

Reflections from a NamekosipiwAnishinaapekwe

My Trout Lake, Your Trout Lake

KAAREN OLSEN DANNENMANN

L'auteure se rappelle son retour à Trout Lake, là où elle a grandi, a élevé ses enfants dans le respect des traditions du peuple de sa mère, en chassant, en pêchant, en apprenant du lac et en apprenant à vivre sur le lac.

It is 2006 now and I am remembering how I came to think about my Trout Lake being your Trout Lake. Since the death of my brother in 1998, I have been going through a particularly difficult time. We had been partners in the reclamation of Trout Lake and we had dedicated our lives to this work. We saw our role in Trout Lake, in part, as bringing our relatives back home, or making our homeland once again accessible to them—those that had been displaced and dispossessed by the residential schools, by commercial fishing, by tourism on the lake.

I came back to Trout Lake in 1981, after having been away for fifteen 15 years. I had two daughters and was expecting a third child. Trout Lake was my life's dream; to learn the life ways of my mother's people and to find and rebuild our place on the lake. The rocky shores and sand beaches, the islands and channels, swamps and bays, poplars, birches and pines, the wind and waters—all were calling me home. I ached for the taste of *kaaskiiwak*, *moon-sochaash*, *atikamekonakishiin*, the food of my home place. I ached for the smells of its hot dusty trails, warm sticky buds, forest beds of balsam fir. With every bird song and loon call transporting my soul back home, I quit my job and packed up my little family and left the city forever. I soon found my childhood memories fused with those of my grandmothers, grandfathers, great-grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. The memories of their experiences flowed through my consciousness while; the hills echoed their ancient voices.

My brother's small trap line was at the west end of the lake and my brother and I spent the first summer building a log cabin. Over the years, we built other cabins and worked with our cousins, hunting, trapping, fishing, learning the lake and learning how to live on the lake.

We held Trout Lake's first sweat lodge ceremony in over 70 years, and brought the drum back. We reclaimed the practices and ceremonies that we had been taught and that characterized our relationships with the animals, plants and trees, giving back as we were being given, a reciprocity that ensured a sustained life on Trout Lake. My brother and I brought young children, youth, and young adults to the trap line, showed them the way we lived, taught them what we knew about traditional life on the Land, had a lot of fun, a lot of laughter. When we told our mother about these excursions, she was so happy, she said that, once again, maybe, the ice on Trout Lake would be full of the tracks of children. We kept those words in mind, keeping our resolve that people would one day come back to Trout Lake to stay.

One of the ways to bring people back was to develop courses that would be delivered in Trout Lake. My brother and I were both trapper instructors, survival course teachers, and wilderness excursion leaders. We were working on a program called IKIP (Indigenous Knowledge Instructors Program) that was the vision of Treaty #3 trappers. I continued with this project after my brother died. I was at a community meeting to talk about the implications of the program and one of the questions I was asked was if the program could be called "*your my program*," and I was immediately put off by the question, remembering all the trappers and Elders I had met and interviewed and I said, no, it could not. When I was asked if it could be said that I was the proprietor of the program, again, I said, no, it could not. I was intrigued by the questions and, just as intrigued by my answers, at the internal voice that would not let me acquiesce. At the end of the meeting, I returned to the questions and said that, for the present time, it could be said that I was responsible for the program.

For a long time afterward, I thought about that, especially when I was in Trout Lake. I knew that there was a huge lesson I was about to be taught a huge lesson and that I had to be still and be receptive. That was often dif-

ficult, being an Anishinaapekwe in Trout Lake was often challenging, my right to be there disputed. I did not have the credibility that had come automatically to my brother and to my men cousins. But gradually, Trout Lake started giving me its knowledge. Answers came to me, into my heart and soul, into my life's blood, quietly into my veins. My hands knew these answers as I reached out to pick berries, reached for moss, rocks, and medicines. In order to articulate this lesson, I tried to learn to weave around the English words I would have to use, around the nuances of the phrases of this foreign language, and especially I was especially challenged to find a way around the seemingly impenetrable ideas of private ownership, individual rights, and the separation of rights from responsibilities.

For the Anishinaape People, in our ancient languages, the words "my" and "our" do not mean possession or ownership as they do in English. In English, these words are even *identified* as being *possessive* adjectives. For Anishinaapek, "possession" is viewed very differently. Traditional teachers tell us, for example, our homes, our canoes, our tools and equipment, are not ours but are on loan to us. Even the articles of our clothing are is on loan to us. Our very bodies are on loan to us. Our children are not ours but are also on loan to us. Our partners are on loan to us. We are very carefully taught that everything on loan to us must be cared for and then returned in the condition, or even better condition, than it was when we acquired it.

For Anishinaape People, then, the words "my," "our," "your," "his," or "hers" are not about ownership or possession but about a relationship. When I say, or when any Namekosipiwiw Anishinaape says, "Trout Lake is my home" or "my Trout Lake," we do not mean that we own Trout Lake, that we possess it (and therefore you do not and neither does anyone else) but rather, it means Trout Lake is that part of our great Mother the earth with which we have a very special relationship. That This relationship includes those with whom we share that home—our aunts, cousins, etc., the moose, bear, gulls, ravens, mice, moles, flies, mosquitoes, fish, the trees, the grass and rocks, etc., etc. That This relationship is characterized by a spirituality and sacredness, an intimate knowledge and huge reciprocal respect and reverence where we all know our rights and responsibilities. This very amazing relationship involves a give and take that requires consciousness and constant nurturing. My Trout Lake takes care of me, is very gentle with me, and teaches me everything I need to know. In turn, I take care of my Trout Lake to the best of my ability, and I remain open to its teaching and growing.

When I think about my Trout Lake, the words of Salish Chief Sealth come back to me. My Trout Lake is about the web of life, about all the interdependence and interconnectedness of time and space and love. In my mind, I hear the words of the great orators and paraphrase them to describe my Trout Lake. Every rock and every tree and every blade of grass on my Trout Lake tell me the stories of those who long ago walked these trails. It is said that

the clear cold waters of my Trout Lake carry the memories of my grandmothers and grandfathers. It is said that the whispers of the wind in the trees, the murmurs of the waves against the sand beaches, the songs and sounds of the forested islands are the voices of the future, the voices of our children's children and their children. This is my Trout Lake, and I lay my claim to say that, but it can also be your Trout Lake.

When I say "your Trout Lake," I mean that you can also cultivate a deeply personal and sacred relationship to Trout Lake, and treat it like you would treat your brother or your child. There is a huge responsibility attached to that relationship. Your obligations are just beginning. Furthermore, Trout Lake being your Trout Lake does *not give you the right to interfere with or damage in any way my sacred relationship with Trout Lake*. You do not have personal rights that supercede the collective rights of all our relations on Trout Lake, its islands, forests, hills, swamps, bays, inlets, etc. You will have to learn your place in Trout Lake and learn to love that place.

Ourstory, and theirstory, of the past 516 years, the smallpox blankets, open warfare, theft of our lands, the residential school system, assimilation—all have made left their marks on us. It is no wonder that we are confused about our rights, and how we must take care to know that rights are inseparable from responsibilities. This is one of the first lessons we learn from the Land. This is the circle we have to pass on to our children, our children who are thirsting for this knowledge, who are demanding to be taught and given their birthright. We women especially, have to take this up as our sacred responsibility.

Kaaren Olsen Dannenmann (Ma'iinkan) is an Anishinaapekwe from Namekosipiink in northern Ontario (Trout Lake). She is a mother of three and a grandmother of five precious little ones. Her life is intrinsically connected to her homeland, her family and her community. She is a trapper and a trapper instructor. She manages a camp for Aboriginal youth and children and other land-based trainings and activities. She works hard to keep traditional culture and knowledge alive in the next generations, with language classes, trips to the trapline, games, ceremonies and special events and gatherings. Kaaren is a strong anti-racism worker and has developed partnerships with non-Aboriginal people and organizations to conduct de-colonizing/undoing racism workshops and trainings. She is committed to peace and justice and is part of several international efforts that support indigenous peoples' struggle for recognition of rights to land, language, culture and economies.