MORE WILL SING THEIR WAY TO FREEDOM
INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE AND RESURGENCE

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RHYTHMS OF CHANGE
MOBILIZING DECOLONIAL CONSCIOUSNESS,
INDIGENOUS RESURGENCE AND THE
IDLE NO MORE MOVEMENT

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On the evening of the 2012 winter solstice, I was up late editing a post written by Anishinaabe comedian and media producer Ryan McMahon for the Indigenous music platform Revolutions Per Minute. According to the Western world’s dubious and anxious misreading of the Mayan calendar, it was the day before the world was supposed to end — the eve of the apocalypse. But the apocalypse was the furthest thing from my mind. The week prior, Chief Theresa Spence of the Attawapiskat First Nation began a hunger strike, demanding a meeting between Indigenous leaders, the Crown, and the Harper government “to meet with First Nation leaders and engage in meaningful dialogue on our rights” (IPSMO 2012) and to discuss the broken treaty relationship between Canada and Indigenous nations. Spence began her hunger strike “in protest of continuing governmental abuses against First Nations,” contending that “Canada is violating the right of Indigenous peoples to be self-determining and continues to ignore our constitutionally protected Aboriginal and treaty rights in their lands, waters, and resources” (IPSMO 2012). Her calls went unanswered, however, and as her fast deepened into its first week, Grand Chief Derek Nepinak, head of the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, boldly declared that “The ‘long silent war drums’ of First Nations people will pound again if [Chief] Spence dies from her hunger strike” (APTN 2012: 1). But the drums had already started.
Idle No More was exploding all around us. Ryan's piece, appropriately titled "The Round Dance Revolution," tried to make sense of this spontaneous unfolding of Indigenous cultural and political action and the "mind-boggling confusion, anger, sadness and happiness" that it invoked (McMahon 2012: 1).

Ryan and I messaged back and forth as I was editing to compile a list of flash mob round dances being planned in the days ahead. More than two dozen events were being organized in urban centres and Indigenous communities across Turtle Island in that week alone. An update blinked across my timeline. The Indigenous DJ crew A Tribe Called Red had just released a new song on its SoundCloud. I clicked through to listen. It began with the drums. "The Road" is an introspective instrumental with a haunting lead melody, an insistent rhythm and a vocal chorus that departs from the group's more overtly dance floor-oriented club tracks. It reverberated with a prescient sense of the movement's evolving form and affective potency: at once melancholic and triumphant, longing, hopeful and defiantly resistant. It captured in sound and carried in spirit the essence of the movement's resonant tension between force and restraint, outrage and introspection; it pushed and pulsed with a determined, rhythmic insistence and restless motion—an intangible, dynamic and energetic flow that, haunted by memory, resonated a renewed presence. It was moving. Inevitably, relentlessly forward. "The Road" was the calm before the storm, the anticipation of a future world that will have already arrived. The world was not ending; it was beginning again.

We published Ryan's "Round Dance Revolution" piece late that evening, and I woke up the following morning to find the world still very much intact, albeit synchronously transformed. I woke up to the news that the Zapatistas had re-emerged. Masked-clad and silent, they mobilized 40,000 strong and marched through five towns in Chiapas, marking exactly 20 years to the day since the EZLN had first taken them over by military force. But this time there were no weapons. There was only the sound of their steps and the occasional cries of support from local villagers. Their message was clear: To be heard, we march in silence. Later in the day, the EZLN issued a brief communiqué that stated, simply:

To whom it may concern:
Did you hear it?
It's the sound of your world crumbling.
It's ours re-emerging.
The day that was the day, was night.
And night will be the day, that will be day

—Translation Collectives 2012: 1

"This is a story of re-emergence.

Idle No More

#IdleNoMore flashed onto screens and then exploded into public consciousness in the late fall of 2012. Its hashtag belied the fact that the movement marked the resurgent transformation of Indigenous activism on Turtle Island, forged in the mediated spaces of the digital, that bloomed into a wave of resistant action shaped by a heady mix of spectacular protest, cultural assertion and spiritual dance. Idle No More not only gave renewed voice to the long continuum of Indigenous resistance struggles against colonialism and the ongoing, lived oppression of our peoples but also to our continued survival, presence and fugitive movement to "break from and through colonial enclosures to (re)discover ... open spaces of imagination and creativity" (Martineau and Ritskes 2014: x). Critically, it was a movement conceived and organized by the leadership of Indigenous women, operating outside of the mainstream Canadian political establishment and Indian Act governance structures and organizations. Idle No More grew rapidly: virally accelerating across media platforms and through flash mob round dances staged in shopping malls across Turtle Island and around the world. Striking simultaneously at the heart of capitalist consumerism at the height of the holiday shopping season and at the contemporary state of Indigenous absence in the public imaginary—in which Indigenous peoples have been disappeared, forcibly erased or rendered invisible—Idle No More signalled a collective rejection of colonial abjection and dispossession, a communal return to presence. The movement gave form and force to long-standing currents of Indigenous frustration against Settler society's biopolitical push to force us into the margins of bare-life survival (Agamben 1998: 65).

Idle No More promised an affirmative politics of presence in resistance to the imminent encroachment of death by neglect wrought by the destruction of our lands, waters and air through large-scale, transnational corporate development and resource extraction; and institutionalized forces of colonialism advanced by Settler governments through legislation and policy. Idle No More embodied the corporeal re-presencing of our peoples in a collective becoming together enacted through the Indigenous reoccupation and reclamation of public space. The movement drew inspiration, in tactical form if not in purpose, from recent contemporary global social movements that have also performed resistance through place-based actions decisively framed in the language of occupation. "Occupation," as W.J.T. Mitchell suggests, "is not only a visual and physical presence in a space but a discursive and rhetorical operation ... It is a demand in its own right, a demand for presence, an insistence on being heard" (2012: 10). Idle No More occupied multiple spaces and modalities of Indigenous resistance that were rooted in, and dynamic expressions of, Indigenous cultural, political, artistic and ceremonial praxis.
In this chapter, I argue that the Idle No More movement was mobilized in conflicted and contradictory sites of visibility and vulnerability in which its technologically coded communicative forms enabled, but also limited, its transformative political potential. I trace the movement’s mediatization and concurrent attempts to forge resurgent languages of decolonial struggle constituted in flux and motion. “To create new forms of politics,” which Saul Newman suggests “is the fundamental theoretical task today — requires new forms of subjectivity” (2012: 147). Idle No More sought to mobilize decolonial consciousness and grounded collective action, but its reliance on communicative technologies both preceded and limited its efficacy and potential. Although the movement initially created an affective transformation of public consciousness in Canada among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, Idle No More’s spontaneity produced an unsustainable aesthetics of immediacy, urgency and intensity. The movement thus reconfigured the temporality of Indigenous resistance according to the flow of code and the logic of the network, where circulation and movement are both generative and restrictive; powerfully immediate, yet deeply mediated. As Federico Campagna and Emanuele Campiglio note, “Politics of rebellion seem increasingly to incorporate the struggle between the voice and the limiting conditions in which it can be heard, between resistance and the annihilating counter-revolution of its spectacle” (Campagna and Campiglio 2012: 3). Idle No More occupied the dialectical space of this contested opening: where the raptural performance that gives the struggle voice and spectacular visibility simultaneously marks its discursive limits and re-enclosure within the networked logics of colonial-capitalism.

The Round Dance Revolution
The Round Dance Revolution was both a representational gesture of Indigenous resistance and performance, and a self-affirmation of Indigenous continuity, presence and struggle. It operated at both levels and frequencies simultaneously, making visible the disparity between Settler colonial realities and the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples, dispossessed from our homelands and territories. The round dances were an evocative intermingling of Indigeneity that reterritorialized Indigenous presence beyond the normative borders in which it is often inscribed (reservation and rural communities), or otherwise erased. The dual character of the round dance form was underscored by its repetition in public spaces: shopping malls, main intersections and government buildings.

The first Idle No More teach-in was organized by a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous women in Saskatchewan in November 2012 to discuss the impending passage of omnibus Bill C-45 — which proposed unilateral changes to the Indian Act, the Fisheries Act, the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act, and the Navigable Water Act — all with serious implications for Indigenous nations, treaty rights and the radical reduction of environmental protection for lakes and rivers (Coulthard 2014: 160). Following the teach-in, the flash mob round dance was mobilized as a tactical form of resistant performance that self-authorized Indigenous presence in public spaces and brought Indigenous cultural and ceremonial practices into the view of Settler society. The round dance is a cultural form that originates among Indigenous nations of the prairies, but finds parallels and equivalence in the tea dances and drum dances of the north, and social and ceremonial dance forms among many Indigenous nations (Martin, 2013: 1). The form’s inherent variability and transmutability, with its emphasis on social inclusion, participation and healing, encouraged broad-based participation; and the round dances spread rapidly and virally from urban centres to far-reaching and remote communities throughout Turtle Island. In one week in December 2012, for example, movement organizers in the greater Vancouver area mobilized more than one thousand people daily, in a wave of round dances held throughout the city.

The technique was simple: Create a Facebook event page, call local drummers and singers to perform, and invite community members and supporters to attend at a specific time and place. Gather, sing, disperse. In the early weeks of Idle No More, hundreds and then thousands of Indigenous bodies filled shopping malls across Turtle Island for temporary gatherings, where the sound of our hand drums and traditional songs echoed through the hallways of capitalist consumption, interrupting shoppers’ attention, and bringing new sonic resonance into the semipublic and Muzak-filled bonal spaces of the everyday. The round dances brought spirit,
energy and music inside the atriums of capitalism; and our songs and dances into auditory contact and visible dialogue with Settler society and government. And many did not know what to make of these simultaneously defiant and celebratory actions. Were they acts of resistance? Performance? Celebration? Or all the above?

The Idle No More round dances performed what Stephen D’Arcy calls a “disruptive convergence,” in which “a crowd physically overruns a space, so that it can no longer be used in the way required by a governing institution or system” (2014: 91). The round dances ruptured both physical and symbolic spaces by transforming them through ceremony and bodies. This convergent technique of “disruptive outburst,” as D’Arcy suggests, took “the form of insurgent street performances in unauthorized spaces” (2014: 91) that disrupted the quotidian rhythms of the colonial-capitalist status quo by calling attention to asymmetries of power and the irrepressible spirit of Indigenous presence.

The heartbeat of Idle No More was, and remains the drum. In the many territories in which round dances were held, the drum was the centre; the organizing principle and rhythmic force by which resistance was given voice in song. The songs performed at the round dances ranged from warrior songs and ceremonial chants to social and contemporary songs, thereby making visible not only the intergenerational survival and continuance of the songs themselves — and the song carriers who bring them forth in the present — but also their resilience and adaptability to new contexts and iterations. In this way, the round dances performed an opposite movement through remembrance and futurity, presence and return. As one CBC news report noted: “The Idle No More flash mobs are a part of ... returning a beat, a song and a dance to the heart of the territories where they were born, and where they still thrive” (Martin 2013: 2).

The round dances’ spirit of defiance against colonial erasure and self-affirmative celebration of Indigenous resistance called on Settler society to witness them as performance, join them in celebration of Indigenous resilience and survival, and to heed them as a call to responsibility — to account for historical injustice and to literally join hands with our people in building new relationships of solidarity and mutual understanding. For our own nations and peoples, this spectacularized performance brought Indigenous Peoples into mutual visibility for each other, thereby reaffirming and recognizing our shared presence and resistance.

Although the Idle No More movement was extensively documented and shared on social media, while its dynamic archive of evolving digital content was distributed across these channels, its techniques of circulation also called attention to the fleeting temporality of “disruptive outburst,” in which autonomous assertions of indigeneity (like the round dances) produced affective appeal, but not systemic change. Although the round dances were at once disruptive, eruptive and disruptive, their detouring of popular consciousness could only temporarily reposition the transit of indigeneity in the public mind. Indigenous struggles that had long remained marginalized or invisible were now brought into hypervisibility, thereby making them legible (and susceptible) to power, control and surveillance. In this conflicted push to give voice to our struggles and bring attention to our grievances, the movement was recast within an aestheticized regime of political performance, drawn into the machinic gaze of technology, and encoded according to the representational logic of spectacle.

Networked Resistance

Idle No More embodied the dialectical nature of contemporary social movements that are bolstered by digital technologies of distribution and dissemination. They provide multiple actors with voice, influence and access to audience beyond established political channels and structures, yet such movements remain subject to the privatized structures of code that dictate their spectacularized rise and fall in the public imagination. Although movements that are accessible to diverse publics and ostensibly to democratic or horizontal organizational forms are lauded for their inclusive and participatory forms, the metrics used to celebrate their success can also be used to denigrate their failure as they decline in public presence and pageviews. To this extent, mediated movements remain vulnerable to shifting public sentiment and criticism by virtue of the form of their articulation and the techniques used in their creation and dissemination. Idle No More — as digitally encoded hashtag and social movement — was already subject to a latent potential for formal “collapse,” even at the height of its online popularity.

But the movement moved within and beyond the limits of the digital to create an affective experience of potentiality among participants: the sense that change was imminent (despite this not being borne out by reality). Idle No More refused the confinement and enclosure of coloniality and cultivated decolonial consciousness: “the freedom to imagine and create elsewhere in the here; a present future beyond the imaginatively and territorial bounds of colonialism ... a performance of other worlds, an embodied practice of flight” (Martineau and Ritskes 2014: IV). The movement was born out of the common experience of lived crisis that is coextensive with Indigenous survival under colonialism, but with the desire to transform it through performance and practice. Campagna and Campiglio describe this spontaneous re-visioning of the present as “the direct practice of an affective necessity” (2012: 4, emphasis added), in which the sense of emotional urgency and critical agentic capacity engendered by Idle No More compelled a young generation of digitally connected Indigenous youth and non-Indigenous allies to heed its calls to action. As we asserted our cultural practices, aired our grievances, proclaimed our desires and raised our voices in song, new political potentials emerged in the discursive break that Idle No More had opened and claimed.
Like the Occupy Wall Street movement before it, Idle No More both welcomed and encouraged _multiplicity_, without conflating plurality and difference into the nebulous rhetoric of an inchoate multitude. The movement was Indigenous-centred, but neither exclusive nor exclusionary. Idle No More called on “all people,” from every background and walk of life, “to join in a peaceful revolution, to honour Indigenous sovereignty, and to protect the land and water” (Idle No More 2013: 1). These broadly stated goals enabled organizers to interweave a vibrant evolving network of intergenerational, intercommunal and international participants. In a literal refusal of “idleness,” Idle No More called for collective action against the stasis of the status quo; embodying a self-reflexive call to physical, symbolic, spiritual and cultural _movement_ that mobilized supporters around the world.

The movement also sparked a wave of Indigenous cultural production. Art, music and media creation proliferated. Digital content went viral. Videos, visual art, posters, images, slogans and digital memes were continuously published, reproduced, and shared across social media. And the round dances brought our traditional songs into a newly emergent public lexicon. Idle No More took digital and Indigenous cultural forms and remixed them: détournment and repurposing photography, news stories and other artwork as the source material for shared social content and resistant truth-telling. But the movement’s vitality and metempsychosis were possible only to the extent that Indigenous participation in digital and online media had reached a necessary critical mass.

Cultural production in contemporary social movements offers a recursive form of creativity that refigures individuated speech acts and communicative action within and through emergent networked collectivities. During Idle No More, Facebook and Twitter provided focal points for the amplification of movement messaging and the real-time coordination of public actions, but the movement enabled a dialogic interplay of forces and voices to be absorbed and reincorporated into its representational flows. These incorporative strategies are tactically effective because of their mobility and fluidity: their adaptive, formless and continuously reforming figuration of _movement_ is expressed as constitutive of contemporary resistance. However, movement is also coded by the networks within which it circulates. Idle No More amplified Indigenous participation online, but this also contributed to a disjunction between the perception of the movement’s digital reach and influence and its asynchronous impact within “offline” communities and place-based sites of struggle.

**Mediatized Subjects and Spectacular Dissent**

In contemporary social movements, temporality and spatiality work both in concert and in conflict. Insofar as the contemporary injunction of social media is to _participate_ (users are compelled to write, to represent, to speak), this injunction is primarily temporal: demanding one’s _time_ (within an economy of attention) rather than a specified _place_ of participation. Hardt and Negri have observed that although in previous eras “political action was stifled primarily by the fact that people didn’t have sufficient access to information or the means to communicate and express their own views”... today’s mediatized subjects suffer from the opposite problem, stifled by a surplus of information, communication, and expression” (2012: 9). This communicative surplus overwhelms us with limitless data and communicative possibilities, and the temporal occupation of our attention becomes spatialized through mediatization, the occupation of consciousness. Mediatization is an emblematic form of contemporary subjectivity in which we are “subsumed or absorbed in the web” (Hardt and Negri 2012: 10). In this view, the “mediatized subject” is not so much alienated, as perpetually occupied:

The consciousness of the mediatized is not really split but fragmented or dispersed. The media, furthermore, don’t really make you passive. In
fact, they constantly call on you to participate, to choose what you like, to contribute your opinions, to narrate your life. The media are constantly responsive to your likes and dislikes, and in return you are constantly attentive. The mediated is thus a subjectivity that is paradoxically neither active nor passive but rather constantly absorbed in attention. (Hardt and Negri 2012: 9)

To effect social transformation without becoming fully "absorbed" by technologically mediated engagement, new subjectivities must be generated through collective action. "Facebook, Twitter, the Internet, and other kinds of communication are useful," Hardt and Negri suggest, "but nothing can replace the being together of bodies and corporeal communication that is the basis of collective political intelligence and action" (2012: 11). Although we would be wise to question the incontrovertibility of this claim, it is clear that one of the subsuming effects of mediatization is to displace other forms of collective action. A central challenge for the Idle No More movement was to navigate (and renegotiate) the tension between digital engagement and "offline" community-based organizing.

The movement first entered this representational regime on Twitter in late November 2012. Within weeks of its first mention, #IdleNoMore took hold of a massive public conversation online. The hashtag trended repeatedly on Twitter, reaching a precipitous height of 58,000 mentions in a single day on January 11, 2013 (Blevis 2014: 1). Until mainstream media reports began to amplify its signals, however, knowledge about the movement and its objectives and goals remained limited. But if access to influence can be redeployed to disrupt the focus and intensity of a movement's demands, under mass media scrutiny and attention the movement's internal contradictions and limits can also be brought to light and exaggerated. Online debates routinely degenerate into futile flame wars between and among movement participants and dissenting voices. And the platforms used to coordinate movement planning and resistant actions can be, and are, continuously searched and surveilled by the State and its agencies.

The dual logic of the contemporary aesthetic regime of politics in the digital age is to order space and data as sites of visibility and access. The digital space of circulation is the grid of code, the matrix of big data. In Rancièrean terms, this involves the discursive partitioning of space, the distribution of the sensible; where the normative order is governed by the police, which "disavows ruptures, seams, sutures, gaps because the police is a horizon or landscape of continual continuity" (Gharavi 2011: 2). Social movements like Idle No More, which seek to disrupt this matrix of asymmetrical power must contend with the repressive force of the State (and, by extension, the regime of the police), who work to control circulation and surveil communication to prevent precisely those "ruptures, seams, sutures, [and] gaps" that movement participants aspire to create. Representational practice within networked movements must be necessarily self-reflexive and attuned to this fraught relationality with power. "Rather than being spectators in a mediated struggle," the South London Solidarity Federation claims, "we must act for ourselves and represent ourselves" (SLSF 2012: 190). Yet self-representation is no guarantor of state-recognized self-determination. Like the Occupy Wall Street movement that preceded it, Idle No More's twinned tendencies toward self-affirmation and external recognition were deeply conflicted. Although Idle No More brought Canadian colonialism into stark focus and public view, it also engendered a significant public backlash.

As the movement circulated, the latent racism of Canadian society became plainly, painfully visible. Indigenous women were increasingly targeted by acts of gendered violence in many communities, including Thunder Bay, Ontario, in which Idle No More was perceived to have "inflamed[ed] long-standing tensions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities" (CBC 2013b). In late December 2012, an Indigenous woman from the Nisnawbe-Aski Nation was brutally sexually and physically assaulted, an attack that was linked directly to Idle No More and investigated by local authorities as a racially motivated hate crime. Following the attack, the survivor, whose name has been protected, issued a public statement in which she urged Indigenous community members to be careful: "Right now with the First Nations trying to fight this Bill [C-45] everyone should be looking over their shoulder constantly because there are a lot of racists out there" (Kappo 2012: 1). Following the attack, and with rising racial tensions and violence in Thunder Bay, "more than a dozen [Indigenous] parents from remote communities chose not to send their children back to Thunder Bay for school [in the winter 2013] semester" (CBC 2013b).

For many movement organizers and participants, contending with increased threats of physical violence and responding to vicious debates in blog comment sections, racist editorial pieces in mainstream media, and a seemingly endless parade of anti-Indigenous "trolls" waging war on social media became a constant preoccupation. The terrain of struggle had been shifted, but an important transformation had also taken place: The movement had forced colonialism into view and, in so doing, into new spaces of discursive contention.

Idle No More made Indigenous resistance to colonialism a front-page story in every major newspaper and media outlet across the country by calling on the State, the Crown, and Settler society to account for ongoing injustices against our peoples and "the broken relationship" (CBC 2013b) between Indigenous Peoples and Canada. The movement successfully interrupted the State's narrative ordering of the colonial present by using embodied acts of performative resistance and communicative dissent to bring attention to the continuity of Indigenous presence.
amid the state’s parallax push to consign colonialism to a “closed chapter” in its soon-to-be-reconciled mythic Settler history. These actions demonstrated that Indigenous Peoples were prepared to contest the State’s (re)conciliatory objectives and resist the assimilative passivity of the status quo. And it represented this resistant capacity as an “affective necessity” (Campagna and Campiglio 2012: 4). But despite its spontaneous flourishing, Idle No More could not translate its power into sustained transformations of the juridico-political regimes against which the movement had first been mobilized.

After the Storm

Idle No More’s explosive spectacle crested in the early winter of 2013, due in no small part to the increasing urgency of Atawapiskat First Nation Chief Theresa Spencer’s hunger strike. Her fast continued for six long weeks. Chief Spencer stated that she would continue to fast until the Harper government and representatives of the Crown met with Indigenous leaders to discuss the repeated violation of treaty agreements and Indigenous inherent and treaty rights. She boldly declared that until a meeting was set, she would remain “ready to die for my people” (c-100 2013: 1). Flouting its disregard for her life and well-being, the Harper government refused to respond or agree to a meeting. Protests continued in the streets. Highways, railways and borders were shut down. Round dances were held around the world. Marchers and walkers began spiritual journeys to Ottawa. Others fasted in solidarity with Chief Spencer. And the media storm began to swirl around Idle No More.

But after widespread debate and outcry over her prolonged fast and its unmet demands, Chief Spencer decided to end her hunger strike on January 24, 2013. Following two months of massive public protests, and a disastrously inconsequential January 11th meeting between Prime Minister Harper and First Nations Chiefs (many of whom boycotted the meeting), Spencer signed a defanged declaration in partnership with opposition party leaders and Assembly of First Nations Chiefs that called for thirteen points of action. Intended to outline steps for Canada and Indigenous nations to work “towards fundamental change,” the declaration was met, instead, with skepticism and disappointment. The movement’s first wave of energetic force had been depleted. Idle No More had expected immediate action on its demands, but none had occurred. Although subsequent “days of action” were called for, and more demonstrations, rallies and marches were organized, the movement shifted from its intensifying crescendo of outrage and defiance to a decidedly more moderate (and modest) advocacy for incremental political reform.

The Spencer declaration marked a passage from Idle No More’s first phase, a cry of urgent protest emphasizing external representation toward a differential spatial configuration of protest actions recentered in place-based knowledge and community. The movement turned away from the overt spectacle of mass protest actions and toward self-affirmative, self-valorizing actions. But for witnesses to the communicative rise of Idle No More through its signifying practices and representational forms, its collapsing statistical metrics were quantified and equated with the movement’s veritable “decline.” Idle No More began as a spontaneous, horizontal and autonomous movement with organizers distributed across a wide geography of urban, rural, reservation and remote communities. There was no organized leadership, central hierarchy or organizing platform; actions were spontaneously organized through decentralized networks; and anyone could participate. As the movement progressed, there was much discussion of the so-called “grassroots” people, whom Idle No More claimed to represent. But as the movement continued from winter 2012 into spring 2013, Idle No More ignited a debate over the revolutionary subject of the movement’s resistance and the question of its leadership. Where and who were the “grassroots” people? Who has the right and authority to represent Indigenous Peoples?

Mainstream media pundits used these questions as evidence of internal “divisions” within the movement. But as Anishinaabe scholar Hayden King wrote, “While we all may dance to a similar beat, our footwork can take us in different directions. And there is nothing wrong with that” (King 2013: 1). Nevertheless, perceived divisions and contestations over representational authority within the movement led some participants and organizers to disengage from and disidentify with Idle No More. Despite two months of unprecedented global mobilization on Indigenous issues that sought to reconfigure the very terms and form of our collective organizing, action and representation, what had been accomplished? The political unrest generated by the movement had intensified and continued, albeit unresolved. Chief Spencer’s demands remained unmet. Bill C-45 passed into law. And Idle No More kept moving, seeking new ways to sustain the momentum of the “Native Winter.”

“Reactivism” and Sustaining Momentum

For many Indigenous communities, the political status quo functions through a colonial modality of governance in response and reaction to crisis. Necessarily short-term and highly localized, this strategy demands that resources and action be mobilized in situations of immediacy, often with limited jurisdiction. Idle No More called attention to this crisis-based mode of governance by confronting multiple colonial temporalities and contexts simultaneously: the immediate (the imminent passage of Bill C-45), the historical (the abrogation of treaty and inherent rights) and the present (continuing forms of social suffering, colonial racism and violence). As such, it was a crisis-based response to crisis-based governance;
cross-temporal and multivalent expression of indignation that captured historical and contemporary Indigenous resentment, or “righteous resentment” (Coulthard 2014: 126), against evidence of our continued state of collective, colonial abjection. Dene scholar Glen Coulthard names this affective response to colonialism as necessary for overcoming colonial disempowerment; that is, “our bitter indignation and persistent anger at being treated unjustly by a colonial state both historically and in the present,” is not only a valid response to colonial injustice but it is also “a sign of our critical consciousness” (2014: 126) and our love for our lands and people.

Although Idle No More mobilized this righteous form of resentment as a form of collective catharsis, it also operationalized a reactive mode of resistance that reinscribed indigeneity as the injurious site of “wounded subjectivity” and politicized identity (Brown 1995: 65). As an exclusively oppositional political practice, this mode of resistance risks reproducing the very “injury” it seeks to refuse. But “states of injury” cannot be the only basis from which to rearticulate Indigenous political claims. To be effective and transformative, decolonial struggle must move beyond a definitional frame determined exclusively by colonial interference and imposition. Resurgent forms of resistance that revalue and revitalize Indigenous governance systems, natural laws and self-valorizing political practices are equally necessary. Idle No More sought creative contention with the State and Settler society, but also posited alternative pathways of self-affirmative action that did not seek recourse to colonial authority for validation or recognition. As Coulthard notes, Indigenous resistance actions (such as blockades and, to a lesser extent, round dances) that disrupt the normative order (by blocking the flow of capital, access to infrastructure or the rote procession of consumerism) are also “affirmative gesture[s] of Indigenous resurgence insofar as they embody an enactment of Indigenous law and … upholding the relations of reciprocity that shape our engagement with the human and nonhuman world — the land” (2014: 170). Indigenous resistance, even in its most defiant, oppositional forms — as the negation of domination — always suggests the possibility of an affirmative counterpart hidden within.

By creating new networks of interconnected actors and rapidly increasing public consciousness en masse through social media, Idle No More effected a profound shift in the speed of conscientization. These networks created new spaces in which to coordinate collective action and strengthened existing connections between Indigenous communities and movement organizers. But the movement also captured the imagination and energy of a rising generation of Indigenous youth who were mobilized into action, many for the first time. Idle No More cut across territorial borders and nation state—based identifications; it was intergenerational, intercommunal and geographically distributed. On the #J1J Global Day of Action held on January 11, 2013, for example, 265 events were organized in more than 17 countries (J11Action 2013). But despite the movement’s global expansion, Idle No More needed to relocalize action and organizing at the community level by reorienting local struggles and longer-term political transformation. The movement refocused around three key areas. First, it shifted emphasis from direct contention with the State to the imminent ecological and political threats posed by large-scale resource development projects and extractive industries (pipelines, tar sands expansion, mining and hydraulic fracturing, and so on) to Indigenous homelands. Second, the movement turned to a self-reflexive analysis of challenges internal to Indigenous communities. Third, movement organizers began reorienting around shared commitments to the resurgence of Indigenous nationhood and governance. Idle No More has since directed much of its energy toward addressing these interrelated and contested sites of engagement.

Idle No More’s “winter of discontent” expressed a collective surfacing of decolonial consciousness that shifted the terrain of struggle by refusing established modalities of resistance — lawful, expected and existent forms of “protest” — and creatively interjecting new forms of collective action into public discourse. The movement disrupted the expected terms of Indigenous engagement with Settler society, and brought Canada’s colonial foundation into full view and contestation. In resistance, Indigenous Peoples affirmed our continuance and coherence as viable political communities that refused to be silenced. As journalist Stefan Christoff noted, “Canada’s political landscape now faces an alarm on colonial questions commonly evaded in the halls of power” (2013: 1). But Idle No More could not transform this foundation; it could only call attention to it. Although it remained affectively powerful, the movement proved incapable of compelling the State to respond to its demands. And in the face of Idle No More’s bold calls to action, the Harper government has remained intransigent.

Communicative Capitalism and Possible Politics

Social media theorist Zeynep Tufekci argues that the disjunction between the spectacle of mass protests and their inability to produce substantive institutional and policy transformations is characteristic of contemporary social movements:

Protests … fueled by social media and erupting into spectacular mass events, look like powerful statements of opposition [and] … pundits speculate that the days of a ruling party or government, or at least its unpopular policies, must be numbered. Yet often these huge mobilizations of citizens inexplicably wilt away without the impact on policy you might expect from their scale. (2014: 1)

According to Tufekci, the seemingly contradictory and “muted effect” of the massive popular uprisings in Turkey, Egypt and the Ukraine — to which I would
add the Idle No More movement — is not a result of their inherent inefficacy; it is a constitutive feature of their architecture. Social media–fuelled movements prioritize immediacy and networked communicative action over sustained and incremental infrastructural development:

Digital tools make it much easier to build up movements quickly, and they greatly lower coordination costs. This seems like a good thing at first, but it often results in an unanticipated weakness: Before the Internet, the tedious work of organizing that was required to circumvent censorship or to organize a protest also helped build infrastructure for decision making and strategies for sustaining momentum. Now movements can rush past that step, often to their own detriment. (2014: 1)

Movements like Idle No More can collapse under the temporal “weight” of their speed-driven dissemination and metric “success,” resulting in a vacuum of strategies for sustaining momentum after spectacular forms of public protest have exhausted their communicative currency. Tufekci argues that media is a powerful force for activism seeking to claim legitimacy in the public sphere, but she rightly points out that contemporary social movements and activists “who have made such effective use of technology to rally supporters, still need to figure out how to convert that energy into greater impact. The point isn’t just to challenge power; it’s to change it” (2014: 1).

To this end, it is critical to consider how communicative praxis circulates within global capitalist networks. Movements like Idle No More make use of available digital technologies to mobilize consciousness, action and resistance; however, these same technologies operate within tightly regulated circuits of power and control. Jodi Dean describes this technological entanglement, in which circulation usurps content, as communicative capitalism:

Communicative capitalism designates that form of late capitalism in which values heralded as central to democracy take material form in networked communications technologies ... Ideals of access, inclusion, discussion and participation come to be realized in and through expansions, intensifications and interconnections of global telecommunications. But instead of leading to more equitable distributions of wealth and influence, instead of enabling the emergence of a richer variety in modes of living and practices of freedom, the deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most of the world’s peoples. (2005: 56)

The foreclosure of politics that Dean suggests inheres under communicative capitalism is the product of techniques wherein “communicative exchanges rather than being fundamental to democratic politics, are the basic elements of capitalist production” (2009: 56). The commodified circulation of information in and for itself displaces “on-the-ground” political struggle: content becomes secondary to the process of circulation that “is crucial to the ideological reproduction of capitalism” (2009: 59). This effects a depoliticization of networked communication “because the form of our involvement ultimately empowers those it is supposed to resist” (2009: 61).

Idle No More’s ostensibly liberatory digital forms (tweetstorms, trending hashtags, and Facebook petitions, and so on) did not compel power to respond and risked displacing forms of grounded place-based political struggle, that contended directly with oppressive institutions and policies, into “imaginary sites of action and belonging” (Dean 2005: 67). Further, this displacement tacitly supported the circulation of capital rather than its disruption. Movement organizers recognized the contradiction between making revolutionary calls for social change on social networks and being unable to realize such changes within the disciplinary spaces of privatization, commodification, surveillance and control instantiated by communicative technologies. This perception also risked reproducing the false binarism of “digital dualism,” in which the online and offline worlds are understood as “separate” and “virtual,” rather than enmeshed within lived reality and capitalism. As Nathan Jurgenson argues, “our reality is both technological and organic, both digital and physical, all at once. We are not crossing in and out of separate digital and physical realities ... but instead live in one reality, one that is augmented by atoms and bits” (2011: 1). Rather than perceiving the digital as a discrete site of “virtual liberation,” it is necessary to consider the ways in which networked action, communication and activism are inscribed within pre-existing social and power relations.

Indeed, as Astra Taylor suggests, the digital intersects with the analog in ways that can actually “magnify inequality” and exacerbate asymmetries of power:

Despite proclamations to the contrary, the online and off-line worlds are not separate; the digital is not distinct from “real life,” a realm where analog prejudices are abandoned. While the Internet offers marginalized groups powerful and potentially world-changing opportunities to meet and act together, new technologies also magnify inequality, reinforcing elements of the old order. Networks do not eradicate power: they distribute it in different ways. (2014: 108)

As Idle No More and other contemporary movements have effectively demonstrated, the network is a site of contradiction and contestation that marks the
discursive battleground in a war over representation, influence and communicative control. For Idle No More, serious considerations began to arise over the long-term strategic utility and efficacy of mass mobilizations coordinated through social media: What alternative pathways could the movement pursue to break from this discursive trap of self-enclosure?

Idle No More's diverse tactics and open-ended goals were not coherently organized, and its multiform digital articulations subtended resistance actions oriented beyond the State. As the movement worked to address both the immediate states of crisis in our communities and ongoing forms of colonialism, there was a marked discursive turn among some organizers away from viral memes and mass mobilizations, and toward the strategic reaffirmation of Indigenous nationhood and the reclamation and reoccupation of our homelands and sacred sites. In late January 2013, Kanien'kehaka scholar Taiaiake Alfred observed that the movement had "plateaued," noting that "the kind of movement we have been conducting under the banner of Idle No More is not sufficient in itself to decolonize this country or even to make meaningful change in the lives of people" (2013: 1). Although Alfred recognized that the movement had drawn broad-based support from many Indigenous nations and settler society, he argued that in order for the movement to revive its initial momentum for "fundamental change," Indigenous peoples need to focus our activism on the root of the problem facing our people collectively: our collective dispossession and misrepresentation as Indigenous peoples. Now is the time to put ourselves back on our lands spiritually and physically and to shift our support away from the Indian Act system and to start energizing the restoration of our own governments... Restoring our nationhood in this way is the fundamental struggle. Our focus should be on restoring our presence on the land and regenerating our true nationhood. These go hand in hand and one cannot be achieved without the other. (2013: 1, emphasis added)

Alfred said that to break out of the echo chamber enclosure of social media's endless calls to action,

we need to alter our strategies and tactics to present more of a serious challenge on the ground to force the federal government to engage our movement and to respond to us in a serious way... we need to go beyond demonstrations and rallies in malls and legislatures and on public streets and start to reoccupy Indigenous sacred, ceremonial and cultural use sites to reestablish our presence on our land and in doing so to educate Canadians about our continuing connections to those places and how important they are to our continuing existence as Indigenous peoples. (2013: 2)

Although Idle No More continued to organize public demonstrations, rallies and marches of precisely the kind Alfred criticized, the movement also began to reterritorialize. Idle No More's reterritorialization marked the movement's need to relocate and reground its organizing and action within Indigenous communities and homelands. Although the strategic reorientation of the movement made sense among participants and organizers, mainstream Canadian media used the opportunity to declare the death of Idle No More. Other recent social movements have been subjected to a similar critique, however, as they effect strategic reterritorializations following a first wave of mass mobilization:

Since the intention is to transform not just the occupied [square or shopping mall] but society as a whole, movements have gradually shifted into spheres more directly related to the lives of their participants, such as neighbourhoods and workplaces, where local needs can be addressed. Generally, this is when the media and many on the institutional left tend to declare the movements "dead," but... this is no reliable guide to the life of the movement." (Sitrin and Azzellini 2014: 12)

To relate directly to the lives of its Indigenous participants, Idle No More sought out new forms of organizing that could be deployed at the local level in support of community struggles for nationhood and autonomy.

The Indigenous Nationhood Movement and Reclaiming PKOLS
In May 2013, Indigenous community members, organizers, activists, academics and allies gathered at the University of Victoria to participate in an Indigenous Leadership Forum (ILF). Over the course of the week-long gathering, participants discussed the wave of resurgent action catalyzed by Idle No More and the possibility of building an Indigenous Nationhood Movement to carry the movement's momentum forward. ILF participants developed a collaborative framework and set of movement principles oriented toward long-term anticolonial social transformation and supporting Indigenous communities and community members in the restoration and reassertion of Indigenous laws, languages, governance and political autonomy.

The Indigenous Nationhood Movement (INM) was launched with a sacred act of reoccupation and reoccupation on May 22, 2013. Under the guidance and leadership of hereditary chiefs and elders from the WÁ·Á·NÁ·EN nations, INM supported the reclamation and reinstatement of PKOLS: the original SENĆOŦEN place name of a
sacred site at the summit of a promontory in Saanich, B.C. PKOLS, which can be translated as “White Head” or “White Rock,” was formerly known by its colonial name, Mount Douglas, after Captain James Douglas (Reclaim PKOLS 2013). It is a sacred site for the WSEANCE people and a historic meeting place for the Indigenous nations in the area; it is part of the WSEANCE creation story and the site where the WSEANCE first entered into treaty with Douglas in 1852 (Lavoie 2013: 1). Hereditary chief WEC’KINEM (Eric Pelkey) of SUTUYT (Tsawout) First Nation led the reclamation with support from Indigenous and non-Indigenous volunteers, who worked with the local Indigenous nations to build public support for the campaign. The reinstatement of the original name fulfilled a long-standing request by local elders to “bring back the names we have always used to where they belong” (ic 2013: 1). I was fortunate to have been asked to participate and help with the reclamation.

On the evening of May twenty-second, marchers gathered at the base of the mountain and hiked to the summit, where they joined in a ceremony to reinstate the original name. The signing of the Douglas Treaty was re-enacted by a volunteer group of performers at the site where it was originally (and coercively) signed, but the inscribed colonial violence of dispossession was inverted; instead of ceding land and territory to the invading colonial power, local Indigenous leaders presented and signed a new declaration honouring the restoration and reinstatement of PKOLS and committing to the future reclamation of other traditional place names throughout the WSEANCE and neighbouring territories. The PKOLS declaration asserted WSEANCE and LERKWINGEN nationhood in terms consistent with their natural laws, traditions, inherent authority over their homelands, and rights as Indigenous Peoples and Nations (PKOLS Declaration 2013). Coast Salish master carver TEMOSEN (Charles Elliott) of WOODED (Tsartlip) First Nation designed a large PKOLS sign from yellow cedar that was carried to the summit and installed at a high viewpoint — overlooking the surrounding mountains, ocean and the city of Victoria. Participants from the Indigenous Leadership Forum wore T-shirts identifying themselves as members of the ILM and worked with local organizers to provide security, assist community members and elders; help carry and install the PKOLS sign; and liaise with civic authorities, media and law enforcement. During the reclamation ceremony, WSEANCE community members recounted the story of PKOLS, first in SENCO’FEN and then in English. After the declaration was signed, the event concluded with the sharing of food, songs and drumming by the local nations.

Having generated high-profile endorsements and support from intellectuals and organizations including Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein, Tom Hayden, Greenpeace and the Sierra Club (PKOLS 2013), the reclamation gathered communicative momentum across social media channels and photo, video and audio content shared online during the event provided witnesses who were unable to attend the event in person with a vicarious experience of immediacy and presence.

The reclamation of PKOLS was a potent assertion of Indigenous nationhood and autonomy that signalled new possibilities for Indigenous-Settler alliances, collective action and decolonizing praxis. The WSEANCE did not seek permission from the State; they took action in alignment with their natural laws, customs, and inherent rights. In doing so, they were supported by a large community of local Indigenous nations, Indigenous visitors to their traditional territory and Settler allies. Against the strictly delimited forms of “permissible” Indigenous activism, the reclamation of PKOLS was empowering and emboldening, not only for the local nations but also for communities and supporters in solidarity across Turtle Island. The reclamation of PKOLS was simultaneously a symbolic, communicative and embodied enactment of autonomous movement within and against the colonial demarcations of “settled” territory and in refusal of Indigenous displacement. In literal terms, PKOLS refuted the dispossession of original place names by re-placing, or returning, the name to its rightful originary place.

In this way, PKOLS worked to overturn the binarism of settler colonial relations by enacting a participatory process of renewal that inverted the colonial frame and proposed an “affirmative enactment of another modality of being, a different way of relating to and with the world” (Covalthard 2014: 169). This resurgent return to an originary form of place-based knowledge — rooted in the SENCO’FEN language — presupposes the alterity of an Indigenous ontological foundation that comes from the land and is, quite literally, of that place. In reclaiming PKOLS, treaty-making was re-visionsed as a processional form of collective action in the present. Demanding both an understanding of interdependent relationality and respect for WSEANCE forms of life derived from millennia of embodied praxis in place, PKOLS marked multiple forms of embodied resurgence and return. It recuperated the spiritual force of Idle No More’s round dance evolution and reframed resistance through ceremony. The return of original names to “where they belong” is, as Aishihkane author Leanne Simpson suggests, not simply a symbolic action, but a “mechanism for reconnecting our peoples to the land, our histories and our cultures... Building a strong, connected Indigenous Nationhood Movement rests on reclaiming the lands and sacred sites we have been removed from” (2013: 1). Reconnection, reclamation and renaming are essential acts of decolonization.

PKOLS thus provided a resonant example of prefigurative decolonial politics in motion—a gesture of renewal that affirmed the critical potentialities inherent in affirmative forms of resistance that seek to make structural and historical injustice visible while self-valourizing Indigenous forms of life on our own terms and in our own languages. As one speaker declared during the reclamation: “We’re Idle No More [and] acting outside the confines of Indian Affairs ... we are acting this time...
not reacting." PKOLS pointed a pathway forward that drew from a long continuum of Indigenous resistances against colonialism, and reaffirmed the efficacy and power of an embodied praxis of presence made visible through reclamation and reoccupation. Although the reclamation of PKOLS was not a new form of resistance, it was a generative provocation that inspired other Indigenous people and communities to see the continuity and interconnections in our struggles to decolonize.

As Leanne Simpson observed:

We all have within our territories our PKOLS, many PKOLS — sacred places waiting to be restored to their place within the fabric of Indigenous societies. Whether it is a mountain, burial ground, hot springs or spring water, buffalo rubbing stone, tipi ring, teaching rocks, a medicine picking spot, or a travel route or a city street, the PKOLS reclamation provides us with impetus to not just feel inspired, but to act. (2013: 2)

Against colonial legacies of dispossession and displacement, PKOLS embodied and compelled action: "to take up our responsibilities to our homelands ... to inhabit them, to maintain relationships with their features and to pass that presence down to our children and grandchildren" (Simpson 2013: 2). This dual movement of refusal and affirmation did not stop with the rejection of colonial naming; it renewed a place-based vision of Indigenous presence and continuity. And it is this "place-based imaginary," Coulthard argues, that "serves as the ethical foundation from which ... Indigenous peoples and communities continue to resist and critique the dual imperatives of state sovereignty and capitalist accumulation that constitute our colonial present" (2010: 82). PKOLS was not unique, but it was an extraordinarily important act for the Státuyx Songhees and the wsÁNEĆ because it physically connects them to a powerful place, alive with story, and breathing with history" (Simpson 2013: 1). PKOLS reinstated a new history of the Indigenous present. "This action to reclaim #PKOLS is truly one of the most exciting I've seen in Canada," said one observer on Twitter. "This is the beginning of something" (Martineau 2013: 2).

Conclusion: New Beginnings

Idle No More is about beginnings, not origins. It was a moment of rupture, a movement of return, a break in our collective consciousness that awakened new possibilities for creative resistance. The struggle to resurge and decolonize is continuous; and our survival compels our action. But resistance reaffirms our force and power; and resurgence reminds us why we are fighting. Idle No More marked both this continuation as well as the search for new languages and practices of struggle.

By rejecting stasis and refuting fixity, the movement set in motion new rhythms of change. Idle No More was a movement of movement that mobilized decennial consciousness among Indigenous people and newcomers alike, and it has enabled us as Indigenous Peoples to reorient our political practices toward rebuilding power and autonomy. Decolonization demands that we forge new political subjectivities through self-affirmative and transformative resurgent praxis. And as our lives and lands continue to be threatened by Settler colonial dispossession and capitalist exploitation, decolonization remains our critical imperative. The transformative becoming of resistant subjectivity is activated by affirming Indigenous ontological priorities and practices (Indigenous land-based knowledges, lifeways, natural laws, songs and ceremonies) and by navigating the shifting terrain of struggle. Our movement demands continual creative transformation.

Indigenous peoples must struggle within and against regimes of representation by mobilizing collective action on multiple fronts: through technology, art, music, culture and ceremony. Demands for accountability from the State and Settler society and to protect the land and water, to uphold treaty relationships, to renew balanced Indigenous-Settler relations, and, perhaps most importantly, for colonialism to end, have yet to realized. But Idle No More's politics in motion drew from the power of our collective ancestral and historical memory to bring a renewed sense of urgency to our ongoing struggle for decolonization. In so doing, new rhythms of resistance began to sound. New forms of transformative praxis began to be forged. And an emergent force of Indigenous resurgence was sparked that will resonate in the generations to come. Melancholic and triumphant, hopeful and defiant, with Idle No More we begin again. We continue. We move. We rise.
NOTE

1. It is important to note that within Settler colonialism, Indigenous “political action” is consistently “stifled,” silenced and delimited by state-sanctioned forms of violence and repression. For more on the effects of framing Indigenous political action as a threat to the state, see Craig Proulx (2014), “Colonizing Surveillance: Canada Constructs an Indigenous Terror Threat.” Anthropologica 56, 1, 83-100.

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