A number of writers have provided quality, in-depth commentary regarding the Idle No More movement (#IdleNoMore), a contested term first coined in late 2012 and later used to describe public rallies, political demonstrations, academic-community dialogues, and direct action spawned largely by the conservative government of Canada arbitrarily pushing through legislation, without debate, to allow unfettered exploitation of the country’s natural resources (Alfred 2013; Coulthard 2013). The impetus for Idle No More relates to the fact that the Jobs, Growth, and Long-Term Prosperity Act (Bill C-38) and the Jobs and Growth Act (Bill C-45), both in the form of omnibus bills (laws covering diverse or unrelated topics), ran directly afoul of the Indigenous rights provision in Section 35 of the Constitution of Canada (1982). Among the legislative changes that took place with no consultation were modifications of forty-four laws protecting fish habitat and Native fisheries, and gutting of key legislation requiring environmental assessment over Canada’s sacred waterways. Indigenous peoples in Canada, along with many other Canadians, opposed the colonial state’s covert weakening of environmental oversight as well as the silencing of public commenting that lies at the heart of the new laws.

Glen Coulthard (2013) nicely lays out the relevant historical antecedents to Idle No More, seeds sowed decades prior as part of the land-based direct action occurring in such places as Goose Bay, Labrador, and Oka, Quebec.¹ In particular, Coulthard points to a 1980s warning by then leader of the Assembly of First Nations, George Erasmus, about the “violent political
action” that will be brought by the next generation of leaders should peaceful negotiation of Indigenous concerns prove elusive. While perhaps a threat meant primarily to intensify the context of the moment, this warning did raise the specter of an Indigenous resistance that was multigenerational in nature and that was unlikely to dissipate so long as Indigenous peoples’ lives were under the control of the settler colonial state.

**Tribally Oriented Indigenous Youth Activism in Canada**

Referring to an earlier era, Jeannette Armstrong articulates the impetus of Indigenous youth activism in 1970s North America through the words of the title character of her book of the same name, *Slash*: “It’s clear what we are suffering from is the effect of colonization” (221). In Slash’s era, a rights and interests agenda is fueled largely by the material inequities of the previous century and more, a welling up of indignation that prompts a search for equity in piecemeal fashion, via the teleology of fast-paced political progress and via an approach reliant on colonial governments to act in good faith. The journey of Slash and his contemporaries in the 1970s and 1980s becomes redundant in its failure to achieve even short-term gains. In time, Slash’s search for justice becomes one of seeking moral rightness through practices embedded in the ontological framework of recuperation and resumption, or as Wallace Coffey and Rebecca Tsosie (2001) might describe, through enacting cultural sovereignty.

In *Slash*, Armstrong narrates a story that makes clear that the search for recognition of First Nations lands from a bureaucracy that is heavily invested in the colonial hierarchy is severely limited. In speaking to this problem in the US context, Coffey and Tsosie (2001: 191) articulate an approach to sovereignty that marries issues concerning land and politics and that attends to “the cultural existence of an Indian nation with its own territory, identity, and history.” In other words, these authors argue that an existence governed by federal laws does not by default define the terms of that existence; rather, such a thing can be delineated only by “the moral vision that has always guided Indian nations in their collective existence as distinctive peoples” (191).

On many levels, Idle No More has proved to be an important moment in the politicizing of Native rights and environmental issues in Canada and internationally, evidenced by the network of solidarity that quickly arose around the movement. Beginning in late 2012, and through the spring of 2013, a number of university campuses in Canada held teach-ins and panel discussions, and several communities organized large gatherings across the
country. In the space between arose flash mobs in the form of Round Dances and other open forms of direct action. The teach-ins, in particular, provided an occasion for some of the country’s most well-known writers and thinkers to engage a broader public discussion regarding Section 35 rights while making important links to the eroding of democratic rights for all Canadians, as this concerns environmental changes contained within the two omnibus bills.

Such opportunities to educate are clearly important in the Canadian context given the ongoing failure of the public school curriculum to attend to the realities of Indigenous peoples’ long land tenure concerning what we understand as Turtle Island, never mind the full range of Indigenous existence in the precolonial era. What Idle No More also reveals is a thirst among Indigenous youth for a place-based pedagogy premised on learning from the land, in the manner of one’s Ancestors, as facilitated by Elders and community knowledge holders. This is an important legacy of the rallies and direct action spawned by Idle No More, for as Taiaiake Alfred (2013) points out, “many people are beginning to realize that the kind of movement we have been conducting under the banner of Idle No More is not sufficient in itself to decolonize this country or even to make meaningful change in the lives of people.”

As with the character Slash, many of the youth engaged by the Idle No More movement have found their way “on to the red road” by working with cultural guides in the form of Elders, traditional knowledge keepers, and women. Youth participation in Idle No More direct action events offered occasions to join in the intergenerational voice pushing back on what Elizabeth Cook-Lynn (2001) describes as settler theft and abuse of Native lands. But what specifically does this mean for Indigenous youth in settings where self-governing communities are more or less absent, namely, urban areas with large settler populations, sites of many of the Idle No More events? Over one-half of Indigenous youth are now raised off-reserve in Canada, and while there is no discounting the existence of distinct, networked urban Native communities in Canada’s large urban centers, such as Quebec City, Winnipeg, and Vancouver, and smaller cities like Owen Sound, Prince Albert, and Lethbridge, it should also be acknowledged that many urban Indigenous youth maintain deep connections to their home territories, to their First Nations, Métis, and Inuit identities. In some instances, as is the case with the Sliammon youngster Ta’Kaiya Blaney, urban Native youth are attuned to the critical analysis of the effects of colonial capitalism on their ancestral lands as this impacts their tribal communities.
Educational Threads to a Broader Movement

Even before the spawning of Idle No More, in communities across Canada could be seen cultural initiatives and educational dialogues that shone a light on the failure of the Canadian government over successive generations to appropriately deal with Indigenous communities on the topic of education. The political ramifications of restoring tribally-oriented systems of learning on Indigenous lands cannot be overstated, and such work is the focus of scores of Indigenous scholars today, including myself (Friedel 2011). An excellent example of this is Ryan Duplassie (2014: 300), who theorizes the Idle No More movement in terms of water flows, and in direct relation to the community of Grassy Narrows and its three-generation-long “public struggle to protect lands and waters, to restore the vitality of bodies, spirits, and local economies.” Prompted by Idle No More and the spirit of Treaty 3’s “as long as the water flows and the sun rises,” Duplassie and a colleague initiated a project whereby Grassy Narrows youth were invited to help build a trapper’s cabin on a local family’s trapline, in the process reoccupying place on the land while learning about the contentious history of resource development policies in the region, and their impact on navigable waters (and movement) for Grassy Narrows citizens. The notion of living with the land, rather than off of it, as described by Duplassie, is a shared cultural perspective across Indigenous Canada. Foundational to this thinking is the notion of reciprocity—that the land and waterways are givers of life and also of sovereignty—and that we are responsible for caring for their health. Through Idle No More and the activism that persists are likely to come many more inspiring collective efforts to improve teaching and learning, in keeping with the long-stated goals of Indigenous Elders, parents, and communities (Friedel et al. 2012).

The sort of resumptive pedagogy described above, happening on the ground, led by communities looking to resituate learning in place, and individuals seeking to foster critical analysis of the issues associated with unsustainable forms of economic development, is key to sustaining the broader politicizing and Indigenizing movement of which Idle No More is but one phase. With few exceptions, the educational work of Indigeneity and self-determination that envelops learners within the social relations associated with Indigenous places tends to happen primarily at the postsecondary level, such as at Dechinta in the Northwest Territories and Yellowhead Tribal College in central Alberta. For vast numbers of Indigenous youth in Canada's rural and urban areas, having opportunities to learn on the land in the manner of their Ancestors is reliant solely on the ability of one's family, or broader community, to provide a land-based experience within their own or some
other traditional territory. Often, such occasions are too few, or tend to lack intensity, meaning that the set of skills and knowledge that students can acquire is at best basic, and the impact of the learning at an embodied level quite minimal.

In addition to lack of learning opportunities, of deep concern are the cumulative impacts associated with ramped-up industrial development in provinces such as Alberta and how this stands to impede access to pedagogical practices that are congruent with land-based learning. The scope of development in recent decades has reduced access to traditional territories, wreaking significant damage to the lands, waters, wildlife, plant life, and so forth that are fundamental to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit ways of life. For some Indigenous peoples, the infringement is so severe that their citizens already have little chance to exercise their Indigenous and/or treaty rights meaningfully. A major implication of ongoing unfettered development is that it will compromise the ability of Indigenous youth to carry the broader movement into the future.

None of this is to say that Indigenous peoples have given up on public schooling as a core feature of a broader Indigenizing and politicizing movement. As my colleagues and I stated in an editorial celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the 1972 Indian Control of Indian Education policy paper (Friedel et al. 2012):

Then, as now, schooling policies and practices were a key focus for Indigenous leaders and communities across the country. A key criticism directed at governments of the day focused on schooling practices, the manner in which federal and provincial efforts had served to destroy Indigenous thought and ways of being as part of fulfilling the larger goals of assimilation (Chrisjohn and Young 1997). As just one instrument of a complex colonial project, Euro-Western educational systems were implicated in educating Native children as “low class labour” (Miller 1996), and for producing hegemony and enacting oppression through disrupting Indigenous practices of transmitting and renewing cultural knowledge. Indian Control of Indian Education represented an important call by local communities to take back responsibility for educating their own children, as stated emphatically by Native parents: “We want the behavior of our children to be shaped by those values which are most esteemed in our culture.” (National Indian Brotherhood [1972] 2001: 2)

The struggle for control over Indigenous elementary and secondary education in Canada is ongoing, recently highlighted by the furor over First Nations Control of First Nations Education (Bill C-33), tabled by the government of
Canada on April 10, 2014. Unlike the omnibus bills mentioned earlier, C-33 was a deal brokered between the leadership of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) and the federal government, later to be rejected by an AFN Special Chiefs Assembly that, in turning down the offer of $1.9 billion in educational funding, stated that they were following the advice of their own experts and citizens. At the core of First Nations refusal of the bill was a perception that the historical chronic underfunding of education would continue given the lack of a statutory guarantee of funding or predictable increases that would keep pace with the costs of delivering a quality education. Particularly problematic was that the bill failed to overtly acknowledge the right to education as an Indigenous or treaty right and, given unilateral federal oversight, too much control was being given up with respect to how First Nations children would be educated. The bill authorized the minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada to tie education to provincial regulation, making no mention of how schooling would come under the control of First Nations laws and values. In sum, the bill failed to acknowledge First Nations as governing bodies with jurisdiction over education. The experience of devolution had already shown Indigenous peoples that inherent responsibility and administrative delegation do not amount to the same thing.

Upon refusing C-33, the AFN Special Chiefs Assembly proposed in its place a process whereby the federal government would enter into an honorable process with First Nations, with provisions to engage diversity both regionally and locally, to embed education as the responsibility of First Nations in accordance with inherent Indigenous and treaty rights. The federal government responded by tabling the bill altogether. At the time of this writing, no new developments have occurred with respect to reviving or replacing the proposed legislation. In the interim, First Nation communities are encouraged by their chiefs, experts, and citizens to continue articulating/building their own educational reforms that will honor the land and their peoples’ cultural perspective.

**Resumptive Pedagogies as an Indigenizing and Politicizing Performance**

As a descendant of the Cree (nēhiyawēwin)-speaking Métis people of mâni-tow sâkahikanihk, Plains Cree for “god’s lake,” also known in Canada as Lac Ste. Anne, located in the boreal mixed-wood ecoregion of central Alberta, I am struck by the profound connections between the Northern Cree\(^6\) round dance and Métis, those reels and waltzes that combine with specific forms of Plains Indian dances to serve as their own unique and meaningful
expressions of place. While certainly there are discernible differences between the cultural practices of Northern Cree and Lac Ste. Anne Cree-Métis, the dance forms practiced by each can be interpreted as serving to honor lands that hold history, movement, and spirituality. Both the Northern Cree round dance and the Métis jig welcome all into what has been called a form of “social poetics” (Quick 2008), a performative understood to emerge in and through the context of land-based social interaction.

The round dance lies at the center of many Idle No More gatherings, described by Cree Elder John Cuthand (Kino-nda niimi Collective 2014: 24) as a dance given to a daughter by her mother’s spirit to help her grieve in a way that would provide peace in the spirit world, “that when this circle is made we the Ancestors will be dancing with you and we will be as one. The daughter returned and taught the people the Round Dance ceremony.” The winter round dance, or whikihtowin, is a ceremonial event held for purposes such as memorials, and also for honoring, celebrations, and so forth. In enacting such an event, community members are provided with a way to begin new initiatives, process grieving, undertake healing, give thanks, honor individuals, and generally engage in social interaction with family, friends, and strangers. Humor and patience are key premises under which the actual event unfolds, and recognition is paid throughout to the nonhuman world.

The memorial round dance, also called the Dance of the Ancestors, is structured around Cree notions of death, namely, the idea that our relationships with those who have gone before are as important as our relationships with relatives still here (including relatives of the nonhuman kind). It relies significantly on narratives handed down for generations concerning aurora borealis, or the Northern Lights, stories of how the people who passed on came back to dance with us, in this way ensuring that our relatives accompany us in ceremonies of initiation, mourning, and celebration. As with all Cree round dances, the large drum (or hand drums) in the middle represents the heartbeat of this larger collective community (community members and Ancestors, all in relation with nonhuman beings), and included in the activities is a pipe ceremony and feast (per the particular First Nations’ protocols). The practice of participants dancing together in a circle, hand in hand as one, up and down and in a clockwise direction, is an embodied and unifying experience meant to strengthen the existence of all. Such movement can be thought of as a form of decolonial healing, as described by Leanne Simpson (2011).

And so it is that Cree round dances are meant to serve as multipurpose events—a time to reinforce our bonds with the Ancestors, to strengthen connections to the community members still here, and to maintain good rela-
tions with the nonhuman world. In this way, the round dance connects the ritual-mythic world with the actual everyday world. This practice of invoking intergenerational, social, spiritual relationships, as reflected in the Dance of the Ancestors, offers us something for understanding what it means to engage learning focused on place and for understanding the links between long-standing cultural traditions and political activist events such as those associated with Idle No More.

In Cree narratives, land is associated with the core of who the Cree people are. In stories told by Cree Elders, land or place is the lens through which all relationships are understood—it is where the Cree language emerges from, where stories of life and death are held, and it is the context from which important teachings are derived. Thinking of place as ancestral, and as a lived expression of relationship with land, we can understand ceremonies such as the round dance as a way to maintain and strengthen our relationships across multiple cosmogonies. Given that the round dance proved to be a major feature of Idle No More direct action, what then should we make of the flash mob versions as witnessed in late 2012 and early 2013 in the streets of Canada’s major western cities? And what might this teach us about the nature and role of resumptive pedagogies going forward?

In Alberta, as elsewhere in Canada, and in fact everywhere that the tenets of colonial capital accumulation remains the only focus of governing bodies, industrial development has accelerated greatly since the 1940s. A direct product of this development has been the destruction of Indigenous peoples’ ancestral homelands. Sylvia McAdam, one of four founders of Idle No More, notes in a *Windspeaker* article on March 25, 2013, “The way we see it, we’re just going to keep moving on until our goal of Indigenous sovereignty and the protection of land and water is in place.” While McAdam herself is not Indigenous, she and three other First Nations activists, Sheelah McLean, Nina Wilson, and Jessica Gordon, explicitly focus resistance on the spatial dimensions of destruction. In so doing, these women highlight for the benefit of all Canadians the long-standing ethic of Indigenous place-based relationality—the notion that the right way to walk involves maintaining good relations among people, between people and the land, and between people and those institutions inherently bestowed with governing powers.

The critical pedagogy lying at the heart of Idle No More, a conscientization of sorts as theorized by Paulo Freire (1972), one enacted by engaging in formal or informal gatherings, also reflects certain elements of traditional Cree education. In traditional Cree pedagogy, teaching and learning rely on the idea that if children ask, then they are ready to know. In other words, just as youth are taught the skills and knowledge associated with the position of
oskâpêwis—or “Elder’s helper”—through the planning and carrying out of traditional ceremonies, Native youth who are active in organizing and participating in large direct action events such as Idle No More are given opportunities to learn firsthand, alongside knowledge holders, Elders, and women leaders, the nuanced nature of Indigenous resurgence (Alfred and Corntassel 2005). Such opportunities, described here as a resumptive pedagogy, furnish youth with what they rarely encounter in public schooling—forms of cultural learning that have not been depoliticized so as to be appetizing to a Canadian body politic. The importance of addressing politics from a spiritual perspective is something Alfred (2013) echoes: “Now is the time to put ourselves back on our lands spiritually and physically and to shift our support away from the Indian Act system and to start energizing the restoration of our own governments.”

In Alberta, flash mob round dances were fueled by the resistance of Indigenous peoples in alliance with grassroots Canadians outraged at the colonial-capitalist expansion facilitated through the passage of the two omnibus bills. Coordinated and articulated through massive online and social media coverage, the round dances were important cultural and political expressions of dissent that, very often, had been organized by Indigenous youth. The performative features of the resistance, specifically in the form of a place-based and Indigenizing ethic of the round dance, featuring movement and song in traditional cultural form, proved to be an effective mix of culture and politics. Not to be lost is that this performance has links to Indigenous peoples’ historical resistance, to past organized discontent and cultural persistence in the face of countless arbitrary enactments of colonial state laws seeking to undermine Indigenous sovereignty.

The deep connections between Idle No More gatherings and ancient practices such as the round dance, ceremonies that have ensured Cree peoples prosperity for time immemorial, are important for us to understand in a pedagogical sense. As Tanya Kappo (Kappo and King 2014: 70) recounts of attending a West Edmonton Mall flash mob round dance, “[I]t somehow brought to life what I had personally hoped the Movement would address. Those issues were first, our sense of ourselves and communities, and second, our existence in the country.” Being couched in an epistemological schema that situates Cree people in conjoined ways within an all-embracing galaxy of interdependent relations—inclusive of land, animals, plants; past, present, and future generations; and other people and communities—the flash mob round dance brings together, rather than separates, the generations, as youth protests often do, in the process reuniting people in the defense of places-as-relationship. 
Projecting the Pedagogical Movement into the Future

For as much promise as we have witnessed through Idle No More, cultural and political activism of this nature is likely only to accelerate given the awakening of a burgeoning Indigenous youth population in Canada, and owing to continued assaults on Indigenous sovereignty and peoplehood by the Canadian government. At the time of this writing (March 2015), organizing is again happening across the country, including a March 14, 2015, Day of Action against the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2015 (Bill C-51). The latest conservative government anti-democracy bill will increase surveillance powers for the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and facilitate the ease with which the Canadian government can eliminate any “activity that undermines the sovereignty, security or territorial integrity of Canada.” As in previous eras of heightened Indigenous action, Indigenous peoples in Canada will be targeted for defending their territories from the devastation associated with further unauthorized, destructive industrial development. The bill itself defines terrorism as any activity seen to interfere “with the capability of the government of Canada in relation to . . . the economic or financial stability of Canada.” The benefit of Idle No More, in addition to its support of cultural teaching, is that it has now brought together allies in the form of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit activists, environmentalists, academics, civil liberties experts, artists, scientists, and journalists, all interested in defending land rights and protecting democratic principles. What is different from 2013 is that the legislation at the heart of the current protest will subject all who participate to the likelihood of harassment, arrest, and jailing given the suspension of the rights, freedoms, and liberties on which Canadian democracy had until now rested. As the grand chief of the AFN states, the potential implications for Indigenous peoples cannot be underestimated: “Who defines lawful protest? I don’t even like the word protest. A lot of what we do is political activism” (CBC News 2015: at 2:55).

Revisiting Armstrong’s novel once more, the options for young Slash were posited as selling out or fighting to the point of death. Yet by the novel’s end it is clear these are not the only choices available to Indigenous youth. A movement thought more broadly, as guided by cultural leaders, Elders, women, and youth themselves, and one that operationalizes Indigenous rights to land and governance practices, poses far and away the most fundamental of challenges to the territorialization of the colonial state. Expressions of cultural sovereignty and political autonomy, tied to being on the land, including in places imbued with sacred and cultural histories, dot Canada’s past back to the earliest days of colonial rule. What has changed about
The occasion of Idle No More, direct action kindled by women to challenge reckless economic development and the silencing of community
voices, stoked by a growing population of young Indigenous people intent on reclaiming relationships to their home territories, offers a key moment for considering what this teaches us about advancing Indigenous place-based pedagogy in formal and informal contexts. Such learning, happening in contexts of direct action, should not be overlooked.

Conclusion

Understanding Indigenous youth involvement in land-based direct action as far back as the 1970s and 1980s is key if we are adequately to interpret the importance of youth engagement in Idle No More’s flaring in late 2012. For Indigenous youth for whom the discourse constructing them remains severely deficient, tied to ancient stereotypical myths of the noble/ignoble savage, needed are concepts that can elucidate the fully nuanced nature of their present-day activism. The clarifying lens of cultural sovereignty (Coffey and Tsosie 2001) is one such concept.

In highlighting the culturally sovereign practices associated with Idle No More as fundamental to a resumptive pedagogy, interlaced by cultural and political activism, we are witness to teaching and learning methods that do not seek to engage Indigenous youth for reasons of their radicalization but for how this prepares them for making connections to a long history of asserting rights and fulfilling responsibilities, as these are associated with legacies of precolonial epistemologies. Much more than a movement whose time has come, Idle No More encompasses an iterative activism and wholly educative endeavor, such moments as these making up the broader living out of an Indigenized sovereignty, one deeply tied to lived experience across multiple eras, oriented to past Indigenous resistance to the unfolding of the settler colonial enterprise, and premised on a collective memory that is recuporative, intergenerational, and innately political.

Notes

1 See also Simpson 2013, which situates Idle No More in the context of four hundred years of Indigenous peoples’ resistance in defense of land, culture, nationhood, and languages.
2 Ta’Kaiya speaks for First Nations Youth about action for the environment: www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvdlqKeDQdo.
3 See, e.g., the story of Shannen Koostachin, a youth education advocate from the Attawapiskat First Nation, who had a dream for a safe school that would offer culturally based education for First Nations children and youths: www.fncaringsociety.ca/shannens-dream.
The term *resumptive* refers to the important historical notion that in “the early 1970s, Aboriginal Peoples and organizations began to mobilize politically. Through their efforts, they regained the strength and political power necessary for resuming control over their lives,” including pedagogy (Michell et al. 2008).

For Dechinta Bush University, see dechinta.ca/; for Yellowhead Tribal College, see www.ytced.ab.ca/.

Or Bush Cree, as described by Cora Weber-Pillwax (2001).

Also called Tea Dance, or Ghost Dance, as described by Weber-Pillwax (2001).

References


