Framing the Urban-Rural Divide: The Role of Historical Myths and Metaphors in the Social and Political Dynamics of North American Colonialism

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**Introduction**

The story of North American colonial expansion is one written in the divide between urban and rural landscapes. Western society has long struggled to define “optimal” human relationships with urban and rural environments, often sparking heated debates between pastoralist and metropolitan ideologies. To the wilderness romanticist, the natural landscape may represent a sanctuary of timeless transcendence, a refuge from the chaos and filth of the industrial city, while to the urbane idealist the wilderness may symbolize a primeval forest of exile, cut off from the social and intellectual riches of industrial society. Although these opposing ideologies differed in their impressions of urban and rural landscapes, commonalities in metropolitan and pastoral ideological framings of progress, reserves, and human disposal demonstrate that these seemingly adversarial characterizations of the urban-rural divide were in fact linked in their intention to rationalize racist conceptualizations of who did or did not belong within the elite spaces of society. Whether glorifying the metropolitan or agrarian, North American colonial mythologies and metaphors from ostensibly antagonistic ideologies used to demarcate the boundaries between urban and rural spaces worked in tandem to enable colonial expansion by facilitating the dispossession, exclusion, and oppression of indigenous peoples.

**Colonial Discourses of Progress**

In both urban and rural contexts, dominant groups employ discourses of “progress” as weapons of societal control to justify displacement, exclusion, and dispossession of groups seen as impediments to “the ‘developing’ nation’s ascent into modernity’s pantheon.” White supremacist logics of linear development understood this “pantheon” as a white space created by and for European society, with the white European elite acting as gatekeepers to this privileged space. Renowned writer and New York native James Baldwin summarized the concept in his 1955 essay “Stranger in the Village” in which he states, “[t]he idea of white supremacy rests simply on the fact that white men are the creators of civilization (the present civilization, which is the only one that matters; all previous civilizations are simply “contributions” to our own) and are therefore civilization's guardians and defenders.” The racist conceptualization of
“civilization” as the domain of white Western society was foundational to the rhetoric of “progress” in both urbanists and pastoralists colonial ideologies. The elevation of white European culture as the developmental benchmark in “advanced society” carried the implicit assumption that this form of “progress” was inherently good and desirable. Throughout colonial expansion, white colonizers utilized this logic of development to exonerate white society of environmental injustices in the name of collective improvement on both urban and rural frontiers.

The Colonial City as a “Civilized” Space

As European colonizers spread across the North American continent and built colonial cities on conquered lands, deliberate measures were taken to enforce physical boundaries between white settlers and indigenous peoples. Glen Sean Coulthard, associate professor in the First Nations and Indigenous Studies Program and the Department of Political Science at the University of British Columbia, described the fanatical obsession with which Canadian planners sought to eradicate indigenous presence from the urban environment in his book *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*: “Historically, Canadian cities were originally conceived of in the colonial imagination as explicitly non-indigenous spaces – as civilized spaces – and urban planners and Indian policy makers went through great efforts to expunge urban centers of indigenous presence.” By explicitly distinguishing the city as both a “non-indigenous” and “civilized” space, colonizers unequivocally expressed exactly who would be included within the bounds of this “civilized” society as it progressed. Characterizations of indigenous spaces as “impediments” to expanding cities underpinned early 20th century development policies, such as a 1911 amendment to the Indian Act permitting the forced expulsion of indigenous communities located within or adjacent to an incorporated town should the displacement be deemed “in the interest of the public.” By the mid-twentieth century, as urban spaces expanded into large suburban areas and indigenous increasingly took up residence within cities, development ideologies shifted to enforce new segregations of settler and indigenous spaces within the urban landscape, cordonning off inner city projects and zones for the
urban poor and growing indigenous populations. By characterizing indigenous society as antithetical to developmental ideals of progress, planners and policy makers justified the expulsion and exclusion of indigenous peoples from spaces of opportunity and prosperity in the urban environment, generating spatial divides that reinforced racialized social hierarchies predicated on white supremacist ideologies of civilization and progress.

Civility and Society in American Pastoralism

Discourses of progress similarly bolstered racist ideologies of American pastoralist society and facilitated the dispossession and oppression of indigenous peoples in pursuit of the rural idyll. Thomas Jefferson was one of the most prominent espousers of the pastoral fascination in the United States and a foundational figure in American ideologies of agrarianism. To Jefferson, progress and civility were evidenced by the physical ordering of the landscape that accompanied Western agricultural practices. He even referred to agrarian landowners as the “chosen people of God,” apparently exonerating white landowners on the basis of some divine mandate. European models of agriculture and animal husbandry that enabled biological control of both plants and animals for human exploitation “elevated human societies beyond the rudiments of savagery and barbarism,” in Jefferson’s view, and served as the defining characteristics of civilized society. Jefferson’s conceptualization of the rural idyll thus built upon a white supremacist logic of progress that discredited any form of rural subsistence developed outside of this European model. Ignorant of ecological harmonies struck by indigenous subsistence practices, Jeffersonian ideology denigrated indigenous ways of life – and, by extension, indigenous peoples – as developmentally inferior to the European customs and peoples, or “behind” in the timeline of progress for no reason other than a lack of conformity to the peculiarities of European agriculture. The inherent injustice of this characterization would appear at odds with Jefferson’s philosophical stance as an Enlightenment thinker, but as environmental historian Carl Zimring notes, Jefferson justified this inconsistency with a “deferred equality” caveat of sorts: red and black men, Jefferson believed, could one day “catch up” to white men in the timeline of progress, given they recognized the cultural superiority of
white settlers, abandoned all traces of their “backward” culture, and fully adopted the European way of life. Through this thin veneer of an Enlightenment dogma of equality, the Jeffersonian pastoral idyll claimed a moral preeminence while relying upon the same racist foundational definition of progress to justify exclusion of nonwhites from the boundaries of “elevated human society.” While permitting social mobility in theory, Jefferson’s form of social mobility hinged upon the adoption of European livelihoods, predicking nonwhite access to environmental resources on the abandonment of the very cultural practices that defined indigenous relationships with the landscape for generations.

The Duality of the Reserve

As the rhetoric of progress and civilization served to define who belonged in conceptualizations of urban and rural society, reserves facilitated projects of environmental and social engineering, allowing urban planners and conservation biologists to dictate human access to urban and rural spaces. Rob Nixon, author and professor of English at the Princeton Environmental Institute, summarized the power of the reserve in enforcing policies of environmental exclusion and oppression, saying “[t]he noun ‘reserve’ may refer to either a sanctuary or a place of involuntary confinement – a refuge or a cage.” The duality of the reserve was especially pronounced in colonizer relationships with indigenous communities, serving as a tool of confinement in one context and a means of expulsion in another.

The Reserve as a Cage – Quarantining Indigenous Society

As colonists built cities throughout North America according to European standards, reservations served as the “cages” in which the settlers sought to quarantine indigenous people’s society while the project of creating urban centers as exclusively “white” spaces carried on. Such spaces of confinement served to enforce boundaries between indigenous communities and urban elites while creating a discrete locale for metropolitan settler society to direct targeted assimilation and cultural repression efforts. Characterizing reservations as concentrated spaces of
“uncivilized” people and “uncivilized” lifestyles, the settler state systematically isolated indigenous peoples and marked indigenous society for destruction, while simultaneously harvesting the next generation of indigenous bodies for exploitation. The adoption and enforcement of off-reservation boarding school policies exemplified this approach, physically isolating indigenous children in the United States and Canada from their communities and forcibly transplanting entire generations to environments dominated by the social engineering forces of assimilation policy. The first of these off-reservation boarding schools, the Carlisle Indian School, was founded in Pennsylvania in 1879 by Richard Pratt. Pratt believed extended physical isolation of indigenous children from the reservation community could “kill the Indian and save the man” and developed a boarding school system designed to “separate children from their parents, inculcate Christianity and white cultural values, and encourage/force them to assimilate into the dominant society.”

By enclosing indigenous society within reservations, social engineers could simultaneously expunge indigenous presence from city spaces, withhold metropolitan resources intended for white society, and isolate an “inferior” culture to enable its eventual destruction. Like Jefferson’s problematic theory of social mobility built upon racist formulations of progress, escape from the prison of the reservation for indigenous youth through the boarding school system was predicated on the acceptance of white supremacist ideologies of cultural superiority that not only disavowed the legitimacy of indigenous ancestral heritage but defined the limits of indigenous peoples’ access to resources within the urban environment.

**The Reserve as a Refuge – Exclusion from Natural Spaces**

While reservations served as tools of exclusion from the urban environment, wilderness reserves enforced the exclusion of Indigenous peoples from natural spaces, “reserving” areas of ecological and cultural value for white elite society while denigrating and vilifying ecological roles of Indigenous peoples as justification for their expulsion. Wilderness reserves in the United States have served as exclusive recreational spaces for white society through the active efforts to erase any history of Indigenous society from the “untouched wilderness” of the American West. In Nixon’s critique of the mainstream environmentalist movement he writes, “[f]rom the
perspective of North America’s First Peoples, the white soul-dream of ‘untouched country’ has been a source of dispossession and cultural erasure.” The myth of “virgin” or “untouched” wilderness espoused by preservationists carried the implicit refusal to acknowledge the influence of centuries of indigenous societal development on the natural landscape, and built directly from white supremacist conceptualizations of progress and civilization as inherently white domains. In this mythological narrative, white settlers were recast as the rightful inheritors of “untouched” land, responsible stewards entrusted with the duty of determining how different landscapes should best serve the needs of settler society. The dispossession Nixon cites was thus twofold: along with the physical expulsion of indigenous peoples from wilderness reserves and the severing of long-standing ecological relationships between indigenous peoples and the environment, indigenous society was expunged from historical conceptualizations of the rural landscape to reproduce and reinforce the illusion of “pure” wilderness sought by environmental transcendentalists. Reservation policies not only served to exclude indigenous peoples from the physical resources of the natural environment, they actively pilfered the cultural resources of history that could serve as sources of strength and resistance.

**Waste and Human Disposal**

Fixated on “progress” and the “reservation” of valued urban and rural spaces, colonizers recognized indigenous presence within the settler state as a menacing threat to dreams of continued expansion and conquest. Alongside justifications of physical exclusion or expulsion of indigenous society from valued urban and rural spaces, metaphors of disposability reduced indigenous peoples and culture to societal refuse in need of not only removal, but destruction. Both urbanist and pastoralist ideologies became obsessed with purification of their respective white enclaves, equating indigenous bodies to the most dreaded forms of pollution threatening the health and vitality of these environments. The disdain for the ever-mounting waste of industrial society in both ideological camps was redirected at indigenous society, followed by increasingly extremist proposals for permanent eradication of the threat.
Indigenous Bodies as Urban Pollution

Reservations provided an effective means of temporarily isolating indigenous bodies and indigenous culture from deliberately white urban spaces, in some instances facilitating dramatic intergenerational social engineering schemes used to further subjugate indigenous peoples. Quarantine, however, could not provide a permanent solution to the racial anxiety afflicting white settler society and the overwhelming apprehension with which colonizers viewed Indigenous presence in the urban landscape. Long-term preservation of the whiteness of North American cities, in the views of metropolitan idealists, depended upon not just isolation, but destruction of Indigenous society. As Andrea Smith, associate professor of media and cultural studies at the University of California, Riverside, explained in her book *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, this “cultural genocide” was viewed as the “more sensitive” approach to the “Indian problem” – a euphemism for white settler anxiety towards Indigenous presence – compared to physical extermination. In order to successfully engineer cities as “non-Indigenous spaces,” urbanists applied a pollution-control mindset to attempt to eliminate Indigenous presence from the view of white urban society and “purify” the “colonial body” of Indigenous contamination. The inherent disposability of Indigenous peoples was reinforced by myths of a “vanishing” culture and society, recast as a natural, evolutionary extinction that ignored policies of active isolation and erasure, while the metaphor of pollution invoked an urgency to rid the “colonial body,” and its cities, of this dangerous contamination. In this frightened state, urban settler society sought to not only physically and socially isolate Indigenous peoples, but permanently eradicate any form of “waste” threatening the vitality of the colonial metropolis.

Cleansing the “Virgin Wilderness” of Indigenous Presence

While urbanists painted Indigenous peoples as metropolitan refuse to be discarded in the backcountry “wastelands,” wilderness transcendental discourses of disposable peoples provoked an equally-alarming rhetoric of mass extermination in the name of environmental sustainability. These extremist, Malthusian ideologies thinly obscured racist devaluation of nonwhite lives in
the purportedly neutral scientific logic of carrying capacity and environmental sustainability. In Nixon’s critique of the mainstream environmental movement, he highlights the disturbingly radical views wilderness transcendentalists often showed towards the human species, particularly the geographically distant or displaced:

> Sometimes such hostility toward the displaced tilts over into a kind of Malthusian sublime, as in Snyder’s suggestion that the project of wilderness restoration would require ninety percent fewer humans… Typically, here, the human cull begins with those dispensable, anonymous, invisible inhabitants who reside in the ‘the world beyond,’ never with any culling of the poetical, wilderness-expanded egotistical male self.¹⁹

Despite an air of neutrality provided by allusions to ecological theory and environmental science, Nixon illuminates the unmistakable prejudice underlying environmentalist discourses of population reduction. Dispensable, anonymous, and invisible, those bluntly classified as “the other” were marked for destruction in order to save the presumably indispensable, enlightened environmentalist and the myth of “pristine” wilderness he so ardently defended. Like urbanist metaphors of Indigenous peoples as a pollution to be cleansed from society, these Malthusian authors and their racist theories of population control were predicated on the assumption that environmental health and sustainability are threatened by “inherently ‘dirty’ or ‘polluting’” peoples who must be disposed of. Just as a waste heap or smokestack infringing upon this mythologically pure landscape would elicit anger and protest from the “wilderness-expanded egotistical male self” Nixon describes, so too those peoples whose existence contradicts the mythology of untouched wilderness would elicit the same anguish and backlash. As Smith observes, populations deemed disposable were those with “the least institutional power or access to resources in society,” often displaced and isolated from the landscapes and environments upon which cultural strength and resilience depended, leaving them most vulnerable to the extremist
policies of population control. Once ostracized from conceptualizations of the ideal society and physically displaced from the “reserved” environments of the white settler state, the need to dispose of unwelcome peoples in pursuit of such mythological idylls was wielded as justification for increasingly atrocious crimes.

**Conclusion**

In both urbanist and pastoralist ideological framings of the urban-rural divide, mythologies and tropes surrounding progress, reserves, and human disposal served to establish and fortify racist hierarchies of human relationships with the environment and enforce barriers of entry to urban and rural spaces. Underpinned by a white supremacist logic of “progress,” enacted through duality of the reserve as both a refuge and a cage, and reinforced with metaphors of “disposability,” seemingly adversarial glorifications of metropolitan or agrarian idylls worked in tandem to facilitate the exclusion, dispossession, and oppression of Indigenous peoples. As the ideological basis of modern societal perceptions of the urban-rural divide and the place of human populations within those environments, tracking the legacies of these historical tropes and mythologies in the social and political dynamics of modern environmental racism may help illuminate nuanced psychological underpinnings of indigenous-settler relations and aid the work of deconstructing persistent structural inequities in North America.
Notes

7 Ibid.
8 Ibid, 175.
9 Nancy Isenberg, White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America (New York: Viking, 2016), 86.
10 Ibid, 94.
11 Zimring, Clean and White, 26.
12 Nixon, Slow Violence, 176.
14 Ibid.
16 Smith, Conquest, 36.
17 Ibid, 9.
18 Isenberg, White Trash, 19.
19 Nixon, Slow Violence, 239.
20 Smith, Conquest, 63.