

REVIEW ARTICLE  
SHUBHRA MURARKA<sup>1</sup>

Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Border of Settler States*, Durham NC: Duke University Press 2014. 280 pp. ISBN electronic 978-0-8223-7678-1

Audra Simpson's (Mohawk of Kahnawà:ke) *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Border of Settler States* has had clear effects on anthropology and generally the social sciences. The term *refusal*, as theorized in her book, has now made its way into everyday conversations amongst anthropologists. Simpson not only won multiple awards for her book, including the Best First Book award, but has also greatly influenced the theoretical underpinnings of other prominent, award-winning books in the field, including Savannah Shange's *Progressive Dystopia: Abolition, Antiracism, + Schooling in San Francisco* (2019) which won the Gregory Bateson Book Prize from the Society for Cultural Anthropology; Juno Salazar Parreñas's *Decolonizing Extinction: The Work of Care in Orangutan Rehabilitation* (2019), which won the Rosaldo Prize from the Association of Feminist Anthropology; and Saiba Varma's *The Occupied Clinic: Militarism and Care in Kashmir* (2020), which won the Edie Turner First Book Prize in Ethnographic Writing awarded by the American Anthropological Association, to name just a few. It is clear that Simpson's writings have been key to contributions made in critical race theory, Indigenous studies, and decolonial and feminist anthropology.

Simpson, a political anthropologist at Columbia University, considers how the structures of settler colonialism continue to shape the everyday lives of the Mohawk people. She shows how settler-colonialism forced the Mohawk nation to contend with issues of membership, which have led to measures of blood quantum and have gendered implications. She also shows how law and treaties granting protection have been ignored and how the settler state continues to infringe on Indigenous sovereignty. Simpson argues that the fear and anxiety of disappearance is alive and real and motivates legislative decisions over membership. She argues that by refusing Canadian citizenship, the Mohawk people are engaging in a politics of refusal that forces the settler

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<sup>1</sup> PhD student in Anthropology at University of California at San Diego. E-mail: [smurarka@ucsd.edu](mailto:smurarka@ucsd.edu). ORCID ID/account: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8655-8026>

apparatus to recognize Mohawk sovereignty. Although this leads to fraught border crossings, those who refuse to carry Canadian passports (and therefore pass as Canadian citizens) are refusing to be absorbed into the settler-colonial state.

In Chapter 1, Simpson lays out her argument and relevant context. She poses the question ‘What does it mean to refuse a passport – what some consider to be a gift or a right, the freedom of mobility and residency?’ This question reflects many of the issues that Simpson explores in her book: citizenship, refusal, border crossings, and the (internal and external) conflicts imposed by settler-colonial nation states. In this chapter, she establishes that colonialism continues to exist in the form of settler-colonialism, countering those who may believe that Canada and the United States are either postcolonial nation states, valorising European North American sovereignty and ignoring the struggles and colonisation of Indigenous peoples, or that the settler-colonial project is complete and the Indigenous population has been ‘successfully’ eliminated through either genocide or assimilation. Having established the context and theory of settler-colonialism, Simpson sets out how it continues to actively affect Indigenous lives. She makes three claims: 1) that nested sovereignty is possible, and the Mohawk people can be part of a sovereign Mohawk nation as nationals, as well as have rights and protections under the Canadian settler nation state; 2) that refusal is an alternative to recognition, in which the act of refusal forces and upholds the recognition of Mohawk political sovereignty; and 3) that anthropology needs to reorient its relationship with Indigenous studies. Simpson reminds us that Canada and the United States only exist as nation states due to Indigenous dispossession and that existing tribal nations and tribal territories are still managed by settlers and treated as wards of the state. She asks how it is possible to be a nation when one is slowly losing land and the right to nation and sovereignty is dictated by a foreign, settler-colonial government.

In Chapter 2, Simpson discusses issues of membership among the Mohawk nation. She shows how settler-colonialism has forced the very existence of these issues and continues to shape the anxieties and conflicts that are present in questions of membership. Although in the past the Mohawk nation was open to outsiders, under the contemporary settler state questions of membership are laden with ethical and moral implications that question ideas of identity, selfhood and nationhood. Who is recognized as a Mohawk? Who has the right to *be* recognized as a Mohawk? Kinship relationships become political. Simpson shows how territorial history shapes these questions. She argues the loss of land over time has led to the fear and anxiety of

disappearing, which is reflected in questions of membership. Defining oneself has become the only way to defend and articulate oneself in the face of settler-colonial dispossession.

In the following two chapters, Simpson subjects the discipline of anthropology to scrutiny. In Chapter 3, she problematizes how history and anthropology have discussed Iroquois people. Implicit in her discussion is how the Western gaze pervades anthropology in its methods, inquiries and conclusions. Anthropological writing seeks to make its work legible to outsiders—the White anthropologist outsider. These works, which constitute a body of knowledge on a group of people and are articulated as canonical works by outsiders, have material impacts on determining legal presence and claims to land.

In Chapter 4, she argues that anthropology's unit of analysis is difference, and that we need to move away from that. She argues that the voices of the people must be central and lives out her argument in the sheer act of writing this book. Simpson shows how the unit of difference is complicit in settler-colonialism by fetishizing Indigenous peoples and contributing to their elimination. By reminding us that 'culture' is defined by difference, Simpson is invoking the colonial history of anthropology and the reminder that difference was how colonial powers justified their imperial project by painting subaltern populations as uncivilized and barbaric. She points out that to be seen as civilized is the death of difference. Political recognition and citizenship are offered when the group is seen as being 'civilized enough'—code for assimilated enough. Decentering difference in anthropology means decentering the (settler) colonial gaze—all the more important given that the appeal of difference continues to dominate anthropology.

Chapter 5 focuses on the issue of borders and border crossings. Simpson argues that border crossings are not necessarily transgressive, as framed in Chicano studies, but rather an articulation of sovereignty and rights. The international border between Canada and the United States runs through Mohawk territory. According to the Jay treaty of 1794, Mohawk people have the right to cross the border freely and transport commercial goods to sell to other members of the tribal nation. However, as Simpson shows, this is not respected but flagrantly ignored through tense border crossings, questionings and detention at borders, the scepticism of border agents presented with Haudenosaunee passports, and the portrayal of Mohawk people as smugglers, despite having the right to transport commercial goods across the international border. Simpson shows how the racialization of minoritized identities has undermined the struggle for sovereignty. She also argues that the 'gift' of citizenship is yet another imposition

and assimilation tactic by a foreign settler government. Citizenship is another way to dismiss the rights of Indian tribal nations and absorb them as citizens of the settler state. She also articulates the idea of ‘feeling’ citizenship vs. citizenship of convenience.

Chapter 6 takes up the issue of gender and the disproportionate burden placed on Native women within the context of settler-colonial dispossession. She discusses the disproportionate violence Native women face and the conflation of Native female bodies with land. She also discusses membership issues and how Native women are dispossessed of their membership and rights when they marry outside the tribe, while white women gain status through marriage. This shows how membership questions are not only questions of who is included, but also of who is excluded, of which Native women bear the brunt. This, too, reflects the fear of settler-colonial dispossession—fear that the White man carrying membership rights would lead to further dispossession of land.

Each chapter in this book is densely packed with information, reiterating and reviewing many of the same ideas in multiple chapters. The reading of this text can feel repetitive, disruptive and nonlinear. While my first instinct was somewhat critical, the style of writing reflects the issues discussed. Seemingly reflecting Simpson’s own internal thought processes and struggles, the iterative and repetitive style of writing reflects the urgency of these issues and shows how they pervade and are linked in several aspects of everyday life. The work reflects the disruption of settler-colonialism for tribal nations. All the chapters discuss citizenship, tribal sovereignty and the effects of colonialism. Simpson often repeats herself, with chapters and arguments overlapping, making it seem that no chapter is making one specific argument. On the contrary, they are all simultaneously making the same arguments, while never focusing on just one argument within one discrete chapter. They thereby subvert the typical model of the ethnography.

While not explicitly an autoethnography, *Mohawk Interruptus* has an autoethnographic feel. A member of the Mohawk community herself, Simpson’s writings can feel as though they simultaneously reflect her own struggles as well as her community’s. In a typical (auto)ethnography, the anthropologist analyses and reflects on the ‘other’. For Simpson, her research and analysis will thus be more self-reflective—and even demand it—as her own histories and experiences are inextricably linked to her research. In studying her community, she is also

studying herself. This leads to powerful moments in which Simpsons' own reckonings around identity and membership come into tension with her interlocuters'.

Simpson's contributions are many. She argues that settler-colonialism still exists, countering settler-nativist fantasies of claims to land. She shows how settler structures continue to disrupt and affect everyday Indigenous life. Simpson also disrupts the idea of citizenship as a political good or 'gift' by arguing that bestowed citizenship is a way to undermine tribal sovereignty and is yet another tactic to continue Indigenous dispossession. She problematizes the anthropological tradition, including the canon and methods that uphold difference as the unit of analysis. She addresses these issues by offering an Indigenous mode of anthropology—a politics of refusal.

As a reader, I would have liked more 'thick description' and less repetition; however, I also recognize and respect the fact that these were intentional, political decisions. This discomfort and desire for more is intentional, and one that we, as readers, are forced to come to terms with. This book can read as though Mohawk voices are missing. However, the text is implicitly imbued with the Mohawk experience and decentres the White anthropological gaze. The mere act of reading Simpson's writings inherently requires listening and accepting the Mohawk authorial (and authoritative) voice and experience. This results in a paradoxical ethnography that is thoroughly an Indigenous text that centres the Mohawk experience while presenting the reader with very little ethnographic description of or interview excerpts with Mohawk people.

Simpson's book feels very much as though she is living out her reorientations of anthropology. Her theoretical and methodical intervention of ethnographic refusal is threaded throughout the book. In writing this book, Simpson is asserting Mohawk sovereignty and recognition. She is writing against the narrative of settler-colonialism and Indigenous disappearance. While we know Simpson has conducted interviews and engaged in ethnography, there seems to be little evidence of these encounters in her writing. She eschews traditional modes of the discipline by doing away with 'thick' detailed descriptions of her surroundings and participants—perhaps her own mode of ethnographic refusal. Decentring difference as the unit of analysis, the moments of difference that *do* show up feel like disruptions themselves, such as when Simpson disagrees with one of her interlocuters. Simpson also assumes a familiarity with Indigenous issues. Given the lack of geographical description, definitions or introductions to terms, she is assuming the reader either has some familiarity with Iroquois issues and/or is putting the burden on the reader to catch up to speed. This is a departure from traditional

ethnography, even those written by other Indigenous anthropologists. This brings up questions of: Who refuses? Who doesn't? And why?

My main criticism, or rather recommendation for expansion, would be to include an analysis of gender. I would have liked to see more discussion of the gendered implications and effects of settler-colonialism. I was left wanting more discussion of heteropatriarchy and perhaps a more explicit account of how it has been internalized in membership decisions and of the disproportionate burden placed on Native women with respect to marriage and membership rights. The fear of elimination restricts only choices for Native women, which reflects how fears of elimination and the responsibility for countering them primarily fall on the shoulders of Native women. Simpson mostly steers clear of any explicit critical gender analysis.

Simpson's book is an important contribution to the fields of anthropology, Indigenous studies, Iroquois studies, border studies, settler-colonial studies and decolonial methodologies. As mentioned in the introduction, she has also had immense influence on other anthropologists, consequently influencing other fields that *Mohawk Interruptus* may not explicitly be in conversation with. She writes against the ways in which history and anthropology have dealt with Indigenous groups as a depoliticized and historicized entity and challenges the foundations of settler-colonialism. Through her writings, she refuses the completion of the settler-colonial project and asserts Mohawk sovereignty and tribal political recognition. *Mohawk Interruptus* is certainly on its way to becoming, if it is not already, part of the new canon of both anthropology and critical Indigenous studies.