

The Winter We Danced

Voices from the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement

Kino-nda-niimi Collective ed., Winnipeg, Canada: ARP Books, 2014.¹

*Reviewed by Grace Li Xiu Woo*²

Idle No More advocates an egalitarian and highly consultative model of government inspired by the predominantly Nehiyawak/Cree traditions of its founding members. In keeping with this philosophy, *The Winter We Danced* documents the origins of the movement through the observations of 78 contributors. There is no editor-in-chief. The Kino-nda-niimi Collective is “a group of Indigenous writers, artists, editors, curators, and allies” who have donated the royalties from this work to the Native Youth Sexual Health Network, an organization seeking to restore knowledge, justice and safe community practices for Indigenous youth.

Idle No More’s influence on the decolonization movement in Canada, on Indigenous strategies to counter Prime Minister Harper’s authoritarian policies, and on relations between Indigenous peoples, their representatives and their neighbours is undisputable. On May 2nd, 2014 Shawn A-in-chut Atleo resigned as national chief of the Assembly of First Nations, an advocacy organization formed of chiefs elected under Canada’s *Indian Act* by those whose status is recognized by the Canadian

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1. Arbeiter Ring Publishing (arpbooks.org), 201E–121 Osbourne St., Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, R3L 1Y4. Overseas readers can order from *The Book Depository* <https://www.bookdepository.com/Winter-We-Danced/9781894037518>
 2. Dr. Woo holds a master’s degree in international human rights law from the Université du Québec in Montreal and a doctorate from the Université de Montréal. She is a member of the Law Society of British Columbia and serves on the board of directors of Lawyers Rights Watch Canada. She is the author of several works including *Ghost Dancing with Colonialism: Decolonization and Indigenous Rights at the Supreme Court of Canada* (UBC Press, 2011).

state.³ This unprecedented event was the result of intense Indigenous criticism of compromise legislation that Atleo had supported. It suggests that issues concerning Indigenous sovereignty and the right to self-determination are becoming increasingly difficult to sweep under the rug, and governments can no longer get away with the acquiescence of “token Indians”.

Whether it is because of Idle No More’s example or Harper’s high-handed mode of operation, demands for consultative decision-making are increasingly common in main-stream Canadian society. They have erupted in debates concerning municipal, provincial and national issues with the Supreme Court ruling that a parliamentary majority cannot unilaterally alter either the rules governing composition of the court or the constitutional structure of the Canadian federation.⁴ When Prime Minister Harper responded by accusing Chief Justice Beverly McLachlin of impropriety, he ignited a storm of protest from the legal profession.⁵ As observed by Grand Chief Stewart Philip, president of the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, Idle No More has helped Canadians find common ground. Indigenous peoples are not alone in their desire to have a say in government and to protect the environment from corporate interests so future generations will have the means to survive. Idle No More marked a turning point. It demonstrated the importance of standing together.⁶

The Winter We Danced is a treasure trove for anyone seeking to understand the philosophy that has begun to bridge the long-standing divide between Indigenous peoples and settler society. In the words of Métis lawyer Chelsea Vowel, “Canada is a test case for a grand notion – the notion that dissimilar peoples can share lands, resources, power and dreams while respecting and sustaining their differences” (p.307). Like the traditional round dances that have become its symbol, Idle No More unites many points of view around shared objectives. The core concerns are

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3. Atleo, Shawn A-in-chut “Statement from Assembly of First Nations Chief Shawn A-in-chut- Atleo” Assembly of First Nations, 2 May, 2014. <http://www.afn.ca/>; King, Hayden, “After Atleo, does the Assembly of First Nations serve any purpose?”, *The Globe and Mail*, Monday, 5 May 2014, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/>; Hopper, Tristin, “Shawn Atleo was a different type of National Chief, and that’s what led to his ouster” *National Post*, 2 May 2014 <http://news.nationalpost.com/>; Kinew, Wab, “Why Canada Still Needs the Assembly of First Nations”, *Huffington Post*, 05/07/2014, <http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/>.
 4. The Prime Minister’s appointment of a judge was rejected on the grounds that he did not have the qualifications required by the constitution: *Reference re Supreme Court Act, ss. 5 and 6*, 2014 SCC 21 (CanLII), <http://canlii.ca/t/g67w2>.
 5. MacKinnon, Leslie, “Harper’s dust-up with the chief justice – pique or strategy?”, CBC News, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/>, 8 May 2014.
 6. Public talk: Chief Stewart Philip, Ardith Walkem, “Pipelines and Indigenous Sovereignty; Kinder Morgan and Northern Gateway”, Vancouver Public Library, 1 May 2014. See: Lawyers Rights Watch Canada, audio/video, <http://www.lrwc.org/>

repealing unilaterally imposed legislation that removes protection for the environment, instituting a collaborative approach to solving the chronic deficiencies faced by Indigenous peoples in land, housing, education and healthcare, and developing mutually beneficial nation-to-nation relationships with Canada. As the biographies of the contributors indicate, the movement is based on a depth of experience that cannot easily be turned aside.