

Grounds for Decolonizing

Getting our Bearings

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A review of

The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization and Resistance (Ed., M. Annette Jaimes, South End Press, 1992)

“Native Americans as a group experience the most extreme poverty...far and away the greatest rates of malnutrition, plague disease, death by exposure, infant mortality, and teen suicide of any group on the continent.”

—M. Annette Jaimes, “Introduction: Sand Creek,” *The State of Native America*

“Native peoples in America remain invisible on their own land, precisely because it is our land.”

—Jimmie Durham, “Cowboys and...,” *The State of Native America*

In my memory there is a multi-colored plastic puzzle map of the “United States,” left from my elementary school days. Each state in the puzzle was a particular tangible shape—the boot of Louisiana, the trapezoid of Nevada, the mitten of Michigan—that found its rightful place among the others by the hard characteristic edges that fit neatly into those of its neighbors. Being a typical American in one regard, I never did memorize all the shapes relative to their names; and several of those little northeastern states got lost somewhere in the bottom of a drawer or under the bed.

What I was learning without realizing it was confusion about what is meaningful, what is valuable, what is real and what is changeable. In my mind the borders of the separate “United States” were as hard and real as the edges of those puzzle pieces, their shapes as durable as the plastic those pieces were made of. The very ground I walked on, was fed from, which the puzzle represented, where its pieces may now lie in some landfill, had no bearing at all.

The State of Native America: Genocide, Colonization and Resistance (Ed., M. Annette Jaimes, South End Press, 1992) is a collection of essays written primarily by Native Americans that challenges North American radicals right where we live—on the lands of the Iroquois, Anishinabe, Sioux, Shoshone, Dine’, Inuit, and Seminole. These are a few of the many indigenous peoples fighting for survival and the recovery of their lands.

Each essay in the collection is an historical analysis or deconstruction of one aspect of the American project to “terminate” indigenous peoples and cultures from this land, leading to the present day. The very fact that the progressive decimation of native sovereignty, of land, water, fishing, religious and wisdom traditions, each require separate study, reflects the historic extension of colonial divide-and-conquer strategies, dissecting once holistic lifeways, into isolated “rights.”

The book should be read cover-to-cover, the organization of the chapter essays moves effectively from the external manipulation of treaties and laws that usurp native land and uproot subsistence traditions through to the inroads of economic, religious and educational coercion and indoctrination. The final chapters discuss how the colonial legacy infused into American art, literature and even radical movements for change, appropriates, misrepresents and diffuses the transformative power of native voices and traditions.

Our Implicit Cooperation

The crux of the book's message for North American readers, however, lies in its challenge to radical activists to acknowledge our implicit cooperation in the colonial relationship when we neglect to confront it in our own words and actions and to integrate our activism with indigenous struggles for the genuine decolonization of Native North America. We cannot credibly speak out against the Israeli occupation of Palestine without recognizing our own position as settlers on Indian lands under corporate and military occupation. Nor can we honorably propose a bioregional geography that eclipses the priority of addressing the land claims of native peoples, from whose traditional understanding environmentalists have so much to learn.

Collectively, the essays suggest the multiple means necessary for decolonization, but they all center implicitly on the basic precondition of native land reclamation. This is an objective which requires the thoughtful participation of non-Indian activists with sympathetic intentions. Author, Ward Churchill (co-director of the Colorado chapter of AIM, author of *Fantasies of the Master Race*, *Struggle for the Land*, among others) brings these two concerns together explicitly in his essay "The Earth Is Our Mother: Struggles for American Land and Liberation in the Contemporary United States," which grapples with the problem of land recovery for Native American people, and confronts North American radicals regarding our general avoidance of the issue. I feel compelled to emphasize this chapter specifically because it addresses a situation that very tangibly hits home with all of us and provokes us at the core of our perspectives.

Churchill begins with a brief history of American theft of native lands. In a passage that nicely deconstructs the American revolutionary mythos, he points out how "in 1763 King George III, specifically to retain the allegiance of the powerful Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) and Muscogee (Creek) Confederacies vis-a-vis England's French rivals—issued a proclamation prohibiting acquisition of lands west of a line drawn along the Allegheny and Appalachian mountain chains." Since so many settlers, including "George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Madison, Anthony Wayne and numerous others among the 'Founding Fathers' all had considerable speculative investments in westerly Indian lands at the time", it was this restriction on land-grabbing, more than taxation without representation that sparked the American Revolution.

And later, it was primarily to legitimize itself in the eyes of established European powers (which shunned the new nation as an outlaw state) that the infant American government was "compelled to present the appearance of adhering to the strictest of protocols in feel compelled to emphasize this chapter specifically because it addresses a situation that very tangibly hits home with all of us and provokes us at the core of our perspectives.

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And later, it was primarily to legitimize itself in the eyes of established European powers (which shunned the new nation as an outlaw state) that the infant American government was "compelled to present the appearance of adhering to the strictest of protocols in its dealings with Indians. Indeed, what the Continental Congress needed more than anything at the time was for indigenous nations—many of whose formal national integrity and legitimacy had already been recognized by the European powers through treaties—to convey comparable recognition upon the fledgling U.S. by entering into treaty relationships with it."

The relevant point here is that there is no question the European and American governments recognized the sovereign national status of Indian peoples and confirmed this recognition with each and every treaty they drew up with the Indian nations, broken though they were. It is a point referred to in different ways throughout this book's essays because it is the basis on which sovereign rights for Native American peoples—and by extension, land rights and recovery—can be argued in a legal judicial arena on a national and international level.

Its meaning is integral to a conscious strategy on the part of Native American spokespersons willing or resigned to reason with the colonizing powers on the latter's own terms, who acknowledge the treacherous potential of doing so. As Glenn T. Morris explains in "International Law and Politics," "Indigenous peoples, as all colonized peoples, have come to realize the importance of semantics in their quest for self-determination...Although the term 'nation' denotes a socio-political construct of European nature, the concept carries with it considerable importance in international debates. Fortunately, among the ranks of indigenous peoples a discussion has begun that calls into question the usefulness of forcing indigenous reality into the forms developed by Europeans."

Morris quotes Oren Lyons, who stresses the need to define the term in a way specific to Native American reality: "...represent yourself as what you are. Nations are not according to size, nations are according to culture." Indigenous cultures do not exist abstracted from the vital native land on which they are practiced and celebrated, from which they are learned, fed, taught. They are distinct in this way from what Jimmie Durham in "Cowboys and..." calls the "continual and movable holocaust" of the U.S. "The state called 'America'...is connected only to an independent settler colony. It has no place of its own, nor did it ever...It is only a state, only a political entity, so its ideological base and its narrative must be absolute."

Maybe that is why, for me, to open to the computer-generated map of the conterminous "United States" on page 149 and see over 35 percent of its land mass drawn over with what are, according to an investigation by the Indian Claims Commission, "judicially recognized as unceded" Indian lands, was to experience a strange moment of illumination. I looked for my home in the land of the Ottawa. In reality, of course, all U.S.-settled land is stolen land and none was willingly ceded. So I see the irony of an elated response to this record of official recognition, granted by the courts of the criminal powers themselves. Even the framework of land ownership the map inscribes is contrary to the values of the peoples whose names it borders. Still, I cannot deny the palpable impression seeing that map left in me when the hard edges of another map engraved in my mind, suddenly softened, shifted and took on potentially different meanings.

Dealing with the Devil

The deeply problematic nature of Indians utilizing the term "nation" for the purpose of arguing native land claims persists, however. It cannot be so readily overlooked by those opposed to the ugly reality of nation states and nationalism exhibited today and throughout European history. Churchill describes the responses of non-Indians who, when indigenous land rights are mentioned, "seek to divert discussion into 'higher priority' or 'more important' topics like 'issues of class and gender equity' in which justice' becomes synonymous with a redistribution of the power and loot deriving from the occupation of Native North America, even while the occupation continues (presumably permanently)." But beyond these diversions, there are genuine concerns involved in "dealing with the devil," so to speak, that non-Indian people who see the restoration of healthy planetary and human relationships contingent upon the revitalization of indigenous cultures, share with native activists themselves.

Each historic account among the book's chapters stands as a scathing testament to the cynical motivations behind the European/American colonial mentality. Each treaty, each incidental recognition of indigenous sovereignty or rights by colonizers predicates a net advance in their encroachment, not only because of the treaty's ultimate betrayal, but also due to the unwritten, unspoken trade off implicit in "forcing indigenous reality into the forms developed by Europeans." Why now, with all the statist machinations for corporate global control, should further treaties, agreements or settlements represent anything else, even in the World Court., under international scrutiny?

Those of us, Indian and non-Indian alike, willing to fight for genuine indigenous autonomy, do not want to see our efforts lead to ultimate and full cooptation of indigenous "nations," welcomed and redefined into the totalitarian grid of the New World Order, and hence lost forever. Because ultimately, of course, this "New World" is not ordered by the collective representation of "nations," let alone the people living within them. Political delineations act as a smokescreen for the malignant urgencies of the all-embracing New World Market; its nations of people, plants, animals, minerals, serving as its ever-expendable resources.

At stake are the vestiges of those traditional native communities still exerting influence beneath the U.S.-imposed puppet governments of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. To the extent that they maintain their traditional forms and values of mutual respect, cooperation, and autonomy, these communities provide living models for healthy sustainable human and ecological interaction. Native social organization reflects the fluid complexity of the natural processes that sustain and inform it. The inherent value of diversity is explicit in natural interdependent relationships, and it is therefore respected in social relationships. This is expressed in the sacred hoop of the Plains Indians, which represents the energetic interdependence among the spheres of life. For humanity as well as nature, and for humanity in relation to nature, the health and integrity of the whole is contingent upon the dynamic diversity of its parts. In decision-making, it means that group unity and strength is contingent upon respect for individual autonomy and that individuals reciprocate by valuing personal autonomy with respect to its contribution to the health of the larger community.

This traditional consciousness, retained and passed along by native elders, is the real strength behind the many native movements resisting corporate invasion and destruction of their lands throughout North America today—at Newe Segobia, the Black Hills, James Bay, Kanehsatake, to name just a few. These active models are crucial antidotes to the world-wide promotion of a homogenized democratic “ideal.” Reconstituted from uprooted fragments the “Founding Fathers” appropriated from the Great Law of the Haudenosaunee, American “democracy” is, like the U.S. itself, only an “ideal.” Groundless, but transportable; empty but packageable, its mediatized images of “freedom” help implement the World Market’s designs for international standardization.

Power of Earth Based Traditions

The examples of “successful” decolonizing revolutions that Churchill offers by way of encouraging struggles for Indian land recovery against the odds, are not encouraging at all. The fact that the American, Vietnamese, Algerian and Sandinista revolutionary movements “turned out to have held colonizing pretensions of their own” cannot be dismissed as beside the point; it is the point. It is crucial that Native American struggles for decolonization are by their nature not, as Churchill describes them, “plainly part of this process of liberation” that “has yet to run its course.” This process is actually not one of real liberation but, in a deeper sense, a hardening of the vital original impulses for genuine autonomy into the overall gridlock of neo-colonial political “reality.”

Russell Means makes this clear in a declaration called “the Same Old Song,” which appears in *Marxism and Native America* (Boston; South End Press, 1983), a volume Churchill himself edited. Referring to the theoretical bases of these revolutions—“Marxism and anarchism and ‘leftism’ in general,” he says, “I don’t believe these theories can be separated from the rest of the European intellectual tradition.” In other words, European doctrine, developing as it has out of the European mind-set of power relationships, ultimately extends those oppressive relations through the “revolutions” it propagates. This is why every such European-style revolution in history “has served to reinforce Europe’s tendencies and abilities to export destruction to other peoples, other cultures and the environment itself.”

The State of Native America, as well as presenting a history of colonization and genocide also constitutes a history of indigenous resistance. And here in the continuity of its own practical conviction lie soundly inspirational examples for the process of decolonization. Its spirit resurges in the activism of the 1964 “Fish-Ins” in the Pacific Northwest, where (by an account quoted by the Institute for Natural Progress) “more than a thousand Indians from fifty-six [nations] throughout the country” gathered in response to the appeal of the Makah elders; through the occupation of Alcatraz, Wounded Knee, Genienkeh, The Trail of Broken Treaties, The Longest Walk and the many and increasing struggles to reclaim and protect native lands from deadly “development.” Similar native convictions underlie the Chipko movement of India and other indigenous movements around the world. Their grounded power and unity derive from their essentially earth-based traditions.

Churchill voices the underlying fears non-Indians have that “in the event ‘the Indians get their land back,’ „native people will do unto their occupiers exactly as has been done to them: mass dispossession and eviction of non-Indians, especially Euroamericans, is expected to ensue.” he follows with a point-by-point explanation of how recovery of native land would actually make people more secure on their land, specifically from government and corporate encroachment, than they are presently. This, for the most part, because the land in question is now pri-

marily in the hands of government and corporations. “It is thus quite possible...for all native claims to be met in full without the loss to non-Indians of a single acre of privately held land.”

If all this land were actually to be returned to the genuine traditional stewardship of native peoples, and safeguarded from corporate development and devastation, the potential for social and ecological rejuvenation would be truly inspiring. When we understand the reclamation of native land as preliminary and integral to the break-up and disintegration of capitalist forces in the U.S., the prospect is even more compelling.

The question remains, of course, whether traditional powers are still strong enough to counteract Euroamerican influence within native communities—not to mention its coercion from without—to allow the fulfillment of such a vision. And it is specifically from the conscious affirmation and exertion of the old ways that such an effective transformation will come—one that does not merely shift the prevailing prerogative of corporate land and labor exploitation to tribal “progressives.”

Any genuine process of liberation is continually threatened with subversion and cooptation by the dominant forces of political and economic “reality.” The desperate and dependent living conditions most Native Americans suffer leave them especially vulnerable to the wheeling and dealing rationale of realpolitik. In “The Political Economy of Radioactive Colonialism,” Churchill and Winona LaDuke outline instances of this all-too-familiar process of economic bribery and blackmail carried out by the mining and energy industries against the Navajo and Sioux nations. In the classic pattern, people robbed of their subsistence economies accept the industries doubtful short-term economic “benefits” and end up victims of long-term poisoning, their lands qualifying as “National Sacrifice Areas.”

Native Americans themselves must contend with their own varying degrees of American/European indoctrination. This influence is what Means is concerned about in “The Same Old Song”—“It takes a strong effort on the part of each American Indian not to become Europeanized. The strength of this effort can only come from the hoop, the four directions, the relations...”

As non-Indians, we have a responsibility to establish our roles carefully within the effort to decolonize this now-occupied land, in a manner that helps regenerate the genuine health and vitality of native peoples and cultures. If we are beneficiaries of the colonial consumption of indigenous labor and land we are far more its victims, physically, spiritually and intellectually. The collective wisdom accrued through generations of native observance of and participation in natural processes cannot be replaced. Our collective human survival depends upon its preservation.

Which brings us back to the land for which maps may again one day be superfluous. Until then, as Churchill says, “the liberation of Native North America, liberation of the land first and foremost, is the key to fundamental land positive social changes of many other sorts...Put another way, this would mean, ‘U.S. Out of Indian Country.’ Inevitably, the logic leads to what we’ve all been so desperately seeking: The U.S.—at least as we’ve come to know it—out of North America altogether. From there it can be permanently banished from the planet. In its stead, surely we can join hands to create something new and infinitely better.”

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