

Toward the 8th fire: The view from Oshkimaadziig Unity Camp

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Anishinabek Confederacy to Invoke our Nation (ACTION)

Abstract

Land is the basis of all life and is an integral object and objective of settler colonialism. As the Canadian state works tirelessly to ‘fill in the gaps’ – both historical and geographical – of its sovereign territorial rule, Indigenous land-based knowledges and existences are pushed further to the margins. And so, Indigenous land reclamations arguably pose an especially potent threat to the logics of settler colonialism by taking back land and providing the space to re-build and protect Indigenous life-ways. This conversational piece engages with experiences of the authors and the Oshkimaadziig Unity Camp – an active land reclamation in what is now called Awenda Provincial Park in Ontario – in order to illustrate how land reclamations both effectively challenge settler Canadian sovereignty and produce a new space within which alternative knowledges, cross-cutting solidarities, and decolonization efforts all co-emerge. Oshkimaadziig Unity Camp has carved out a space in which meaningful strides are being made to go beyond decolonization as a metaphor and encourage the embodiment of new anti-colonial relations between people (both Indigenous and settler) and the land.

Keywords: *decolonization; land reclamation; Oshkimaadziig; land-based education*

Introduction

Land is the basis of all life. Within Canadian settler colonial rule, land is both an object and objective. As an external object to be owned and exploited, land in the Canadian state and society is primarily related to as a source of private economic wealth. As an objective, the history of settlement on Turtle Island (North America) – a history that, despite continued resistance, continues unbroken to this day – shows that sovereign authority over land must always remain a keystone of settler colonial rule. This is why the Indigenous reclamation of land, as a strategy of relating to it in fundamentally more social and relational ways, is an especially potent form of colonial resistance.

In order to secure its territorial sovereignty, the Canadian state has relied upon violence, denial, and deceit. Since Canada bases its legitimacy on upholding ‘law and order’, it must retroactively legitimize settlement through both legal and reconciliatory mechanisms. As such, the Canadian state is forced to continuously ‘fill in the gaps’ of its own claims to sovereign authority. These ‘gaps’, however, are multiplying in size and number in recent years. Thus, it is important to note that, in the face of Indigenous resurgence, establishing the legitimacy of Canada – as a territory, government, history, and identity – remains *an unfinished project*. Assessing the legitimacy of the Canadian state from the viewpoint of Indigenous land-based resistance brings the unfinished nature of Canadian rule into focus. The continued presence of resurgent Indigenous nations across Turtle Island is an unsettling reminder that Canada’s so-called ‘Indian problem’ has not and will not go away so long as the settler colonial project continues its programme of accumulation/assimilation by dispossession.

In this light, the reclaiming of land by Indigenous people across Turtle Island is an especially potent threat in a settler colonial context. Land reclamation not only undermines the legitimacy of the Canadian state’s control of and its claims to these lands, but also opens up a positive and creative space in which to build new decolonizing relations that work toward a coexistence based on peace, respect, and non-interference. The Oshkimaadziig Unity Camp is one such example. In this short piece, the authors attempt to speak in a conversational, situated manner that attempts to write across the Indigenous-settler divide. Giibwanisi is a co-founder of the Camp, which was established in 2012 in what is now Awenda Provincial Park. Karl is a settler graduate student who works with the Camp and other initiatives that are committed to building relationship between people and with the land based on the fundamental principles of peace, respect, and coexistence as found in the Guswentha (Two Row Wampum). This piece is a chance for the authors to produce something that writes ‘from the two rows of the Wampum’ so to speak and collectively situate the Oshkimaadziig Unity Camp in a larger context of land-based resistance and Biskaabiiyang: a process that does not take decolonization as a metaphor but as an embodied way of life that requires a physical and spiritual return to the land. In this special land-based issue of *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society*, we would like to address the journal’s three themes, briefly touching upon our situated understandings of Indigeneity, education, and society in relation to the work being done at the Oshkimaadziig Unity Camp. But first, let us say a few words about the Camp.

Oshkimaadziig Unity Camp

‘Oshkimaadziig’ in the Anishinabek language refers to the “new people” of the 7th Fire Prophecy. Briefly, the 7th Fire Prophecy is a point in time when we humans must choose between two paths. One path is interpreted as that of capitalism, environmental destruction, and spiritual alienation. The other is a path toward decolonization, spiritualism, and a return to a harmonious relation to the land and to each other; all of which help direct us back to the natural rhythms of Mother Earth. The Oshkimaadziig are those people whose responsibility it is to aid humanity in building a future that works toward lighting the 8th Fire. As such, the Camp is a space committed to forging a path towards decolonization through lighting the 8th Fire and creating a collective future based on respect for all nations on Turtle Island.

The Oshkimaadziig Unity Camp began as a protest against the legal resolution of the Coldwater Narrows Land Claim within Canada’s Specific Land Claims process. The specific claim effectively renounced four Nations’ rightful claims to over 10,000 acres of land in return for approximately \$307 million, the largest sum awarded in the history of specific claims. For those who opposed this settlement, the acceptance of this agreement extinguished the potential for future generations to live on, connect with, and protect these ancestral lands. And so, a small group of opponents to this surrender decided that future action would be taken that extended beyond the negotiation table.

The Camp was set up in Awenda Provincial Park, chosen due to its rich Anishinabek history and the presence of a Council Fire rock with etchings dating back to 1795. Since its construction, the Camp has been under periodic surveillance and harassment from the park’s superintendent, the Ontario Provincial Police, and Ontario’s Ministry of Natural Resources. Two and a half years later, the Camp continues to grow, builds new structures, and becomes increasing self-sufficient. Its purpose is to serve as a space within which new dialogues and actions are built through settler-Indigenous relationships. Land, and a respectful relation with it, is vital both to ensuring the survival of Indigenous life-ways as well as building an anti-colonial resistance to the violence of the Canadian settler state. The Camp is occupying these lands in order to reclaim and reignite traditional teachings, ceremonies, and governance structures in order to resist the unbroken legacy of colonialism in Canada. The space is meant to provide an environment within which relations old and new, with First Nations and Settlers, may be made and remade through the fundamental principles of peace, co-existence, and non-interference. Today, it remains a site of resurgence and resistance to Canadian colonial rule and a space of learning and relationship-building.

The Camp's message is clearly displayed for all those who walk up to it: No Surrender.

Giibwanisi: The “successes” of the Oshkimaadziig Unity Camp are many things to many people. For me, I want to scale down the efforts to individual levels to highlight some of the positive effects the Camp has had. Although some of us who utilize the camp are not yet skilled hunters, trappers, medicine men, sweat lodge conductors, or anything fancy, we have begun to lay the foundation of what decolonization can look like and feel like on personal and relational levels. In the Anishinabek understanding of world, the land serves as the basis of all cultural and traditional teachings. Therefore, actively returning to our ancestral lands naturally brings us into a more intimate relation with



them, allowing the natural elements of all sacred things to appear as they wish and to re-awaken and re-invigorate our Anishinabek ways of life. In this way, the land, the spirits, and the teachings present themselves to us directly, in a manner that may otherwise have only been presented by seeking the many ceremonies and guidance of Elders and Medicine People.

The 7 Sacred Grandfather Teachings, for example, are something that you cannot effectively grasp simply by consulting a book, or not necessarily even from an Elder. Instead, I believe that the Elders, through conducting ceremony, teach one how to live their life with the same sacredness that is expected of ceremony. And through this sacred way of being and living, one learns how those 7 Teachings are actualized in everyday life. The challenge of attempting to grow resistance and move beyond settler society by building a communal and modest living at the Camp was hard and severe for us, but it was something that the camp members had to undertake. Our backs were against the wall and we made the decision to commit to something more than a land claim here, or a settlement there. We actualized our desire to return to the land, to our life-ways, and built the Camp.

As we undertook this radical project we forged new relationships with “settler Canadians.” Such relationships may not have otherwise happened it weren’t for the transformations we undertook. Where historical residues of hurt and distrust towards settlers may have been the only relationship we had previously known, we found that when non-native allies approached us with genuine intentions, we could learn to trust and heal some of that intergenerational trauma we carry with us.

Indigeneity

Karl: Prior to settler colonial rule, Indigenous societies practiced a respectful, integrated relationship to the land on and through which one's life is lived. Thus, unsurprisingly, the ongoing colonialism that plagues Turtle Island is a project that is premised on the continued dislocation and spiritual alienation of Indigenous peoples from their lands. This separation festers in the grey landscapes of urban centres, sprawling monochromatic suburbs, impoverished living conditions on reserves, and the destruction of the remaining green spaces by extraction industries. Today, the Canadian state attempts to ensure that all Indigenous claims to land which fall outside of private property regimes or reserves delineated by the Indian Act are funneled into the bureaucratic apparatus of Specific or Comprehensive Land Claims.

Giibwanisi: Understandings of Indigeneity differ depending on people's dis/connection to/from the land. For a lot of 'urbanized' Anishinabek people, who have been dis-located from the land, 'Indigeneity' may not necessarily include a reconnection and recommitment to the land. For them it may involve rallying around 'treaty rights' and/or negotiating for better conditions in education, employment, and health care for Indigenous peoples. For others, simply having access to language classes, Elders, or teaching/sharing circles is enough. Indigeneity, specifically in relation to the Canadian state, may present itself in two generalized forms. On the one hand, it may be channeled through the Band Office and abide by the Indian Act. On the other, it may be enacted through asserting inherent rights to this land, like we have seen in Oka, Ipperwash, Gustafsen Lake, Grassy Narrows, Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug, Elsipogtog, or – on a humbly smaller scale – Oshkimaadziig Unity Camp. In other words, Indigeneity in Canada may involve abiding by Canada's assimilationist, liberal, 'acceptable' forms of Indigeneity ('Aboriginals') or conversely those who assert a distinct nationhood that does not presuppose Canadian sovereignty and which refuses to become another piece in Canada's 'cultural mosaic'.

Karl: Oshkimaadziig, a project in a long line of past, present, and future land reclamations, is an attempt to carve out a space where the choice is not between private ownership, isolated reserves, or monetary compensation for a history of illegal settlement. In the name of the future of generations to come and their ability to work toward Biskaabiiyang, the Camp actively protests and opposes the surrendering of rightful claims to ancestral lands in exchange for a one-time monetary compensation. Oshkimaadziig is direct-action initiative aimed at restoring some semblance of Indigeneity that refuses to take self-determination, sovereign nationhood, and decolonization as mere metaphors.

Giibwanisi: Our disconnection from the land is worrying. The Anishinabek way of life is inextricably linked to the land in every regard: our songs, ceremonies, language, culture - our very way of life - all come from the land. As such, Oshkimaadziig aims to emancipate our people and our lands from the authority of the Canadian state and its imposed Indian Act Band Council system, while simultaneously reasserting Anishinabek Clan Governance and actively working

toward a unifying project of land-based decolonization, all of which are fundamental in reasserting and strengthening Indigeneity.

Education

Giibwanisi: The process of colonization on Turtle Island has removed Anishinabek people from the land and, as a result, a great deal of people no longer possesses the knowledge of how to exist on the land - not as an individual and certainly not as a community.

Karl: Colonial, capitalist forms of education teach its pupils that the land is a commodity to be bought, owned, and exploited. Land is unquestionably equated with property. A relationship based on humans relating to land-as-property is one of mastery, exploitation, and disposability. Not only is this a view that results in massive environmental destruction but one that is fundamentally at odds with *any* vision of the decolonization of Turtle Island.

Giibwanisi: The Anishinabek are taught that the land moves and breathes like any other living organism. The seasons change, the animals migrate, things grow, things die, in the winter time things go to sleep only to be reawakened in the spring time. Anishinabek education of and from the land stresses a respectful relation to the land that requires us to treat it with the dignity afforded to any other living organism. We cannot live without what the land produces for us, both materially and spiritually.

Colonization has removed this source of knowledge through the displacement of Anishinabek peoples, and all other nations on Turtle Island, from a meaningful connection to the land. Our songs, the ceremonies, the prayers - they all come from the land. Without the land, and the 'education' our relation to it provides, the modern-day Anishinabek is only a fraction of what he/she used to be.

The Oshkimaadziig unity camp, as a reclamation site, is actively 'reclaiming our Indigeneity' through reviving and educating on our traditional ways of living, our clan and governance systems, our songs, our ceremonies. Many people balk and say that our way of life out on the land is dead – it is not. It will die only if we allow it.

Karl: Thus the project of 'decolonizing education' isn't simply altering the curriculum in elementary schools. It is about learning the ways in which we can move from our current relationship to the land, which relies on exploitation, by gaining the knowledge necessary to restore a radically different coexistence with both nature and each other.

Society

Karl: Many settlers often conceptualize the future of Indigenous-settler relations with the un/conscious assumption that we are still a part of that future, still here, still settled. By

definition, decolonization disrupts this colonial mindset and brings to the fore the contingency of settler futurity – and this makes it an alienating concept for many settlers living on Turtle Island. But, simply put, it *has* to be that way. Decolonization, like colonization, is a process and, as such, it must always be unsettling. That being said, Oshkimaadziig is a project based on *unity* as symbolized in the Medicine Wheel. The Camp strives to be a space where all nations may build meaningful decolonizing relationships based on the principles of respect, friendship, and peace. The Camp also serves as a facilitator or connector between Indigenous folks living in more abstracted urban settings and a place that is committed to re-strengthening traditional life-ways, which will guide all of us through the precarious crossroads of the 7th Fire Prophecy.

Giibwanisi: A society cannot be considered “decolonizing” without first addressing the continued colonization and settlement of Turtle Island in a meaningful and material way. A decolonizing society must be committed to dismantling the state, White supremacy, and patriarchy and must also be anti-imperialist, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist. It may incorporate various degrees of traditional Indigenous governance and may have political forms that are parallel with some strands of Communism and Anarchism. Oshkimaadziig has to reclaim a space where such political commitments are able to flourish in decolonizing ways that would be suffocated by Canadian settler society. We want to be a connector between the city and the land.

The broader work of being a connector is bringing together community-building strategies in urban areas and community building work at Oshkimaadziig. Settler colonialism, here and now, affects and implicates us all. Decolonization is no different in this regard. To work towards surviving the 7th Fire and lighting the 8th requires Oshkimaadziig to engage with persons in all areas, whether they are Indigenous, settlers, migrants, what have you. The 7th Fire is the Prophecy that states we, all of us on Turtle Island, have to return to the land through rebuilding a respectful and integrated relation to Mother Earth. The 8th Fire prophesizes that in order to survive the 7th Fire, we as a united people must return to an “earth based” existence. This is the ‘decolonization’ that Oshkimaadziig is working toward.

Miigwetch and thank you.