
On Idle No More

Yale D. Belanger and P. Whitney Lackenbauer. *Blockades or Breakthroughs?: Aboriginal Peoples Confront the Canadian State*. Quebec: McGill-Queen's U P, 2014.

<http://www.mqup.ca/>

Ken Coates. *#IDLENOMORE and the Remaking of Canada*. Regina: U of Regina P, 2015.

<http://uofrpress.ca/>

Kino-nda-niimi Collective. *The Winter We Danced: Voices from the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement*. Winnipeg: ARP Books, 2014.

<http://arpbooks.org/>

Kisukyukyit, hu qak#ik Angela Semple. I am a member of the Ktunaxa nation located in Southeastern British Columbia, and a status Indian according to section 6.2 of Canada's Indian Act. I choose to open this review by positioning myself as an "insider" when it comes to Indigenous people in Canada: an important starting point, as it has become well-accepted practice within Indigenous studies to acknowledge our positionality as writers, activists, scholars, and community members. I will focus strongly on this concept of positionality throughout my discussion of the three texts reviewed.

Following the footsteps of many of the authors under review, I'd like to share a bit about my own experience with the Idle No More movement. When I was approached to write this essay, I was immediately brought back to the winter of 2012/2013, where I followed and participated in the movement in various ways, from attending gatherings (Park Royal Mall, Vancouver) and marches (Elsipogtog Rally, Vancouver), speaking at events (Idle No More Rally, Simon Fraser University), all the while tweeting and Facebooking the hashtag along with thousands of people across the world over the past three years. Never in my lifetime have I experienced this kind of Indigenous pride and unity, and I am eternally grateful for the experience, which will follow me through a lifetime of being "idle no more."

But what is "Idle No More?" While the social media posts and gatherings that happened worldwide were life-changing for myself and many other Indigenous people in Canada, the majority of Canadians still have little to no understanding of the events that took place, or of their continued impact on our communities. Often, not surprisingly given the historical coverage of Indigenous resistance, the media "went wrong" (*Winter*, 294) in regards to Idle No More. This illustrates a necessity for literature such as the three books in review. "Idle No More" as a catch phrase was coined by four women in Saskatchewan: Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam, Sheelah McLean, and Nina Wilson. In 2012, these women found themselves "fed up" with the Canadian government's omnibus Bill C-45, a "massive piece of impenetrable federal legislation" (Coates, XIII), taking particular issue with proposed changes in environmental protections and Indian Act legislation. Gordon, McAdam, McLean and Wilson decided to hold a "teach-in" on November 10 to garner

support in their protest. They advertised the teach-in through a Facebook event under the title “Idle No More” as a “grassroots movement for solidarity which welcomes all community members!” (Coates 3). The women also took to Twitter, with Jessica Gordon using the hashtag (#idlenomore) for the first time on October 30, later tweeting it to Sean Atleo, then Chief of the Assembly of First Nations (4). The response was immediate, as Indigenous people from all over Canada began sharing the Idle No More hashtag and planning their own events, from teach-ins to round dances to a “National Day of Solidarity and Resurgence” held on December 10, 2012 (Kino-nda-niimi Collective 391).

I cannot remember the first moment I heard about Idle No More, though I do remember an early conversation where a friend of mine shrugged it off “oh, right, we shouldn’t leave our cars idling...” (many cities and towns have “Idle-Free zone” signs posted in parking lots and pick-up zones, an almost unattainable goal during Canadian winters). I giggled, wondering myself about the title. I echoed the sentiments shared in some of the works under review that we, as Indigenous people, had never been “idle,” and I questioned the connotations that “Idle No More” had when thinking about our Elders and their own fights and movements (ie. Oka or AIM). But as time went on, I came to view it as an immediate call to action rather than a reflection on the history of Indigenous protest. As Coates explains, “Gordon, McAdam, McLean, and Wilson decided to do something. This, among all the things that happened over the coming months, was the most radical step” (Coates, 3). And that is the heart of “Idle No More”: Of course, we, as Indigenous people have been doing good work in our communities since time immemorial, but with this current (2012) federal government and their secretive and destructive omnibus bills, it simply wasn’t enough. “Idle No More” became our rallying cry.

What is truly fascinating, though, is how Idle No More grew to encompass much more than a specific protest about a specific piece of legislation. As the events spread through cities, small towns, and Indigenous communities, it was clear that Indigenous peoples and our allies had simply been waiting for a spark to start the forest fire that became Idle No More. This metaphorical forest fire spread far and wide in the milliseconds it took to click thousands of “retweet” and “share” buttons. It burned in our hearts as we sang, drummed, and danced together. It left any sense of apathy behind in its ashes, clearing a path for a renewed empowerment of Indigenous voices within Canada. At each Idle No More event I attended, and every time I logged in to check the progress of the hashtag on Twitter, I was inspired and uplifted by the connections Idle No More was making all over the world. I was born more than a decade after the height of the American Indian Movement, and was only two years old when Oka happened. For me, Idle No More created a sense of Indigenous community that I had never been a part of before, and it did so through social media. Known in Indian country as our newest form of the “moccasin telegraph,” social media has transformed the way Indigenous communities across North America are able to communicate with each other, connecting our Elders, children, aunties, and uncles from all different nations in mere seconds, and allowing us to find solidarity on issues we care about, as seen through Idle No More.

Here I want to return to the discussion of positionality. As I mentioned, I have placed myself in the role of the “insider”: someone who participated in the Idle No More

movement as a status Indian in Canada. I've identified myself by sharing my nation with you (Ktunaxa). This is protocol within Indigenous communities. In certain settings, for example at a community gathering, I would follow this up by naming my grandmothers (Patricia Sam and Sabina Cote) in order to situate myself further within the community. Because this protocol is so well established, it is a natural progression for Indigenous scholars to continue this form of introduction through our academic work. It is important to note here that Indigenous Studies is a relatively new field within the academy, and to also acknowledge that Indigenous-authored scholarship within the field is an even more recent advancement. I point this out, as until 1960 it was illegal for a status Indian in Canada to obtain a university degree unless they were willing to give up their status.

Under those conditions, non-Indigenous people created virtually all research done about Indigenous people. This concept of control over representation is not a new one, but I want to stress it to the context of the three books being reviewed here, at a time when thousands of Indigenous academics, writers, artists, filmmakers, Elders, teachers, community leaders, and even politicians have emerged to tell our stories from our point of view. This is inherently important when it comes to *Idle No More*, as each of the texts explains issues with media coverage of Indigenous resistance and resurgence. When, for a century or more, we've seen non-Indigenous people continuously get it wrong, it is important that we share our own stories, and that those stories get heard. This is not—I repeat, firmly, *not*—to say that non-Indigenous people cannot participate in Indigenous Studies. Instead, I am arguing for a careful examination of work on or about Indigenous people that includes awareness of the positionality of the author or editors. To explain this further, I want to draw upon Ken Coates' description in *#IDLENOMORE and the Remaking of Canada*:

In fact, *Idle No More* was not meant for non-Aboriginal Canadians. It was not an attempt to persuade, convince, or direct political change. *Idle No More*, it seemed clear as time went on, was by Aboriginal people, for Aboriginal people, and about Aboriginal people. For the first time in Canadian history, non-Aboriginal Canadians were relegated to the sidelines (xxi).

So, if the movement was by us, for us, and about us, who better to look to for an explanation than the “insiders”?

I have outlined the concept of positionality here in detail because I think it is one of the major defining factors between the three works in review. *The Winter We Danced* is an anthology edited by the Kino-nda-niimi Collective, (Kino-nda-niimi means “we are dancing”¹) described as “a group of Indigenous writers, artists, editors, curators, and allies...” with the lead editors listed as Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair (Anishinaabe), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Anishinaabe), Tanya Kappo (Nehiyaw), Wanda Nanibush (Anishinaabe), and Hayden King (Anishinaabe), who—along with many colleagues, relatives, friends, and organizations—assembled this collection together over the summer and fall of 2013.” (Kino-nda-niimi Collective, 439). *The Winter We Danced* illustrates its “insider” status right from the outset. Using the term “we” in the title creates an important union between the editors of the anthology, the writers of each piece, and

the reader. The dedication of the book reads “for those who danced...and are still dancing” (Kino-nda-niimi Collective, 5). It is clear that this book is intended, in the spirit of Idle No More, as an offering to those who have been inspired by the movement. The next few pages of *The Winter We Danced* hold a photo by Hannah Yoon of two women in regalia lighting a sage bundle, and a poem titled “A Healing time” by SkyBlue Mary Morin. Opening with this dedication, photograph, and poem illustrates the centering concept of the anthology: sharing Indigenous voices on Idle No More through art, poetry, and essays.

If you decide to read only one of the books reviewed here, I wholeheartedly hope that you choose *The Winter We Danced*. This collection showcases a multitude of Indigenous voices sharing their thoughts on the movement *as it happened*. Many of the essays were actually published in various blogs, newspapers, and journals over the course of the winter of 2012/13, and have been republished here in order to provide an overview of Idle No More as a whole. As the Kino-nda-niimi Collective explains “What is striking is that never before have Indigenous writers and artists had the capacity to write the movement, alongside the movement taking place taking place, and the result is a diverse collection of voices and perspectives that represent our experience of the movement” (439). Here we have insights into the movement created by the participants in real time, as they lived and breathed the growth of Idle No More.

I want to share another story of my experience in the movement. In the winter of 2012, I had attended and worked at Simon Fraser University (SFU) for over five years. Throughout my time there, I had never once seen a police officer on campus, even when we had more controversial (for example, pro-life) demonstrations, campus security handled these events solely on their own. Yet when I stood up to speak at the Idle No More event on campus there were two uniformed (and armed) police officers in the audience. It turns out the RCMP were under orders to be present at *every* Idle No More event held in Canada. In an internal RCMP report on Idle No More, the movement was deemed a “bacteria.”² When I read those words, just as when I saw armed police at the events I attended, my heart sank. This is exactly the kind of misunderstanding of Idle No More that *The Winter We Danced* works to combat. Instead of violence and anger, our movement aimed to share love of our communities and our mother earth, and, most importantly, to show our hope for the future. The collection captures the spirit that was (and is) present throughout Idle No More. Essays explore the power of Indigenous peoples and our ceremonies, photos celebrate the gatherings that we held to create space for ourselves within the colonial nation state of Canada, while poems speak of the intergenerational trauma from which we are healing.

The Winter We Danced is a collection made up of scholarly essays, poetry, photography, and other forms of visual art. The inclusion of more creative works is unique to this collection, among the three books reviewed. While the majority of the book is made up of scholarly essays, it would not be complete without the inclusion of photos that capture the movement (again, in real time), and the artwork from various Indigenous artists. The choice to give voice to the artists is an incredibly important one, as it acknowledges something that is inherent within Indigenous knowledge: we are all connected. Each part

of the community must necessarily be involved for us to move forward. So, we have essays from well-known academics like Pam Palmater. We have poems, songs, and personal reflections on the movement from artists including Tara Williamson, we have visual art from Sonny Assu alongside a historical timeline from the editors of the collection. All of this illustrates the broad spectrum of the movement that is Idle No More. Including visual art and poetry alongside the scholarly, historic, and political essays is inherently important because there is so much art that was inspired and created during the movement. To ignore that aspect is to re-define the movement in terms that would miss the point, and again, “get it wrong.”

Finally, this inclusion of creative works acknowledges a fact that is often explored within Indigenous Studies; the personal cannot be separated from the academic. Rather than strive for some mythical objectivity, we share our own personal experiences in various mediums in the hopes that we can give you the “gift” of a greater understanding of Idle No More and Indigenous peoples, my own coming in the form of this essay, and of course, the Kino-nda-niimi collective with their beautiful contribution that is *The Winter We Danced*. Just as it was when we gathered over the winter of 2012/13, we are reaching out with our words in the hopes that we can change the future for our children, our grandchildren, and our ancestors who are always with us. One final note about the book, is that all of the royalties from the sale of the book go directly back into the community, specifically being donated to the Native Youth Sexual Health Network. (Kino-nda-niimi Collective, 411). The Kino-nda-niimi Collective’s dedication to community here is shown through action, not simply through the words of the anthology.

As I have stressed throughout this essay, examining the positionality of the author in the field of Indigenous studies is of great importance. By explicitly sharing your position as an Indigenous or non-Indigenous person, you are respecting the protocols of our communities, and creating space for Indigenous understandings (the practice of introducing yourself and your place in the community) within the academy. While this may not strike a chord with academics who continue to strive for objectivity or lack of bias, I believe that Indigenous scholars place less importance on objectivity, and a much greater importance on responsibility and relationality. How you situate yourself within a community is of utmost importance, then, not because of a bias that could make you unreliable, but instead because reliability is based on your relationship to the community you are addressing. Part of this responsibility to community comes from a long-standing history of non-Indigenous people researching and, in effect, “stealing” from Indigenous communities, telling our stories without our control and “spinning” the truth to fit political agendas of assimilation and colonization.

Again, I’m not arguing that only Indigenous scholars should do research about Indigenous people. The important part, in my opinion, is that researchers identify themselves and their experiences in relation to the community they are talking about. This gives readers the ability to discern their reliability in the context of information they are sharing, especially when it comes to talking about Indigenous communities and issues. Ken Coates provides us with a perfect example of the kind of self-reflexivity that I

would call responsible and respectful scholarship. At various times throughout his book, *#IDLENOMORE*, Coates identifies himself as non-Indigenous, for example:

As a non-Aboriginal man who watched from the sidelines and did not participate in any of the organized activities or demonstrations associated with Idle No More, I am, in many ways, far removed from the centre of the movement. I have, however, worked on Aboriginal issues for decades... (xiv).

Further on, Coates makes an important academic distinction: “I do not like being described as an ‘expert’ on Aboriginal affairs. I am, instead, always a student, and I have been blessed by the willingness of many Aboriginal people to share their stories, experiences, and perspectives with...” (xv). As an Indigenous academic myself, I have often experienced difficulties forcing the academy to understand, respect, and value Indigenous knowledge. As an example, when our Elders speak of their knowledge, they will often say, “I do not know much” or “I know nothing.” This show of humility does not mean that they are not “experts,” or that they have no wealth of knowledge. Instead, it illustrates that we are always in a state of learning, as Coates so aptly captures in the above quotation.

I recommend *#IDLENOMORE* for two reasons. First and foremost, as a companion to *The Winter We Danced*. I believe Coates would agree with me on this, as he speaks about the Kino-nda-niimi Collective anthology as an inspiration for his own work, and he points to needing to listen to Indigenous voices to get a better understanding of what is an inherently Indigenous movement. As a companion piece, this work gives an extensive overview of the Idle No More movement as it follows the progression through Coates’ research: “In the pages that follow I will offer my view of what happened, gleaned from hundreds of YouTube videos, thousands of Facebook postings, and tens of thousands of tweets, newspaper accounts, and other evidence of a movement that refused to follow the rules of both Canadian politics and global protest” (xix). If I were to teach a course that included Idle No More, I would pair the timeline chapters from this book with some of the more personally involved pieces in *The Winter We Danced*.

Secondly, this is an important book for allies. In telling his own story, as a non-Indigenous person growing up in Northern Canada, Coates describes being almost completely unaware of Indigenous people and issues. This personal background provides important insight into Indigenous/Non-Indigenous relations in Canada. While *The Winter We Danced* provides a brief timeline of the Idle No More movement, I would look to this to provide more detailed research into how the movement grew, and into specific moments (such as Chapter Four: “The Ottawa Distraction and the Complicated Evolution of Idle No More”). Coates gives us a detailed look at how the movement formed, and it’s implications in wider Canadian society. While his writing style is generally self-reflexive, Coates has done his homework. Even though I don’t always agree with all of his statements regarding the movement, for example, Teresa Spence’s request to speak to the Governor General, although it may seem “confused” to non-Indigenous peoples makes sense when you consider our treaties being signed with the Crown, Coates work is thorough and respectful. For those looking for chronology as well as a more thorough

examination of the “technologies of mass mobilization” (Coates, Chapter Seven), this is a highly useful text.

Finally, the anthology from Yale D. Belanger and P. Whitney Lackenbauer titled *Blockades or Breakthroughs?: Aboriginal People Confront the Canadian State*. As I have outlined, acknowledging our place as researchers in Indigenous Studies is becoming increasingly mainstream, and as far as I can tell, the editors and contributors to this anthology are exclusively non-Indigenous. This is an assumption based on a clear lack of positioning throughout the anthology, as well as my Googling each contributor. I do not mean to police identity in any way, so I do hope the contributors forgive me if I am mistaken. That being said, my argument centres not on the actual identity of a person (I’ve already discussed Coates as a non-Indigenous ally), but rather on how they present themselves when discussing Indigenous issues.

From the outset, *Blockades or Breakthroughs?* left me wanting. The cover of this book displays an iconic photograph by Ossie Michelin taken from a protest in Elsipogtog. The photo shows a woman, kneeling before a wall of police officers in combat gear (shields and masks), holding up a single eagle feather. Oddly enough, the titled caption states “Aboriginal peoples *confront* the Canadian state.” The image jars, as we see, in fact, the Canadian state confronting this Indigenous woman, peacefully holding up a feather. For those who do not know about Elsipogtog, it is another moment in our history where Indigenous people took action (peaceful occupation) of their traditional, and in this case *unceded* territory, and the army was sent in to uphold an injunction for a multi-national fracking company. This, of course, is simplifying the conflict, but I take issue with language such as “confront” or “protest.” Indigenous people involved in actions such as blockades, or even Idle No More gatherings, are defenders of our relation, the land. As per the goals of the Idle No More movement, the Canadian state has done very little to honour its treaties with Indigenous nations, and has actively and genocidally sought out our destruction as Indigenous peoples. In our eyes, then, Canada has always been “confronting” or worse yet, “attacking” who we are, and we are simply standing up, celebrating our survivance, and saying we will no longer let these attacks happen.

The other issue I take with this anthology is the question itself: “Blockades or Breakthroughs?” This question removes the agency of Indigenous nations by questioning their tactics from an outsider perspective. Each contributor examines the “facts” of an individual land dispute in a singular chapter. In this sense, the overarching picture gets missed for a discipline specific (i.e. historical or political science based) approach as Western academics discuss the outcomes of various displays of Indigenous resistance. The title question here, I argue, misses the point. Each of the disputes in question comes out of a colonial history that sought to get rid of us as Indigenous people. While contributors to this anthology may feel that they have the right to decide the “success” of a movement, or whether an Indigenous blockade succeeded as a “breakthrough,” they do so through a lens that privileges non-Indigenous academic concepts over Indigenous knowledge and “insider” voices. Works like *The Winter We Danced* and *#IDLENOMORE* instead illustrate how everything that we do as Indigenous people, including just the simple act of existing in the face of desired cultural genocide, is a

breakthrough. We have already succeeded, and now we are celebrating, educating, and creating together through movements like Idle No More.

In closing, I'd like to leave you with a bit of the spirit of Idle No More, as shared in the opening poem of *The Winter We Danced*:

We dance
to soften the hard lumps
that have formed
in the heart,
the hurt inside³

The Idle No More movement allowed us, as Indigenous peoples, to come together in ceremony—our jingle dancers leading the way, our sage bundles lit, our drums connecting us to the heart beat of mother earth. For a community that is continuously faced with colonial violence, these moments spent dancing together are vital for our healing, and for rekindling the fires within us for future generations. In Ktunaxa, we say hu sukił kuqni. Thank you.

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¹ Schwartz, Daniel. "Idle No More prepares for day of action" *CBCNews*. 7 Oct 2013. Web. 25. Sept 2015. <http://www.cbc.ca/m/touch/news/story/1.1913429>

² Barrera, Jorge. "Idle No More movement was like 'bacteria,' says internal RCMP document" *APTN National News*. 7 May 2015. Web. 17 September 2015 <http://aptn.ca/news/2015/05/07/46350/>

³ from "A Healing Time" by Sky Mary Morin, *The Winter We Danced*, page 9.