

# AambeMaajaadaa!

## Community Organizing in Indigenous Communities and Leanne Simpson's *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence*

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### A Book Review

Tara Williamson, M.A., J.D., B.S.W.  
Professor  
School of Law, Justice and Community Services  
Fleming College

Simpson, L. (2011). *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence*. Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring. 165 pages, \$19.95, ISBN 978-1894037-50-1

When I was asked to develop a community organizing course for the Aboriginal Emphasis Initiative in the social service worker program at Fleming College, I began running through the list of great books, articles, and other resources I've used or seen in the last few years on this topic. Although I do have a background in social work, I have also had the opportunity to study and work in the fields of law and Indigenous governance; and so, I look to all of these areas when considering the most current and relevant information on any topic. In the process, I quickly realized the kinds of divisions that still happen between disciplines that tend to limit the dialogue in any field before the conversation has even started. In response, I'd like to open the horizon a little and offer a book review of a new work that would normally be classified as "Native Studies" but which I have found to be an incredible contribution to the field of community development and organizing in its focus on Indigenous ways

of thinking, knowing and how that relates to organizing and mobilizing in Indigenous communities.

Leanne Simpson's newest book *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence* is a tremendous effort of Indigenous philosophy and intellectualism. But, don't let the Westernized meanings of "philosophy" and "intellectualism" fool you. While it is absolutely rigorous in its research and argumentation, it's written in extremely accessible language with numerous uses of narrative/storytelling approaches that make it a pleasure to read. Simpson sets out very broadly to explore how community regeneration is connected to Nishinaabeg political and intellectual thought. Her guided exploration proves to be engaging and thoughtful. However, her real success lies in her capacity to show (instead of just tell) - through her use of traditional stories, personalized accounts, and localized examples of community organizing - that indeed "Resurgence is our original instruction" (p. 66).

As part of her thesis, Simpson acknowledges the important role of some Western based theories (social movement, critical, post-colonial) in "diagnosing, revealing, and even interrogating colonialism"(p. 31). Her critique of these theories is that they do not provide guidance when it comes to Indigenous people organizing a community that contests and is without colonialism. For similar reasons, she is suspect of the reconciliation agenda pushed by Canadian and Indigenous governments and people alike. Although her critique is sharp, it is also concise and it quickly becomes clear that Simpson's real focus is not to dissect Western theory but to hold up Indigenous theory (which is consistent with the principle of *aanjigone* (p. 54) that she maintains in analysis and practice throughout the work). The subsequent chapters flow nicely into each other as Simpson explores how Indigenous philosophy is expressed and acted out through visioning, storytelling, gathering, language speaking, and parenting.

What is particularly moving about this book is that although Simpson is not necessarily going out on a limb when she communicates some values of Indigenous theory/thought - i.e. she considers *bimaadziwin* (the art of living in a good way), the 7 sacred Anishinaabe teachings, and interconnectedness in her epistemology - she is able to relate these

concepts with depth, meaning, and context. For example, the notion of “interconnectedness” that permeates Aboriginal perspectives/issues/thought classes and texts has arrived at the point where its meaning has become largely symbolic and romantic. Simpson weaves together our relations to eels and salmon with an analysis of transformation and flux that left me seriously considering the differences and boundaries between humans and swimmers. It was a refreshing path for my mind to explore. Simpson also engages with the newest literature and information in the field and her commitment to the use of Anishinaabemowin (the Ojibwe language) is commendable. Finally, Simpson uses footnotes in a repetitive way that makes it easy to use only one section or chapter of the book without losing out on informative or referential sources.

Admittedly, the things that make this book empowering for an Indigenous professor might be the same things that make it frustrating for some students. The infusion of Anishinaabemowin into the text may be challenging for non-speakers. Also, the very nature of this Indigenous philosophy – one that is fluid, interactive, and personal – really reaches outside of traditional post-secondary models of education and it may be difficult to ask students to approach this book/text in such a different way than their other classes. Finally, the book is not intended to be a community organizing text because it lacks the skills-based knowledge that would be necessary in a social work/social service work academic text .

However, I cannot help but think of these challenges as just that – challenges. I don’t think it is unreasonable to ask students to work through language barriers and I believe it is our duty as teachers to help students think outside the proverbial box. If you have the luxury of being able to teach a course that is dedicated to community organizing in Aboriginal communities, this is a gem of a resource. If you are looking to supplement a more mainstream community organizing course with Aboriginal knowledge/theory, then you will undoubtedly find contemporary and informative excerpts and chapters that can be used in a variety of teaching situations. Either way, Simpson’s focus on re-creation, resurgence, and a new emergence has the power to rekindle a passion for community organizing and mobilization. In the spirit of our original instructions - “Aambemaajaadaa! Come on! Let’s get going!” (p. 25; p. 29).

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**NISHNAABE KINOOMADWIN  
NAADMAADWIN**