

REVIEW ESSAY

Honour Songs and Indigenous Resistance

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Simpson, Leanne and Kiera L. Ladner, eds. 2010. *This is an Honour Song: Twenty Years Since the Blockades – An Anthology of Writing on the “Oka Crisis.”* Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring. ISBN 978-1894037-41-9. Paperback: 19.95 CAD. Pages: 366.

This is a powerful book about memories and action, history and social change. Like so many others, I vividly remember the summer of 1990, the summer of rebellion in Kanien’kehaka territory, a pitched battle over a quiet stand of pines near the town of Oka, Québec. As the editors of this wide-ranging collection put it, “the mobilization of Kanien’kehaka that summer was such a powerful image and such a defining moment for so many of us (Indigenous and Canadian alike)” (3). Leanne Simpson describes the way an act of resistance carries its transformative power into the future by way of an image from Nishnaabeg elders’ teachings about the ripple effect of a stone thrown in the water (17). Wab Kinew remembers “the summer that we stopped playing Cowboys and Indians and started becoming warriors” (51). Clayton Thomas-Muller says in watching the events, “Something deep inside of me snapped. I quit trying to be Canadian. I just gave up” (219). Peter Russell and Kiera Ladner both refer to that summer as a “flashpoint event.” The mobilization of 2,000 military troops against a community of men, women and children exposed the deep contradictions at play in the Canadian state. There was both an ugly racist backlash and an unprecedented upsurge of radical indigenous and non-indigenous solidarity across the country.

At the same time, ideas and strategies for solidarity action on the non-Indigenous Left were put to the test. Our weak knowledge and understanding of Indigenous issues, and our lack of trusting relationships of solidarity with Indigenous activists were exposed. Those of us who saw the obvious injustices in the theft of Indigenous lands for a golf course and the massive military response to the Kanien’kehaka blockades were compelled to become students of the history of Indigenous dispossession and resistance at Kanehsatà:ke, and of the history of Indigenous dispossession and resistance generally in Canada (I took a run at this in my

own doctoral dissertation; see Simmons 1996). As a student in Toronto, I remember vigorous debates about the role of non-Indigenous people in solidarity movements, about political divisions within Indigenous communities, about the uneasy relationships of Indigenous peoples with labour movements and with Quebec nationalists. That summer represented exactly the kind of collective political school in struggle that social movements embody at their best.

In their introduction to *This is an Honour Song*, editors Leanne Simpson and Kiera Ladner point out that Indigenous resistance didn't start with the 1990 battle at Kanehsatà:ke. Rather, it was the product of centuries of struggle for land and self-determination by Haudenosaunee. More immediately, it was the culmination of a variety of struggles across Canada since the Red Power movement of the 1970s, including the 1974 occupation of Anicinabe Park still so clearly remembered in 1990 by the parents and relatives of Ontario Anishinaabe youth like Wab Kinew. The events at Kanehsatà:ke were foreshadowed in 1989 by Assembly of First Nations Chief Georges Erasmus, who pointed to the various Indigenous struggles of the early 80s as warning signals to the federal government that the failure to address the issues festering across the country would lead to escalating confrontations (Erasmus, 1989).

174

Nor was 1990 the "end of history" for Indigenous movements, or for the development of political ideas among Indigenous peoples. On the contrary, the ensuing 20 years have seen a variety of important new developments. The occupation of Revenue Canada's Toronto offices for 29 days in December-January 1994/95 marked a watershed in Indigenous mobilizations bringing together urban and rural activists. In southern Mexico, the Zapatista rebellion sparked solidarity across state boundaries, prefiguring the global justice movements that exploded at the turn of the millennium. The past two decades saw diverse courageous actions in defence of Indigenous lands, harvesting rights and sovereignty, and new efforts to organise across Indigenous nations including the Wasáse movement associated with Kanien'kehaka scholar-activist Taiaiake Alfred, and the Defenders of the Land movement. There were also various measures taken by the state to buy peace (such as through the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, land claims and self-government processes, and the Truth and Reconciliation process to address the legacy of residential schools). At the same time, efforts were made to erode and even eliminate special aboriginal rights, facilitating the increasingly rapid appropriation of Indigenous common lands by resource development interests (for an account of this, see Gordon 2010).

A remarkable layer of young radical Indigenous intellectuals and artists has been forged in this crucible, directing their critical gaze at the Canadian state, the destructive forces of capitalist expansion, and the contradictions of gender and class within their own communities. Meanwhile, non-Indigenous supporters have begun to come to terms with the reality that Indigenous peoples are much more than mere victims – they are, and have always been, historical agents, who have had a significant impact on the shape of the Canadian state and economy through their ongoing resistance. These evolving Indigenous and non-Indigenous strands of thought are richly represented in the wide range of writings, poetry and art collected over the space of a year by Simpson and Ladner (with some acknowledged gaps caused in part by time constraints, including a lack of Québécois contributors).

The collection is framed as a series of Honour Songs, which in the words of the editors “are sung to publicly honour and acknowledge all the beautiful things, all the good these individuals and communities have brought to the people, and to honour the positive impact this ‘crisis’ had on Indigenous Peoples and Canada” (6). As evidenced in this collection, Honour Songs in the colonial context come from a place of resurgent strength born of collective resistance. This is a resistance in which women and men of all ages from elders to youth have specific, very powerful roles. It is a solidarity whose power is derived from diversity both within and across nations. It is a radicalism whose teachings are derived both from indigenous spiritualities and ways of life on the land, and from the hybrid societies of urban spaces.

Such intertwining of voices is at times raw at the edges, at times uncomfortably dissonant (or consisting of what gkisedtanamoogk calls “multiple harmonies”). In this respect, the book develops in interesting ways the dialogic modalities of indigenous ways of knowing, practiced in the form of Talking Circles or in collective labour on the land (McGregor, Bayha, Simmons 2010), and explored in Taiaiake Alfred’s work through the use of excerpts from a variety of interviews (2005). This form of knowledge creation does not seek to cram political experiences and perspectives into a static and preset theoretical mould; rather it allows for the unfolding of political analysis from the ground up and at times by indirection, combining strands of theory with stories, poetry, interviews, testimonials, and visual and performance arts. The authors often reflect on the Kanien’kehaka rebellion by way of other resonant stories of resistance; we read about battles at Ipperwash (Peter Russell), Grassy Narrows (Judy Da Silva), Burnt Church (gkisedtanamoogk), the Lubicon Cree

territory/Athabasca tar sands (Melina Laboucan-Massimo), Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug territory, (interview with Jacob Ostaman), Ardoch-Algonquin territory (interview with Paula Sherman). These stories are reminders that throughout Canada there are various other quieter “Oka crises” where indigenous peoples are reclaiming their lands and resources or defending them from theft. And as Kiera Ladner observes, the issues remain unresolved in Kanien’kehaka territory and beyond (311).

Through its presentation of these stories, narratives and memories (what Damien Lee calls “echoes” or in his Anishinabemowin language, Aadizookaanag and Dibaajimowinan [236]), the book challenges readers to cross conceptual boundaries. This is embodied in the usage of indigenous languages in the texts and in the reproduction of Indigenous artistic expressions that wrestle with colonial assumptions. Readers are required to radically reimagine the colonial order of things through the reframing of the “Oka Crisis” in terms of Kanien’kehaka names and agency; through the artistic interventions of Jane Ash Poitras, Robert Houle, Rebecca Belmore, Gerald McMaster, Shelley Niro and Greg Hill; and through Michael Orsini’s critical reflections upon the mainstream media’s role in the “Oka Crisis.”

As a whole, this collection represents a sampling of the current “state of knowledge” among those who support indigenous self-determination. The reader is bestowed with a responsibility to interpret all the voices and images in relation to their own experience and political education, and derive their own conclusions about the path of action to be followed. Just as multiple nations respond to colonial oppression via a single nationalism, multiple stories become one – but the one story is constantly destabilized by its own multiplicity. The single sure message is summarized by the editors thus: “something must be done now – before another twenty years pass” (7). There is no allowance for self-indulgent nostalgia in all the memories strewn through the book. Rather, this is a call to action for indigenous self-determination, for the health of the environment, and for social justice in this country and beyond. And it is a call to action across nations and race. In the words of gkisedtanamoogk, “every struggle in the world is a human struggle” (82).

Several of the authors pose the challenge to the readers, directly and indirectly: Poet Al Hunter says, “We control / Our own / Destiny” (57). Gkisedtanamoogk says, “In the final analysis, we do what we choose to do ... What are your choices?” (87). Harmony Rice asks “How far would you go?” The grandmother in Paula Sherman’s narrative, “Wísakedják and the Colonizer,” expresses the wish that “the young would begin to understand how important they are for the future” (344). No one is off the hook. Kiera

Ladner makes this clear in pointing to the importance of non-state political spaces and political actors: “They are the little thing[s] from which big things grow ... They are the ones that we sing about” (313).

Women’s voices are remarkably strong in this book, at least half of which is composed of interviews and works by women. This is an appropriate homage to a struggle in which women like Kanien’kehaka activist Ellen Gabriel played a leading role. Harmony Rice shares interviews with five indigenous women of Ontario, and Judy Da Silva speaks eloquently of the devastating impacts of violence against women as this intersects with environmental destruction: “I feel once we honour Mother Earth and protect her, the women will become strong again” (73). But the responsibility for honouring women’s strength is not left only to the women; gkisedtanamoogk makes it clear that “In the principles of the struggles of the people, Indigenous women have always been key, central movers and shakers” (86). In the essay by Robinder Kaur Sehdev, we learn that gender politics are also a key basis for understanding the politics of solidarity. She writes of the ways in which the Kanien’kehaka struggle informs the politics of solidarity among Third World Feminists, and conversely how Third World Feminists support understanding of interlocking oppressions. Intersections of gender, race and land are explored by way of the image of bridging in the Kaswentha (Two Row Wampum). The two parallel paths symbolizing the Haudenosaunee relationship with Europeans is bridged by three rows of beads representing peace, respect and friendship. In Sehdev’s view, this bridging or “bridgework” reflects the relationship as an ongoing and perpetually difficult transformative process rather than a fixed objective, shaping the sense of identity of all those involved.

But this bridge-building is now situated in the context of struggle, and strategic questions are paramount. The iconic images of Kanien’kehaka warriors, women and children confronting Canadian soldiers in the summer of 1990 foregrounds the role of the Canadian state in the oppression of Indigenous peoples. Notwithstanding Ladner’s effort to draw attention to non-state political spaces, the state and its contradictory legal apparatus is the main focus of analysis in a number of the essays. Damien Lee reflects this focus in his assertion that “as Anishinabek, we are seeking to transform our current relationship with Canada” (241). June McCue and Patricia Monture write of the limits in Canadian law as a framework for Indigenous self-determination. And in her epilogue to the book, Kanien’kehaka activist Ellen Gabriel addresses nine recommendations

specifically to “the Government of Canada and those levels of government that fall under its jurisdiction” (346).

Discussion of the role of Canadian corporate capitalism in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples comes through in the specific stories of struggles for land, but is perhaps underplayed in the more theoretical works. More thorough analysis of capitalist expansion and crisis within and beyond the Canadian state might shed light on the changing conditions of Indigenous struggle over the past twenty years, in particular some of the complexities arising from the increasing participation of Indigenous people in wage labour, both in rural communities (serving Indigenous corporations and joint ventures) and in cities. Sheila Gruner provides an inkling of what this might mean in her suggestion, derived in part from reflections on the multiple struggles against Free Trade in the 1990s, that analysis of capitalist social relations be understood in relation to the need for development of “alternative life relations” binding “all sites of struggle throughout the Americas and beyond, as people continually seek to reorient the uprooting effects of the capitalist project” (98). Gruner emphasizes that she is describing a way of thinking, and it is implied that the implications of this approach still remain to be fully understood. Certainly there is much work to be done to analyze how labour exploitation, race and nationhood combine as forces in indigenous struggles – and how this reality informs the challenges of building solidarity within the labour movement and the broader left.

178

References

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