

Performativity of Time, Movement and Voice in Idle No More

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The Kino-nda-niimi Collective, eds (2014) The Winter We Danced: Voices from the past, the future and the Idle No More movement, Eds. The Kino-nda-niimi Collective. Lead editors Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Tanya Kappo, Wanda Nanibush and Hayden King. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Arbeiter Ring Publishing.

We

As is apparent from the 'we' in the title and the long list of editors, The Winter We Danced is as much a collective of voices as it is a collection of authors. The 'we' assembled here all share a connection to the Idle No More (INM) movement. This movement began in November 2012 as an Aboriginal response to a Canadian federal government bill that eroded indigenous sovereignty and environmental protections. INM continued to grow—often using social media for expression and coordination—with hundreds of rallies, teach-ins and protests resisting neo-colonialism (Idle No More n.d.).

The seventy-nine contributors in this volume include academics, activists, artists, indigenous leaders and journalists from sixteen indigenous groups, including Anishnaabe, Cree, Métis and Dene, as well as eighteen settler allies from across Canada, making it a book of breadth and depth. And, as is reflective of the movement itself—beginning from the four women who organized the first teach-in and the leadership shown by Chief Teresa Spence—the majority of the contributors are women. The anthology consists of a remarkable range of reprinted material, including online publications, blog posts, tweets, Facebook comments, interviews, open letters, press releases, transcriptions of public speeches and audio podcasts, song lyrics and poetry. However, the book also includes seventeen original reflections commissioned specifically for the collection. Additionally, forty-five photos of Canadian and international rallies, dances and events, spanning from 18 December 2012 to 25 July 2013, are distributed throughout the text to illustrate 'a visual experience' of INM (27). This includes the 'Image Warriors' section, which features seventeen pieces by visual

artists reproduced in colour. While the anthology is reflective of the radically decentralized and web-based nature of INM, I should note there is also some critique of social media platforms as a closed circle of people sharing similar views (347–9).

The editors position the book as ‘an ambitious primer on the history of Idle No More and its implications’ that has the potential to serve as ‘a platform for responses to the movement’s very existence’ and is intended to be read by diverse audiences (21–6). I believe that performance scholars should be among those audiences. Key concepts in performance studies like temporal drag and performativity, and key conventions like movement and voice, are central to many cultural practices associated with Idle No More. Performance scholars are ideally suited to understanding how these concepts and conventions enable embodied political action and solidarity in the public realm.

Danced

The round dance has been a central element of INM gatherings and is referred to throughout The Winter We Danced. In the introduction, the editors recount its significance as told by Cree Elder John Cuthand. He explains that the dance was taught to a grieving daughter by her mother’s spirit to help her grieve in a way that will give her spirit peace in the other world and ‘that when this circle is made we the ancestors will be dancing with you and we will be as one. The daughter returned and taught the people the round dance ceremony’ (24).

In Rebecca Schneider’s Performing Remains: Art and war in times of theatrical reenactment she explains how attention to affect leads to a notion of ‘temporal drag and reach’, that time is flexible, not linear, and that the past can be dragged into the present while the present also reaches into the future, which contributes to the ‘interaction or inter(in)animation of one time with another’ (2011: 31). Schneider’s concepts of affect dragging and reaching through time to an inter(in)animation are demonstrated beautifully through Cuthand’s story as well as through Tanya Kappo’s description of a round dance at the West Edmonton Mall in Alberta. These were public performances of identity and pride. Kappo recounts, ‘...we were glowing, our people were glowing.... it was powerful enough to awaken in them what needed to be woken up—a remembering of who we were, who we are’ (70). Ryan McMahon says that the dances signalled hope

and a return, calling them “Political/Guerilla Theatre” (100). In a poem, scholar Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair describes dancing as, ‘writing with our feet/we speak/in the air/conditioning...Ha ya hey ya/we live’ (148–50). The round dance is both a metaphor for the decentralized nature of INM and a method for connecting the present with the past. The centrality of this culturally expressive practice reveals performance to be at the symbolic heart of this movement.

Winter

In contrast to the warm months and seasons embedded in the titles of counter movements like May ’68 or the Arab Spring, Idle No More unfolded in the depths of winter. For most of Canada, winter is a time of extreme cold and stasis—a holding pattern as people wait for the warm weather to return so they can start moving again. Idle No More activists urged action at this cold time of year, and many people responded despite the extreme weather. This paradox of fixed seasonal stasis and political action (or a time of widespread engagement) is reflected in The Winter We Danced. The mixing of reprinted print, web-based materials and original reflections destabilizes the present moment of reading a fixed text. The book demands a leaping out from the print form and calls upon the reader to connect with web-based sources that continue to post commentaries. The book is a living entity. While reading the numerous inclusions from blog sites, including “Decolonization: Indigeneity, education & society”, “Divided No More” and “âpihtawikosisân”^{[note]1}, I felt compelled to go online to check more recent posts (just as I hope the Performance Research reader will be prompted to do after reading my review).

During winter, many of the waters in Canada are frozen and unmoving on the surface. The defence of navigable waters is of key significance to the INM movement. In December 2012 the federal Conservative majority government led by Prime Minister Stephen Harper passed Bill C45. The bill stripped federally protected waterways and left only 0.01 per cent of rivers and 0.03 per cent of lakes protected (ecojustice 2012: 7).^{[note]2} To protest this ecological injustice, scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s contribution encourages indigenous activists to saturate the land with stories. She references Mississauga Nishnaabeg place names and how you ‘almost always

have to look at [a place] from the perspective of paddling a canoe' (359–63). Lori Mainville states that Bill C45's threat to waterways revealed that 'the free flow of water demonstrated to us that we were just as free as it is. We were guided by the land' (112–15). Chickadee Richard connects the leadership of women in INM with the fact that in her culture women are water carriers (133–8). Ryan Duplassie also links the momentum of INM to flowing water and shows how recounting acts of land stewardship with youth creates indigenous worldviews (300–2). While the protection of water is essential to everyone in our increasingly warming world, the connection between navigable waters, indigenous mobility and the relationship to the environment is significant. Navigation through water at one time was the major method of travel and communication between diverse groups—and continues to be an access point into indigenous conceptions of place. The fight to protect this right informs Taiiaki Alfred's call for a reoccupation and presence on the land that will lead to indigenous governance that is not compromised by its authority stemming from a colonial governing structure (347–9). The centrality of water in the INM struggle does not at first seem to signify performance; however, the mobility of water needs to be recognized as enabling sovereign performativity through navigation. Metaphorically, the freezing of water may seem to be a way of removing it from a navigable state, as the federal bill threatens to do. However, people have always found ways to use ice for travelling and, as Idle No More has demonstrated, may be able to use this threat to increase their motivation and mobility.

Voices

The diversity of this collection is also a reminder of the significance of oral tradition in First Nations and First People's cultural practices. Lori Mainville describes it as 'a relational reciprocity of speaking, listening, and witnessing as a group' (345–7). Indeed, the sheer number of voices included in The Winter We Danced both demonstrates the reciprocity of the movement and offers, in this curated anthology, an exceptional opportunity for listening and witnessing. The detailed biographies of the contributors (415–38) represent a powerful document in its own right. The biographies illustrate the power base that the momentum of Idle No More amassed. Moreover, it shows the many voices (past, present and future) in support of indigenous resistance and action. The

Winter We Danced is a valuable resource to access nuanced and multiple perspectives on the important issues that define Idle No More. It is also a vital way for performance studies scholars to begin to engage with this moment of indigenous mobilization, which will shed light on earlier political actions, and give a perspective on performativity in our present digital culture.

Notes

1 This is the Cree language word for the Métis people.

2 Notably excluding from protection Kitimat River and Upper Fraser River in British Columbia, both of which lie along the route of the contentious Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline.

References

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