



Idle No More Round Dance Revolution at the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics Montreal Encuentro: A Discussion with Roewan Crowe and Alex Wilson

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Idle No More (INM) is a people's movement of tremendous strength and vitality. Sparked by a group of women living in Saskatchewan, it is seen as one of the largest Indigenous mass movements in Canadian history. As Alex Wilson, an active member of Idle No More, writes:

Idle No More is many things—an affirmation of Indigenous sovereignty and protection of land and water; a series of nationally and locally organized teach-ins, rallies, protests, and round dances; a call for peaceful revolution—but always, at its core, it is a very contemporary political expression of old knowledge: that we, the land, the water, and all living creatures are related and, as relatives, we are meant to love and care for each other. This commitment to relational responsibility and to action that effects love is the starting place of Idle No More.¹

Roewan Crowe interviews Alex Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree Nation) about the significance of the round dance, INM's use of social media, and her recent participation at the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics Encuentro in Montreal. Alex is an Associate Professor of Education and Director of the Aboriginal Education Research Centre at the University of Saskatchewan. Her academic and community work and her passion focus on Indigenous land-based education and social ecological justice. As a community organizer, she uses education and Cree philosophy to intervene in ongoing practices of colonialism, oppression, and the destruction of land and water.

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New Dawn Drum Group. Photo by Virginia Johns.

WILSON: One of my favorite photos of Idle No More is of the New Dawn Drummers—a drum group composed of four young women from La Ronge, Saskatchewan. The girls came together and sang and drummed at the first Idle No More event in LaRonge. After that first event, their grandfather, Carson Poitras, was told of an ancient prophesy that there would come a time when women would need to reclaim the drum and that, this time, would signify a shift. The photo is one of my favorites because you can really see the passion and strength of the girls. There is this huge issue of violence against Indigenous women in Canada, and silencing is a part of that continuum of “missing and murdered.” The New Dawn drummers are a counter narrative to those voices that are continually silenced and those bodies that are usually pathologized and absent.

CROWE: Idle No More (INM) has gathered thousands of people across Turtle Island to dance the round dance. Hand-in-hand, to the beat of the drum. Can you talk about the choice of the round dance that is at the core of the movement? What is the significance of this particular dance? What power do you think lies in the round dance?

The round dances bring people together, and once together we move forward. Many Nations believe that the drum and drumbeats represent the heartbeat, life itself. Since we all come from our mothers, there is also a connection to our origins as humans but also as individuals, and to the land. The cadence of the steps and the drumming and the singing are in sync with our hearts beating. When we are in a circle, we all have a place, we are all significant. It is beautiful and powerful. And, for some people this is healing.



Idle No More January 16 Call to Action. Photo by Kevin Konnyu.

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WILSON: Yes, the round dance is a contemporary expression of something much older. So people coming together, “coming in” to the circle, is a powerful expression of unity and recognition of land, indigenous bodies, women’s voice and agency. Thousands of people in a shopping mall, the nexus of consumerism and commercialization of women’s bodies, dancing and singing, undo heteropatriarchy and the capitalist system that supports it.

CROWE: I have been to round dances in Winnipeg, Manitoba, at different locations: downtown at the intersection of Portage and Main, at Portage Place Shopping Mall, and in front of the Manitoba Provincial Legislature. I have felt the beauty of assembling together in the city. It was powerful to dance with everyone in this way. It felt especially significant given colonization in Canada. To be part of an Indigenous-led dance in the middle of a large Canadian city was moving, particularly when you think about how expressions of indigeneity, and indigenous cultures and traditions have been banned. Can you speak to this?



West Edmonton Mall round dance. Photo by Arsan Buffin.

CROWE: Idle No More is a grassroots movement in that it is open to the general public, all peoples. Can you talk about what the phrase grassroots means to you, and how it is understood in Idle No More organizing?

WILSON: INM was initiated by four women in Saskatchewan. From those four it rapidly grew to hundreds, thousands, and now hundreds of thousands across the world. It is unique from other recent social movements, in that it is everyday, ordinary people, usually women, most often mothers, who are organizing in their own families and communities around issues that are of importance to them. There are no “leaders” in the typical sense of the word, meaning that each person that is part of the movement can call people to action and show leadership in a non-hierarchical way. I like to use the example of weegess. Weegess is a plant, known in English as muskrat root or wild ginger. It grows in the swamps and is used by Cree people as a medicine with spiritual significance. It links us to our origin story and embodies and elicits a special energy. The root grows laterally, in a non-hierarchical way. When you break off one piece, new tendrils grow, and so it is continually regenerating. This is how Idle No More is.

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Lately some of us have been using the term “bushroots” rather than grassroots, since it makes sense for those of us from the bush. I also think this is why social media has played such an important role in Idle No More as well. The Internet is increasingly accessible and has been a way to quickly share information. This has been important when mainstream media have either not covered issues that are important to us, or have vilified or pathologized indigenous peoples. We can quickly and effectively subvert those messages.

CROWE: What role has social media played in Idle No More organizing? What have you learned about using social media?

WILSON: Social media has played a huge role in Idle No More since the beginning. Sheelah, Sylvia, Jess, and Nina connected on Facebook because they were “liking” each other’s posts. Although some had worked together in the past, it was social media that helped them to organize the first Idle No More event, a teach-in, on 10 November 2012 at Station 20 West Community Centre in Saskatoon. Word spread very quickly via social media about the event, and, even though there was a huge snow storm that day, over 100 people showed up to hear speakers, spoken-word artists, and community activists address impending legislation that would negatively impact indigenous peoples and the environment. The main Facebook page was created by an Idle No More group in Southern Alberta, and the website began as a blog by an organizer from Saddle Lake (Shannon Houle); the first #idlenomore hashtag was created in October. So within a few weeks, largely because of social media, word got out very quickly. There are a few things that are important to point about the use of social media and Idle No More. For example, the first webpage had the option of signing up for notifications, and in doing so participants could select male, female, or “other” as gender options. Even though the designation of “other” is problematic, it did provide a space for a non-binary gender identification. Within the first week, there were 989 female, 650 male, and 50 who identified as other signed up through the site. Social media has given us the opportunity to provide some analysis around gender. Since body sovereignty and gender self-determination have been principal to the movement from the beginning, I think it is important to reflect on trends and the use of social media. An analysis done by Full Duplex, after six months of Idle No More, tracked tweets and Facebook posts and linked spikes in action to on-the-ground events such as the Global Day of Action on 28 January 2013. An interesting point made in a one-year analysis by Mark Blevis was that the movement was unlike other recent movements, in that social media was predominantly used by women. A majority of the tweets and Facebook posts were positive, and those that were negative were coming from males. This was not surprising, because at its core Idle No More challenges heteropatriarchy both in theory and in actions. To me, this backlash from men, including indigenous men, is a strong indicator that Idle No More is shaking things up.

As of this week there are over 295,000 people in the new website database (idlenomore.com); 132,000 on the main Facebook page (facebook.com/IdleNoMoreCommunity); 15,000 on the email blast list; 26,400 Twitter followers (@Idlenomore4); 2000 on the text blast list (text

1.306.994.7009); 700+ Facebook groups; and a list of over 700 Idle No More organizers.



Idle No More Round Dance Rebellion/Revolution. Karina Hodoyan, Kevin O'Connor, and Alex Wilson. Hemispheric Institute Encuentro, 2014. Photo by Julio Pantoja.

CROWE: Recently you and several members of Idle No More participated in the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics Encuentro held in Montreal. Many of you participated in a performance workshop hosted by La Pocha Nostra that involved planning a performance intervention in addition to an INM intervention.

WILSON: Karina Hodoyan (Mexicana-Xicana), Kevin O'Connor (settler/ally) and myself (Opaskwayak Cree Nation) are three queer artists, scholars, and activists who were brought together as a collective through Idle No More. We are interested in performances that validate indigeneity while also opening up space for resistance to colonial oppression. In support of Idle No More and building on the Encuentro's theme of "Manifest: Choreographing Social Movements," we proposed organizing a flash-mob round dance in downtown Montreal. The round dance was to situate the Encuentro firmly in its place in relation to the indigenous/settler uprising that has gripped the country in its recent form since 2012. Idle No More exploded on the Canadian political scene and has extended across the world, transgressing and challenging many borders. Flash-mob round dances as protest performances took place in shopping malls, street intersections, and public/political spaces across Canada, and continue to do so. These round dances open up space for indigenous and settler participants to move together and create a space for questioning, discomfort, and, potentially, reconciliation. The round dance helps people come to consciousness about the impacts of colonialism on queerness, sexuality, gender, race, ability, and how these are interconnected with the ongoing exploitation of humans, other species, and our environment, through the transgression of space and movement of bodies. We question how round dances open up space for a "politics of the kinesthetic." How do the round dances within Idle No More allow for a specific kind of co-existence through co-resistance by both settler allies and indigenous peoples? So in planning, we connected with Idle No More activists Melissa Dupuis and Widia Larriveire and others in the Montreal region and organized a collective round dance where all participants in the Encuentro and the Montreal community could join. At the Montreal Encuentro people from

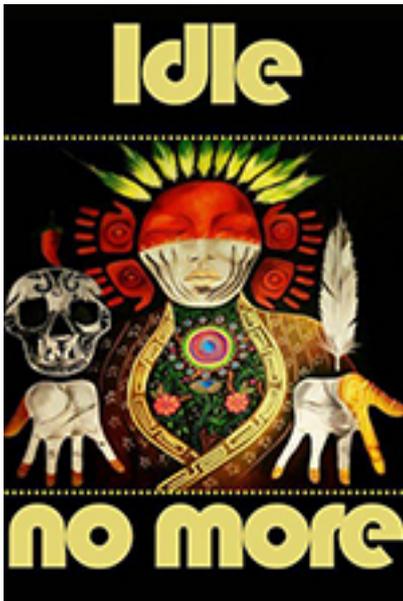
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across the Americas danced together. The event was opened with a prayer and some powerful words by Mohawk Ellen Gabriel and other speakers; Sylvia, Sheelah, Melissa, and Karina translated to Spanish.²



Pan-Indigenous (Anti) Manifesto. La Pocha Nostra. Hemispheric Institute Encuentro, 2014. Photo by Lori Novak.

After the round dance some of us went directly into the La Pocha Nostra urban intervention. The week-long La Pocha Nostra workshop at the Encuentro was incredibly intense—a whirlwind really. I don't think the fullness of this intensity really hit me until we were mid-performance. The performance we created was entitled "Pan-Indigenous (Anti) Manifesto 3.4: Co-Creating a New Performance Declaration for the Americas." There was this spiritual energy of coming together in the round dance, and then we were pulled apart. For me, the most powerful part of the performance intervention was when this spiritual energy hit me. There were four of us from the northern hemisphere, all Idle No More organizers, standing across from four women from the south, members of La Pocha Nostra members and Montreal Immigrant Women's Centre. We stood across from each other while the rest of the performance took place. There were hundreds of people gathered all around us. I was overwhelmed with emotion, as were the other women, and something just happened where we all connected. What I take from this profound experience is the common experience that indigenous women, and all women even, have of current and historical violence. Yet here we are, now more powerful than ever. It was very clear to me that we cannot stop doing this work. When we viewed the photos afterwards, non-human shapes appeared in some of them—a reminder that what we are all doing is supported by our ancestors. There were, of course, many other significant aspects to the workshop and performance, but this is just one part to focus on for this discussion.



Idle No More poster. Image created by artist Wanda Luna.

CROWE: What do you hope for the Idle No More movement?

WILSON: My hope is that local communities continue to organize and act upon issues that are important to them, that the network continues to grow so that we can help each other out, and that we are able to do so in peaceful, non-violent ways. My ultimate hope is that we can stop this pervasive violence and destruction that's going on. We will.

Roewan Crowe is an artist, theorist, and organizer energized by acts of disruption, transformation and the tactical deployment of self-reflexivity. She has a particular passion for feminist art, creating community, and facilitating initiatives in cultural democracy. In her queer, conceptually informed artistic practice she enters into fatal wounded landscapes—often violent and xenophobic—to explore the possibilities that open up when artists walk through the shadows of the world. This year she launched *Quivering Land*, (ARP) a queer Western that engages with poetics and politics to reckon with the legacies of violence and colonization in the West. She is an Associate Professor in the Women's and Gender Studies Department at the University of Winnipeg and Co-Director of The Institute for Women's Gender Studies.

Dr. Alex Wilson is Neyonawak Inniwak from the Opaskwayak Cree Nation. She is an Associate Professor and the Academic Director of the Aboriginal Education Research Centre at the University of Saskatchewan. Her scholarship has greatly contributed to building and sharing knowledge about two spirit identity, "Coming In," history and teachings, Indigenous research methodologies, and the prevention of violence in the lives of Indigenous peoples. As an

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organizer with the Idle No More movement, she integrates radical education movement work with grassroots interventions that prevent the destruction of land and water. She is particularly focused on educating about and protecting the Saskatchewan River Delta and supporting community-based food sovereignty efforts.

Notes

¹ Wilson, Alex. Forthcoming 2015. "A Steadily Beating Heart: Resistance, Persistence and Resurgence." Final chapter in "'And More Will Sing Their Way to Freedom': Indigenous Resistance and Resurgence," edited by Elaine Coburn. Fernwood Press.

² Alex acknowledges that her response to this question was developed collaboratively through the writing, thinking, and organizing work she did with Karina Hodoyan and Kevin O'Connor in preparation for the Montreal Encuentro.