"Living in 'The Dish With One Spoon': Transdescendence and Convivance in Daniel Coleman's *Yardwork: A Biography of an Urban Place*"

Claire Omhovère (Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3 – EMMA)

> [T]o think about the manner in which I inhabit the earth and in which I do or do not cohabit with other species, to speak not of resources but of nourishment, is to go further than any philosophy of the environment. It is to take a path that is assuredly not that of sustainable development.[1]
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> Corine Pelluchon, *Nourishment: A Philosophy of the Political Body*

The subtitle of Daniel Coleman's *Yardwork* acknowledges in place the existence of a form of life that his third book of non-fiction explores in exquisite detail. Born in 1961 in Ethiopia to a family of Canadian missionaries, Coleman came to Canada as a young adult to study literature and complete a university education. Now a professor of Canadian literature at McMaster University, he has also published outside the academic field. His 2003 memoir *The Scent of Eucalyptus: A Missionary Childhood in Ethiopia* was followed in 2009 by *In Bed with the Word*, an autobiographical essay in which he ponders the relevance of reading to his critical and spiritual engagement with the world. *Yardwork* could be regarded as the third instalment in a life-writing project that turns to place as one of the foundations of the self.

The life under scrutiny begins this time in the yard at the back of the house in Hamilton, the industrial city on the western tip of Lake Ontario where the Canadian scholar and writer has made his home with his wife Wendy. The plasticity of the essay, a prospective,

[1] "[…] penser la manière dont j'habite la terre et cohabite ou non avec les autres espèces, parler non pas de ressources mais de nourritures, c'est aller plus loin que toute philosophie de l'environnement. C'est prendre un chemin qui n'est assurément pas celui du développement durable" (Pelluchon 2015, 15).

tentative form by definition, means that it is a most suited genre to try out new dispositions regarding the practice of place in an area that used to be known as a "Dish With One Spoon" by the Indigenous populations who had agreed to preserve it as a neutral ground for their common use before the onset of colonisation.[2] With the influx of European settlers, the district they called the Head-of-the-Lake underwent profound transformations, culminating with the industrial boom that boosted the development of the city of Hamilton while causing considerable damage to its environment. Three decades after the slowing down of its steel industry, the area is presently showing the signs of an ecological resilience that may lead to a renaissance in the post-industrial age. Although the timeline matters, Coleman is not writing a history of place. His approach is more geographical in spirit, looking at the languages, discourses and practices that have transformed a physical location into a place, a portion of space imbued with signification for its human inhabitants,[3] but also a milieu shared by myriad life-forms. In this article, I propose to analyse the decentring *Yardwork* operates from the ego-centred genre of the biography to a form of writing which is eco-centred, by which I mean that it is rooted in an ontology where convivance serves as a challenging model to help us rethink the usage of life-giving places. This reading of Coleman's essay found its impetus in the philosophy of Corine Pelluchon and the related concepts of transdescendence and convivance that she discusses in *Nourishment, a Philosophy of the Political Body* (2015, 2019 for the English translation) and the as-yet untranslated *Ethique de la considération* (2018).

From her standpoint as a philosopher at the crossroads between ethics and political sciences Corine Pelluchon wonders why the environmental challenges facing humanity have

[2] Brooks's *The Common Pot* includes a map of the Dish With One Spoon as described by Joseph Brant that can be consulted online https://lbrooks.people.amherst.edu/thecommonpot/map1.html. The first European record of the Dish With One Spoon occurs in the Jesuit Relation of 1644-45, at a council between the Hodinöhsö:ni' and the French: "Things are going well" said all the guests; "We eat all together, and we have but one dish" (qtd in Schiavo and Salvucci 2003, 279).

[3] *The Dictionary of Critical Theory* defines place as "a physical location invested with meaning" (Buchanan n.p.). Likewise, Tim Cresswell foregrounds the symbolic dimension of place in the triad – location, locale and sense of place – that constitutes it (132).

not triggered any fundamental changes in the functioning of democracy. Why has the spreading awareness of the Anthropocene[4] impelled no drastic political change so far? Why do we maintain lifestyles that are detrimental to the environment and the wellbeing of human societies? Finally, how come no environmental ethics has emerged as an effective answer to the current crisis? To shed light on these questions, Pelluchon first observes that the humanism inherited from Greek philosophy cannot help us apprehend present ecological perils, insofar as the persons living in the Antiquity could not avoid witnessing the immediate consequences of their actions, as their lifetime was spent surrounded by the people or the things their decisions would impact. With their increasing pace, technological progress and globalization have also altered the very structure of individual responsibility. Our everyday impulses have repercussions that remain largely unknown to us, thus encouraging insidious forms of indifference and disengagement (Pelluchon 2018, 44-45). About the Enlightenment, she similarly argues that "philosophers of freedom, from contractualists to existentialists, have not sufficiently taken the measure of what it means, for us, to inhabit the earth" (2019, 4). To remedy this, Pelluchon engages in an in-depth reflection upon the corporeality of the human experience and the life-sustaining relationships that bind earthlings to their habitat, their home, the *oikos* which is the root word for *eco*logy but also *eco*nomy. Her phenomenology of nourishment foregrounds the idea that human beings are dependent on the environment they live from and that nature, as a result, cannot be regarded as a stock of resources, a conception that has shown its limitations even in terms of sustainable development. In *Nourishment*, Pelluchon outlines a new social contract based on a "living with" for which she coins the noun "convivance" and that serves as the cornerstone of an ethics of consideration, the "living for" to which her latest book, *Ethique de la considération*, is devoted. Convivance designates the desire to live together that is a pre-condition for

[4] Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, the co-recipients of the 1995 Nobel Prize for chemistry, popularized the term in a groundbreaking essay published in 2000.

conviviality: “It precedes the social contract which it makes possible insofar as it instils in the citizens the feelings, affects and capacities that will foster a sense of obligation in them, preparing them to obey laws, to deliberate and participate in the life of the city. […] With convivance, ‘living from’ leads to ‘living with’ and, ideally, to ‘living for’” (2018, 148-149, translation mine).

The concepts discussed by Pelluchon have their antecedents in her fresh interpretation of Bernard of Clairvaux’s treatise on consideration (1148-1152), a cardinal virtue premised on humility from which Pelluchon derives the principle of “transdescendence” that informs her own conception of consideration:

> Far from being a ‘transascendence,’ an upward move relating the subject to what stands above, consideration rests upon the experience of one’s vulnerability, and the deeper self-knowledge that results from it. Exploring the pathic dimension of sensing, linked as it is to the disposition of affects and the archaic layers of the psyche, leads to a state of receptiveness that predates language and helps us sense what we have in common with other beings, both human and more-than-human. Consideration does not designate the elevation or the contemplation that would let us penetrate the essence of things, but a deep understanding of the bond that connects us to other living beings, illuminating our relation to the world and those we live with. (2018, 101, translation mine)

For Pelluchon, frailty doubles as strength when it is experienced from within vulnerability, since being vulnerable deepens our sentience to what surrounds us, including the weakness of others. Following in the footsteps of Levinas, Pelluchon argues that this receptiveness leads to a form of responsibility for others that is grounded in our corporeality. She defines transdescendence as the disposition necessary to establish the convivance through which

relational subjects reveal their aptitude to live with and among sentient beings in the same milieu.

Why read Coleman's biography of place through the prism of Pelluchon's phenomenology of nourishment and the ethics of consideration it leads to? Transdescendence and convivance are helpful ideas when trying to understand the ethical and political decentring *Yardwork* effects in its exploration of the subject's habitat, the *oikos* that sustains his being in place among the other living organisms that cohabit within the ecosystem of the yard. The two concepts of transdescendence and convivance, it must be noted, were born out of the ongoing critique of Western dualism that began with Husserl's phenomenology. As such they testify to the ability of philosophical discourse to examine its own language and identify the aporias that undermine its foundations, as Derrida's deconstruction has amply shown. Likewise, Pelluchon's phenomenology of nourishment dislodges the Cartesian cogito from the plane of reason and redefines the body as "the point of departure of any political reflection on what can constitute a common space" (2019, 87). Her effort to surmount Western dualism from inside the philosophical tradition that gave birth to it is comparable to the position Coleman adopts from within Canada's settler culture to critique utilitarian views of the land as a resource devoid of value as physical and spiritual nourishment. In *Yardwork* Coleman proposes to consider the life in his backyard as part of the ecosystem which the Indigenous people refer to as the "Dish With One Spoon." How the biographer conciliates the two positions he occupies simultaneously, as owner of the yard but also as resident of the Dish, will be discussed in three steps, beginning with the principle of transdescendence that orients Coleman's essay, before addressing the desire for convivance implicit in his discussion of the Indigenous "Dish With One Spoon." This will lead me to conclude on the ethics of consideration the essay deploys with regard to the place Coleman has come to regard as home, its First Nations populations, and the multifarious life forms that cohabit in it.

Transdescendence, or Becoming Grounded

The essay, from the French verb *essayer* meaning *to try* but also *to venture*, is a choice medium for experimenting new propositions. Its adaptable format, variable length and exploratory dynamic are conducive to "some thinking of the rough and duct tape variety," as poet Don McKay once aptly put it, when describing one of his own ventures (9). The parallel with repair work suggests that the argumentative force necessary to connect separate concepts requires both elasticity of thought and the recognition that a working idea may only be provisionally adequate to the demonstrative task at hand. With this disclaimer, McKay rejects all forms of perfectionism and intellectual arrogance. A similar reclaiming of the position of the *amateur* can be found in Coleman's choice of the compound "yardwork" for his titular analogy:

> I can't claim any particular expertise. I'm not especially well informed about the environment […] I like birds, flowers and bees, but I'm not an expert on any of them. I'm not a historian or a landscape architect. Nonetheless, I want to learn about the layers of story and soil, to be more than a cheerful visitor who compliments the pleasant views. I want to dig in, to hunker down and figure out where I am. I want to connect with where I've ended up. (*Yardwork* 15-16)

This declaration of intention, a cornerstone in the tradition of the essay, balances terms that express strength in intent with humility in attitude. The essayist's lack of expertise paradoxically frees him from the restrictions a disciplinary field imposes on the scholar. Far from limiting his possibilities, his assumed ignorance is an opportunity to learn indiscriminately about the place to which the twists and turns of life led him. Haphazardness and inexperience, two apparent weaknesses, are turned into assets. The rest of the essay will pursue this paradox through the contradictory ideas it re-articulates, with a view to rehabilitating the unusual force inherent in vulnerability.

Coleman's opening statement queries the opposition between the visitor and the dweller, between mobility and sedentariness, two occupations of place that hark back to the historical figures of the settler and the indigene. Since the early days of colonization and well into the twentieth century, European settlement has emphatically been viewed in Lockean terms as the permanent, industrious occupation of the land that seemingly justified the displacement, and the ultimate replacement of native populations who, allegedly, could not lay claim to a land so immense they only sparsely occupied it (Fee 23-24). Indigenous societies of nomads or hunter-gatherers, it was thought, lacked the agricultural skills Europeans had mastered along with the technologies that confirmed the newcomers' divine right to claim the ownership of the land. The pioneer literature of the nineteenth century contains ample evidence of these views that remained unquestioned until historians reappraised them, showing that European colonists were both unwilling and unable to acknowledge the traces centuries of Indigenous stewardship had left in the landscape of the Great Lakes country. In his ecological history of the area, John L. Riley points out that when British settlers started trickling into this region after the outcome of the Seven Years' War, the wilderness that met them was only pristine in appearance. For the most part it resulted from the re-wilding that followed the epidemics and the wars of the 1700s when both scourges depleted the forest of its Indigenous inhabitants and put a provisional end to native land care (55-83, 169).

Recasting the settler as a visitor makes it possible for Coleman to connect mobility with the ecological damage colonization wrought on places that were customarily abandoned after being exploited for what they could yield: "Move and improve. And if the place doesn't improve fast enough, or won't keep pace with our drive, we move again. […] we *light out for new territory*" (*Yardwork* 30, added emphasis). Coleman's nod to Huck Finn's valedictory words (Twain 363) is an ironic reminder of the economic exploitation and the attendant forms

of racial and political exclusion that have fed the restlessness of North-American settler societies. Coleman's essay, however, stems from a firm intention to stay. Planting ornamental bushes, setting down new flagstones perpetuate expressive motifs, or "refrains" (Deleuze and Guattari 382-433) inherited from the cultures born around the Fertile Crescent where the enclosed garden emerged as a symbol of the domestication of the wild, the promise of an earthly paradise. "Cootes Paradise" is one of the local toponyms the early settlers bequeathed on the marsh around which the city wrapped itself. It is now a wildlife sanctuary administered by the Royal Botanical Gardens. "Paradise" is a prominent motif in "Holy Land," *Yardwork's* first chapter. In Farsi the word originally meant "enclosed garden." The clear-cut division between nature and culture, the wild and the domesticated, is specific to the societies that developed east of the Mediterranean. Over the Neolithic period the plants and the great mammals of the Fertile Crescent were domesticated simultaneously, allowing for the early appearance of agriculture and writing in this region. Elsewhere in the world, the domestication of the wild occurred along more erratic lines, so that human and more-than-human beings continued to exist in great proximity, often sharing the same attributes or nature, as evinced in animism and totemism (Descola 51-53). There is no attempt on Coleman's part to minimize or disown these antecedents. Phrases such as "a settler society like ours" or "we settlers" (*Yardwork* 23; 296) repeatedly assert where the biographer comes from. They keep up a clear distinction between his position as one of the "Johnny-come-latelies" now residing in the area (*Yardwork* 30), and the vegetal, animal and human inhabitants who have preceded him and with whose presence and memory he now cohabits. The admission of his belatedness also entails an awareness of the anteriority of the stories the settler society displaced, erased or sought to absorb when it "face[d] the uphill battle of jump-starting the invention of place-sense by superimposing imported traditions and jerry-building

new ones" (Buell 257).[5] So it is from the confines of his small backyard that he proposes to observe the past and present transformations of his neighbourhood and the area where the city of Hamilton developed.

The Colemans' yard does not provide a vantage point but, rather, a site of immersion, a place where one can roll-up one's sleeves and "dig in" (*Yardwork* 16). Digging-in takes place in the concrete, material world even before it turns into the mental effort necessary to disturb the history of Hamilton's past and expose what lies, in more than one sense, below its manicured front lawns. Digging-in, in other words, reflects a transdescendent attention to the physical world experienced through the resistance its "layers of story and soil" (*Yardwork* 15) opposed to the biographer's tools, whether material or analytical. Understanding the imbrication of these layers leads the biographer out of his study into the garden. Sheltered from public view, the backyard encourages a proximity with nature which the decorousness of front yards usually excludes. It is a zone of transition between private and public spaces, between the indoors and the outdoors where nature, although it occasionally consents to being tamed, also asserts its own prerogatives. Traipsing racoons, hungry deer, white grubs and other trespassers wreck Coleman's patch of grass, nibble at his favourite plants, and ultimately defeat the strategies deployed to build a patio on a flat, even surface (*Yardwork* 77, 170, 45-50). Although these repeated mishaps are recounted with irresistible self-derision, Coleman's talent for laughing at his own expense does not quite obliterate the seriousness underlying his report. It is as if each comic anecdote offered a low-key alternative to the romantic reverence for the wilderness and its gothic double – the great story of conquest that has been pitting settling communities against a hostile environment, at least since *Wacousta*

[5] Buell has the US in mind when, on the same page, he cites the "Anglo-American wholesale borrowings and fabrications of Indian stories" to illustrate his point. In a Canadian context, Catharine Parr Traill's *Canadian Crusoes* is an excellent example of a composite story injecting elements of indigenous knowledge about place into a narrative of settlement derived from Defoe's colonial paradigm. The bush right at the back of the settlers' house is the Canadian equivalent to Crusoe's desert island. It is in this uncertain, liminal zone that the children get marooned and learn their surviving skills from a young Indian girl, before the vicinity of their parents' house could be tamed to suit the settlers' needs. Retracing their adventures gives Traill the opportunity to describe the agricultural landscapes that will emerge out of the wilderness over the years.

(1832) and the notorious response Major John Richardson's novel received in Northrop Frye's "Conclusion to *A Literary History of Canada*." But the Colemans' backyard is a far cry from Frye's garrison. In the relations he seeks to establish with the teeming life inside his yard, the *amateur* gardener repeatedly loses face, but each small defeat lets in the animals, the broken trees and poking-up stones whose collective presence contradicts the very idea one may have of a manicured garden, although they do make for a lively, homely yard. On these occasions, the gardener's humiliation contains its own, paradoxical triumph in terms of transdescendence every time a failure brings him closer to the soil – the Latin *humus* from which "humiliation" but also "humility" and "human" all stem –, encouraging him to adapt to the yard's wayward, inexplicable ways instead of trying to subdue them.[6]

If transdescendence supposes humility, to be humble in the present case also implies renouncing two privileges afforded by distance: the commanding view over the surveyed field and the additional benefit derived from its aesthetic contemplation. Although the Colemans undoubtedly love their yard, the essay gives more prominence to the hard work that contributes to its maintenance than to the enjoyment of its amenities. Not only does the compound "yardwork" enhance human activity, but it also conveys the transformative effect this messy activity has upon the body and the mind of its owner. The title hints that the yard does, indeed, work insofar as it affects and possibly alters all the living and more-than-living bodies it encompasses. "Yardwork," in this sense, supposes a transdescendent readiness to let oneself be touched by the place one inhabits and is inhabited by. As Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology has shown, this reversibility is characteristic of human perception in its interlacing with the world. In it lies the openness that makes us sentient beings, vulnerable and therefore responsive to our environment. Cultivating this openness, being humble is central to an essay which looks down to the ground to observe what being part of an

[6] Adaptability nevertheless has its limits. After all his ploys to deter white-tailed deer have failed, Coleman puts up a six-foot high chain-link fence around his yard, without which the yard as such would have disappeared (*Yardwork* 171).

"ecosystem" means, and what being part of it without being central to it signifies. Interconnectedness is a key idea in ecology that lays less emphasis on causal chains of repercussions than on the mutual dependence between the different elements a system comprises, no matter how small the whole or its components (Iovino 35). Ecology, in other words, calls for a close reading of the relationships that constitute its systems, and this is precisely what Coleman engages in with *Yardwork*.

Yard, Pillow or Dish?

What happens when a place is no longer defined as a set of coordinates but as a system of relations, including the symbolic relations words express? "Yard" is surveyor's talk, a measurement that prepares the land for ownership and the enclosures that parcel it out. One yard stands for the many yards that constitute a property. As such, the yard is a synecdoche, the substitution of a part for the whole, an eloquent reduction of a more spatial complex reality. Reducing complexity is a propensity Coleman's essay nevertheless resists by attending to the plurality of stories contained in the toponyms attached to the area:

> The people whose names do get acknowledged on street signs in my neighbourhood are the Binkleys. […] Deer, Carolina wrens, red oaks, hummingbirds, Princess Point people, white pines, turtles, glaciers, Attawandaron, Michi Saagig, muskrats and Hodinöhsö:ni' people have passed through, inhabited, fought over, rooted, made homes or nests, settled seeds into every crease and corner. But it's not until someone fences off a piece and registers it as private property that a human name gets stuck on the place. There's a big difference between calling a place the Dish With One Spoon, or even the Head-of-the-Lake, and calling it Binkley Crescent.
>
> It's a very different relationship to reality. (*Yardword* 62)

Coleman's digging into local history restores complexity, anteriority and diversity where binary understandings of Indigenous-White relations encouraged simplistic readings of how swathes of land came to rest in settlers' hands. "This Actual Ground," the essay's second chapter, dwells upon the geopolitical legacy of the Beaver Wars (1642-1698), the alliances the Hodinöhsö:ni'[7] made to assert their control over the region that gave access to the waterways of the Great Lakes, "an invaluable, open, and borderless thoroughfare of continental commerce" (Riley 346). The same chapter dwells upon the motley, multi-racial society which, a century later, thrived on the banks of the Grand River where the British granted to their Hodinöhsö:ni' allies land the Crown bought from the Anishinaabe Michi Saagig. The Six Nations received Haldimand Tract as a result of the promise secured by Joseph Brant that his people would be compensated for the home they had lost in the region of the Finger Lakes, after they had fought on the British side during the American Revolution (*Yardwork* 154-155). In this respect, the strength of *Yardwork* lies perhaps less in the evidence it brings forth to debunk "the myth of [the area] being settled by Loyalist Britons" (*Yardwork* 76), than in the attention it devotes to the languages that came to express contrasting and competing attitudes to the same place.

Although *Yardwork* is not a scholarly work strictly speaking, it does include a bibliography assorted with a glossary of the Iroquoian, Mohawk and Ojibway words used by its author with indications as to how to pronounce them. Far from being a study *about* Indigenous "place-thought," a term Coleman owes to his friend and colleague Vanessa Watts (*Yardwork* 10), it presents an approach *to* the Indigenous place-thought that remains attached to the area. In Coleman's case, the approach involved mutual forms of engagement – taking a beginners' class in the Mohawk language (*Yardwork* 23), joining partnerships between the

[7] Whenever possible Coleman uses the Seneca name "Hodinöhsö:ni'," that is "The People Who Build the Long House," preferably to "Iroquois," an Algonquian slur meaning "real snake" which the French borrowed from their Huron partners in the fur trade and military allies. Likewise the Algonquin people (or Anishinaabe) denigrated their ancestral enemies calling them "cannibals" or "Mohawk," a name that remained attached to the Kanien'kehà:ka, or "People of the Flinty Ground" (*Yardwork* 18; 22).

Six Nations Polytechnic and McMaster University (*Yardwork* 139), developing personal relationships with members from different First Nations, in addition to reading extensively in the field of Indigenous studies.[8] None of these credentials makes him an expert, however. Coleman insists on the derived and properly inauthentic nature of the information he "cobbled together" (*Yardwork* 23) from different sources. Again, the essay does not grapple with Indigenous place-thought *per se*, but with its relevance to a contemporary understanding of the conceptions of place European settlement displaced and partially replaced, all but erasing them, which puts Euro-Canadians today in a position of responsibility regarding past and present generations. To the synecdoches embedded in the language of settlement and the simplifications that "paste a European fantasy over whatever was here" (*Yardwork* 57), Coleman contrasts the significations enduring in the Indigenous stories about place, especially those accessible to English-speaking audiences outside their community of origin. He approaches these stories and the ceremonies that keep them alive as a respectful outsider, aware of the distance required to ward off the misguided curiosity that has caused perhaps as much damage to them as the ignorance with which they have also been met. Standing close enough to listen to these stories, but not so close that his own voice will cover their source, Coleman further explains: "From what I've learned from Hodinöhsö:ni' people, stories such as Atsi'tsiaka:ion's fall from the sky function as ceremonial narratives that dramatize nature's law of equality and interdependence. They teach us about the agreements upon which all life depends" (*Yardwork* 25). When Coleman makes space for these stories in his biography of place, he is acknowledging their precedence in the past and their endurance in the present, in spite of the erasures colonization involved:

[8] Two years after the publication of *Yardwork*, the field of Indigenous studies continues to expand, gaining many essential references after the controversial celebration of Canada 150 fostered a wealth of publications by Indigenous writers across Canada in the field of fiction, life-writing, history and political sciences. Kiera L. Ladner, and Myra J. Tait, eds., *Surviving Canada. Indigenous Peoples Celebrate 150 Years of Betrayal* (2017) and Katherena Vermette, and Warren Cariou, eds., *ndncountry!* (2018) are both representative of the current trend.

> I'm caught, therefore, because a settler society like ours is built on both erasing and glass-boxing the stories of the people who were here before us. Without an active awareness of First Peoples and their stories, it's easier to think of our ocean-crossing founders as peaceful settlers and to ignore the culture killing that was part and parcel of land theft. If we act like there aren't any stories of those who lived here before our ancestors arrived, we take over without memory or conscience. (*Yardwork* 23-24)

The strength of this claim lies in its emphasis on an "active awareness," one that is not content with admitting past wrongs, but which also endows writer and reader alike with a responsibility for how Indigenous stories are received and responded to when they are circulated outside their communities of origin.

This is arguably very different from the hoarding, showcasing and dissecting to which Indigenous cultures have been subjected over the past. Coleman, instead, opts for the position of an active listener, attentive to the significations that have found their way into English through the double detour of translation and trope, or, to be more precise, through formulations that may acquire a figurative value when expressed in English. An example of this can be found in Coleman's account of the Six Nations' Great Law of Peace which he sets off against Christian hopes in a better life:

> Rather than aiming skywards, the Hodinöhsö:ni' […] look down. They say the principles of the Great Law of Peace on which their long house confederacy depends lie in the ground, like a pillow under our heads. For them, peace isn't projected into the ethereal future. It's here and now, arising from the very land on which we live. […] If you don't trust the ground on which you live, you will never think of it as a pillow where you can take you rest. (*Yardwork* 51)

Again, the concept of transdescendence is helpful to understand from a Western viewpoint the consideration for the land that has been cementing the Six Nations Confederacy to the present day. Although the simile "like a pillow under our heads" encourages a poetic leap, the trope does not soar into an abstraction, but literalizes the symbolic power of the Law in an image articulating the triangular relationship that binds the aboriginal inhabitants to the land through the Great Law of Peace, elsewhere translated as "the great niceness," or "the great warmth" (*Yardwork* 140). The last two metaphors challenge the stereotype of the "ecological Indian" living in immediate closeness to nature, as if autochthony necessarily implied an instinctive care for the environment and respect for all of its manifestations.[9] The Great Law of Peace and the constellation of stories surrounding it (*Yardwork* 142 & 153) express an intimacy with nature which is less spontaneous than mediated by a symbolic system of rights and duties making it possible for the Six Nations, in spite of their different customs and languages, to establish the principles that have sheltered the Iroquoian Confederacy and contributed to its longevity as a political institution from its creation, around a thousand years ago, to the present day (*Yardwork* 139-141).

"The Dish With One Spoon" is another phrase likely to catch the outsider's attention owing to the significations the metaphor aggregates in English. Accounting for its origin takes Coleman back to oral accounts of how the Great of Law of Peace put an end to the conflicts in which the Mohawks, the Oneidas, the Onondagas, the Cayugas and Senecas were embroiled by the end the sixteenth century. The Dish With One Spoon was the foundational agreement

[9] The phrase was coined by anthropologist Shepard Krech in *The Ecological Indian* (1999). A revamping of the myth of the noble savage, the stereotype "has grown in tandem with the contemporary myth of the 'environment-under-siege,' and together they enjoy an undeniable status of political correctness. An image that was once considered degrading now has political clout – and can be a force for good in the exercise of Native esteem. (It is now, however, also injected into battles over land and rights, where it is understandable that others take exception to it)" (Riley 310).

that gave birth to the Iroquois Confederacy *ca*. 1570-1600:[10] "The assembled folks said, 'We shall have one dish (or bowl) in which will be placed one beaver's tail and we shall all have coequal right to it, and there shall be no knife in it, for if there be a knife in it, there would be danger that it might cut someone and blood would thereby be shed.' *Thus, the dish has a spoon, but no knife*" (*Yardword* 147-148, emphasis added). The demonstrative use of "thus" underscores the explanatory value attached to myth through a toponym that encapsulates a twofold story – not only the story of how the Dish came to be, but also the story of how its contents shall be used. It is the relevance of the Dish to the present, much more than its origin in the past, that Coleman stresses when he elaborates on the ethical principles the metaphor captures, vehicle and tenor fused into one:

> For the Six Nations, the Tree of Peace defines the ideals of the Dish With One Spoon, where everybody can share the provisions of the earth *without fear of an attack or even of needing a visa. [...] The Dish is an ecological philosophy and a kind of international, interspecies diplomacy all in one, as humans are not the only members of the co-op*, whose participants include everyone from Hano'gyeh the muskrat and A'no:wara the turtle in the creation story to ohnerahtase'ko:wa the Tree of Peace. It's rooted in a specific, literal place, not just an abstract idea.
>
> And we're in it. (*Yardwork* 148, emphasis added)

The story of the Dish speaks in terms that are relevant to present issues of land management and territorial sovereignty, both of which are of major importance for the inhabitants of Hamilton and the borderland region of the Niagara Escarpment. "Visa," "interspecies" or "co-op" would sound both anachronistic and inappropriate if this was a scholarly discussion. But there is no academic pompousness in the account above, and no attempt either to showcase

[10] The Iroquois Confederacy, "often characterized as one of the world's oldest participatory democracies," was founded by five allied nations in the late sixteenth century, joined in 1722 by the Tuscarora, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Iroquois-Confederacy, consulted Feb 18, 2020.

the sense of resource management that prevailed among pre-contact "Indians," which is one contemporary reaction the fallacy of hindsight may encourage. Instead, Coleman emphasizes that the political will that brought the Dish into existence, and maintained it through the perils of the Beaver Wars, when the Attawandarons' Nation preserved their neutrality to run the Head-of-Lake as "a kind of common where enemies could collect food in peace" (*Yardwork* 60, see also 110), is still relevant to the present. The principles undergirding the Dish, far from being obsolete, could help frame the two equally important issues the city of Hamilton and its region are now facing, namely the ecological recovery of the area after decades of industrial degradation and the cohabitation of populations who, like yesterday's enemies, may well have divergent political agendas, but still have more to gain from the recognition of their commonality than what they may lose in disunion.

Margaret Atwood once famously commented on the romantic compensation that followed the diminishing threat Canada's Aboriginal populations posed to European settlement in the late nineteenth century:

> [A]s the age of the colonial wars receded, motifs of revenge and warfare gave way to themes of nostalgia; and as the age of the explorers receded as well, living like the Natives in order to survive in the wilderness was translated into living like the Natives in the wilderness in order to survive. Survive what? The advancing decadence, greed and rapacious cruelty of white civilization, that's what. (1994, 44)

But the neat reversal Atwood perceived in the mid 1990s is far less visible in the present context. Three decades later, the wilderness and white civilization no longer stand in a stable, recognizable opposition. What's more, the very image of Canada as an ecological sanctuary has become moot. During the hunting season, Hodinöhsö:ni' parties roam Hamilton's city parks to cull the population of urban deer, in accordance with rights secured in the 1701 Nanfan treaty (*Yardwork* 175-179). Between 1992 and 2006, the push-back of the Six Nations

people against the building of a housing development on disputed land led to an embroilment with the Mohawk Warriors, a gang involved in trafficking that caused the American FBI to lead a covert investigation on Canadian soil (*Yardwork* 156-158). Coleman's digging exposes layered, shifting and contested ground (*Yardwork* 23) where roots do not lead back to a pristine pre-contact past, but ramify through periods of time when diplomatic agreements and mutual obligations have been regulating the use and the occupation of the land among populations who were more diverse in their languages, social structures and cultural habits than the generic misnomer "Indian" could ever express. Although this point was argued long ago (see, for instance, Berkhofer 1978), it is quite telling that Coleman should feel obliged to reassert this fact in a biography of place where the question that emerges is not so much how to "live *like* the Natives," to paraphrase Atwood, but rather how to "live *with* the Natives" and a host of other creatures.

Living with: Conviviality and Convivance

If the Dish has a heuristic value as a political allegory, it is undoubtedly because the trope is so eloquent it seems to speak across cultural divides of the occasions when people sit together and help themselves out of the same dish, often after setting a plate aside for the unexpected visitor, or foreigner.[11] Conviviality and hospitality go hand in hand insofar as there is no conviviality without civility, from table manners to the reciprocal rights and obligations between the guests and their hosts. Linguist Emile Benveniste called attention to the reversibility of these twin words in European languages due to the ambivalence of their Latin root, *hostis,* which produced contradictory yet related derivations in "hospitable" and "hostile." The antithetical meaning of *hostis* as "friendly" or "hostile foreigner" went on puzzling linguists until Benveniste showed, relying on Mauss's anthropological study of

[11] In a European context, Paul Gilroy's *After Empire* promoted conviviality as a political paradigm offering an alternative to the divisions that cut across multicultural Britain at the turn of the millennium. Gilroy, however, remained on the safe, festive side of conviviality and did not take into account the hostility hospitality occasionally unleashes, as the move towards Brexit subsequently showed.

potlatch rituals, that it implied a relation of equality through compensation. The gift of hospitality to the foreigner thus requires a form of reciprocation, a counter-gift, failing which the relation between host and guest will shift from friendly to inimical (Benveniste 94).[12] Jacques Derrida proposed a memorable reading of the aporias of hospitality in a series of seminars that replaced the concept in a finite world where the laws of hospitality, limited and contractual as they are, form an antinomy with "*the* law of hospitality, the one that would command that the 'new arrival' be offered an unconditional welcome" (Derrida 77, emphasis added). The story of the Dish contrasts with the Greek foundations of the concept Derrida discusses in *Of Hospitality* in the sense that the Dish With One Spoon has no individual owner, which rules out a relation based on personal, family or collective prerogatives. Here, the host is the land and the guests everybody and everything that lives on it. Those who eat from the same Dish do not stand in a relation of obligation with respect to one another, but to the land that feeds the commensals and keeps them healthy. It is perhaps necessary to recall that a commensal, in feudal times, was the equivalent of a mess-mate. The *OED* indicates that the word is still used in biology to refer to "an animal or plant which lives attached to or as a tenant of another, and shares its food (distinguished from a parasite, which feeds on the body of its host)." The Dish With One Spoon, it would then seem, encourages relations of commensality over forms of parasitism. The removal of a knife is explicitly intended to avoid hostility among the guests who all enjoy the same status with only one spoon at their disposal. As the emphasis falls on the singular, in implicit contrast with the plurality of the commensals, the relation between the place and its residents necessarily differs from the relation between a resource and its users. The commensals are not shareholders. Strictly speaking they do not share the Dish. They share the spoon.

[12] For an illuminating analysis of the Greco-Latin understanding of hospitality and its evolution in Judeo-Christian societies, see Payot 2018.

If there is one spoon for all, and one spoon only, that disproportion suggests that the access to a common fund of well-being calls for the sort of binding agreement for which terms such as "treaty" or "law" may be used.[13] To the reader who apprehends this story with no insider's knowledge, the single spoon adds the value of convivance to the allegory of conviviality. As a political paradigm, conviviality must be distinguished from convivance. The latter, Pelluchon explains, "requires the creation of a public space allowing the formulation of a common good as everyone's horizon. This necessity is absent from conviviality, where not caring for one's dining neighbours does no exclude behaving in a civil, courteous manner towards them" (Pelluchon 2018, 152, translation mine). This subtle distinction implies that civility is not enough. The convivance model rests upon a conception of the relational, vulnerable subject absent from the philosophical tradition that viewed the social contract as an aggregate of autonomous wills. Convivance, on the contrary, supposes "an embodied subject who feels hunger and thirst, and whose well-being requires earthly as well as spiritual nourishment" (Pelluchon 2018, 151, translation mine). Coleman's understanding of the Dish With One Spoon also supposes that when eating together goes on a par with living together, "sharing the same food requires people to acknowledge the existence of one another and, as a result of this, to establish privileged relations of sociability between them" (Pelluchon 2018, 151, translation mine). Such a philosophy of nourishment, as the epigraph opening this essay insists, rules out one-sided systems of extraction and exploitation.

Taking the pre-requisite of convivance further helps clarify Coleman's position as a biographer of place. Although Coleman is writing from within the yard, his account makes it clear that the yard is alive because it is nestled inside the Dish. The position he adopts as a

[13] On the topic of treaties, Coleman emphasises the misunderstandings awaiting the speakers of a single language who use it from different cultural perspectives: "we tend to think of treaties the way John Locke thought about law, as mechanisms for trading property. But the Hodinöhsö:ni' law of peace is based on the idea of treaties between people and all residents in an ecosystem. That's why longhouse people have a clan, for example, to name some folks in their community for their special relationships and responsibilities with the deer or bears or turtles in their neighbourhood" (*Yardwork* 244).

newcomer to the area goes beyond civility.[14] Not only does *Yardwork* take into account the existence of competing versions of the same place, Indigenous creation stories as well as European stories of settlement, but it also reflects upon their unique though uneasy coexistence:

> Maybe this is what ecology means; maybe it means attending to a whole and holy ecosystem of stories. Instead of listening to just one word or just one story, maybe tuning in to all the stories that jostle together in any given place, maybe this messy process will help me, help us understand the piled up layers – the cracks and seams that run through them, their interdependencies – that distinguish the "thisness" of this place. (*Yardwork* 39)

In the paragraph above, as well as in a number of similar passages,[15] geology is made to serve a metafictional purpose. Words used to describe a geological terrain, *e.g.* layers, cracks, and seams, are lifted from their original context to refer to the plurality of stories that give place a symbolic consistency. What happens when Coleman departs from the Dish to reinvest the time-honoured discourse of geology, a staple of Anglo-Canadian literature and the early text-maps nineteenth-century writers devised to orient themselves in the new land (Wylie Krotz 114-115, Mason 2013)? The passage above tests a principle Coleman gleaned from the Indigenous place-thought, namely the idea of ecological interdependence, which he displaces and replaces in another context where it still makes sense. In the process, he is bringing together discourses about place that do not say the exact same thing, but whose different versions sit together in their mutual tension. This process of conjugation begins with the first

[14] Coleman carried out a scholarly analysis of the idea of civility as a pillar of the national project in *White Civility, The Literary Project of English Canada* (2006) and its 2007 coda, "From Canadian Trance to TransCanada: White Civility to Wry Civility in the CanLit Project." Ten years later, *Yardwork* could be read as a backyard extension to the critic's main activity as an academic, distinct from it on the surface, but certainly related to its intellectual foundations.

[15] See, for instance "scientists mark the passage of time through the stories they find in rocks. In the layers of limestone, dolomite and grey shale in the escarpment walls, they see that this place, including my backyard, was once a warm, tropical sea," "those vociferous rocks" (*Yardwork* 26, 37).

chapter, “Holy Land,” that confronts, compares and makes conversant different visions of the sacred, Christian and non-Christian ones. What their assemblage ultimately suggests is that a plurality of apprehensions adds to the holiness of the land, instead of subtracting from it. Coleman’s biography of place underlines that not only do the stories that constitute it coexist, but they can also be brought together in conversation and contradiction.

This article established a conversation between Pelluchon’s philosophy of nourishment and Coleman’s biography of place showing that Coleman’s understanding of the Dish With One Spoon can be related to a minor yet enduring Christian branch of Western philosophy that has long been critical of postures of autonomy and superiority, but attributes strength to humility and vulnerability. *Yardwork* is therefore driven by a synthetic effort to draw in disparate elements in a mental move that goes beyond the segmentations and discriminations of analytical thought, but reveals a desire to see things together and grant them due consideration. For the biographer, this entails taking his distance from an intellectual tradition that relied on exclusion, not only because *tertium non datur* is a foundational principle of Western thought, but also because exclusion has been one of the levelling forces in the history of settlement: “If becoming grounded means relating to the realities of this place, then it’s going to involve figuring out *how* to learn, how to notice things we’ve been taught to ignore, to rename and forget” (*Yardwork* 90). This is precisely what the essay achieves through a thorough exercise in transdescendence. Living in the Dish first involves learning from the Dish, its residents and their past history, to understand what belonging to this particular place has entailed in the course of time. As the investigation proceeds, the focus shifts from being part of the Dish to being *a* part of the Dish, that is one of the many life forms that coexist in the same ecosystem and that, by necessity, have had to devise collective agreements to preserve the source of their nourishment and well-being. In *Literary Land Claims*, Fee reminds her readers that “[i]maginary Indians […] have been

wheeled in as necessary, either to demonstrate what Eva Mackey calls 'the mythology of white settler innocence' or to provide resources for settlers to indigenize themselves" (2015, 9). Coleman's vision of "the convivial Indian" certainly has an imaginary dimension to it, as is the case with any subjective construct of others and of their cultures when apprehended from the outside. But contrary to previous, partly or wholly imaginary constructs of Indigenous people as "noble savages" or "ecological Indians," "convivial Indians" as experts in inter-species negotiations, treaty-making, and legal procedures, will perhaps prove less convenient to wheel about.[16]

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[16] This essay is dedicated to Eileen Antone, one of the plenary speakers who opened the fourth TransCanada conference, "Mikinaakominis / TransCanadas Literature, Justice, Relation," Smaro Kamboureli and Larissa Lai co-organized at the University of Toronto in May 2017 as a critical counterpoint to the nationwide celebrations of the 150th anniversary of Canada's Independence. On this occasion Eileen Antone, an Oneida of the Thames First Nation, spoke eloquently of "The Dish With One Spoon," the place that welcomed us all during the four days the conference lasted.

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