Colonialism and Relocation: An Exploration of Genocide and the Relocation of Animist Aboriginal Groups in Canada.

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This exploratory paper looks at the potentially genocidal effects of community relocation and the imposition of capitalist time upon animist Aboriginal groups in Canada. Contemporary sociological and historical approaches to genocide define it as the violent interruption or destruction of relations that create and sustain a group, and maintain their collective lives and identities. Relocation has been used by the Canadian government and major corporations throughout history to destroy Aboriginal ties to the land, securing Aboriginal land and labour for capitalist expansion. Colonizers forced communities into a serial spatiality consistent with capitalist relations of production. Significant changes in temporal orientation, caused by the implementation of wage labour onto Aboriginal communities living on reserves, disrupt social and economic relational processes that are necessary for maintaining the group as a whole. This re-arranging of spatial and temporal perceptions violently disrupts the relational processes involving both humans and the environment— that create and sustain animist communities’ group life and identity.

RELATIONAL APPROACH TO GENOCIDE

Recent sociological and historical approaches to genocide define it as the violent interruption or destruction of relations that create and sustain a group, and maintain their collective lives and identities (Bloxham & Moses 2010; Powell 2007, 2011; Woolford 2009). Such approaches understand group life to exist as ongoing processes of relations and negotiations and that are culturally specific. These processes are fundamental to building and preserving group life, and are worth protecting (Hinton 2002; Powell 2007, 2011; Wolfe 2006; Woolford 2009). This approach contrasts with other genocide theorists who rely on the UN’s restrictive definitions of group identity, forcing the complex dynamics of group formation into “overly restrictive social categories” (Hinton 2002: 4). Others define groups targeted by genocide using the fictitious classifications imposed on them by perpetrators who perceive group members to be threatening or dangerous (Chalk & Jonassohn 1990). Such an approach is problematic because it makes the destructive labels perpetrators impose onto target groups fundamental to the definition of genocide, rather than protecting victim groups’ own unique collective lives and identities (Woolford 2009).

THE GENOCIDAL EFFECTS OF RELOCATION

Relocation has been used by the Canadian government and major corporations throughout history to destroy Aboriginal ties to the land, securing
Aboriginal land and labour for capitalist expansion. The structuring of the modern nation involves first the shaping of physical space, which presupposes capitalist relations of production and societal relations in general. Colonizers are able to grant or deny access to spaces, which includes land and resources. They have the authority and power to define these spaces and the people in it (Tyner 2006). Relocation is used as a spatial tool of domination. The government monopolizes the procedures of the organization of space (Poulantzas 1978). Often the spatial layout of the reserves makes it very difficult for communities to continue living in accordance to their culture and worldviews. This is the case for any Aboriginal community in Canada that has been forced to locate onto one of these small pockets of land, including animist cultures which are the focus of this project.

The government’s inscription of meaning onto space is a method of exercising power. The new social space of the state is mapped out and physically organized through the “growth of communications, transport, and military apparatuses and strategy, the emergence of borders, limits and territories” (Poulantzas 1978: 100). As the modern state is mapped out, “territory and tradition are inscribed,” replacing old knowledge with new meaning (Poulantzas 1978: 97). Capitalist space is different from all others and brings every other aspect of social life under its new organization and assignment (Poulantzas 1978: 97). Transformation of the spatial matrix refers to the “practices and techniques of capitalist economic, political and ideological powers- they are the real substratum of mythical, religious, philosophical or ‘experiential’ representations of [space]” (Poulantzas 1978: 98). Therefore, all avenues of life are implicated in this knowledge creation, and all aspects of people’s lives are affected by the spatial matrix, not just economic.

One way that colonizers ascribe meaning using space to justify the exploitation and appropriation of Aboriginal land for commercial gains is through the creation of racialized knowledge. The creation of ‘race’ as a justification for the theft of Native land denies Aboriginal people of the opportunity to create and project their own identities to the rest of Canada because they have an artificial one created for them by white colonizers. Colonizers do not simply steal the land from Aboriginal people- as Europeans continue to arrive they proceed to steal biography, history, and identity (Gregory 1993: 33). Meanings and uses of space are never separate from the contestations over identities (Tyner 2006: 63). The essence of colonization inheres in seizing and transforming “others” by the very act of conceptualizing, inscribing, and interacting with them on terms not of their choosing; in making them pliant objects and silenced subjects of the colonial scripts and scenarios (Woolford 2005: 40). Europeans are able to grant or deny access to spaces, which includes land and resources. They have the authority and power to define these spaces (Tyner 2006). In Canada, it is the colonizers who arrived and began to regulate and police geography who maintain the power of the space and the people in it.

ANIMISM AND PRE-CAPITALIST SPACE

Colonizers forced communities into a serial spatiality consistent with capitalist relations of production. Pre-capitalist animist societies have a circular spatial layout, ensuring that everyone has equal access to resources, creating a balance of power. The circular and symmetrical layout allows every group member to have the same
level of access to food, water and transportation (Shkilnyk 1985). While there are no visible boundaries, group members are socialized with particular spatial perceptions, and are aware of how much territory is needed for each family or clan to live comfortably and satisfy any practical needs. An integral aspect of the animist society’s physical layout is economically determined. Clan-based family groups are “separated by unspoken (yet well understood) distances, and definite territories [are] allocated to them by custom and usage for trapping, hunting, gathering,” and other forms of food gathering (Shkilnyk 1985: 65). These modes of production- hunting, trapping, gathering, berry picking and sometimes fishing- go back for generations and are the traditional determinants of animist spatiality.

Notions of space play an integral role in animist communities’ relational processes that make up their group life. Animist cultures do not maintain an animate-inanimate dichotomy as westerners do. From this perspective, “persons” comprise one of the major classes of objects to which the self must become orientated; however, this category of being is by no means limited to just human beings (Hallowell 1975: 143). From an animist perspective, “persons” refers to both human beings and non-human beings. Notions of social relations and interactions, as well as social organization, therefore include human beings, non-human beings, material objects and nature. From their perspective, all persons and animals are animate, as well as substantives such as “trees, sun-moon, thunder, stones, and objects of material culture like kettle and pipe” (Hallowell 1975: 146). All animate beings are capable of metamorphosis- including humans. This capacity “links human beings with the other-than-human persons in their behavioural environment” (Hallowell 1975: 163).

Animists’ ability for metamorphosis demonstrates the extent to which the environment is embedded in their cultures. People can morph into animals, elements, weather (such as thunder and lightning), and parts of nature such as tree stumps. Morphing abilities determine one’s position within animist power hierarchies (Hallowell 1975: 170). Non-human persons rank in top positions within these hierarchies alongside human beings. Human beings would not be able to hold top ranking positions within this hierarchy, nor would they be able to morph at all, without their deep interconnected relationships with animals and the environment. In fact, the most fundamental goals of animist life- longevity, health, and freedom from misfortune- cannot be achieved without the “effective help and cooperation of both human and other-than-human persons” (Hallowell 1975: 171). Having an understanding of animist cultural notions of space illuminates the extent that the relocation has been destructive to animist communities.

**ANIMISM AND CAPITALIST SPACE**

A case study of the relocation of the animist Ojibwa community in Grassy Narrows demonstrates how destructive relocation can be to animist culture. To secure Aboriginal land and labour for capitalist expansion, colonizers forced animist Aboriginal communities into a serial spatiality consistent with capitalist relations of production. Their old reserve was consistent with animist spatiality- “continuous, homogenous, symmetrical, reversible, and open”- to a new reserve consistent with capitalist space: “serial, fractured, parcelled, cellular and irreversible” (Poulantzas 1978: 103). Colonizers force the Grassy Narrows community to relocate onto a new
As a result of the move to the new reserve, certain aspects of the Ojibwa way of knowing about the reality of space and time ceased to be useful in structuring individual and social experiences (Shkilnyk 1985: 64). A major aspect of colonialism in Canada involves the forcing of Aboriginal communities like Grassy Narrows onto small pockets of land called reservations (Satzewich & Liodakis 2007). This act disrupts the relational processes that reproduce the Ojibwa as a collective group.

Grassy Narrows Indian Reserve lies about 120 miles east of Winnipeg and is inhabited by an Ojibwa tribe with a population of about 600-700 people (Statistics Canada 2006). The community, up until the 1960’s, lived consistently with the “ancient patterns of Ojibwa life” because they had limited contact with white settler society (Shkilnyk 1985: 2). This is not to say that the government had not been trying to monopolize on their traditional lands by encroaching on their ways of life through attempts at modernization. Residential schools in the 1920’s, elective chieftaincy beginning in 1933 and persecution of religious practices in the mid 1930’s were amongst these attempts (Vecsey 1987: 290). However, relations were for the most part cooperative and peaceful- especially in the economic realm- up until destructive colonial projects began intensifying in 1963. One of the most devastating colonial practices was the forced relocation of the community to a new reserve, upon which it was very difficult for the Ojibwa to live in accordance to their culture and worldviews.

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The community was able to maintain economic autonomy until 1947-1948 when the Ontario government implemented resource management and licensing- now known as the Ministry of Natural Resources (Vecsey 1987). Through Forced licensing and regulating, the government attempted to undermine the remaining socio-economic avenues that Ojibwa had left since moving to the new reserve (including trapping, gardening, hunting and fishing). By 1977, 97.4 percent of the income on the reserve was spent on non-Aboriginal products- 47 percent went to the Hudson's Bay Company and 21 percent went to the Ontario Liquor Control Board (Shkilnyk 1985). Grassy Narrows’ economic autonomy was eroding on the new reserve and with it went the structure of societal life. It only took a few years for hunting and gardening to become nearly obsolete, and commercial fishing was one of the few ways that Ojibwa were able to maintain economic practices that were complementary to their traditional ways of life and allowed them to maintain their collective lives and identities.

The new space had an alienating effect on the community, which violently disrupted the relational processes- involving both humans and the environment- that create and sustain Ojibwa group life and identity. The new reserve’s spatial layout is a perfect visual example of a capitalist space because it is literally positioned like a grid rather than circular. Houses are grouped very close together, causing clans to live intermingled. This undermines the community’s levels of comfort and privacy. The grid-like layout also disrupts the community’s social, economic and political structures. On the new reserve some people live closer to the water source which creates new tensions. The Grassy Narrows community is also unable to hunt and trap on the new reserve to the extent that they did before, undermining their traditional relations of production. As the government re-organized Grassy Narrows’ relations of production, all other aspects of their lives were affected in turn.

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now known as the Ministry of Natural Resources (Vecsey 1987). In 1957 the first commercial fishing license is implemented. Commercial licensing still allows the Ojibwa to maintain economic practices that were complementary to their traditional ways of life. Sharing remains highly valued throughout the community (Vecsey 1987). Fishing fits well into seasonal cycles of work (Shkilnyk 1985). Fishing also holds religious sanctions, both in terms of catching fish and sharing them throughout the community. Fishing provides a sense of pride and confidence to the community. They deliver thousands of pounds of fish to Kenora fish market. The Ojibwa are able to fish all year round, and some people also work as fishing guides seasonally (Shkilnyk 1985). Commercial fishing brings high levels of income to the community. After being forced to relocate in 1961, fishing becomes an even more important aspect of Ojibwa community life. Shkilnyk explains that this is because...

... it was one of the few remaining occupations ... that permitted families to work together. Because sons worked alongside father and wives tended nets while husbands were guiding, commercial fishing had provided some continuity with the traditional ways of organizing work within a family group. Moreover, the loss of the trapline way of life just seven years earlier made commercial fishing even more important as a link with customary ways of living from the land (1985: 200).

Up until the 1960’s seven out of nine families in Grassy Narrows work in the fisheries since they opened in the 1950’s. Community life and its continuity heavily depended on fishing in Grassy Narrows.

In May 1970 the Ontario government banned commercial fishing on all lakes and streams in the English-Wabigoon river system (Shkilnyk 1985). Dangerously high levels of methyl mercury were found in the fish throughout this aquatic region. The culprits were Dryden Chemicals and Reed Paper Limited (Dryden Division), which operated between 1962 and 1975 (Shkilnyk 1985). Dryden Chemicals produced mercury cathode chlor-alkali which was used as bleach in the near-by pulp and paper mill. During this time about 40,000 pounds of inorganic mercury leaked into the environment “via aquatic and aerial discharges”. About half of this went into the English-Wabigoon river system (Shkilnyk 1985: 189). Mercury is highly poisonous to human beings with frightening health implications. As a result, the Ontario government placed a fishing ban to prevent people from eating contaminated fish. Severing the Ojibwa community’s ties to their land and community has dire consequences, which is exactly what happened when the fishing ban was implemented in their territory due to mercury poisoning. The community went from a 95 percent employment rate to a 95 percent unemployment rate. Community members as a result are forced to work menial capitalist positions that do not fit well with their worldviews and do not contribute to their collective lives and identities (Shkilnyk 1985).

The new reserve not only affected the community’s economic relations, but as Poulantzas suggests “it is an essentially politically character in that the State tends to monopolize the procedures of the organization of space” (Poulantzas 1978). The political implications can be clearly seen in the relocation of Grassy Narrows as well. Government intervention continued to increase under the guise of “community
development” (Vecsey 1987). White officials believed that new houses, roads and infrastructure would somehow solve the Ojibwa’s social and economic problems. It became increasingly evident that community development was equated with the ideology of modernization, and so-called “progressive Indians,” who assimilated more successfully, could inspire more “backwards” ones to do the same (Shkilnyk 1985: 135). Repeated Canadian attempts to "modernize" Indian life, to encourage economic "development" only made things worse for Ojibwa group life (Vecsey 1987:291). The Ontario government continues to impede people from living in their traditional way of life through various tactics, including the refusal to address the issue of contamination, and the continual exploitation of Grassy Narrows land for commercial gains.

The new reserve is also spiritually unfit for the Ojibwa community to live on. The new space consists of bad land which could be perceived by the Ojibwa but not by the colonizers that forced them to move there (Shkilnyk 1985). Their new living space is not spiritually suitable because there are bad spirits that roam the area (Shkilnyk 1985: 71). Spirits live in certain places and it is important not to disturb them because of all the trouble they can cause. The new reserve is already inhabited by a bad spirit which is extremely problematic and would have normally prevented the community from settling there. The spirit beings of the Ojibwa world exist in the same space as people, and occupy “a characteristic spatial locale associated with a natural feature of the terrain,” such as cliffs and mountains for example (Shkilnyk 1985). These spirits could affect anything from people’s health and vitality, to the productivity of the land. Therefore, choosing the space for human settlement relies heavily on spiritual criteria because the well-being and collective survival of the band depends on it (Shkilnyk, 1985). Shkilnyk summarizes the importance of space and social relations for the Grassy Narrows Ojibwa in saying: “In short, space and social order, with attendant considerations for privacy, security and equality of access to water, were inextricably intertwined in the settlement form the old reserve” (1985: 68).

**Animism, Pre-Capitalist, and Capitalist Time**

Significant changes in temporal orientation, caused by the implementation of wage labour onto Aboriginal communities living on reserves, disrupt social and economic relational processes that are necessary for maintaining the group as a whole. Western cultures have come to assume that there is one natural and absolute temporal order in the universe. This is the 24 hour clock time which follows the earth’s orbit around the sun. In the West, a year consists of 365 days, give or take several hours, made up of months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, and seconds (Shkilnyk 1985). It is easy to forget that these categorizations of time are products of our colonial and capitalist culture. This system of time is embedded in capitalism; time becomes a commodity that can be bought and sold, wasted, lost, made up, and so on. Time can be measured and its components aggregated (Shkilnyk 1985).

Animist cultures traditionally used pre-capitalist time that often went by the moon. The moon was not a division of continuous time but instead a reoccurring event (Shkilnyk, 1985). The moons were differentiated by names that referred to things like the seasonal appearance of certain animals or to the condition of plant life during a particular season. The cycle of seasons was very important. Years were not
temporal units of continuous duration that could be reduced to smaller measurable units but simply an interval of time between the recurring events of the seasons (Shkilnyk 1985). Relocation caused traditional modes of production to be destroyed and, as a result, communities were often forced to participate in menial capitalist labour jobs to survive. Western time perspectives went hand in hand with the shift to on-reserve wage labour and government sponsored employment projects.

Societies’ entire ways of life, including their way of thinking about time and of structuring their daily activities were undermined by the relocation. Pre-capitalist time that is consistent with animist worldviews was often ‘task-oriented,’ measured through cyclical work and chores and on nature- so wind, sun, tides and so on (Thompson 1967). The temporal rhythm of traditional animism has been described as gentle and flowing in response to physical necessity, external circumstances, or simply by whim. Time is conceived in an abstract fashion, or is assumed to be autonomous or infinitely divisible (Thompson 1967). Time that is perceived as linear or sidereal, or treated as a commodity is completely alien to animist cultures. On many reserves, these Western capitalist notions of time are a dominant mode of individual and social orientation, and animist cultures are forced to live within these restricting categorizations. The re-arranging of temporal perceptions violently disrupts the relational processes that create and sustain animist groups’ life and identity.

CONCLUSION

Colonialism and relocation has wreaked havoc on Aboriginal animist communities across Canada, however this devastation has not been without resistance. Reclaiming appropriated land is very important to regaining decolonized identities, and the process of land rights struggles are essential to undermining colonial and capitalist power. The reclaiming of space taken through colonization is a process which both undermines colonial power and at the same time allows Aboriginal people to begin rebuilding a new, decolonized identity. As Aboriginal groups in Canada struggle to regain their stolen lands, they are resisting colonial boundaries and reasserting decolonized identities.

The deliberate distortion of boundaries, such as those which occur during the process of reclaiming colonized space, can be referred to as “gerrymandering” (Tyner 2006: 132). This is a political process where the manipulating of boundaries and spatial distributions takes place, and therefore the dominant political structures attempting to control these boundaries and the people within them are undermined. “Just as space is produced through the contestation of representations, so too are identities” (Tyner 2006: 59). Resistance in this form involves a variety of “insurgent social practices that eluded ‘proper places,’ mocked established grids, and defied imperial cartographies of power” (Gregory 1993: 195). A creation of new space is made where Aboriginal animist groups are able resist the genocidal effects of forced relocation and live consistently within the spatiality and temporality of their own worldviews.
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