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As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance by
LEANNE BETASAMOSAKE SIMPSON

University of Minnesota Press, 2017
\$24.95 USD

Reviewed by **BRYANT SCOTT**

In *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance*, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson does as she has always done—she provides a fierce critique of North American settler colonialism, while laying the groundwork for how resistance might be articulated, realized, and embodied. As an Indigenous poet, musician, author, and (at times reluctant) academic, Simpson is best known for her prodigious work on Indigenous issues and her activism with the ongoing protest movement, Idle No More. *As We Have Always Done* is, in part, a memoir of her experiences living and learning with the Elders at Long Lake 58 First Nation, a First Nation band government in Ontario; it is also an ambitious attempt to outline a system of radical resistance by taking seriously local, Indigenous, and alternative ways of knowing. The possibilities and the struggles outlined in *As We Have Always Done* stem from the desire to embody resurgent practices as a way of reproducing indigeneity and “generating” Indigenous freedom.

While that may sound like a tall order, it is an essential one for Canada’s First Nations people due to increasingly egregious conflicts over land, resources, and climate change. As a result, in addition to being a *tour de force* in decolonial practice, *As We Have Always Done* looks primarily to Nishnaabeg intellectual practices: Simpson refers mainly to Indigenous scholars, traditions, and

concepts as a way of both practicing and embodying Indigenous epistemological processes.

Although *As We Have Always Done* is fundamentally about the reassertion of Nishnaabeg knowledge on its own terms, rather than through the lens of “Western knowledge systems,” Simpson’s methodological emphasis on knowledge and discursive systems of power places the work squarely within the framework of decolonial thought. She explores how her people, the Michi Saagiiig Nishnaabeg, might really live otherwise, by outlining a theory of practiced Nishnaabeg resistance and nationhood. Her nuanced approach to Indigenous resistance and resurgence examines the subtler aspects of settler oppression, focusing on epistemological, ontological, and what she calls ‘cognitive’ aspects of colonialism. Much of the originality and vigor of the work comes from Simpson’s dedication to theory that facilitates freedom. “One has to be the intervention,” she writes, “one has to not only wear the theories but use them to navigate life” (29).

The book opens with a personal account of the author’s own explorations of learning, thinking, and knowing beyond the confines of disciplinary knowledge and academic thought. She describes her time with the Nishnaabeg Elders and the challenges of really embodying in mind and spirit Indigenous thought systems while stepping away from Western systems of power that privilege “Western theories, epistemologies, or knowledge systems” (13). As someone who has climbed the academic ranks (and has held numerous distinguished visiting professorships) she begins with the deep ontological struggle of learning to “leave all of that kind of education behind in order to come into

[Indigenous intelligence] with hesitation and an open heart,” and observes that

postsecondary education provides very few skill sets to those who want to learn to think in the most complex ways possible within the networked systems of Indigenous intelligence. (14)

That she attempts this in such a sustained and sophisticated way and largely succeeds (despite some problematic aspects which I will outline, respectfully, later) is a testament to her position as pioneer of the first rate in Indigenous studies.

After relating her voyage toward “living in a Nishnaabeg present” (2), Simpson focuses on aspects of Nishnaabeg intelligence that offer ways of rethinking and imagining possibilities for a present marked by environmental crisis, dispossession, settler colonialism, displacement, gender violence, and occupation. Offering methods of “radical resurgence” grounded in Nishnaabeg knowledge, each chapter focuses on some of the most pressing issues of our moment. Chapters four through eight employ what she calls “grounded normativity,” which she uses interchangeably with “Nishnaabeg intelligence.” Borrowing the term from Glen Coulthard, Simpson describes the approach as “ethical frameworks generated by these place-based practices and associated knowledges” (22). “In academic circles,” she continues,

this is an important intervention because grounded normativity is the base of our political systems, economy, and nationhood, and it creates process-centered modes of living that generate profoundly

different conceptualizations of nationhood and governmentality—ones that aren’t based on enclosure, authoritarian power, and hierarchy. (22)

Each chapter takes on a different aspect of this place-based methodology, including “Nishnaabeg Internationalism,” “Nishnaabeg Anticapitalism,” “Endlessly Creating our Indigenous Selves” (or relational and fluid identities), “Land as Pedagogy,” and “Indigenous Queer Normativity.” With this impressive scope, there is more than enough to captivate any artist, activist, or scholar interested in grassroots social change.

While Simpson claims that this book “adheres to a different set of intellectual practices than the ones privileged in the academy” (29), she tends to see the academy, and even Western knowledge, as something of a monolith at times, particularly as an increasing number of academics are attempting to outlining similar epistemological practices and will no doubt read this book. Despite claims that “this isn’t an academic book in a Western sense,” in many important ways *As We Have Always Done* fits the criteria of late 20th- and 21st-century academia, which is why those working in Indigenous, postcolonial, ethnic, queer, gender, and race studies would find much of value in its theoretical models. Part of the reason for setting up this binary in the book is that Simpson is conscious of the accusation that decolonial theorists and those who seek to “recuperate” Indigenous knowledges are reproducing

the epistemic schema of Area Studies [...], producing studies *about* the subaltern rather than studies

with and from a subaltern perspective. (Grosfoguel 2007)

Ultimately, *As We Have Always Done* is a valuable contribution to Indigenous and decolonial theory and praxis. Simpson delinks the nuanced structures of oppression from Indigenous life, which makes the book a model for anyone attempting to better understand oppression, indigeneity, and resistance. Although the primary objective of the book is to outline a theory of embodied Nishnaabeg resistance, Simpson moves from reflection on experiences with her tribe and her struggles to grapple with subtle systems of power and oppression.

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