

AS WE HAVE ALWAYS DONE: INDIGENOUS FREEDOM THROUGH
RADICAL RESISTANCE

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Author)

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Reviewed by Elena Lamberti

Writer, scholar, multifaceted artist and activist, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson is one of the most interesting Indigenous voices from contemporary Canada, not only for her work with the Idle No More movement, but also for her innovative approach to more traditional literary, cultural, and historical discourses. A member of the Mississauga Nishnaabeg community, well trained in the Western canon (she holds a PhD in Interdisciplinary Studies from the University of Manitoba), Simpson completed her Indigenous education under the guidance of Doug Williams, an Anishinaabe elder who helped her to deepen her knowledge of what she defines as *Nishnaabewin*, the “Nishnaabeg intelligence:” a form of awareness based on the “Land as Pedagogy” approach, a concept underpinning her book *As We Have Always Done*. As she explains, in this pedagogical model “embodied practice” stands as a key concept opposing more coercive Western models of (literary and life) education: sentences like “theory isn’t just for academics, it’s for everyone” (151), or “there is no standard curriculum,” encapsulate her approach to *Nishnaabewin*. In her vision, knowledge implies a more direct involvement of the individual in a learning-by-doing process that does not start from given and accepted taxonomies, but from the idea that all theories can be continuously regenerated through practice. “If you want to learn about something, you need to take your body onto the land and do it. Get a practice, [...] get involved, and get invested” (165).

What might sound like a new version of the traditional Emersonian idea of what an American scholar should be, is in fact a real challenge to American pragmatism and

self-reliance. If the American pursuit of happiness sounds more like a call to an individual economic success that rewards those who work hard and invest their talents to improve their social status (and welfare), what Simpson proposes is instead a call to pursue a new ethical-political horizon based on a different understanding of the relationship between the individual and the community. Simpson often recalls that indigenous communities did not bank money; instead, they banked relationships. Therefore, *As We Have Always Done* is a personal journey into a resilient indigenous tradition based on various principles that resonate as counter-narratives to the American ones, if we use the term “American” as a synonym for the leading cultural model reflecting the capitalistic, normative spirit of globalization.

“Internationalism,” “Anticapitalism,” and “Queerness” are the axioms of Simpson’s discourse translating Land as Pedagogy in a volume that challenges also traditional academic narratives; therefore, her first-person narrative is an interesting act of storytelling that also reflects the political will to empower the teller, based not on Western literary approaches but on new semantics revitalizing an ancient oral heuristic. Genre-hybridity and trans-mediality are constant practices in all Simpson’s works, both as an academic, a writer, an activist, and an artist: she constantly shifts from different expressive codes, therefore creating a different form, at once original and traditional. For this reason, *As We Have Always Done* is a crossroads of communicative possibilities that creates a mobile semantic and questions mainstream ideas, starting from everyday stories: the academic footnotes are there, but they often refer to “Nishnaabeg stories” the author has heard from elders, to “series of conversations with” different people (academics, elders, friends), or to quotes from panel discussions that inhabit Simpson’s memory. The goal is to give power back to the community to collaboratively imagine different ways to inhabit our world, more inclusive and sustainable, investing on relationships through storytelling.

This book perfectly epitomizes the indigenous critics’ resilience to dominant models of literature and literacy, including those elaborated by post-colonial theories and writing. It exemplifies a new indigenous discourse that elaborates a new form that transcends the mere denunciation of the colonial past and retrieves a dialogue with

diverse cultural traditions to imagine a different future at a time of crisis. Simpson's book is based on *alterNative* semantics that turns literature and criticism from subject to function, generates a collective catharsis as academic discourse gets rid of dominant classifications and defines new shapes for a poetic intuition that turn creativity into agency. Simple storytelling becomes key to political activism and civic awareness.

Simpson's original method introduces a different social vision where "internationalism" challenges globalization and the logic of nation-states, in order to retrieve a different idea of 'community.' In fact, Indigenous internationalism opposes all traditions based on colonial violence and exploitation, what Simpson calls "extractivism," a term coined to re-translate the process of colonization and redefine Eurocentric "appropriation," and "naming." "Extracting is stealing. It is taking without consent, without thought, care or even knowledge of the impacts on the other living things in that environment" (75). Inevitably, in this book Indigenous freedom starts from a counter-appropriation of the terminology used to frame history and culture, a sort of radical resistance to what is still perceived as a linguistic subliminal brainwashing. Similarly, "anticapitalism" opposes a globalization perceived as the output of money-based individualism, and encourages a global economy based, instead, on mutual understanding as a strategy to reconsider priorities and sustainability. Simpson's "society of makers" opposes the "society of consumers" as the foundation of freedom and of a more ecological self-reliance "My Ancestors didn't accumulate capital, they accumulated networks of meaningful, deep, fluid, intimate, collective and individual relationships of trust. In times of hardship we did not rely to any great degree on accumulated capital or individualism but on the strength of our relationships with others" (77). Storytelling is an ethical strategy to *accumulate* relationships, as stories can become an empathic territory where to develop shared collective memories and identities. Words are a different technology than the one required by capitalism. "We certainly had the technology and the wisdom to develop this kind of economy, or rather we had the ethics and knowledge within grounded normativity to *not develop* this system, because to do so would have violated our fundamental values and ethics regarding how we relate to each other and the natural world" (78, original emphasis).

As said: people over banks. It might sound as a naïve idea, but it is refreshing, as it challenges globalized politics that do not necessarily consider culture (and even less literature) as an engine for social innovation. Naïve is not necessarily bad, it can open different paths to pursue happiness, as other scholars have started to prove, also from within the Western humanistic tradition (Floridi 2020).

“Queerness” is another important concept discussed by Simpson as part of a different idea of “normalcy;” she recalls how heteronormativity is a concept imposed over the Indigenous reality by settlers and Western religions. “My sense is that my Ancestors lived in a society where what I know as ‘queer’ [...] was so normal it didn’t have a name” (129). Nishnaabeg concept of “two-spirit people” was, in fact, used to define a person that was at once male and female, an accepted reality that was twisted by the new moral codes imposed by the colonizers; the paradox is that in recent times, the LGBTD+ Indigenous movements had to fight for the civic rights of a community that once was not perceived as diverse precisely because diversity was a status quo.

What makes Simpson’s idea of “Indigenous freedom through radical resistance” particularly interesting is that it is not based on a nostalgic call for a lost world; nor is it an attack on colonization *tout court*. The trauma is there, wounds are shown, but Simpson’s radical resistance relies on different semantics that evolve into the will to suggest that a different way to do things is possible. In Simpson’s work, *Nishnaabewin* goes beyond sentimentality and becomes a narrative that blurs past and present into a different perceptual dimension that the cultural anthropologist Joseph Weiss defines as “The future perfect:” “The future perfect is a grammatical tense in which a future is framed as already determined—‘this is what will have happened’” (73). It is a dimension that translates the Indigenous radical resistance into a different approach to resilience, something that ethnophilology (Benozzo 2010) explains through the uncanny relationship between prey and predator: each time a (literary, artistic, linguistic) tradition is conquered by a dominant culture, at first it is forced to adapt to mainstream models but, little by little, it resurges and reshapes those models from within. The prey becomes the predator, and radical resistance empowers Indigenous freedom. “As we have always done,” little by little, this is what will have happened.

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