, but *hanoh* is extended as a personal *hanoh* of your community to the *hanoh* globally of the world. We do that, too, but we use water.

When we greet others and go other places, we talk in our language about the waters: our wetlands with the rice, our mountains, but always the waterway. We’re always figuring out the waterway. And when I go anywhere—this has become a habit of mine—I’m always checking out the waterways to whatever place we’re headed to. It makes sense, then, that even though I’m a professor in Indigenous Nations Studies, I do not just do “scholactivist” projects, but also actual forms of activism for water protectors. Because water protectors are needed not only at Standing Rock but at many, many other places as well.



**STANDING ROCK TEACH-IN**

**NOVEMBER 22 | 6:00-9:00PM**

**NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENT & COMMUNITY CENTER**  
**PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY**

Using circle methodology, all participants will engage in discussions about Climate Justice, Indigenous Sovereignty, the balance between Activism and Journalism, and the Environmental Impacts of the proposed Dakota Access Pipeline.



This Event is **FREE & OPEN** to the public.  
 Dinner will be provided.

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What is important for us as Indigenous peoples, quite often—I always like to modify a bit, because we’re all different—we don’t separate theory, imagination, and practice. When we do something or think about something, if we dream and we imagine—what we call inaendumoowin—it is also very necessary to put that into practice and usage. So, for instance, I taught a graduate course on critical methodologies, for our School of

Gender, Race, and Nation. It's really fascinating to me to see, when you're bringing in the latest scholarship for a Black Studies Department, a Women, Gender, and Sexuality Department, an Indigenous Nations Studies program, and a Chicano/Latino Studies Department, that there is a really fascinating similarity. Yes, we create theory. Absolutely, we create theory! But, our theory is entangled with, at all times, practice. And that makes a very, very big difference, I think. And it is also important after you've grown up on Peter Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid*, which is all over *The Dispossessed*! I read that. I read Karl Marx when I was little, in our language, Anishinaabemowin; we had it translated, of course—Finnish, Russian, English. We had some Jewish elders that came over from France, and so we were learning a bit of Hebrew as well.

The sense for us is that to be ogichidaa, to be what is referred to as a warrior, really means to be big-hearted and courageous. And lingering behind all of that: you're always interested in mediating towards peace. Jeannette Armstrong, who is Okanagan, has pointed out in her language—they've created an entire international school up in Vancouver, BC, what she calls the En'owkin Centre. (Some of the words I'm giving you here, by the way, are at a more sophisticated level, not just at the baby language level, but at the more sophisticated level.) So, for en'owkin, it is to embrace difference. Now, what is meant by that is not just a token "ooh, you're different, come on in!" It means, instead, that you recognize that when you are together, you are not going to come to a full consensus. That embrace of difference, at the same time, is part of the freedom. We would make real tribal decisions. We would have 50 degrees below zero weather... We would use our wiigiwam during the summer, but during the winter it was far too cold. So, we had a shelter that was more like a house. In the process of that, you face actual life-threatening decisions on making it through the winter, getting to the other side. We're always very conscious of that.

In *The Dispossessed*, I was so struck by Takver, Shevek, and others when they're going through a time of famine, essentially. When there is such a terrible loss that takes place, what do they do, what do they decide? They have a computer that spits out postings for them; they're technologically savvy. But you'll notice what they do—even when it becomes tough, when it's a decision of "am I going to be away from my husband, am I going to be away from my wife and daughter, perhaps for years?" they ask, "Is it that important that I join in and make sure that I post myself to an area that is really, really experiencing difficulty right now?" They really get into it, really do that. This is a form of what we would think of as mutual reciprocity. What that means is that, in a shared

community, you have a responsibility, and you know that responsibility and you actually follow that through your own heart.

An older usage in our language for heart actually places it in the head. I have always loved Ursula's powers of imagination and the way she expresses it—it just feels so Indigenous to me. For us, the heart is in the head where you have your visions and dreams. And that is the heart. That is where you are through your dreams and your imagination. So, when adrienne spoke about love, it suddenly reminded me: Oh yes, yes, up here, in my head. We dream and we imagine, and how beautiful when those imaginings and those dreams become open to others. To interact with and build on, or to have fun with the imaginative powers that you have been expressing. That, my whole life, I've never gotten over.

I'm here to dispel the myth that Indigenous peoples are oral only. In fact, I would classify myself as a reading Indian. There are many of us that talk about that, but we have a history with that as well. One that has been made invisible—that's one reason why I studied and received my PhD in 16th century studies. I was really curious: what was going on in Europe where they somehow managed to erase the information that, in the New World, we had written languages?

I grew up knowing about my written language pre-contact. The closest thing would be like a hieroglyphic; you read those hieroglyphics as you read words. What was being passed down was both written and orally transmissible knowledge, simultaneously. I like to think that Ursula K. Le Guin's *ansible* has that kind of quality. You can pass it down simultaneously. There are those who understand it at face value, and then there are those who study the linguistic richness of it.

I've taught three or four graduate seminars on Ursula K. Le Guin, and I am very conscious of the tendency to say: "Oh, Shevek is Robert Oppenheimer. And *The Word for World is Forest* was written during the Vietnam War." All of that is very important, but as Samuel R. Delany points out, it is really important as a reader to see the kind of resonances that are coming through for you. And so, in my case, it was not just me that read Ursula K. Le Guin. It was many of us in our community. Because her thinking really matched with where we were headed.

When I met my husband (at a very young age—we fell in love and got married and we are 37 years married now), he was a Taoist, and that was the first person I ran into who thought as strangely as I did. At this point I'm in California thinking, "Oh, I better keep

my mouth shut, you know. I'll just wait and see what kind of glib retorts they come up with and I will smile and nod." But I realized that these principles of balance and responsibility and mutual reciprocity are very much a part of Ursula K. Le Guin's thinking when she is writing *The Dispossessed*. And, of course, I search for every tidbit where she talks about her experiences.

In *The Wave in the Mind*, Le Guin has an essay on her Indian uncles. She spends time talking about those Indian uncles. And I give this as a piece to my students. That and her "On the Frontier." I'll read just a few words here:

The other side of the frontier, the yin side, that's where *you* live.[1]

And there she is talking to me as a Native person.

You always lived there. It's all around you. It's always been. It is the real world, the true and certain world full of reality. And it is where they come. You were not certain they existed until they came.[2]

Can I correct a misperception that a lot of people have about Manitou or the Manitou spirit? Many stories—it's become a common leitmotif at this point—say that, as Native peoples in our stories, we were waiting for white gods to come across to our continent and take care of us. You know that one? And they based it on a word, Manitou, which actually does not mean god, or little god, or your gods. What it means is, "wow, this moment of engagement with a new person could have serious consequences." You don't know if they are human yet. So, are they a human person? Or a spirit person? Or an animal person? But meeting with this person is going to be so life changing, so exciting, so thrilling, something momentous. So, Manitou actually in that sense is referring to that moment. And you aren't just experiencing it as a Native person. The contactee is also experiencing that Manitou and should be realizing just how portentous this moment is. I just wanted to clear that up, so when you hear that, let them know: *The Indigenous peoples of North (and South) American first-contact did not think white men were gods.*

Le Guin says: "Coming from another world they take yours from you, changing it, draining it, shrinking it into a property, a commodity, and as your world is meaningless to them until they change it to theirs, so as you live among them and adopt their meanings, you are in danger of losing your own meaning to yourself." [3]

I love her saying that, and I have a couple of qualifications. We're not quite as downtrodden as that may appear. We don't always adapt in ways that are just pale imitations. We again are practical—our theory is practice—and we pick up what is useful for us.

For instance, consider Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*. In this film, Gary Farmer plays the figure of Exaybachay or Nobody, and he overgoes the Indian guide motif. Well, Gary and other tongue-in-cheek Natives working on the film kept pointing out how contemporary Natives would be using snowmobiles to traverse the terrain. Jokingly, the group kept saying: "you need to put snowmobiles in there." And, apparently, there are outtakes from the film that show them riding around on snowmobiles. Jim Jarmusch got a little bit nervous and pulled out of it. But when we had Gary Farmer out to Portland State University, he said that he was totally rooting for the snowmobiles—because we take what is useful, and it is so much more useful, as we did in our area, to have a snowmobile. In my youth, we wouldn't have cars, but you'd have that snowmobile. Because you can leap ice, you know? You can take off and time it and hit the next ice ledge, and you'll be okay. Can't do that with a car. And some Nish were busy using their Jay Treaty cards to go back and forth between this 49th parallel that was our imaginary wall: that wall being Canada on this side and the US on the other.

That's the other thing I love about *The Disposessed*: the discussion of the wall. The book opens with these lines:

There was a wall. It did not look important. It was built of uncut rocks roughly mortared. An adult could look right over it, and even a child could climb it. Where it crossed the roadway, instead of having a gate it degenerated into mere geometry, a line, an idea of boundary. But the idea was real. It was important. For seven generations there had been nothing in the world more important than that wall.**[4]**

The wall is simultaneously in one's head, internalized, and physically there and apparent. I find it fascinating that it is so low—that adults can go and see right across, and little ones can climb right across it. That's my favorite part. I love that image of a wall that is there that children can climb over, but then there are other walls that are so much more oppressive beside the wall that is the uncut rock. I always think of taking the wood block, going back, and uncarving that rock.

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[1] Ursula K. Le Guin, "On the Frontier," in *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination*. (Boston: Shambhala Press, 2004), 28.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., 28-29.

[4] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Dispossessed* (London: Gollancz, 1974), 1.

—CITATION—

Grace Dillon (2017): The NishPossessed: Reading Le Guin in Indian Country. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, No. 12. <https://doi.org/10.13016/M27940W1K> (<https://doi.org/10.13016/M27940W1K>) doi:10.13016/M27940W1K



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## ONE THOUGHT ON “THE NISHPOSSESSED: READING LE GUIN IN INDIAN COUNTRY”

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Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology  
ISSN 2325-0496