

This is an Honour Song

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The summer of 1990 brought some strong medicine to Turtle Island. For many Canadians, “Oka” was the first time they encountered Indigenous anger, resistance and standoff, and the resistance was quickly dubbed both the “Oka Crisis” and the “Oka Crises” by the mainstream media. But to the Kanien’kehaka (Mohawk) people of Kanehsatà:ke, who were living up to their responsibilities to take care of their lands, this was neither a “crisis” at Oka, nor was it about the non-Native town of “Oka.” This was about 400 years of colonial injustice. Similarly, for the Kanien’kehaka from Kahnawà:ke and Akwesasne who created “crises” by putting up their own barricades on the Mercier Bridge or by mobilizing and/or mobilizing support (resources) at Kanehsatà:ke, this really had nothing to do with Oka, a bridge or a golf course. This was about 400 years of resistance. Like every Indigenous nation occupied by Canada, the Haudenosaunee have been confronting state/settler societies and their governments since those societies began threatening the sovereignty, self-determination and jurisdiction of the Haudenosaunee. It was not a beginning. Nor was this the end. This was a culmination of many, many years of Onhkwéhonwe resistance resulting in a decision to put up barricades in defense of, and to bring attention to, Haudenosaunee land ethics, treaty responsibilities and governance.

Although the mainstream media focused on the white town of “Oka” and the “warriors,” the Kanien’kehaka resistance was envisioned

and carried out by Kanien'kehaka people from Kanehsatà:ke, Kahnawà:ke and Akwesasne. Although the mainstream media focused on masked warriors, the resistance began in March as a peaceful blockade on a snow covered dirt road with the simple intent of blocking the Oka golf course's planned expansion into the Pines or the commons: a small piece of land that the people of Kanehsatà:ke had been fighting to have recognized as theirs for at least 270 years. Further, while the media tried to focus solely on the warriors, in actuality, the resistance was carried out by countless men, women and children behind the lines and behind the scenes mobilizing support and resources. True, it was a critical act of resistance, but it was also a vision of reclamation, revitalization and restoration of Haudenosaunee lands, treaties, political traditions and responsibilities. Such vision and resistance served to inspire countless individuals and communities across the country as they put up their own blockades in solidarity with the Kanien'kehaka and/or to empower other struggles of resistance.

The summer of 2010 marks the twentieth anniversary of the Kanien'kehaka resistance at Kanehsatà:ke and Kahnawà:ke. And 2010 also marks the anniversary of a 290 year long resistance at Kanehsatà:ke which has seen countless generations of Kanien'kehaka fight to have their rights to their lands (including the commons/the Pines) acknowledged and respected. We thought it was time to observe these anniversaries.

But why "Oka"? Why a book marking this anniversary and honouring this particular resistance when Indigenous Peoples have been resisting colonialism as individuals, communities and nations since the dawn of colonization? People throughout the Americas have been engaged in an almost constant struggle for the reclamation, revitalization, and restoration of lands, treaties, political traditions and responsibilities. It is a struggle that began soon after the discovery of Europeans in Indigenous territories; about the time that the Europeans and their offspring societies proved themselves to be an invasive species that just wouldn't go away and one that just couldn't be respectful of another's territory, traditions, spiritual beliefs, economy or political system. Such struggles are anything but new. They have taken a multiplicity of forms from legal actions to public marches or demonstrations on the lawns of government buildings, and from Métis armed insurrections to protesting uranium exploration. Such

struggles have even presented themselves as suicides. As Richard Wagamese wrote during that summer of 1990:

Fourteen years ago, in May 1976, a young man died. Dressed in full traditional manner of his Peigan people, he travelled beyond the borders of this reality forever. He carried with him the love, respect and honour of his people. He carried with him an intimate knowledge of the realities of native life in Canada. And that is why he died.

Nelson Small Legs Jr. shot himself through the heart. He left behind notes to his family and friends as well as a note to the news media. ... [T]hose brief words to the press ring as heavily today as they did then.

*I give up my life in protest to the present conditions concerning Indian people in southern Alberta. For 100 years Indians have suffered. Must they suffer another 100 years? My suicide should open the eyes of non-Indians into how much we've suffered.*¹

So why a book on this particular resistance and not one about Small Legs or Listuguj or Ipperwash or Haida Gwaii? These were critical, influential mobilizations. While all of these nations threw stones in the water that generated a ripple effects, Kanasatà:ke was different. Not because of the ripple, but because we saw those powerful images every night on the news for months—images that became a defining moment for many of us. Images that generated unprecedented Indigenous response in the form of solidarity blockades across Turtle Island. The answer is quite simple—the mobilization of Kanien'kehaka that summer was such a powerful image and such a defining moment for so many of us (Indigenous and Canadian alike). But while it was such a powerful image and while it empowered so many individuals, communities and nations engaged in their own struggles, like the story of Small Legs it is important to understand that resistance often has an underbelly—stories of a community divided and stories which serve to divide a community. It is important to acknowledge that underbelly, but in putting together this book we seek to honour both the mobilization and the communities involved in their entirety.

Honouring and revealing Indigenous resistance is of critical importance to our communities, because these struggles are not well documented in mainstream Canadian history, they are manipulated by

mainstream Canadian media and are hidden from Canadians and often Indigenous Peoples alike. Every single Indigenous nation in Canada has a long history of resistance. This resistance has been recorded in particular and unique Oral Traditions, spanning centuries and often documenting individual acts of resistance, in addition to wider-scale mobilization. Indigenous nations have a long and honourable history of standing up for justice, for peace and for the protection of their territories and citizens. They have been organizing, contesting, dissenting, and mobilizing since the invasion began, and the proof lies in the fact that we stand here today, connected to our lands as *Indigenous Peoples*.

The impetus for this book project was an academic conference in Montreal attended by both Ellen Gabriel and me (Kiera Ladner). During her talk, Ellen spoke of the opportunities that she has had to travel across the country (and beyond) and how her travels have allowed her to hear stories about the importance and the impact that their resistance has had far beyond the borders of Kanien'kehaka territory. As I sat and listened to her speak of the importance of such stories, it struck me how many people in the communities never had such opportunities or had never heard the voices from across the country speak of the resistance or its impact, and I knew I wanted to do something. But what that something was I did not know. Most importantly, I didn't know if this was something that I, as an outsider, should be doing.

After speaking with Ellen in Montreal and Ottawa over coffees, breakfasts and even birch bark basket making, I began to understand my responsibility and made a commitment to do something to publicly address the impact of the so-called "Oka Crisis." This sense of commitment and responsibility only intensified when I visited Kaneshatà:ke several months later. That day afforded me the opportunity to speak with people, other than Ellen, about the resistance in 1990, its impact on the community, and this project. It also provided the opportunity to tour the community long besieged by the loss of land and its checkerboard pattern, to see the commons—to see those Pines still standing and to hear the sound of the wind through the trees as if it were a constant Honour Song for the people who had stood strong nearly twenty years ago. It was an emotional moment spent driving with Ellen down the dirt road where the original blockade had been, thinking of the people who had stood there all those

years before. A moment spent thinking of images and the woman I saw on my television every night for months. A moment recalling how the events at Kanehsatà:ke and Kahnawà:ke and how the people of Kanehsatà:ke, Kahnawà:ke and Akwesasne changed my life. And thus it was a day that I will never forget, for the people that I spoke with and the tour of the community reminded me of so very much about my own journey, why I was doing this project and the responsibilities that I carry.

So I put down my tobacco and I called Leanne—just as I always do when I am struggling with something big. After many, many conversations with Leanne, Ellen, and numerous Haudenosaunee and non-Haudenosaunee scholars and activists, the idea for the book was born. We would mark the anniversaries with a book honouring the impact of the resistance with stories from across our Island. I hope that we have accomplished this and that our Honour Songs are heard with the intent and respect with which all of our contributors wrote them.

When Kiera first presented the idea to me, I (Leanne) was initially reluctant. Not because the resistance at Kanehsatà:ke and Kahnawà:ke wasn't deserving; it most certainly is. This event changed my life. But because culturally, Nishinaabeg people are taught to tread very, very carefully and to avoid interfering with the affairs of others. I knew the pain and division the “crises” had created, fostered and reinforced in these communities. I knew as a citizen of the Nishnaabeg nation that I was an outsider to both the resistance and to the pain and division. So I put my tobacco down, and asked for guidance from my Ancestors, and the direction came. The Kanien'kehaka and Haudenosaunee people I spoke with were supportive. The Elders I spoke with were supportive. John Samson of Arbeiter Ring expressed his unwavering support of the project, calling Oka “the greatest political education of his life,” and doors just opened.

While the project began with a trip to Montreal for Kiera, it ended with a trip to Montreal for me. During the last few days approaching our publisher's deadline, I travelled to Montreal with my children to accompany my partner who was attending a workshop at Concordia University. These things never happened by chance. As I was making my way back from the hotel pool with my children, Minowewebeneshiinh and Nishna, I ran into Ellen Gabriel in the

elevator of our hotel. This was the first time I had met her. I introduced myself, and we exchanged a few words. I was wet, having just been in the pool, more dishevelled than normal, and I was caught by surprise. But as I looked into her blue eyes, I remembered. I remembered being a young 19-year-old Anishinaabekwe. I remembered seeing her on TV, and I remembered what that image had taught me and why I carried it through the next twenty years. I remembered that this was the woman responsible for waking me up. For sending me on a path that led me to learn my culture, my language, my political traditions. This was the woman that challenged me to find my voice and to use it.

The second image I took from that trip came from the stop of that sacred mountain in the middle of Montreal. As I looked out over beautiful Kanien'kehaka territory, my eyes focused on the Mercier Bridge, and I felt the enormity of the parallel mobilization at Kahnawà:ke. The Mercier Bridge leading in and out of Montreal, the traffic chaos, the white anger, the sheer number of people their intervention affected.

Throughout the project, I have carefully listened to the guidance and concerns of Ellen Gabriel through Kiera. I have also consulted with my friend and colleague Taiaiake Alfred, and am thankful to both of these individuals for providing us with honest, forthcoming advice and perspectives. Kiera and I have tried to the best of our abilities to honour the contributions of individuals and communities involved in the most respectful way possible, in a way that does not further entrench any divisions in the community. Any mistakes or missteps are our own.

This book represents an Honour Song in the tradition of the Nishinaabeg and Nehiyaw nations, sung by a diversity of writers, scholars, activists and artists to honour all of the people that participated in the resistance from Kanehsatà:ke, Kahnawà:ke and Akwesasne. Honour Songs in Indigenous traditions are sung to publicly honour and acknowledge all the beautiful things, all the good, these individuals and communities have brought to the people, and to honour the positive impact this “crisis” had on Indigenous Peoples and Canada.

We also undertook this project to acknowledge the pain and the sacrifices made by the people of Kanehsatà:ke, Kahnawà:ke and Akwesasne. Pain and sacrifices these communities continue to live with. Twenty years is not long enough to heal a wound this large—particularly

when these communities continue to be punished for the action by police, military, locals, surrounding municipalities, Québec and Canada. Twenty years is not long enough to heal divisions between families and friends. Twenty years is not long enough to heal divisions within communities, let alone those between nations.

We also undertook this project to bring attention to the fact that twenty years later the issues that resulted in the so-called “Oka Crisis” have not been resolved. People of Kanehsàtà:ke are constantly forced to fight for the commons and what remains of their lands. Kanien’kehake in each of these communities continue in their efforts to rebuild and revitalize their nation, their government, their relationship to their lands and their treaty relationship with settler societies and governments. Something must be done!

Something must be done now—before another twenty years pass. As Patricia Monture wrote almost twenty years ago on the heels of the Kanehsàtà:ke resistance, “I am frightened by the violence that we saw this summer at Kanehsàtà:ke. In twenty years time, I do not want to turn on the television set and see one of my two boys standing there holding a gun. That is not what I want for their future.”² We are haunted by these words and the echoes of these same words that have been spoken by countless generations of Indigenous mothers, grandmothers and aunties since the dawn of colonization. Those two boys are now towering young men (both well over six feet tall) with a younger brother. Though these boys have changed, the realities of resistance and the situation in Kanehsàtà:ke have not. There are still episodes of Indigenous resistance, and young people are actively mobilizing in numerous communities as we write. Our hope is that something is done. This is not what we want for future generations.

We began this project in earnest during the summer of 2009. Our deadlines were extremely tight in order to get it out by the spring of 2010. As such we relied heavily on our own networks, drawing upon people from outside of the communities involved who had both an honour song to sing and the time to write it. Every single person we spoke with about writing for the book, whether they ended up contributing or not, indicated that the “Oka Crisis” was a defining moment in their lives. It was important to us to include a diversity of voices— from community activists and traditional people to young activists

and emerging academics to poets and visual artists and scholars from Indigenous communities across Turtle Island and from Canadians. While we are missing several key voices (like Québécois) due to the inescapable time constraints, mid-stream dropouts, and the limits of our networks, we nevertheless hope that we have accomplished this. There was a fantastic response from the Indigenous artistic community, and we were only able to include a very small portion of that response—the artists whose practice lends itself to print media. Oka not only inspired artists to write songs, performances, theatrical works and contributions to the visual arts, it impacted the practices of a generation of artists who continue to create works today.

It is our hope that this book honours the resistance and resurgence of the Kanien'kehaka, and its influence on the resistance and resurgence movements of other Indigenous nations and its influence on Canada. Indigenous Peoples and their nations have been resisting and struggling against the colonialism since the very beginning. The Ancestors not only fought, blockaded, protested and mobilized against these forces on every Indigenous territory in Turtle Island, they also engaged in countless acts of hidden resistance and kitchen table resistance aimed at ensuring their children and grandchildren could live as *Indigenous* Peoples. The Grandmothers, Mothers and Aunties were particularly adept at keeping us alive, and passing down whatever traditions they could so we would have warmth in our hearts and warmth in our bellies. We believe it is important to reveal the legacy of resistance in order to not only shatter mainstream Canada's image of Indigenous Peoples as "passive victims" of colonization, but also to demonstrate to future generations that they exist because of the responsibility, sacrifice, courage and commitment of their Ancestors. Ultimately, and with the utmost humility, we undertook this project to help us pass on the legacy of resistance, of resurgence and of peace to our children, who will inherit this legacy and to the generations yet to be born.

Note on Terminology

Although the "Oka Crises" is known to most Canadians as the "Oka Crisis," the term is offensive to many involved in the struggle because it refers to the non-Native town, and because the term was

manufactured by the mainstream media. We agree. However, in editing a collection from a group of such diverse writers, we have left the language up to individual writers. Like it our not, Indigenous or Canadian, people identify with the term “Oka Crisis” in a far greater way than they do to phrases such as “the resistance at Kanehsatà:ke” or the “standoff at Kanehsatà:ke and Kahnawà:ke.” Still, we feel it is important to disrupt colonial labels, and have encouraged writers to decolonize their use of language where appropriate.

¹ Richard Wagamese (1996), *The Terrible Summer*, Toronto: Warrick Publishing, p. 65.

² Patricia Monture (1997), “Notes on Sovereignty” in Andrea P. Morrison (ed.), *Justice for Natives: Searching for Common Ground*, Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, p. 198.