BOOK REVIEW


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Audra Simpson’s Mohawk Interruptus explores the political life of the Kahnawâ:ke Nation and challenges dominant notions of sovereignty, citizenship, and Indigeneity reified by contemporary and seminal cultural anthropologists, such as Lewis Henry Morgan. It makes readers grapple with belonging within and of a state (2014, p. 115), while also presenting the social and political incentives to essentialize Indigenous1 groups through anthropology and other social science research. Considering emerging scholarship in Ethnic and Indigenous Studies in education, this text could impact future directions of education research and practice regarding emancipatory, decolonizing curricula.

Simpson begins with the question, “How is it that Indigenous people, and their politics, have come to be known in particular ways?” (2014, p. 12). She investigates this question using three signposts which are woven throughout each chapter. Signpost 1 describes how membership is articulated through knowledge, identification, and beliefs, which comprise a collective archive. Simpson unpacks facets of membership which constitute legitimate—or illegitimate—claims to land and socio-political belonging in Kahnawâ:ke. Specifically, she identifies the grating of citizenship as a mechanism of settler colonialism, which disrupts Indigenous notions of membership to the land. In negotiating their own forms of membership and exclusion, Indigenous nations challenge the settler colonial states in which their sovereignty is nested.

Signpost 2 investigates the settler colonial states’ desire for land, which produces problems including gendered violence, crime, and substance dependency (2014, p. 156).

1 In keeping with the language used by Simpson throughout her book, I alternate my use of the terms “Indigenous” and “Indian,” as well as “Iroquois” and “Haudenosaunee.”
Simpson argues that these problems comprise a structure of settler colonialism because many of Kahnawà:ke’s difficulties directly result from conflicts with the U.S. and Canadian governments. For example, Simpson examines Indigenous experiences with detention at international borders. She reframes borders of settler states sites for the articulation of rights as opposed to sites of transgression, which connects to the policing of citizenship in Signpost 1. Simpson illustrates the physical and social violence acted upon the Mohawk of Kahnawà:ke in times of uprising and collective refusal using historical and contemporary narratives and archival research.

Signpost 3 demonstrates the burden placed on Indigenous nations like Kahnawà:ke to endlessly articulate their sovereignty. Simpson traces the historic and contemporary refusal of settler colonial notions of citizenship, politics, and land ownership. This clarifies the political motivation to refuse passports or other forms of recognition assigned or associated with settler colonial nations.

Among the strengths of Mohawk Interruptus is the strategic integration of Indigenous narratives, interviews, and documents. Including these artifacts and data firmly ground the audience in the context of Simpson’s work with lived experiences. This promotes reflection and knowledge construction centered around the lived experiences of the Kahnawa’kehró:non. Her use of artifacts also contributes to an overall feeling of a narrative or storytelling experience as opposed to other academic texts. Overall, this made the text more engaging and accessible, especially for an audience outside the field of Anthropology or Indigenous Studies.

Another strength of Simpson’s work is her disruption of prevailing approaches to constructing knowledge of Indigenous nations and histories. She argues that cultural revival (or compliance) might elevate the Kahnawa’kehró:non to a more tolerated status among settler colonial societies—and even other Indians. However, Kahnawà:ke’s steady commitment to political identity is often characterized as a detriment to cultural preservation. Because political activism does not serve the dominant polities, it is decried as cultural loss.

Historically, Kahnawà:ke has not figured into the North American university curricula. Simpson’s analysis of existing scholarship of Indigenous groups could inform university courses regarding methodology. This discussion invites critique of current approaches to ethnography and participatory research involving Indians. Additionally, this text has a lot to say to institutional mechanisms which control what kind of research is conducted—and, more importantly, published and circulated accessibly.

This book presents arguments and ideas represented in recent scholarship of Ethnic Studies and Social Justice Teaching at the K-12 level. The legacy of Indigenous and Ethnic Studies in schools is fraught with political conflict, cultural appropriation, and refusal to
imagine and accept Indigenous people as contemporary and future citizens. There is significant controversy around the content and availability of Ethnic and Indigenous Studies curricula in the United States (Sintos Coloma, 2018). Some argue that offering Ethnic Studies courses, which often provide historic and contemporary perspectives of Indigenous life across contexts, promotes knowledge that is harmful despite research which indicates the positive effects of such curricula (Dee & Penner, 2016; Hynds et al., 2011). Much of the struggle to implement these curricula is the result of strong ethnic community organization, including Indigenous groups. As such, *Mohawk Interruptus* is important for non-Indigenous scholars and practitioners in education who support decolonizing, inclusive curricula.

**References**


