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Discussion with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson BY LEANNE BETASAMOSAKE SIMPSON & KITE

Kite:

Thank you, again, so much for talking to me. I know you have a new book, and I would love to hear about that too. But could you introduce yourself for the recording?

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson:

Yeah, for sure. Aaniin, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson ndizhnikaaaz. My name is Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, I am a Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg writer, academic, musician, and I'm a member of Alderville First Nation and I live in Peterborough, Ontario.

Kite:

So, I think that the reason I wanted to talk to you about listening was because it seems to be a core part of the method by which you're engaging with nonhuman in your work. Do you have a definition for listening that you subscribe to? Because I think sometimes that there's listening and hearing, sometimes things aren't for us, and sometimes we can't hear a certain range of information.

LBS:

Yeah, for sure. I think of listening as a deeply relational Anishinaabe practice. I think of it as a practice of knowledge production. I think it was and continues to be a foundational practice for the Anishinaabe people.

I think back to when I started listening to our origin stories, to our creation stories, and there's the beginning part of one of our stories that I shared, and that's known as Turtle's Back, (the one who loves us most completely) was dreaming and visioning, and their thoughts went out into the universe, and because there was no container for those thoughts, they didn't hit anything, and they just went on forever. And those are the stars. But the sound that those thoughts made were the sound of seeds in a gourd, a shaker sound, that so many Indigenous people use in ceremonies and in our music.

Then she talks about how the next sound was that heartbeat of all existence. And that heartbeat, that drum sound, combines with the sound of the gourd. Representing intellectual thought and emotional thought combined, and then the whole universe gets created.

And so, that, I think, to me has pointed to this incredibly important, reciprocal relational practice of listening. When I'm hanging out with elders, particularly when I'm hanging out with elders in the bush, they're always listening, they're always listening to sounds that someone coming from the city like myself might miss, that we block out. They're listening to sounds as a way of relating, as a way of communicating with plants, with animals, with spirits. They're listening to sounds in conversation with their ancestors and with those that are yet to be born.

And part of that listening is quiet—not talking, and reflection. So I think oftentimes, in non-Indigenous cultures you'll have social folks filling in space and silence with chit chat and with conversation, and often, in Anishinaabe, especially with older elders, there'll be these long, beautiful, periods of silence.

So, I think that's one place that comes from. I think another place I've written about is our word for truth, the practice of truth, *Debwewin*, which is the sound of your own heart. Listening is different than hearing. Listening gets conceptualized in western thought. Ultimately, it's very intimate ... but also, an intentional experience in conversation. If you're doing it correctly, you're listening with your whole body, your whole spirit, and you're doing it with an open heart. That, I think, is so often one of the places that you want to get to when you're in a durational ceremonial practice, get to that place where you're able to listen with an open heart. Because that's often where transformation comes from, that's often a site of knowledge production, it's a site of transformation. It's a doorway.

I think sound is crazy important in terms of connections and relationality, and as a practice and one of the aspects of the oral tradition. I love orality, and I love the oral tradition, and I love to see the worlds that you can create out of that. And listening is the most important part of that, for sure.

Kite:

This reminds me of a few chapters of *As We've Always Done*. I think it's this idea of individual responsibility, and I guess I've been relating that to listening in terms of the core part of your being that you're responsible for, and it's not up to the community to listen for you. I also wanted to hear from you about

individualism in Anishinaabe culture. I love doing stuff with Anishinaabe folks, because there's a real lineup with Lakota, but there's some serious differences. Sometimes I forget that they're very different worlds, but they share core similarities.

LBS:

Yeah. I think individuals are responsible for listening to their own truths and listening to the sound of their own heart, for self actualizing, and for figuring out how to contribute to the community in a good way, in a productive way, in a way that generates more life. Based on things like their name and their family and their clan and their gifts. In an expansive way, not in a way that creates enclosures. So, in my interpretation of this, and It's not everyone's interpretation of this – everybody has a lot of freedom. The community's job, the family's job is to rally around individuals and support them in their own self actualizing within the ethical scaffolding that holds the community and the collective, including plant and animal nations, including the natural world, including those ancestors and the ones yet to be born, as part of that conversation and with the goal, again, of creating more life and not just human life, but the life of everything on the planet.

Sometimes it's really easy in colonial society and in capitalist society to get really focused on the individual. But that's just one part of it. It's important to figure out your own voice and to use your own voice, to listen to yourself, I think, as a life practice, but that's always going to be in conversation with all of these other beings that you're sharing time and space with, because we're relational, and because what I do impacts other life beings.

So, I think it's this really interesting conversation, it's really interesting thinking through, it's a really interesting practice of articulating your own needs and your own voice. But then I love, and this part I think that we need to reclaim a little bit more, ways of weaving and braiding all of those different perspectives into collective thought and collective action and collective worlds. So the way that we take that diversity, and then weave it into something that's nurturing and generative for everybody, but also cohesive in terms of all of our relationality.

Kite:

It reminds me of something I've been wondering, maybe there's an Anishinaabe equivalent, maybe not. I was teaching a "Music of Native North America" class this semester and obviously, there's no materials, and I just had to make it up theoretically, but I was trying to explain to the students

why songs are ethics, and why and how they generate ethics method-wise. There's a story, this total upheaval of story, because we were doing some research and realized a lot of Lakota stories that we think are core stories, such as our creation story, and we actually have no proof that they weren't made up by an anthropologist. So that's chaos. But, there is this story of Song. Where an old man goes to the Black Hills to die, but he hears a prairie chicken sing, and he learns the song and the dance and it heals him. And so then he takes the song down to the people, and now Song is medicine. Obviously that's the short version.

But it's interesting to me because it's so clear. You listen to land, and you're patient for many days, and then you know that nonhumans are beings, ontologically, and then they give you a way to understand new knowledge. Then you can go do that method and that process, and then you have ethics, then you've done an ethical action. I know that my PhD brain wants to structuralize everything, so that's a highly structured vision. But I wondered if there is a relationship?

LBS:

Yeah. I mean, my PhD brain goes to this division in western thought between practice and theory. And this idea, even when you start talking about embodied practice, they're like, "Oh, well, the theory came first, and the academics taught you the theory, and then you embodied it." And I think that's really backwards in terms of how I see elders and knowledge holders functioning. This embodied practice, particularly when it's done collectively and over different scales, and I would say, an individual connection to the spirit world would be one iteration of that. And then as you add beings, the scales shift. That's a place of knowledge generation. You're making theory, you're building theory, you're building ethics. That then can become something that you can talk about through story. But those two things are very, very linked, and I think are the same thing for me.

That's a pretty amazing story that you just shared. And I think of that part where the ethics of the person being gifted that song and then figuring out how to take their body and communicate that medicine. So, as a vocalist, that's something that I think about, and it can be very tricky to use your body as an instrument. Then the ethic of sharing, that that gift wasn't just for that person to use to heal themselves. They immediately saw that communal aspect.

We have a lot of stories about that through drums and different instruments and songs being given to somebody almost as a conduit, to take them to community to heal and to share. So yeah, I would definitely see Song as ethics. And I love how integrated it is, even till this day in our community. It's like it doesn't really matter what you're doing. But inevitably, there will be a prayer, a song, a joke, and a story. And I think that's a beautiful embodiment of an ethical practice that is not a set of laws on paper, but it's relational, and it's living and it's embodied.

Kite:

So this brings me to another question that I've been asking a lot, a question that'll probably take me through the rest of my life, which is, where do songs come from? If I ask my grandfather, he would say we're just conduits. We have very little between us and Creator. I mean, this could be a really specific question, a new song pops in your head, some people have experienced the instant knowledge of the whole form, the whole poem, the whole song, and some people get the first impetus and then have to do the labor and do the editing. But I don't know.

LBS:

That's a great question, if that is a question. The first thing that popped into my head was the songs that come from the birds, *beneshiiwag*. I think back to different origin stories about how birds were tasked with the responsibility of spreading seeds over the earth, seeds that were a container for kinetic and potential energy. I think of how present, when you're outside in the bush, how present that bird song is as a form of communication. So I think that's one place, but it's not the only place. I hear and I understand that idea that we're just conduits and that they're coming from another world and another place, but I also understand that we're all different conduits. Depending on what kind of conduit you are, what song might come. Sometimes I think of the world as this network of relationships between humans and plants and animals and the natural world, spanning across time and space, and I think of my body as a hub in that algorithm, and that I'm made up of relationships, and I'm made up of communication and sometimes that's physical and sometimes that's spiritual, and sound is part of that.

And so sometimes I think songs are stories, sometimes they're prayers, sometimes they're ethics, sometimes they're connectors, sometimes they're healers, they have a power and it comes from a place that I don't think that I can fully understand or articulate. I think it's a beautiful thing to think about

that question, and carry that question throughout your life and actually pay attention to the work that sound, song, and listening are doing.

Kite:

I always go back to what you say about protocol, because it's such a complex word and that does harm and can also do great good. And first I feel like English isn't helping at all, nor is the way people will protocol obviously. But I'm trying to create in my mind this delineation between Indigenous responsible and reciprocal listening and this New Age form of listening, where sometimes if I'm trying to define how one listens to the land, it's difficult to express, but I know that in order to do it ethically it involves responsibility and things that veer towards protocol in order to keep the bumpers on it and keep my covenants with the nonhuman world, because I think in sound it can get really too woo-woo, the bumpers come off and settlers think they can listen to anything and they can absorb anything. So, I'm wondering what your thoughts are about ethical bumpers for listening.

LBS:

I mean, I think that oral tradition and oral practice is very complicated. And I think Indigenous knowledge systems are very complicated and robust and rigorous. And I think listening within that context is much different, it's a different practice, it's a rigorous practice, it's a robust practice, it's a practice that there are certain skills that you need to hone over decades in order to be able to do it.

I don't pretend to be able to listen to the degree that some of the knowledge holders, language speakers, and elders can. I mean, they've grown up in an environment where collectively people were nurturing that and were doing those durational ceremonial practices that generated parts of your brain that enabled things like empathy and connection and listening.

That is one of the bumpers for me, is that we have to stop looking at Indigenous knowledge as something that is simple, that you can just dive into and take whatever you need. That's a very colonial way of looking at things that are Indigenous.

I used the word "protocol" once in an interview that I was doing alongside Lee Maracle and she corrected me and said, "I don't like that word "protocol" I like the word "practice", and I thought pretty deeply about that over the last few years, and I really like the idea of practice, and of embodying and practicing Anishanaabe ethical practices, because there is still

bumpers, but it there isn't that rigidity and one size fits all almost dogmatic thing that can come with the word "protocol".

And it's something that seems so accurate. I've seen I've been out with the Anishinaabe and Dine hunters who run out of tobacco, and know that they need to offer something to their ancestors into the spirit world before they harvest. I've seen elders leave a little piece of their bologna sandwich. I've seen hunters who have nothing— engage in a conversation through prayer with those ancestors, so that they understand that they didn't have tobacco this time, but there's a need. There's a conversation and presence. To me, that is something that is really, really beautiful and is really, really important. Our culture cannot be reduced to a set of protocols or a set of laws or a set of rules, particularly when you're out on the land, because the land throws all kinds of things at you, and you do the best you can, and I think that you have to trust that your ancestors in the spirit world are benevolent. I'm going to be an ancestor someday. We're going to be ancestors someday. And I want to be the kind of ancestor that's loving and caring and supportive and contributing, to bring forth more life rather than in closing and shutting it down.

So, yeah, I think that practices are important, I think those bumpers are important, I think when we're talking about all of this amongst hetero patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, cultural appropriation, all of those kinds of things, that it's our responsibility and there's an ethic to saying no. Actually protecting and maintaining these practices for ourselves and for our communities is also really important.

Kite:

One of the things that I've been thinking about is knowledge generation in spheres, not as hierarchies, but a lot of the work that I do ends up interfacing with the AI tech community, for better or for worse, and a lot of that academic talk ends up being critical. Using Indigenous knowledge, and I guess Indigenous ways of listening as a critique, when I think we should be being generative, because I think we've come to the conclusion that it's not working. I'm not really sure why we have to keep being critical in a white academic context.

But then also, when you were talking now, I was thinking about this dual sphere of knowledge, where the bumpers of listening and engaging with the world and being reciprocal, some of these conversations are sacred as internal conversations between Indigenous folks. And on one level, I still

want settlers to know that there are laws and protocols and there are rules and they should be very, very, very careful.

LBS:

Yeah. I mean, I think we just have to continue to have those conversations that our knowledge, our bodies, our minds, our spirits, our lands, are not for stealing, are not for taking, are not for white settlers. I think that critique and critical thought is important, but I think in the academy, I mean, you can get a lot of degrees and a lot of grants and publish a lot of papers just critiquing.

I do a lot of land based work. When you're on the land and you're in a camp and you have a group of people that are just critiquing, the camp falls apart pretty quickly, because you're not doing the labor of life. It becomes really important when you're in a group on the land to take care of each other, to be getting wood so you're warm, getting water, cooking food, doing the dishes, you have to be putting wood on the fire or the fire goes out. Taking care of all of the camp's needs.

And so I think that critique is important. But I also think in world building context. And I think Anishanaabe people were always building our world as a life practice, daily, yearly, generationally. I think that most of the energy needs to go into that building process, that generative process, or you don't have a world. That's also very difficult work. It's work that's around visioning, it's work particularly in colonial contexts, we don't know how to do it. I see artists doing this, artist collectors doing this, I see movements doing this, and I see Indigenous communities doing this.

And so oftentimes these kinds of endeavors where we're collectively trying to embody the alternative and build something different aren't successful. But they are successful to me, because I think every time we come together and we try to dream or vision, or think through, or build the alternative, or live of the alternative, even if it's just for a few minutes, even if it's just for a few hours. Sound performances, sound artists are often creating the space for this and holding the space for this. I think that's generative and I think we learn what it feels like, There's knowledge that gets generated there that we use for the next time.

That work, to me, in my own practice, it's been much more difficult, it's scarier. It always generates more questions than answers. But I think it's really, really important work. I think critique comes in, especially when I'm working with students where they start asking questions. "How do I not

know this knowledge? How do I not know my language? How have I never been out on the land? How do I not know my songs?"

Then that critique, and learning about colonialism and critiquing the system becomes very important as they take their intimate experiences and scaffold it with the collective and understand colonialism and anti colonialism and their responsibilities and roles in that. But I think it is a danger to get caught up in just critiquing, because then you're not building any alternative. And then you're neglecting what for me has been a very generative side of knowledge production, and hope, actually.

Kite:

Yeah. I had this experience last week. I went out to interview a man named Mike Marshall, who builds and teaches traditional Lakota camp games. I've been thinking a lot about my cousin who's also an academic and artist, Clementine Bordeaux. We talk about protocols a lot and she often talks about this pinching that elders do to correct you. It could be a joke, it could be a jab, it could be a physical pinch to say, "No, that's not how it's done."

And I was talking to Mike Marshall, he was showing these games, they've this couple versions, the older boys' version has a deer knuckle, and you pull the sinew and it spins and you whack each other with it. And then also, these little boys' bow and arrows. I said something like, "Does this help them work on their skills for hunting for later?" And he stopped me and said, "No. This is for fun." I forgot what he said, but he meant that's a white person's way of looking at children. And now I read it like, oh, racialized children can have fun too.

And this was right last week, so all these elders we're having to think about Kamloops and really intense experience that half of them say that happened in Canada, but we have our own boarding schools. And all their parents and most of them went to school like that. And so, that was such a good hard pinch for me. There's so much more that's generated by play than by skill building. And he really wanted to be very clear that camp life was extremely fun, and that kids spend so much time playing games, especially in the winter. And it is really transformative to think about how much fun we had.

Yeah. And I've heard elders talk about the silence that residential schools brought when all the children were taken away and there was no more fun and there was no more laughter, the sound of laughter in September was gone. It was that silence, of not having that joy that children bring through play and through laughter, and how the sound of laughter then infuses and

wraps itself around the community, if you're in the vicinity of the sound. It seems horrible and terrible to me that you and I both have to be reminded of that, that joy and laughter, that we're allowed to, not just as children, but as communities, we're allowed to laugh, and to experience pleasure and joy and happiness and have that as part of the fabric of our life.

Kite:

I have a collaborator, Alisha Wormsley who's an Afro futurist, and I learn so much about joy from Afrofuturism, because we try to do these futuring exercises, these dreaming exercises, and I'm like, "Let's use sorrow to teleport. Let's use joy. Let's find one kernel of joy and use that to generate the future". It's tough.

LBS:

Yeah, it is tough, but I feel like that practice of finding that one kernel of joy as individuals and then community, that's powerful, generative stuff.

Kite:

Okay. another question. I'm a musician, and I grew up playing in group musical settings. And the most important lessons I've ever learned were in those groups and how you can't dominate, you can't control, you have to listen to the drummer, it's the drummers' band, lessons like that. And I'm wondering how your musical practice gives back to the rest of your practice.

LBS:

It's been very transformative to the rest of my practice, because it's something that I came to later in life. I was already established as an academic, I already have a writing career in the midst. I had lots of experience with music as a child, lots of music lessons, but also in a very churchy white environment. And so this was a process after having kids and reclaiming my own voice.

Also, I think as an academic and as a writer, it's very possible to just live in your head. So, when I had my two children, giving birth, I found out, was an experience that I couldn't really intellectualize my way out of. It was actually a very embodied experience. And so performance, then, became this incredibly challenging site for me to reclaim my own voice, but also be inside my body and use my body to communicate and connect with an audience, which I found very difficult and challenging.

And so, listening was first and foremost about listening to myself and dealing with all of my own trauma and damage, because I couldn't step up to a mic

and make any kind of sound when my body was wracked with depression or anxiety or thinking about past traumas. And for a while, every time I stepped up to a mic, this voice would come into my head, this, "Who do you think you are? Why do you think anybody is going to want to listen to anything that you have to say?" Which I think is a very common experience for Indigenous women.

So, I had to work through all of that in therapy and in ceremony and onstage, really, as well. And I have a very soft spoken voice, my delivery and live performance, my voice is very soft, which I love, because my people are very quiet people. Our voices are very quiet. And so it was just something that was a part of me and was a part of my people, and I didn't want to learn to project or to force myself to speak louder, or sing louder than my body wanted to.

And so that ended up putting me in conversation with the members of my band, and us figuring out how to be able to perform cohesively as a group and still have my voice which is very soft be heard. It put me in, oftentimes, a lot of adversarial conversations with sound men, because they wield a lot of power in a live performance, there's a lot of patriarchy, there's a lot of they know better than me. So I had to learn how to speak back to that.

I had to learn how to write for music and for sound, because at first, I think I was just very much doing poetry or spoken word over music. And then in this last record, Theory of Ice, I really wanted to move away from that approach and make sure that the lyrics were in conversation with the instruments and with the other voices, and that these were songs.

And so, I took poetry from the middle of the novel Noopiming, and I worked with my band right from the get go in terms of generating the sounds that were going to go with this. And then the poetry made the shift into lyrics, because there's an economy with poetry, but there's also an economy that's quite different with lyrics because sound takes folks on an emotional, spiritual journey. You're bringing your words into conversation with other stories, and other voices, and other narratives. And so figuring out how to make my voice and my lyrics be in conversation with guitars and drums and keyboards and other voices, necessarily then changed some of the words. It brought it off the page.

And the durational practice, I think, of being in a band and performing the same songs every night is something that can be at times a real grind, but at other times you've performed the same song 50 times, and then you will

understand that song in a slightly different way. And that to me is so similar to some of the insights and transformations I've experienced in ceremony, that I really liked that.

And now when I go back into the classroom, profs can usually just read their lecture or do their PowerPoint and the audience can be on the floor and they wouldn't notice. And now if I lose the audience, it's devastating. So I think it's definitely impacted how I speak and how I lecture and how I teach and how I am as a human.

I think there was a point when I was writing *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* where I was writing about how making culture is so important and embodied practice is so important. And I was like, "I'm just sitting here typing these ideas into my computer. I need to walk the talk, Leanne." So yeah, that's been something that has been incredibly transformative for me as a human and as whatever it is I am in my other practices.

Kite:

That is great. I'm really happy to hear about the process of singing, because I sing in a band and I got kicked out of my own band, and they're still going up. Thank God I got kicked out for being a bad singer, because now I have a whole career. I would have just continued to be in bad bands throughout my twenties. But I spent a long time trying to sing again and be like, "No, I can't do it." [inaudible 00:45:48]. So it's real good to hear.

LBS:

That journey's been really important to me because there's a very, very narrow line of what's acceptable and what's a good singer, particularly for female voices. And that's so counter to Anishanaabe culture where every voice is amazing because it's an absolute expression of your essence and your spirit. And so, yeah, I definitely struggled with that with all of that in this record. And so, I really wanted to reclaim that idea that that song within an Anishanaabe context is for everyone. Everyone was singing and writing songs all the time. It wasn't just reserved for these people in our community that were deemed the experts on it. It was a practice that was so communal and so celebrated and a way of expressing one's own truths, which is so anti-capitalist and beautiful.

Kite:

Yeah. Yeah, I'll never forget, I found this recording from the '70s of I think the most important Lakota singer and she was an elder at that time, and I listened to it and I don't know what I was expecting, but her relationship to

pitch was unimportant. I mean, there was a core, obviously, but really it was unimportant. Her relationship to projection, I mean a little bit, but it was so intimate, and I was like, "Ah." I'm putting importance on the wrong ... If she is the shining example, then it's to be reexamined.

I have one last question. Interpret this how you want to, but what was the first nonhuman you came to know or communicate with or listen to?

LBS:

I think the first nonhuman that I interacted with and that I related to in a meaningful way, with some depth was black bears. In my early twenties, I was relearning, and it's not my culture, I was living in Northern Ontario, bears were appearing in my dreams, and then also in my life, as I was driving around in the highways, as I was hiking, as I was camping, as I was spending time with elders.

And it's not lost on me that bears are very large, very scary and very obvious, but I think this real-world experience with them while in conversation with elders, while relearning, was significant, in that I started to see the world in a different way. I started to experience the world in a different way. I started to pay attention, and, ultimately I started listening in a different way, and listening to things that were much smaller and much more insignificant than a huge black bear. So I think that stands out for me as beginning of a different kind of listening.

Kite:

I mean, do you see dream listening as important? Do you experience listening in dreams?

LBS:

Dreams in my culture are incredibly important. And again, it's important to put those bumpers up, because I feel like dreaming is something that everybody does, but in a cultural context, there's a specific way of listening and reading to dreams. Not all dreams are the same; there's a more complex and rigorous way of interpreting those dreams. But I think dreams and visioning and those times where your subconscious and the other parts of your brain are communicating with other parts of the world outside of the physical, I think are generative and very important parts, sites of knowledge for Anishanaabe people.

Kite:

Awesome. Thank you so much for talking to me. This was so fun, to talk

about [crosstalk 00:51:14] with someone who actually does or look like does listening.

LBS:

All right. Well, thanks for having me, and I hope that I get to meet you in person someday.

Kite:

Thank you.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson is a renowned Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer and artist, who has been widely recognized as one of the most compelling Indigenous voices of her generation. Her work breaks open the intersections between politics, story and song – bringing audiences into a rich and layered world of sound, light, and sovereign creativity. Working for two decades as an independent scholar using Nishnaabeg intellectual practices, Leanne has lectured and taught extensively at universities across Canada and the United States and has twenty years’ experience with Indigenous land-based education. She holds a PhD from the University of Manitoba, and teaches at the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning in Denendeh. Leanne is the author of eight books, including *A Short History of the Blockade* and the novel *Noopiming: The Cure for White Ladies* which was short listed for the Governor General’s Literary Award for fiction and the Dublin Literary Prize. *The Accident of Being Lost* was a finalist for the Rogers Writers’ Trust Fiction Prize and the Trillium Book Award. Leanne is also a musician. Her latest release *Theory of Ice* was named to the Polaris Prize short list and she is the 2021 winner of the Prism Prize’s Willie Dunn Award. <https://www.leannesimpson.ca/>

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