Kwe as Resurgent Method

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Abstract

Like *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* and "Land as Pedagogy," this book was generated from within Nishnaabeg intelligence — Nishnaabeg intellectual practices or, more broadly, Nishnaabewin — rather than the traditional theoretical and methodological orientations of the Western academy (Simpson 2014; 2013; 2011). It is anchored theoretically within the ways my people generate knowledge, through deep reciprocal embodied engagement with Aki, and by participating with full presence in embedded practices — inherent processes that occur within a series of ethical frameworks that, when adhered to, continually generate consent.

Keywords

Nishnaabeg intelligence, indigenous knowledge, women's knowledge

Kwe as resurgent method[1]

While the few years I spent with the elders of Long Lake #58 are responsible for me falling deeply in love with Nishnaabewin, they are also the beginning of me being able to link the experiences of my life with a critique and analysis of colonialism. As an instructor in many different Indigenous land-based programs, I often have the honor of witnessing our people link the circumstances of their lives — that is, how they experience the personal trauma of colonialism through the child welfare system, the state education system, gender violence, addictions, poverty, the prison system, or mental health issues — to the larger structures and process of settler colonialism. These are powerful moments to witness, and in my own person these moments have been the most theoretically generative, particularly if these moments are housed and nurtured within grounded normativities.

Like *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* and "Land as Pedagogy," this book was generated from within Nishnaabeg intelligence — Nishnaabeg intellectual practices or, more broadly, Nishnaabewin — rather than the traditional theoretical and methodological orientations of the Western academy (Simpson 2014; 2013; 2011). It is anchored theoretically within the ways my people generate knowledge, through deep reciprocal embodied engagement with Aki, and by participating with full presence in embedded practices — inherent processes that occur within a series of ethical frameworks that, when adhered to, continually generate consent.[2]

In *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, I used the Seven Fires Nishnaabeg creation story, as told to me by elder Edna Manitowabi, to demonstrate the nature of knowledge from within Nishnaabewin, and this is also an important theoretical anchor in this book (See Simpson, 2011, pp.31-49). In *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, I emphasized in my analysis of this story that knowledge within the Nishnaabeg universe comes from the spiritual world and flows to humans through intimate relationships with human and nonhuman entities. I discussed how knowledge is created through the combination of heart knowledge or emotion, and thought or intellect. I explained how the transformative power of knowledge is unleashed through movement, kinetics or action, our embedded practices and processes of life; that is, one has to be fully present and engaged in Nishnaabeg ways of living in order to generate knowledge, in order to generate theory. In this way theory is generated from the ground up, and it necessarily then has to be accessible to all Nishnaabeg so we each have the opportunity to develop our own intimate meaning. I talked about how Gzhwe Manidoo transferred all the knowledge that went into the creation of the universe to Nishnaabeg bodies, but that the knowledge was so vast it didn't just stay in our heads, it spilled into every aspect of our beings.[3] I stressed that knowledge is intimate within Nishnaabewin: individuals have the responsibility for generating meaning in their lives, for discovering their place in the world with the guidance of their names, spiritual relations, clan affiliations, their own gifts, desires, talents, and skills sets and by actively engaging the world. I emphasized it was the responsibility of families and communities to support individuals and their diverse life paths, as opposed to judging and discouraging individual growth and actualization, and that this creates agency and self-determination, variance and diversity. I went on to talk about how Nanabush's early trips around the world (discussed in more detail in chapter 4 of this volume) outline Nishnaabeg ways of knowing or generating knowledge, including visiting, ceremony, singing, dancing, storytelling, hunting, fishing, gathering, observing, reflecting, experimenting, visioning, dreaming, ricing, and sugaring, for example (See Simpson, 2011, pp. 31-49). Chapter 4 also explains how Nishnaabeg internationalism allows for the engagement of other theoretical traditions within the frame of Nishnaabewin. Edna says, "wear your teachings," and what she is telling us when she does, is that you can't study or read about this system to understand it. One has to animate our practices of living over several decades. One has to be the intervention, one has to not only wear the theories but use them to navigate life.

As much as this book is about my own deepening understandings of these theories within my life, these intellectual practices are also the mechanism through which I have generated my understanding of the theories, concepts, and ideas in this book. This book comes then from a different set of intellectual practices than the ones privileged in the academy. It adheres to a different set of theories on how knowledge is constructed, generated, and communicated. It uses a different set of methodologies to generate those ideas. I understand the word *kwe* to mean woman within the spectrum of genders in Nishnaabewin, or the Nishnaabe language. Kwe is not a commodity. Kwe is not capital. It is different than the word *woman* because it recognizes a spectrum of gender expressions and it exists embedded in grounded normativity. Kwe cannot be exploited. There is a fluidity to my use of the term kwe that gestures to the gender variance within Nishnaabewin. Kwe does not conform to the rigidity of the colonial gender binary, nor is kwe essentialized. In my mind, kwe has the capacity to be inclusive of both cis and trans experiences, but this is not my decision to make, because I do not write from that positionality.

My life as a kwe within Nishnaabewin is *method* because my people have always generated knowledge through the combination of emotion and intellectual knowledge within the kinetics of our place-based practices, as mitigated through our bodies, minds and spirits. In fact, within Nishnaabewin, I am fully responsible for generating meaning about my life through the way I think and live. This internal work is a necessary and vital part of living responsibly and ethically within our grounded normativity. It is my sovereignty. Within this larger process, on the land I've engaged in Nishnaabeg practices of hunting, fishing, harvesting rice and medicines, ceremony, language learning, singing, dancing, making maple syrup, parenting, and storytelling, and I've spent over a decade learning from elder Doug Williams. I've paid great attention to my thoughts, emotions, and experiences as a kwe living at this particular point in time, and I've used this to critique settler colonialism and to generate thoughts on radical resurgent responses.[4] I have not reacted to these emotional responses uncritically but explored and processed them through ceremony, discussions, artistic practice, and therapeutic contexts and with elders. This is an act of resurgence itself: centering

[1] Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017, pp. 27-37). Copyright 2016 by the Regents of the University of Minnesota. Reprinted by permission.

[2] *Aki* means land — place, power, relation; it is the opposite of land as commodity. Aki is not capital. Throughout this book I use land-based and place-based interchangeably to denote practices that come from relational reciprocity with Aki.

[3] The Creator, the one who loves us unconditionally, according to Doug Williams; see endnote 60 in Simpson, 2017, p. 46.

[4] This is actually something Indigenous scholars do, and I think have always done. I was reminded of it in reading Mishuana Goeman (2013), when she talks about the mobility of her family causing her to pause at the dichotomy between urban/reservation and reflect more deeply on spatialities (p. 7).

Nishnaabeg intellect and thought through the embodiment of Nishnaabeg practices, and using the theory and knowledge generated to critique my current reality.

This is not just experiential knowledge or embodied knowledge. It is not just individual knowledge rooted in my own perspectives and experiences with the abusive power of colonialism, because it is theoretically anchored to and generated through Nishnaabeg intelligence and because it takes place entirely within grounded normativity — perhaps a strangulated grounded normativity but grounded normativity nevertheless. In an entirely Nishnaabeg intellectual context, I wouldn't have to explain this at all. This would be understood because it is how our knowledge system has always worked.

This is kwe as method generating kwe as theorist.

This is kwe as method generating kwe as theorist, *as we have always done*.

To this end, this isn't an academic book in a Western sense, because in many ways it does not conform to and reproduce straight, white, cisgendered, masculinist academic conventions, theories, and citational practices, and therefore knowledge, despite the fact that these are normalized within the academy.[5]Indigenous people, particularly children, women, and Two Spirit and queer (2SQ) people, can choose to use the conventions of the academy to critique the system of settler colonialism and advance Indigenous liberation, and I believe this is valuable work.[6] We can also choose to continue to produce knowledge and theory in opposition to the academy as resistance, resurgence, and sustenance through our own systems of knowledge, and I believe this is also vital work.[7] Many of us do both at the same time. However, the knowledge our bodies and our practices generate, that our theories and methodologies produce, has never been considered valid knowledge within the academy and therefore often exists on the margins (Smith, 2010). As a result of this gatekeeping, the academy cannot account for nor explain what has happened to me as a kwe under the system of colonialism in a matter that I can wholeheartedly embrace, and without the knowledge, analysis, and critique produced by Indigenous people, particularly women and 2SQ people on our own terms, the academy cannot have a full understanding of colonialism as a process nor can it fully understand Indigenous resurgence.[8] As political orders, our bodies, minds, emotions, and spirits produce theory and knowledge on a daily basis without conforming to the conventions of the academy, and I believe this has not only sustained our peoples, but it has always propelled Indigenous intellectual rigor and propelled our resurgent practices.[9] This is Indigenous excellence.

Following Nishnaabeg intellectual practices, you will find me citing Indigenous scholars and writers that resonate most profoundly in my head and in my heart, as the practice of debwewin, or the practice of producing truths (Maracle, 2003).[10] You will find me relying on Nishnaabeg practices as theory, highlighting my own personal practice of Nishnaabeg intelligence and privileging the often painful and uncomfortable knowledge I carry that has been generated from existing as an Indigenous woman in the context of settler colonialism. My body and my life are part of my research, and I use this knowledge to critique and analyze. I will not separate this from my engagement with academic literature, because in my life these things are not compartmentalized. I write from the first person, because within Nishnaabewin, this is a mechanism of accountability for my own thoughts, critique, and analysis, and a recognition that these will necessarily vary from other Nishnaabeg thinkers. I use Nishnaabewin as a theory because that is what my people have always done, although there are many other conceptual windows into our thought system. I tell stories, both sacred (aandisokaanan) and personal stories (dibajimowinan), as a way of communicating ideas and concepts because that is how my people express themselves, and I rely on Nishnaabeg aesthetics to communicate meaning through story (see chapter 11 for a detailed explanation). Some concepts are introduced early in this book and then repeated later in the work as a mechanism for deepening understandings because in Nishnaabeg intellectual practices meaning is derived from both repetition and context.

There are those who will not see this as an expression of the complex system of Nishnaabeg intelligence, as theory or intellect, or as a valid form of knowledge production. I will not apologize for this, or qualify this, or defend this, nor will I write this book in a way that might be more palatable to whiteness. There are those who will therefore position this work not as theory or an academic contribution but as a soft intellectual work or narrative or creative nonfiction. The later positioning is both racialized and gendered, and I have no desire to center whiteness and answer to their positioning. This work has already been done by several scholars and students in Indigenous academic circles. I believe my job as an Indigenous thinker and writer is to use the work of my colleagues to expand us, challenge us, and to hold us all up, as this community continually does for me (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999; Kovach, 2010; Wilson, 2009; Simpson, 2001; Simpson, 2000a, 2000b).

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[5] The Indigenous academic community, particularly PhD students, have been forced to justify the use of Indigenous methodologies, ethics, and theories and more broadly Indigenous ways of knowing for nearly three decades now. I'd encourage those who find this paragraph surprising to read Smith 1999 as a starting point, and Hunt, 2014, pp. 31-31.

[6] I am using Two Spirit and queer (2SQ) as an umbrella term in this book to refer to all Indigenous Two Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, transsexual, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, and gender-nonconforming people. See http://www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/ for more information. Hunt writes, "Two-Spirit is used by some Indigenous people to describe the diverse roles and identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, trans and/or gender-fluid Indigenous people in North America. At the 1990 Winnipeg gathering of the International Gathering of American Indian and First Nations Gays and Lesbians, 'Two-Spirit' was chosen as a term to move away from the anthropological term 'berdache' in describing Native queer identities and communities. Following this usage, and that of some recent Two-Spirit scholarship, I choose to capitalize this term; "Witnessing the Colonialscape," xv. I include the term *queer* in 2SQ to recognize that not all Indigenous queer people use the term *Two Spirit* to identify themselves. Lesbian elder Ma-Nee Chacaby presents a different understanding of the term Two Spirit, which is explained in chapter 8.

[7] Again, for those readers who find this idea new, I'd suggest beginning with Patricia Hill Collins, 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

[8] Of course this is beginning to change with the swell of Indigenous scholarship, particularly by Indigenous women and the 2SQ community.

[9] The idea of bodies as political orders I learned from Audra Simpson in her talk "The Chief's Two Bodies," keynote address, International R.A.C.E. Conference, Edmonton, October 2014; available online https://vimeo.com/110948627. This is discussed further in chapter 8.

[10] In Simpson 2011, chapter 1, endnote 17, I talk about debwewin as the sound of my heart or the art of truth making.

This book builds upon the thinking and action of countless Indigenous peoples I am in relationship with in the present and with those who have engaged the same ideas and thinking in the past. My writing and thinking is (still) highly influenced by the unapologetic work of Lee Maracle in general and *I Am Woman* in particular. When I read this book, it feels like she wrote it *to me* (Maracle, 2003). It feels truthful. It feels real because it is. She wrote about what it was like to be an Indigenous woman, and she used it to formulate a scathing critique of the colonial system. She didn't back it up with academic references. She didn't qualify it. She didn't say maybe it isn't like this for everyone. She didn't dance around being a victim. She didn't beg for the colonizer to recognize her pain. She hit gender violence, capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and colonialism hard. She just spoke her truth, without apologies. And then she published it herself. As if this is normal, as if it is her birthright, because, as she demonstrates to us, it is. Here we are, over twenty years later. It is still in print. It's still being used in courses. There is nothing like it. To a large extent, I learned *kwe as method* from her, scholars like Trish Monture, and community organizers like Judy DaSilva and from so many Indigenous women like them, working in their communities, in cities, and in their families with zero fanfare and little recognition. I think the first time I saw kwe as method in action was during the summer of 1990, when I watched a Mohawk activist from Kanehsatá:ke, Ellen Gabriel, on the nightly news act as spokesperson for her people during the "Oka Crisis." The same unapologetic grounded truth that emanated from her during the summer of 1990 she carries with her to this day, not as a celebrity, but as a committed educator and language activist in her community.

At its core, kwe as method is about refusal (Simpson, A., 2014; 2007).[11] It is about refusing colonial domination, refusing heteropatriarchy, and refusing to be tamed by whiteness or the academy. I understand this refusal in the context of Nishnaabewin and Michi Saagiig grounded normativity because I have come to know refusal most intimately in this context. Within Nishnaabewin, refusal is an appropriate response to oppression, and within this context it is always generative; that is, it is always the living alternative. When the Nishnaabeg were exploiting the deer by overharvesting, the deer refused and left the territory.[12] After the state believed we could no longer hunt and fish in our territory as a result of the Williams Treaty, many hunters and fishers refused and continued to do so. When Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg women were told they were not Status Indians because of whom they married, many refused and continued to live as Nishnaabeg. Earlier this year, when white cottagers demanded James Whetung stop harvesting wild rice on Pigeon Lake, he refused, and then the wider community also refused (See Simpson, 2016). I exist as a kwe because of the continual refusal of countless generations to disappear from the north shore of Lake Ontario. I am interested in all the ways the Nishnaabeg refuse colonial authority, domination, and heteropatriarchy throughout time while generating Nishnaabewin.

I am often reminded of this when I think of of Kiizhigo, and I think of Kiizhigo when I'm refusing to be confined to the city and when I am out on our lakes. Kiizhigo was a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg who lives in Curve Lake. He did not like the way the government was constantly interfering in the life of the community, so he left and went to live on an island by himself. He refused colonial domination and reembedded himself in Nishnaabewin, taking care of himself with bush skills and knowledge of the land. Kiizhigo lived there by himself for many years until he died, and the island is now named after him.[13] Everyone thinks of Kiizhigo and his refusal when we drive or paddle by his island. His refusal is now encoded on the land.

The Radical Resurgence Project

The Radical Resurgence Project uses Indigenous interrogation, critique, and theory, and the grounded normativity these systems generate, as the intelligence system that instigates resurgence and is the process from which grounded, real world, Indigenous alternatives are manifest and realized. It employs Nishnaabeg story as algorithm, as coded processes that generate solutions to the problems of occupation and erasure and to life on earth. It begins from a place of refusal of colonialism and its current settler colonial structural manifestation. It refuses dispossession of both Indigenous bodies and land as the focal point of resurgent thinking and action. It continues the work of dismantling heteropatriarchy as a dispossessive force. It calls for the formation of networks of constellations of radical resurgent organizing as direct action within grounded normativities and against the dispossessive forces of capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and white supremacy. These are actions that engage in a generative refusal of an aspect of state control, so they don't just refuse, they also embody an Indigenous alternative. This in my mind is not up for debate. I simply cannot see how Indigenous peoples can continue to exist as *indigenous* if we are willing to replicate the logics of colonialism, because to do so is to actively engage in self-dispossession from the relationships that make us Indigenous in the first place.

As I do in all my writing, I write first and foremost for my own people. There are many different diverse interpretations and philosophical standpoints within Nishnaabewin, and as communities of thinkers, I know we will continue to engage very deeply with our knowledge as Nishnaabeg lives. My favorite thing is discussions where Indigenous intellectuals engage with my work from within their own nations' thought system. These conversations are so rich and affirmative to me. I look forward to this Indigenous internationalism. I look forward also to continuing to build this internationalism with the brilliance of Black theorists artists, activists, revolutionaries, and radical imaginaries and their communities both within my territory and beyond with the hope that we can become mutual coresistors in our flight to freedom.

At this point, I've made a series of basic, necessary interventions to set the stage for my discussion of the Radical Resurgence Project. I've made the case for centering this work in the theoretical home of Indigenous intelligence and grounded normativity, and that this book itself is conceptualized and communicated through Nishnaabewin. I use kwe as method to refuse and to analyze colonialism as a *structure of processes*, and I've placed the eradication of gender violence as a central project of radical resurgence. These interventions continue and are expanded over the course of the book. In chapter 3, I put forth a more expansive nonhierarchical conceptualization of dispossession to include land and bodies as the meta-relationship Indigenous peoples have with the state. I also use

[11] This concept is also reconsidered in the conclusion, this volume.

[12] This is a Nishnaabeg story, and it is explored further in chapter 4 and the conclusion.

[13] I've heard this story from Doug Williams several times — every time we pass Kiizhigo Island. There is a written version of it in Vanessa Watt (2010, p. 41). Her story also comes from Doug.

kwe as method to discuss settler colonialism as a structure of processes. My discussion of *Indigenous* intelligence or grounded normativity as the theoretical fuel for radical resurgence is deepened in chapter 4 with my discussion of place-based Nishnaabeg internationalism. I then turn to another crucial intervention in resurgence theory with a consideration of Nishnaabeg practices of anticapitalism in chapter 5. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 take on heteropatriarchy as an impediment to Indigenous nation building and radical resurgence, and queer Indigeneity as a crucial expression of Indigenous intelligence. Chapter 9 explores place-based resurgent education that centers children in Nishnaabewin. Chapter 10 considers resurgent struggle, recognition, and generative refusal within Indigenous movement building. This leads to my consideration in chapters 11 and 12 of constellating everyday acts of resurgence into collective action through everyday decolonization and live a decolonizing queer politics, drawing n work by Kwagiulth (Kwakwaka'wakw) scholar and resurgence theorist Sarah Hunt along with non-Indigenous scholar Cindy Holmes. I also examine Cree/Dene scholar Jarrett Martineau's work on resurgence in artistic practices and the creation of constellations as flight paths to Indigenous freedom. The Radical Resurgence Project concludes in the final chapter by considering resurgent mobilization.

These interventions are explored through engagement with my own understandings of Nishnaabeg intelligence, Indigenous scholarship, and kwe as resurgent method. They are reoccurring themes that are introduced in various forms and then deepened as the book progresses. These interventive themes are explored from the starting poinng that radical resurgent mobilizing must refuse dispossession in all forms and take on, in a deeply critical way, the forces of capitalism, (3white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy, and that in these refusals, we center ourselves in generating the alternatives.

As for *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, the vast majority of thinking and research for this book has taken place in community and on the land. My thinking is highly influenced through conversations and interactions with several Indigenous theorists, including elders Doug Williams and Edna Manitowabi, my children, Minowewebeneshiihn and Nishna, and the collective work of the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning, particularly Dene elders and land users. Some of the theorists cited in these pages practice within Indigenous intelligence systems, some within Western systems, and some carry and practice both. They are all concerned with Indigenous excellence regardless of where their practices are based, and their work is rigorous. I have thought a great deal about the important discussions around citational politics in Indigenous Studies, and for me this discussion moves beyond just citations; for me these are complex questions that relate to the construction of knowledge itself. Those who think and live within Indigenous intelligence systems are marginalized within the academia and are not positioned as theorists or thinkers. For those of us trained within the academy, the parts of us that embody Indigenous intelligence are also marginalized and often invisible to the academy but visible to our families and communities. Following Nishnaabeg practices, I have cited the source where I first learned the concept — not necessarily where I first heard the concept, but where I first paid attention to it. The idea of *thinking in formation* or *thinking with*, for me, comes from Indigenous intellectual practices and is also parallel to the intellectual work and brilliance of Black feminist theorists and is central to this work (Johnson, 2016). In this book, I am thinking and writing deeply about the challenges Black feminist theorist Alexis Pauline Gumbs asked of herself in writing *The Spill*. I am asking myself, what does it mean to write *with* Indigenous theory? What does it mean to "prioritize being with each other, being with the work, being with the possibilities, more than they prioritize the gymnastics of trying to get it right in a structure built on wrongness?" (Johnson, 2016). To Gumbs, this meant no citing white people or men in her book. To me, it has come to mean thinking critically about the emerging canon in Indigenous Studies, noticing whose voices are centered and whose are marginalized, prioritizing Indigenous intellectual practices and theories, embedding myself in a format with other Indigenous thinkers, and citing the works necessary to bring about interventions of the highest caliber as I strive for excellence within these Indigenous spaces on Indigenous terms.

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