

Interview with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

Leanne is a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg independent scholar, writer, musician, artist and friend. Leanne's many books including *As We Have Always Done* have been tremendously influential in grounding Indigenous approaches to social, political and ecological questions. We were both interested in talking to her about her own ideas about friendship and community, and as always, curious about how her thinking challenges ours. She has historically picked our arguments apart and pushed us hard in gentle and generous directions.

AJ/MH: This project started with us just meeting once a week in a bar to read and talk together. At the beginning we were just trying to think through and past racial nationalisms and xenophobias that are circulating in so many ways in the present ecological moment. Then we began to talk and wonder about friendship and community, and what they might have to say?

LBS: This practice of study really resonates with me. I'm drawn to the idea that our present moment requires getting together once a week, reading books, thinking together, thinking through together, not necessarily as a debate but towards understandings that are forged in relation to each other. Friendship as an intellectual and political practice has historically been quite important in Black feminist organizing and in Indigenous feminisms as well. In my experience, it isn't often "debate" or at least its thinking that takes place outside of the heteropatriarchy

of the western academy and their practice of debate. I think about that all a lot in my work –the conversations around fires or kitchen tables, on the picket line, on the front step or in the park, at shows or protests that transform the way I think. These are almost always associated with some sort of collective action, whether that's a land based practice, or organization or making sure everyone in the community or the classroom has what they need to be able to contribute. For Indigenous peoples, this is the sort of study that is the fabric of our politics. Learning to voice when we disagree, to work through conflict in a way that is gentle and respectful, to sit with unpleasant emotions and then make decisions with integrity are very important communal practices in our politics.

There's often joy, and laughter and care in these spaces. Food. Ceremony. Joking around. Games. Because there's joy in all that and in relational politics building, maintaining and transforming relationships is the political work. For those of us who work out of the margins of the academy, whose work is informed by a struggle and movement building, I think that the methodology of thinking through with friends, thinking alongside friends, and having those real world relationships that are ongoing is a really important intervention into how knowledge is generated and shared. This is also important to do in community, with people you may or may not be friends with. It is important to do this across movements and sites of struggle as a practice of solidarity.

AJ/MH: We poked around the idea of kinning – the attempt to see the other-than-human as family. Maybe that sounds great if you belong to something or you know if you're kin with them, but what if you're not, what if you don't belong somewhere and how so easily distorted notions of community flow into notions of nationhood and belonging in the service of exposure.

LBS: If you are alive or were recently alive on planet earth, then you are part of a deep network of relationships that exist outside of your own body and sphere of influence. You belong.

I don't see the division between human and other-than-human, or human and non-human. I see a division between living and nonliving

things, and even that is a bit fluid if you think along with sphagnum moss for instance, where only one cell in twenty is alive, but even the dead cells contribute to the structure. This idea of living and non-living though is reflected in and encoded in Nishnaabemowin, and the structure of our language, which is mostly verbs. And the way that you conjugate those verbs is based on whether things are animate or inanimate. And so that tells me that if you're looking at being in deep relationality with living things, you're thinking on a planetary scale, an intimate scale, a family scale, and a community scale. And that means that everything that is alive has spirit, and is also interacting in another realm. To me this represents a kind of humility that maybe we just don't know everything. There are other forces at work that we don't understand. So belonging isn't about the nation state. It's not a border, it's not a chunk of land with an army around it. It something more profound than that.

Biidaaban is a word in my language that means dawn. It means that first light, peeking over the horizon, before the sun has come up. It's composed of three smaller words. And in Nishnaabemowin, when you split the bigger word into the three tiny words, that's when the poetry and the theory actually spill out. The 'bii' part means the future is coming at you. The 'daa' is the present or home and 'ban' or 'ban' is a suffix that you would put on to the end of someone else's name when they passed on. So it denotes the past – so Biidaaban the present, which is the collapsing in of the future and the past. And so that, to me, is a really mind-blowing sort of concept in terms of thinking about how important the present is.

In Nishnaabeg thought, it is the present that gives birth to the future. This is when you plant the seeds. This is where this is where you can change the trajectory of the future. It places that kind of responsibility in the now. And I love that sort of reminder that you get every morning when the sun comes up about the importance of that presence and the importance of being alive and taking on that responsibility.

If you take that concept and add it to this deep relationality, then you've got ancestors, and you've got those yet to be born. You have a cosmos that is very much alive, that is multi-dimensional, and is made up of layers of relationships that are networked together. That's what I mean in my work, when I'm talking about this complex web of relationships be-

tween living things. The spectrum of relationships that I can have with plants and animals and spirits are the same spectrum of relationships that I can have with humans.

I'm interested in how we communally take on these responsibilities to live together in a way that brings forth more life. I have a responsibility to that web and to that set of interconnections and interdependencies to live in a certain way. And the way that I'm supposed to live in a way that promotes continuous rebirth that promotes a diversity of life and living, both on an intimate and on a planetary scale.

My ancestors were living in a way where they were practicing consent and accountability long before there was conflict. They were committed collectively to ethical practices that were based on systems of care, for the land and waters, for plants and animals and for societies that were different than their own. Individuals had a high degree of self-determination in order to be their best selves and to contribute to society. They treated other living things in particular ways to show respect. There are rituals and ceremonies that are done to make sure the animals we harvest feel respected even in death. We have stories of people marrying beavers and living intimately with beaver society for instance.

The practice of consent is really at the core of all those relationships, because people are constantly communicating with plants and animals and ancestors and those yet to be born, and constantly through embodied practice. Before we harvest a moose, we might place an offering and ask the moose to give itself up in the physical world so that we can feed our families. We would commit to using all the parts of the moose, taking only what we need, and sharing with other animals and people in our community.

I think that respect for the autonomy of other living things is a way of thinking about commune. It is a way of thinking with other forms of life. It is a way of taking care and to me, that is a very, very different way of making and living in a world.

AJ/MH: We've spoken to two scholars, Leela Gandhi and Julietta Singh – and both of them have cautioned us about trying to define the idea of friendship. As soon as you try to define it, it begins to lose its

power. Julietta has this cool phrase where she says, it's the relationships that we don't have a name for. Friendship is what's left after we have named and fixed all the other relationships. And we like that a lot, but sometimes we get stuck, it's a conceptual hang-up for us, like if we're going to talk about something, we have to know what we're talking about. Do we need to put some guardrails on the conversation in your opinion or is friendship something that we cannot, should not define?

LBS: In English, friend is used to refer to a spectrum of relationships and of intimacies. If I'm friends with someone, there is an element of care involved. In Nishnaabemowin, and in the ethical framing I'm talking about, there is a series of ethical practices that one engages in whether or not the other living being is a friend. Consent, non-interference, accountability, respect for individual self-determination, building consensus, repairing and transforming harm. All of that must happen whether or not I think of the other living being as a friend or not.

In Nishnaabemowin, one of our words for the being that made the world is Gzhwe Manidoo. It means the one who loves us most completely, the one who loves our naked selves, the one who loves unconditionally. I think about the practice of unconditional love and how it was an instigator in the making of this world. It is a reminder that living things have the capacity to live within mino-bimaadiziwin, or continuous re-birth, and also the capacity to destroy life. And when forces are out to destroy life, then to me at least, our responsibilities become quite clear. This is why Indigenous peoples put their bodies on the lines to protect lands and waters from pipelines and mining and deforestation. This is why water protectors are protecting springs and headwaters. This practice of care isn't based on friendship, it's based on a belief that the water inside our bodies is related to water cycling through the planet, and all living things share that water.

AJ/MH: We want to cycle back for a second to ask you about this idea of borderlessness. We've been thinking about borderlessness in the wake of racial nationalisms and policing and surveillance states. The idea of borderlessness is very attractive in lots of ways, but Indigenous Nations

and other kinds of threatened communities often require protecting sovereign borders and asserting nationhood.

LBS: It's hard to mark the Anishinaabe on a map because our "borders" were pretty leaky. There is a part of the world, around the Great Lakes where we have a strong presence, where we governed ourselves through embodied politics and deep relationality. I live in the eastern part of that formation. There are places close to where I live where our origin stories take places. We always shared time and space with other living things. We share land, water and air with billions of other living things that are intimately connected to all forms of life on the earth. Humans have a responsibility to live within the living networks we're a part of. I think of the bush or the forest of a gathering place of many different species and forms of life. I think of the tall grass prairie as a gathering place of many different species and forms of life. The Black Oak Savanna is in between and there is a spectrum of many different communities as you move between these open ecological systems. There is distinction, but there is no border.

We were never the "only human ones" in our homeland. Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg homeland is an eco-tone, the overlapping of two eco zones that creates a place of incredible diversity. The Wendat (Huron) often lived amongst us living in longhouses and farming. To the south, our presence gradually decreases. Nishaabeg place names become fewer and Haudenosaunee places names become greater. In these zones we had more intensive diplomacy. We spent more time working out our differences, negotiating ways of living peacefully. These overlapping lands, shared spaces weren't unique in my way of thinking. We were already sharing land and water with beavers and moose and ducks and fish. We were already forming ecosystems that were connected to other ecosystem. There was already an intimate practice of internationalism. Embodied politics is a constant cycle of accountability, consent and communication.

When Indigenous peoples use the term nationhood, we aren't talking about nation states. We are talking about formations that respected and

worked with different sovereignties over shared time and space. Giving up what you can so others might live. Again, this ethic of care.

It's the nation state as a delivery system for racial capitalism that's the problem. Racial capitalism requires borders and enclosures and violence. It requires heteropatriarchy and transphobia.

It is possible to make worlds that connect to other worlds, places where self-determination doesn't threaten the very viability of the planet where we can live and work together. It is possible to make Nishnaabeg places where we govern ourselves without the sort of borders. It is possible for living things to move and migrate without destroying Nishnaabeg homelands. There are lots of people from different moments and intellectual traditions dreaming and thinking about this. There are people in every part of the world coming together and building pieces of this with each other. Indigenous peoples on every continent hold communal experiences and theory about how to live and live well without police, prisons and armies, in societies where violence is unthinkable, without enclosures.

