



Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States

By Audra Simpson



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Mohawk Interruptus is a bold challenge to dominant thinking in the fields of Native studies and anthropology. Combining political theory with ethnographic research among the Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke, a reserve community in what is now southwestern Quebec, Audra Simpson examines their struggles to articulate and maintain political sovereignty through centuries of settler colonialism. The Kahnawà:ke Mohawks are part of the Haudenosaunee or Iroquois Confederacy. Like many Iroquois peoples, they insist on the integrity of Haudenosaunee governance and refuse American or Canadian citizenship. Audra Simpson thinks through this politics of refusal, which stands in stark contrast to the politics of cultural recognition. Tracing the implications of refusal, Simpson argues that one sovereign political order can exist nested within a sovereign state, albeit with enormous tension around issues of jurisdiction and legitimacy. Finally, Simpson critiques anthropologists and political scientists, whom, she argues, have too readily accepted the assumption that the colonial project is complete. Belying that notion, *Mohawk Interruptus* calls for and demonstrates more robust and evenhanded forms of inquiry into indigenous politics in the teeth of settler governance.



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Editorial Review

Review

"*Mohawk Interruptus* is Audra Simpson's bold challenge to the academic apprehension of the Iroquois. She has succeeded brilliantly. This book is now the authoritative history of Kahnawà:ke and a powerful statement that recasts our people and redefines how research on Indigenous peoples should be done. This is a long-awaited book by the most intelligent, passionate and incisive of Iroquois intellectuals. It makes me proud to be from Kahnawà:ke and deeply impresses me as a scholar."

(Taiaiake Alfred (Kahnawà:ke Mohawk), Professor of Indigenous Governance at the University of Victoria)

"Few other works on contemporary Native American community politics are as wide-ranging and theoretically sophisticated as *Mohawk Interruptus*. By examining many competing but linked understandings of Mohawk national identity, Audra Simpson exposes a uniquely Indigenous and Iroquoian conception of community that transcends national and ethnographic prescriptions of unitary and fixed social identities."

(Ned Blackhawk, author of *Violence over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West*)

"This brilliant ethnographic and political study of how the Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke *live and enact* their sovereign nationhood and refuse incorporation is a masterpiece. It challenges and transforms the way Indigenous politics is studied in Anthropology and Political Science and deserves the widest possible readership."

(James Tully, author of *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Two Volumes*)

"In her brilliant study of Kahnawà:ke, a Mohawk reserve outside Montréal, anthropologist Simpson rejects this dominant image of indigenous nationhood on the brink and 'starts with a grounded refusal, not a precipice.' The author problematizes long-standing assumptions to position the actions of the Kahnawà:ke nation as that of refusal, a valid alternative to political recognition. Through in-depth ethnographic research, Simpson identifies what is important to the community, as evidenced by her discussion of important intellectual Louis Hall, whose analysis of Mohawk nationhood has deeply influenced Haudenosaunee people, yet has been largely ignored by scholars. . . . Such incisive analysis promises that this study will be influential and widely read. . . . Essential. All levels/libraries."

(K. L. Ackley *Choice*)

"Simpson accomplishes what she set out to do in this text, namely to offer a critical evaluation of settler colonialism as experienced by Kahnawà:ke Mohawk. Her book is beautifully written: her prose is elegant, and she interweaves ethnographic research with political history and theory to build her argument. . . . Simpson enhances our understanding of how a community of people struggle to understand, and why they must continually fight for, their political independence after centuries of settler colonialism."

(Ruth Burgett Jolie *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*)

"[A]n essential read for any study of settler colonialism, native/indigenous/first-nation studies, or the study of sovereignty, and also stands on its own as an important narrative of North America's ongoing colonial history."

(Ian Kalman *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2015-10-01)

"*Mohawk Interruptus* deftly interrogates how settler colonialism and anthropological practice in the United States and Canada have circumscribed Iroquoian (Haudenosaunee) identities—and Mohawk identities, in particular—in ways that ignore contested interpretations of indigeneity and serve to erase indigenous nationhood. . . . A major takeaway from Simpson's account is that anthropologists, political scientists, historians, and those of us in Native American studies need to theorize and examine how people experience and feel membership, citizenship, and nationhood while not replicating colonial projects of erasure in our scholarly research and writing."

(Lisa K. Neuman *American Ethnologist* 2015-11-01)

"[A] tour de force exploration of contemporary Kahnawa:ke political life. . . . In its examination and sustained critique of the settler colonialism and the politics of nationhood, recognition, and refusal, and its vision of more productive and inclusive understandings of Kahnawa:ke citizenship, *Mohawk Interruptus* joins some of the most provocative and cutting-edge work taking place in Native/indigenous studies today. We would be wise to heed its challenge to develop similarly rigorous and critical studies of indigenous self-determination throughout the hemisphere, in whatever forms they might take."

(Kirby Brown *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 2015-04-01)

"*Mohawk Interruptus*, was recently voted 'Best First Book Published in 2014' by the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association, and after reading it I can understand why.... The complexities of Indigenous life in *Mohawk Interruptus* are given neither the security of romanticization nor the comfort of the scholarly pulpit."

(Brendan Hokowhitu *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 2016-02-01)

"Rather than merely a book of and for anthropology, then, *Mohawk Interruptus* calls upon its reader to rethink action and collectivity through a different modality than the current political registers presume. Refusal, both as a political theoretical concept and as a quotidian shared practice, may allow a continued, powerful, and even potentially joyful relationship to state power."

(Kennan Ferguson *Theory & Event* 2015-12-01)

"[Simpson] offers a highly nuanced and theoretically sophisticated ethnographical study illustrating the kinds of critical research questions insider researchers can ask that lead to new understandings and challenge the orthodoxy. Simpson has made a significant contribution as an insider researcher, an Indigenous studies scholar, an anthropologist, that highlights the exciting new era of Indigenous research we have entered."

(Robert Alexander Innes *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 2015-05-01)

"I expect *Mohawk Interruptus* will assert its place in the Haudenosaunee canon, which will compel subsequent scholars to take a closer look at how Indigenous communities in general struggle to maintain their political integrity under the pressure of a variety of colonially created borders and the laws that enforce them over the sovereign rights of others."

(David Martínez Wicazo *Sa Review* 2016-03-01)

About the Author

Audra Simpson is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University. She is a coeditor, with Andrea Smith, of *Theorizing Native Studies*, also published by Duke University Press.

Users Review

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Paul Eastman:

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