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As We Have Always Done

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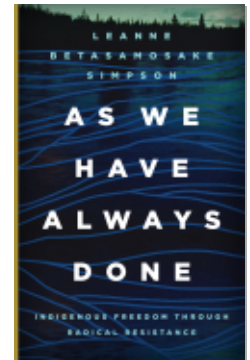
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FIVE

NISHNAABEG ANTICAPITALISM

IN EARLY 2013, author, social activist, and filmmaker Naomi Klein, known for her political criticism of corporate globalization and capitalism through her activism and her international best sellers *No Logo* and *The Shock Doctrine*, e-mailed me and asked if she could interview me for what would become a *New York Times* best seller, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. And so, on an icy February morning, I drove the same section of the 401 that inspired “I Am Not a Nation-State” in the introduction to meet her in the Toronto neighborhood of Roncesvalles.

I was nervous. Naomi Klein was a big deal, and I wasn’t sure why she wanted to interview me. I knew she had close ties to other Indigenous activists and writers, including the late long-time Secwepemc activist, leader, and writer Art Manual and Lubicon Cree activist and organizer Melina Laboucan-Massimo; I was unsure what I could possibly add to her research. I went because she lives in my territory, because her work is smart and widely read—more widely read and considered than any works by Indigenous peoples, particularly Indigenous women. I went

because not very many people reach out to me in the way that she did.

We met in a coffee shop. I remember both of us being nervous. She was a little bit late because she had slipped on an icy sidewalk. I remember wishing that I had dressed better. She brought her copy of *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, which was covered in colored sticky tabs. She had read the book, *really* read the book. I wished I had reread it, so I could remember what I had written. I was afraid she thought that I might be smarter than I was in real life.

Naomi and I talked for a few hours in a conversation guided by her questions. She recorded the interview on her iPhone and had offered to transcribe it and publish it in a manner that suited us both, and then to use snippets in her book. The interview has now been blogged and reblogged in a variety of places.¹ The significance of this in my own thinking is that this is when I began to understand the importance of critiquing and analyzing capitalism from within Indigenous thought, from within grounded normativity or Nishnaabewin, from within Nishnaabeg intelligence. I've always shied away from taking capitalism on in my work because I have always felt that I haven't spent enough time reading, thinking, and analyzing Marx—that I should leave the analysis of capitalism, its role in dispossession, and its impact on me as an Indigenous woman to others more qualified to do so. I didn't feel qualified to speak back to capitalism as an Indigenous woman. Once I recognized that bit of cognitive imperialism in myself, it became just the thing I knew I had to speak back to. And so I've changed my mind. I think it is way too important a conversation not to have within the Nishnaabeg nation in particular and within the broader Indigenous nation-building movement, even if it is difficult. Indigenous peoples have extremely rich anticapitalist practices in our own histories and current realities. I think it is important that we continue the work of our Ancestors and our elders in critiquing and analyzing capitalism, how it drives dispossession, and its impacts on us from our own perspectives. Indigenous peoples in my mind have more expertise in anticapitalism and how that system works than any other

group of people on the planet. We have thousands and thousands of years of experience building and living in societies outside of global capitalism. We have hundreds of years of direct experience with the absolute destruction of capitalism. We have seen its apocalyptic devastation on our lands and plant and animal relations. This in no way diminishes the contributions of other anticapitalism theorists, thinkers, and writers; rather, I think it adds the beginnings of a critical reframing of the critique, one that is centered within grounded normativity.²

Naomi wanted to talk about extractivism, what she describes in her book as a “nonreciprocal, dominance-based relationship with the earth, one of profound taking. It is the opposite of stewardship, which involves taking but also taking care that regeneration and future life continue.”³ Extractivism wasn’t something I had thought a lot about, but the conversation unfolded as follows.⁴

NAOMI KLEIN: Let’s start with what has brought so much Indigenous resistance to a head in recent months. With the tar sands expansion, and all the pipelines, and the Harper government’s race to dig up huge tracts of the north, does it feel like we’re in some kind of final colonial pillage? Or is this more of a continuation of what Canada has always been about?

LEANNE SIMPSON: Over the past four hundred years, there has never been a time when indigenous peoples were not resisting colonialism. Idle No More is the latest—visible to the mainstream—resistance and it is part of an ongoing historical and contemporary push to protect our lands, our cultures, our nationhoods, and our languages. To me, it feels like there has been an intensification of colonial pillage, or that’s what the Harper government is preparing for—the hyper-extraction of natural resources on indigenous lands. But really, every single Canadian government has placed that kind of thinking at its core when it comes to indigenous peoples.

Indigenous peoples have lived through environmental

collapse on local and regional levels since the beginning of colonialism—the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway, the extermination of the buffalo in Cree and Blackfoot territories and the extinction of salmon in Lake Ontario—these were unnecessary and devastating. At the same time, I know there are a lot of people within the indigenous community that are giving the economy, this system, ten more years, twenty more years, that are saying “Yeah, we’re going to see the collapse of this in our lifetimes.”

Our elders have been warning us about this for generations now—they saw the unsustainability of settler society immediately. Societies based on conquest cannot be sustained, so yes, I do think we’re getting closer to that breaking point for sure. We’re running out of time. We’re losing the opportunity to turn this thing around. We don’t have time for this massive slow transformation into something that’s sustainable and alternative. I do feel like I’m getting pushed up against the wall. Maybe my ancestors felt that two hundred years ago or four hundred years ago. But I don’t think it matters. I think that the impetus to act and to change and to transform, for me, exists whether or not this is the end of the world. If a river is threatened, it’s the end of the world for those fish. It’s been the end of the world for somebody all along. And I think the sadness and the trauma of that is reason enough for me to act.

NAOMI: Let’s talk about extraction because it strikes me that if there is one word that encapsulates the dominant economic vision, that is it. The Harper government sees its role as facilitating the extraction of natural wealth from the ground and into the market. They are not interested in added value. They’ve decimated the manufacturing sector because of the high dollar. They don’t care, because they look north and they see lots more pristine territory that they can rip up.

And of course that's why they're so frantic about both the environmental movement and First Nations rights because those are the barriers to their economic vision. But extraction isn't just about mining and drilling, it's a mindset—it's an approach to nature, to ideas, to people. What does it mean to you?

LEANNE: Extraction and assimilation go together. Colonialism and capitalism are based on extracting and assimilating. My land is seen as a resource. My relatives in the plant and animal worlds are seen as resources. My culture and knowledge is a resource. My body is a resource and my children are a resource because they are the potential to grow, maintain, and uphold the extraction-assimilation system. The act of extraction removes all of the relationships that give whatever is being extracted meaning. Extracting is taking. Actually, extracting is stealing—it is taking without consent, without thought, care or even knowledge of the impacts that extraction has on the other living things in that environment. That's always been a part of colonialism and conquest. Colonialism has always extracted the indigenous—extraction of indigenous knowledge, indigenous women, indigenous peoples.

NAOMI: Children from parents.

LEANNE: Children from parents. Children from families. Children from the land. Children from our political system and our system of governance. Children—our most precious gift. In this kind of thinking, every part of our culture that is seemingly useful to the extractivist mindset gets extracted. The canoe, the kayak, any technology that we had that was useful was extracted and assimilated into the culture of the settlers without regard for the people and the knowledge that created it. . . .

The alternative to extractivism is deep reciprocity. It's respect, it's relationship, it's responsibility, and it's local.⁵

As I drove home after the interview, and in the editing process that followed, I could see why Naomi was focusing on extractivism as a narrative that could open up a conversation with Canadians and spark mass movement on climate change without bringing up capitalism and the backlash that entails, but the more I thought about extractivism as a concept, it didn't explain what had happened to my people and to me. Stewardship as an alternative was too simplistic a concept to describe the relationship of Nishnaabeg with land. The more I thought about extractivism, the more important it became to name capitalism, particularly in the context of radical resurgence. I was recently reminded of this by Nipissing elder Glenna Beaucage in Ryan McMahon's Redman Laughing podcast season on reconciliation, because she names it, and she remembers an old man, or an elder, naming it. She says:

When the treaty came, it turned the word creation into resources, and resources are to be exploited. To me creation is to be respected, but when we say resources, now we can exploit them. We got mixed up. I heard an old man tell me we've become capitalists. Even with our fishing and hunting we've become capitalist. We see money.⁶

Later on in that same conversation, another Nipissing elder talks about how the education system in Ontario is designed to move our people into the middle class, away from Nishnaabewin. Like these elders, I can't see or think of a system that is more counter to Nishnaabeg thought than capitalism, and over the past two decades I have heard elders and land users from many different Indigenous nations reiterate this, and it is part of the elder's analysis and thinking we ignore. We hold a collective apathy around critiquing, organizing, and creating alternatives, despite the fact that Nishnaabeg people and our society are the alternative—we lived without capitalism for centuries. There is an assumption that socialism and communism are white and that Indigenous peoples don't have this kind of thinking. To me, the opposite is true. Watching hunters and ricers harvest and live is the epitome

of not just anticapitalism but societies where consent, empathy, caring, sharing, and individual self-determination are centered.

My Ancestors didn't accumulate capital, they accumulated networks of meaningful, deep, fluid, intimate collective and individual relationships of trust. In times of hardship, we did not rely to any great degree on accumulated capital or individualism but on the strength of our relationships with others. The Michi Saagiig oral tradition has within it stories of Wendat and Rotinonhseshá:ka /Haudenosaunee coming to us and asking to hunt or farm in our territory during times of famine. Our grounded normativity compelled us to assist our neighbors if we were able. We also have a series of embedded practices that redistribute wealth within the community. Harvests are distributed in community to our most vulnerable members—those who cannot harvest for themselves. Many of our ceremonial practices include a giveaway component where goods are distributed among participants. Gift giving is part of our diplomacy and designed to reinforce and nurture relationships. In daily life, greed, or the accumulation of capital, was seen as an assault against the collective because it offended the spirits of the plant and animal nations that made up our peopled cosmos, and therefore put Nishnaabeg at risk. “Capital” in our reality isn't capital. We have no such thing as capital. We have relatives. We have clans. We have treaty partners. We do not have resources or capital. Resources and capital, in fact, are fundamental mistakes within Nishnaabeg thought, as Glenna Beaucage points out, and ones that come with serious consequences—not in a colonial superstitious way but in the way we have already seen: the collapse of local ecosystems, the loss of prairies and wild rice, the loss of salmon, eels, caribou, the loss of our weather.

Another mistake is the idea of excess. There are lots of Nishnaabeg stories about the problems with excess. Recall the Deer clan story in chapter 4. When the Nishnaabeg killed an excess of deer, the deer left the territory, to the point where today we have an abundance of deer in my territory but very few Deer clan people, and this reminds us of that imbalance. Medicine people often look for excess and imbalance in a person's life when they

look for and treat root causes of illness and disease. Going back, even one generation in my family, I see a way of life that was careful, frugal, full of making and self-sufficiency, and one that frowned upon waste, surplus, and overindulgence. Older members of our communities will often comment on this, particularly with regards to my generation and our children and the sea of things they are growing up in. It concerns them. It worries them. They see it as a problem with the way we are living.

On one hand, for Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg living Nishnaabewin, material wealth simply didn't make sense, because we never settled in one place. We were constantly moving throughout our territory in a deliberate way, carrying and making our belongings as we went. Having a lot of stuff made life more difficult on a practical level. On an ethical level, it was an indication of imbalance within the larger system of life. When Nishnaabeg are historicized by settler colonial thought as "less technologically developed," there is an assumption that we weren't capitalists because we couldn't be—we didn't have the wisdom or the technology to accumulate capital, until the Europeans arrived and the fur trade happened. This is incorrect. We certainly had the technology and the wisdom to develop this kind of economy, or rather we had the ethics and knowledge within grounded normativity to *not develop* this system, because to do so would have violated our fundamental values and ethics regarding how we relate to each other and the natural world. We chose not to, repeatedly, over our history.

Similarly, we don't have this idea of private property or "the commons." We practice life over a territory with boundaries that were overlapping areas of increased Indigenous presence, maintained by more intense ceremonial and diplomatic relationship, not necessarily by police, armies, and violence, although under great threat we mobilized to protect what was meaningful to us. Our authority was grounded and confined to our own body and the relationships that make up our body, not as a mechanism for controlling other bodies or mechanisms of production but as structures and practices that are the very practices of Nishnaabeg life. We have stories warning us of the

perils of profit—gain achieved not through hard work within grounded normativity but gain, benefit, and advantage achieved in disproportion to effort and skill or exploitation. Nanabush is the most obvious example of all of this. He experiments with capitalist modes of production when he tries to get various beings—skunks, ducks, geese, for example—to do the hard work of life for his own personal gain and accumulation. He tries in various stories to outsource the work of feeding himself, and disaster ensues. There are stories where he is greedy; he experiments with capital accumulation, and disaster ensues. There are stories of Nanabush manipulating animals to create competitive markets for his goods and services, and again disaster ensues. There are stories where Nanabush engages in a host of exploitive and extractivist practices at the expense of plants, animals, or the Nishnaabeg, and this results in his demise. His preference in these stories is to employ various beings of creation in service to him, while he lounges around and enjoys the profit of this unequal labor. He is categorically met with his demise every time, and eventually he learns his lesson.⁷ One of his brothers, however, does not. He insists that the community feed him by hunting, fishing, and gathering on his behalf. We do, because we are kind, empathic, and decent people. We give him time to work his shit out. We try to bring him back into the fold by encouraging him to be a self-determining part of the collective by engaging in some practice, *any* practice really. Nanabush's other brother, in a similar circumstance, becomes an artist as a way of contributing and living in our nation and is celebrated for his contribution. But this brother, the lazy one, doesn't. Eventually, the nation can no longer carry him, and he withers away and dies. His death is a transformation, and he becomes the moss on the rocks that you see in our territory.⁸ Moss reminds us. Moss, like pine trees, or maple trees, or geese, is an algorithm, a practice for solving a problem, and all of these Nishnaabeg algorithms are profoundly anticapitalist at their core. To me, Nanabush embodies anticapitalism because the system of grounded normativity within which he exists demands nothing less. Capitalism cannot exist within grounded normativity.

I wrote in *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* that Nishnaabeg society is a society of makers, rather than a society of consumers. This is the foundation of our self-determination and freedom —producing everything we need in our families within grounded normativity within a network of caring and sharing. We made our food, our clothes, our homes. We made our education system, our health care system, our political system. We made technology and infrastructure and the systems of ethics that governed its use. We made our social services, our communication system, our histories, literatures, and art. We didn't just control our means of production, we lived embedded in a network of humans and nonhumans that were made up of only producers. In terms of resurgence, this holds a lot of hope for me in creating alternative economies and ways of living. Education cannot just be about shifting our children into the urban middle class. Resurgent education must be about turning our children inwards toward Nishnaabewin making.

Too often, in my experience, Indigenous peoples in Canada start from the place that global capitalism is permanent and our survival depends upon our ability to work within it. The poverty facing Indigenous communities is an imposed poverty, the result of being a target of extractivism for generations now. Solutions to social issues like housing, health care, and clean drinking water that divorce the cause (dispossessive capitalist exploitation under settler colonialism) from the effect (poverty) serve settler colonial interests, not Indigenous ones, by placing Indigenous peoples in a never-ending cycle of victimhood, and Canadians in a never-ending cycle of self-congratulatory saviorhood, while we both reinforce the structure of settler colonialism that set the terms for exploitation in the first place. Organizing around issues of poverty and social conditions in urban and reserve communities as a critical core of the project of resurgence, as a political issue, breaks this cycle. It also has the potential to build collectives of individuals taking on the responsibilities of the nation, while aligning themselves with those who face the greatest struggle and carry the greatest burden of settler colonialism. The division between reserve and city is an artificial co-

lonial division. We are all related, and this is all Indigenous land. Strengthening reserve-urban relationships strengthens nations, and it has the potential to build movement.

Throughout my adult life, I've spent time on traplines and hunting territories in northern Ontario and in Manitoba. These trappers were inevitably dealing with the logging industry clear-cutting their traplines. Canada and the provinces have from their legal perspective successfully dispossessed Nishnaabeg people of our territories through a series of settler colonial processes. These settler colonial processes—treaty making, policy making, consultation, impact assessments, and the court system—provide them with the ethical justification to clear-cut a particular trapline, removing another Nishnaabeg family from the land and effectively destroying their grounded normativity, destroying remnants of an Nishnaabeg economy, plant and animal habitat, medicines, ceremonial grounds, burial grounds, hunting places, libraries of knowledge, and networks of relationships, because it is in the best interest of Canadians to do so. Often Nishnaabeg people will participate in all the processes settler colonialism sets up for us to have a voice in this, except the processes are set up to reinforce settler colonialism, not disrupt it. Oftentimes this results in blockades, as it has in Grassy Narrows, with people now having blocked a logging road for over a decade. To me, this is a clear indication that land users do not see this situation as inevitable. On a local level, individual families are living this way of life, in some cases choosing a lower standard of living and to not move to the city, to live Nishnaabewin. Resistance to capitalism isn't futile, it's the way out.

It is critical that this generation inspires and creates the next generation of Indigenous peoples that can think and live inside of their own intelligence systems more deeply than my generation. I worry we're not doing that. I think resurgence must be centered on nation-based, diverse, and unique Indigenous thought systems that house Indigenous intelligence. This is our source and our seed. We cannot be Indigenous without it, and these systems have been under assault for over four centuries. This is a political issue, an education issue, and a mobilization

issue. Just as the Nipissing elder reminded us, the goal of radical resurgent education and mobilization cannot be the proletarianization of our people. This is not the new buffalo. The massive shift of Indigenous peoples into the urban wage economy and the middle class cannot be the solution to dispossession, because this consolidates dispossession. We cannot build nations without people, and we cannot build Indigenous nations without people who house and practice Indigenous thought and process, and we also cannot build sustainable Indigenous nations while replicating gender violence. In the next three chapters, I make the case for the dismantling of heteropatriarchy as a core project of the Radical Resurgence Project.