

**SETTLER COLONIALISM A PERSEVERING INJUSTICE, THE
RESPONSIBILITY TO CONTEST IT, AND SETTLER ALLIES' USE OF
MEDIA TO DISSEMINATE A COMPETING DISCOURSE:
THE CASE OF ASINABKA**

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Abstract

Colonialism may seem a thing of the past, harking back images of European powers in Asia or Africa. However, colonialism perseveres, particularly in the form of settler colonialism in states like Canada and Australia. Settler colonialism entails illegitimate capture of land and erasure of Indigenous peoples from those lands. Some settlers are awakening to the ongoing injustices and their responsibility to support Indigenous peoples. This article uses one case of settler allies in Ottawa who struggle to thwart colonialism and support Algonquin people. In so doing, they attempt to use the media to counter the hegemonic logic of settler colonialism.

Key Words

Colonialism, Indigenous peoples, Ottawa, Algonquin, media, settler colonialism

Résumé

Le colonialisme peut sembler une histoire du passé, faisant fi des images des puissances européennes en Asie ou en Afrique. Cependant, il persévère, en particulier sous la forme du colonialisme des colons dans des États comme le Canada et l'Australie. Il entraîne la conquête illégitime de terres et l'effacement des peuples autochtones. Certains colons prennent conscience des injustices actuelles et de leur responsabilité de soutenir les peuples autochtones. Cet article utilise un cas d'alliés colonisateurs à Ottawa qui luttent pour contrecarrer le colonialisme et soutenir le peuple algonquin. Ce faisant, ils tentent d'utiliser les médias pour contrer la logique hégémonique du colonialisme des colons.

Mots-clés

Colonialisme, peuples autochtones, Ottawa, Algonquins, médias, colons

Colonialism may seem a thing of the past, harking back images of the British or Dutch in parts of Asia or Africa, for example. There is a common misperception that colonialism ended in the mid-20th century with the independence of many Asian and African countries that had been under European control. However, such illegitimate occupation and acquisition of political control over other nations and their exploitation persevere. This statement may seem surprising to many since, in the territories where colonialism continues, it is not generally perceived as such. Perhaps this is because the colonizing populations now outnumber the Indigenous populations or perhaps it is because the colonial powers have so successfully created an image of legitimacy for their sovereignty. Nevertheless, settlers around the world continue to attempt settling and dominating lands not traditionally their own. This is seen in Canada, the United States of America, and Australia, among other nations (Wolfe, 2006). This colonialism began in the Western hemisphere in the form of genocide when European settlers first arrived. Indigenous people already inhabited the continent for at least 12000 years (Stebbins, 2013) but after Columbus' first landing, tens of millions of Indigenous people were massacred. 95% of the Indigenous nations' populations were wiped out all over the Western hemisphere (Stannard, 1992). European colonists made multiple interconnected attempts to annihilate Indigenous peoples over the proceeding centuries. This genocide was seen not only in the massacring of Indigenous people but in successive attempts to destroy Indigenous societies as well. An example of the state-led intent to extinguish Indigenous societies in Canada is evident in its imposed boarding schools for Indigenous children where cultural practices were forbidden and physical and sexual abuse were rampant (Benvenuto, Woolford & Hinton, 2014). Although the outright slaughter of Indigenous people became unacceptable, such attempts to annihilate Indigenous societies continue today, largely unnoticed. The last Canadian federally funded residential school for Indigenous children, one of the most notorious for physical and sexual abuse, was closed only about 30 years ago. Despite purported Indigenous and treaty rights in these settler colonial states, the political reality of Indigenous peoples today is that their sovereignty is impinged upon by imperious settler states. Furthermore, Indigenous people continue to be targeted for physical and cultural destruction, particularly through theft of their traditional lands (Alfred, 2001). Settler states deny the sovereignty of Indigenous nations that existed in the territories for millennia before settlers arrived.

Academics have termed this form of colonialism that endures today *settler colonialism*. It is defined by territories where invasive settler societies attempt to replace Indigenous populations. The settlers progressively develop distinctive identities and sovereignty in those territories (Wolfe, 2006, Veracini, 2011). This form of colonialism attempts to expunge Indigenous peoples from the territory's history. This erasure creates the illusion that the land was free for the taking, thus justifying theft of Indigenous lands. Land is accumulated as a source of resources or real estate for settlers (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009). Settler colonialism's organizing principle is therefore inherently eliminatory, aiming to liquidate Indigenous peoples such that colonists may acquire more land and settle permanently in new communities. Taking Canada as an example, one finds that this illegitimate appropriation of land and replacement of Indigenous nations is largely ignored in mainstream discourse and politics. Indigenous nations' sovereignty is ultimately limited by the 'sovereign' Canadian government, composed almost totally of settler colonists (Amadahy & Lawrence, 2009).

Settler colonialism functions in part by making the colonial situation appear invisible. Settler colonialism presents settlement as merely part of the past. It ignores continued Indigenous presence on the land and it obfuscates the reality that both settlement and Indigenous resistance are ongoing (Toth, 2016). Settler colonialism indubitably then manifests and operates through the dominant discourse of the state. In Canada, even though the government has increasingly used the terms ‘recognition’ and ‘reconciliation’ in relation to Indigenous peoples, particularly since the outcome of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, use of these terms still serve to legitimate ongoing settler colonialism. Mainstream contemporary Canadian politics of reconciliation and recognition in fact perpetuate colonial subjectivity among Indigenous peoples and coopt their efforts. These terms do little to address the generative structures of colonialism and serve to undermine Indigenous worldviews and claims. These terms are coined and interpreted in a settler way, not an Indigenous way. Furthermore, it is at the discretion of the Canadian government as to how to realize these terms, not at the discretion of Indigenous people (Coulthard, 2014). ‘Reconciliation’ has arguably been appropriated by the hegemonic discourse to promote a positive image of the Canadian state (Henderson, 2013). Despite the government’s alleged attempts to usher in ‘recognition’ of Indigenous rights and ‘reconciliation’ with Indigenous peoples, the brutality of colonialism continues in many forms (Regan, 2006, Coulthard, 2014).

Settler colonial ideology is also prevalent among most Canadian settler citizens. For example, while most Canadians note a large gap in the standard of living between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, only about half of non-Indigenous Canadians feel Indigenous people have any unique rights as the first inhabitants of Canada. And just as many non-Indigenous Canadians believe that Indigenous people themselves are the biggest obstacle to achieving a better standard of living as the number of Canadians that identify the policies of the Canadian government as the biggest obstacle. Furthermore, most settler Canadians do not believe mainstream Canadians benefit from discrimination of Indigenous peoples (Environics Institute, 2016). This is even though Canadian prosperity relies largely on extractive industries and the export of raw materials, which also depends upon the illegitimate and continued appropriation of Indigenous land. Canadian prosperity relies on the social and legal discrimination of Indigenous peoples (Barsh, 1994). Not only are settler Canadians generally unaware of how the nation continues to prosper based on perpetual settlement, they are also largely uninformed of the early genocide committed by settlers that eliminated almost all Indigenous peoples and attempted to wipe out their cultures. For example, most Canadians have not heard about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that concluded the Canadian state intentionally committed physical and cultural genocide (Environics Institute, 2016). Canadian settler citizens, like the Canadian state, are immersed in settler colonialism. Even when it comes to terms like; apology, reconciliation, and recognition as they relate to Indigenous peoples, settlers interpret them in a way that rejects relationships of mutuality and respect because they unwaveringly consider the Canadian state’s sovereignty as supreme (Mackey, 2013). Discourse and opinion emanating from the government and settler citizens therefore demonstrates the extant ignorance of continuing injustices committed against Indigenous peoples as well as ignorance of how settlers profit from these injustices.

Theft of unceded Indigenous land endures and Canadian governments and settlers continue to profit from it. But this theft of land not only robs Indigenous nations of their traditional territories and sources of livelihood, it also robs them of their cultural and spiritual bases.

Indigenous peoples hold their lands as having the highest possible meaning and make their statements relative to points of land (Deloria Jr., 2003). Land gives meaning to relationships and ways of being for Indigenous peoples. Land refers to concepts, memories, histories, ideas, emotions, relationships, identities (individual and community), and objects associated to a particular place (Michell, Vizina, Augustus & Sawyer, 2008). Land is considered a source of knowledge and strength by Indigenous peoples and yet the Canadian state and settlers continue ongoing appropriation of the land and suppression of Indigenous nations. The settler colonial project marches on to expand settler control of land and to delegitimize the sovereignty of Indigenous nations and their connections to the land that existed for millennia before settlers arrived. Indigenous sovereignty and their critical connections to the land continue to be denied and sabotaged.

Although settler colonialism and its inherent injustices are not for the most part understood by the larger settler Canadian population, as is evident in the discourse and popular opinion of Canadians, some settlers are starting to comprehend the reach and gravity of settler colonialism and how they benefit in their complicity. Significantly, these settlers are throwing away the colonial idea that Indigenous claims are an ‘Indigenous-problem’ and are instead realizing that settler colonialism and Indigenous claims are a ‘non-Indigenous’ problem. Settlers themselves are responsible for settler colonialism and its inherent injustices; there is a responsibility for settlers to thwart this colonialism as it is perpetuated largely by settlers. These awakened settlers are attempting to push back against colonial relations of power, while recognizing their entanglement and complicity in these colonial relations of power (Keefer, 2010). Their anti-colonial stances start with being critical of hegemonic forms of knowledge and being conscious that although states claim sovereignty over territory, they do not have legitimate bases to absorb the territory (Churchill, 1992). Settlers must relinquish land, power, and privilege from this standpoint. This approach means being accountable to the sovereignty and futurity of Indigenous peoples, not that of settlers (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Anti-colonial stances assert decolonizing efforts must center and privilege Indigenous life, community, and epistemology. As Sium, Desai, and Ritskes (2012) specify, decolonization struggles demand the valuing of Indigenous sovereignty in its material, psychological, epistemological, and spiritual forms. Thus, Indigenous knowledges are taken as the starting point for resurgence and decolonization. Sium et al. (2012) also emphasize decolonization is relevant to the particular context and geography. What is called for in decolonizing depends on the particularities and complexities of local Indigenous desires and needs. In this way, decolonizing struggles offer possibility for settler allies to engage in the present towards an Indigenous future. Decolonization projects can be reimaginations and re-articulations of power, change, and knowledge. Additionally, because of the deep value and connection Indigenous peoples hold for land, struggles for the restoration of traditional Indigenous territories are considered central to decolonizing efforts.

There are examples of settlers across Canada who are increasingly becoming cognizant of the power of settler colonialism, their complicity in the system, and their responsibility to support Indigenous resurgence. One such example is observed in the actions of settler supporters of the Algonquin people in Canada’s capital city, Ottawa. Algonquin inhabited the Ottawa area for at least 8000 years; European settlers arrived only about 400 years ago. Indigenous peoples never surrendered the land to settlers (Algonquins of Ontario, 2013). Furthermore, the Royal Proclamation of 1763 prohibited the settlement of Indigenous lands

unless they were first ceded to or purchased by the Crown. This has never been done and Algonquin have been petitioning for their title in this area for over 250 years. In addition to being pushed out of their traditional lands and having them occupied by settlers, Algonquin now also face the imminent threat of commercial development on a site they have considered sacred for at least 5000 years. This site, called Asinabka, was similarly never ceded or surrendered (Macdougall, 2016). Asinabka consists of a waterfall and islands in the Ottawa river that hold strong historic, cultural, and spiritual significance for the Algonquin (Asinabka, 2016). Not surprisingly, most Algonquin nations are opposed to this development project and say that no level of government has consulted or accommodated the Algonquin over this issue (APTN, 2015). Despite Algonquin speaking up and formulating specific resolutions, construction has begun at Asinabka (Valentina, 2016). Some settlers in the Ottawa area have understood this injustice perpetrated by settlers and have been propelled into action to support the Algonquin fight to protect their land. The point of focusing on these settler allies in this article is not to laud their actions uncritically, nor to erase the primary activism of the Algonquin on whose land this story all takes place. But attention is drawn to these settler allies as their actions demonstrate an attempt at an anti-colonial stance that centers Indigenous resurgence, particularly as it relates to restoration of traditional Algonquin land. Asinabka is a very significant place for the Algonquin and settlers are starting with this value for the space and centering the Algonquin struggle to preserve the land from commercial development. In so doing, the settler allies reject government and builder discourse that presents the commercial project as good for the economy and environmentally sustainable. Settler allies are starting with Algonquin sentiments of the importance of this land and working out of a sense of comradeship to support the Algonquin value for the land. As mentioned earlier, decolonizing entails focusing on Indigenous knowledge and interests and being accountable to Indigenous futurity, not that of settlers. Thus, economic gain, which would be for the largely non-Indigenous peoples, is not of import to these settler allies. They overtly prioritize Algonquin interests as opposed to potential gain for settlers. Furthermore, settler allies say that even if the development is considered environmentally sustainable, the fact is that it is being built illegitimately and on a sacred Algonquin site. No matter how sustainable the community is it is still being built by erasing the value of the land to Algonquin (Cicero, 2016).

This case also demonstrates the hegemony of the settler colonial logic and how it continues invisibly and unquestioned. Merely labeling a project as economically profitable or environmentally sustainable seems to justify development projects. Windmill, the company building the Zibi commercial and real estate project at Asinabka, claims that Zibi will offer employment opportunities for Algonquin and raise awareness about Algonquin people and their culture in Ottawa (Porter, 2017). However, only two of the ten Algonquin nations' leadership support the Zibi commercial development at Asinabka. Their leadership and some of their community members hope the project will bring economic benefits to their communities, particularly through construction jobs (Porter, 2017). But other members of these same Algonquin communities state that the leadership does not represent their interests and that they are opposed to Zibi (Tumilty, 2017). Most Algonquin are opposed to the project and state that they were not properly consulted, that giving the land back to First Nations people would constitute an act of reconciliation, and regardless of how sustainable development might be it would still be built on what they consider sacred land (Cornick, 2016). Even though most Algonquin community members and their leadership are against the development, Windmill said its aim was 'just about reaching out to the Algonquins and

inviting them to be part of the project' and dismissed the fact that many of the Algonquin are against the project (Bay, 2015). According to Windmill, general Algonquin consent is not necessary for development of the project on their sacred lands and the company has no qualms about hiding this stance. The fact that Algonquin consent is not mandatory for the project illustrates the power of settler colonial logic at play.

There are non-Indigenous in Ottawa who have come to understand the blatant injustice of this development project. They have decided to center Algonquin values for the sacredness of the land and support Algonquin resurgence to preserve Asinabka. These settler allies are trying to draw attention to the settler colonial nature of this development project. They are active in a variety of ways. In particular, many of these allies engage the media in their efforts to support Indigenous interests. In so doing they are also countering the prevalent Canadian settler colonial logic that suppresses and erases Indigenous voices. Some allies have used the media as a tool to draw out the contradictions of settler colonialism and provide a rebuttal that is so far uncommon in public discourse. Any representation, even small, of Indigenous and settler ally perspectives in the media indicate at least a rupture in the dominant settler colonial discourse. Allies are intentionally using the media to create awareness of the issue and shed light on how the development exemplifies the perpetuation of colonialism (Macdougall, 2015). To reiterate, focusing on settler ally use of the media is not to disregard the main statements made by Algonquin regarding Asinabka. Rather, focusing on settler ally use of the media is for the purpose of demonstrating how some settlers are waking up to the realities of settler colonialism, their responsibilities, and taking action -partly through the media.

Many alternative ideas are presented by settler allies in the media, in their support of Algonquin desires to preserve Asinabka. Allies largely focus on how the circumstance is an overt act of settler colonialism. They emphasize that the area was never ceded or surrendered by Algonquin people (Macdougall, 2016). It is therefore not possible for the government to legally sell the land to private developers. In the media, allies cite Canadian government documents like the Royal Proclamation of 1763 that prohibits the settlement of Indigenous lands unless first ceded to or purchased by the Crown and iterate that Asinabka has never been ceded. Allies also say that even if the Crown is considered sovereign over this land, other government documents dating back to 1854 reserve the space for public use as parkland. These documents stipulate that, at most, the area may be leased under certain conditions. Allies draw attention to the fact that the area cannot legally be transferred to private companies even though the developer is insisting lots in the area are privately owned. Historical records show there is no private ownership (Neigh, 2017). Settler supporters are thus openly calling on the government to make sure land is not transferred from the government to the private developer (Cornick, 2016). Allies also communicate to the media that so far governments of all levels mostly continue to ignore Indigenous requests for communication, discussion, and consultation (Macdougall, 2016) and they publicly iterate that the government has so far not addressed the issue and is deferring it to Windmill (Harford, 2016). Allies are thus framing this development as an outright colonial act in the media (Macdougall, 2016). They are using the media to highlight and legitimate Indigenous claims to land and the Canadian government and citizens' perpetuation of colonialism through this development. If it were not for these competing ideas in the media, the project would merely be lauded for its economic potential and for being environmentally sustainable.

Moreover, in the media, allies stress that acknowledging Indigenous claims would be a powerful act of reconciliation (Rousseau, 2016). In their statements, allies are centering Algonquin values for the land as a reason for their efforts to fight development (Neigh, 2017). And they are drawing upon and citing teachings of Algonquin elders like the late William Commanda and Albert Dumont (Rousseau, 2016), demonstrating their intent to take direction from the Algonquin.

Allies also publicly draw attention to the colonial nature of the development project and its obstinateness by showing there are equally profitable alternatives that could be built, not on sacred land, and yet those alternatives are not even being considered by the developer. For example, settler allies draw attention to the fact that there are other nearby spaces, close to Asinabka, where the development could take place in lieu of the sacred site (McCooney, 2015). Building in another available location would still garner profit for the developer and not prevent potential employment for Algonquin. Allies' perspectives demonstrate that the development need not be a zero-sum game. There could still be development and job creation for Algonquin community members. Allies publicly question why the development, in its current form, must be at the cost of a sacred site, particularly when alternatives exist. They demonstrate the callousness and invisibility of settler colonialism. It is unlikely the Canadian state and people would allow for a development project to be built on a sacred site like a church or mosque without the consent of the congregation. Yet, in this case, Asinabka is not considered a sacred place by most Ottawans, otherwise its desecration would not be occurring.

In media statements, allies are also demonstrating that to be an ally is a constant exercise of discernment. Their comments show that serious thought is required about how to support local Indigenous resurgence. Being a settler ally is not straightforward; being an ally implicitly means not supporting an opposing side. In many cases, when it comes to disputes over land, there may be Indigenous peoples on opposing sides as well. This is the case with Asinabka and how allies explain their allegiance provides an important lesson for other settlers in how to practically take an anti-colonial stance. In the case of Asinabka, two Algonquin communities do support the development. However, settler allies justify their opposition by asserting that majority of Algonquin community members and their leadership reject the development, as does the National Assembly of First Nations (Macdougall, 2016, Neigh, 2017). Ally supporters justify their support by expressing they back what the majority of Algonquin want. They have vociferated that Windmill has only consulted with one or two nations and another group they claim to have consulted is 'fictitious' and does not legitimately represent the Algonquin people (Harford, 2016). Other allies have stated the chiefs may be out of step with the larger Algonquin community (McCooney, 2015). These allies therefore offer ideas for navigating allyship when choices are not clear because often Indigenous nations do not have homogenous perspectives. Thus, allies draw attention to the colonial nature of the project through the media but also demonstrate and exemplify how allyship occurs.

Settler colonialism is the ongoing settlement on stolen land and legitimization of a foreign sovereign state. Its ideology is so dominant that it goes largely unnoticed. However, some settler allies are coming to understand how settlers profit off this injustice and are attempting

to center Indigenous resistance. The case of Asinabka exemplifies a case where allies are propelled by the knowledge and aspirations of the Algonquin people and are attempting to support them. Part of the allies' activism is shown in their use of the media where they attempt to counter hegemonic settler colonial logic. Through media they question the sovereignty of the Canadian state by drawing attention to the fact that the territory was never ceded or surrendered and they provide legal documentation to evidence this. Allies challenge the state by publicly questioning the state's purported intentions for reconciliation given the various level of governments' inaction on this issue. Similarly, allies have offered alternatives to building on the sacred site, where economic gain and employment for Indigenous community members need not be lost, indicating the outright irreverence of the colonial project. Allies are using the media to counter the dominant settler colonial logic. Furthermore, many of their public statements contribute to ideas of how allyship might work on the ground, showing new alternatives to the settler colonial logic. In justifying how allies determine who to support within Indigenous nations, for example, they are demonstrating that being an ally is a continuous struggle and demands constant exercise of judgment and corresponding action. In however small ways, settler allies are opening new and different paths of thinking for the mainstream settler community and often through the media.

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