Muskrat Falls: A Product of Colonialism & Capitalism

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The complexity of the relationships between Aboriginal peoples and the provincial government that are exemplified in the construction of and reaction to the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric dam cannot be simply realized in the details of the project, but must be understood in the context of settler colonialism social theory. White Europeans invaded lands around the world with specific paradigms and goals and it is through their continued influence that the creation of a poisonous, power-producer can occur.

Theoretical Background

Throughout his work Foucault (1978) discusses how in the Middle Ages power was held by a sovereign who had the authority to “let live or make die” (137). After the Enlightenment and the weakening of the powers of the king, power penetrated its way through society and focused on changing people into disciplined, docile bodies. As scientific theories turned social in the 19th Century, populations became something to be changed to work better, that is, more efficiently and productively. This created a new modality of power that has been at the core of our social institutions including schools, hospitals, factories and prisons. Agamben (1998) builds on Foucault’s work with an analysis of the concentration camps created under the Nationalist Socialist regime of the 1930s. He argues these camps were made acceptable by presenting the Jewish people as Homo sacer. As the sacred man, they were without rights and were reduced to their biological being, their zoe, a bare life. By putting these people into a state of exception and reducing them to their zoe, the government was able to subject them to cruel and inhumane treatment. Agamben extends this analysis to the treatment of prisoners in the United States, which highlight that the state of exception is not a
unique phenomenon but central to governmentality, as the ability of governments to grant citizenship implies its ability to remove or withhold such citizenship as well.

Stoler’s (2002) work exemplifies how government attempts to mould populations were not limited to the Western countries where they were philosophized, but became experiments in the colonies that these Western governments ruled. This is evident in the treatment of settler colonies to their indigenous populations, who had no rights and were treated as an inferior species. Rather than taking an historical approach, Sassen (2014) draws parallels between such varied means as toxic mining operations and greedy financial instruments to argue that the goals of the current economic leaders have dramatically shifted from the past. Through their extraction of profits, corporations have shown a clear disregard of the social and environmental implications of their actions. She suggests that the rise of foreign investment and multinational corporate structures have created subterranean trends that are destroying environments and expelling peoples for the pursuit of hyperprofits. In this paper, I will build on Sassen’s theories of expulsions by discussing the history behind who becomes expelled. While governments and corporations cannot choose where natural resources are located, they can choose which ones are extracted. These decisions are informed by paradigms classifying which populations have value and which ones do not. As a colossal dam set to poison the waters and surrounding Aboriginal population of the Churchill River, Muskrat Falls exemplifies both the aggressive, historical biopolitical paradigms discussed by Foucault, Agamben and Stoler, and the profits over people expulsions discussed by Sassen.
Indigenous People in Canada

Canada’s relationship with Aboriginal peoples is more than 500 years old. In the early days, Aboriginal peoples had guided Europeans into Canada through the rivers, helping them find beavers and shelter. The Hudson’s Bay Company encouraged their workers to build relationships with Aboriginals and to gain influence and respect, European elite would marry Aboriginal elite. Saul (2008) describes these attitudes as changing around the 18th Century when a new wave of Orangemen English immigrants began arriving. Their aggressive attitudes sparked such events as the Riel Rebellions and relationships disintegrated thereafter. Settlers in Canada increasingly treated Aboriginal peoples as inferior and attempted to either remove or assimilate them to replace them on this new land. The Canadian government introduced laws that were meant to erase Aboriginal culture and force them into their industrial capitalist ethic. This is evident in the “Encourage the Gradual Civilization of the Indian Tribes” Act of 1857, the banning of traditional cultural practices through the potlatch in 1884 and the Sun Dance in 1895, and the pass system of 1885 (INAC, 2010; Cairns, 2014). In the 20th Century the Canadian government sought measures to remove Aboriginal populations and identities with such measures as the Sexual Sterilization Act of 1929 that disproportionally targeted Aboriginal peoples, the 1969 White Paper that advocated the elimination of Indian peoples as a distinct group, and the blood ratio rules used to disenfranchise Metis people (Grekul et al, 2004,; INAC, 2010). The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples found that while Canada was founded on treaties that respected Aboriginal groups as independent nations, Canadian policies have intended to “suppress Aboriginal nations and their governments, undermine Aboriginal cultures [and] stifle Aboriginal identity” (INAC, 2010).
While Newfoundland and Labrador did not join Canada until 1949, the white upper classes of both countries share European roots and many of the attitudes apparent in Canada are evident in this province as seen in the elimination of the Beothuk, the residential school system, and the living conditions of Aboriginals living in Labrador. The reverberations of settler colonialism are apparent in the development of Muskrat Falls as well, but as a modern construction Muskrat Falls also represents the heightened ambitions of today’s profit-driven elite. Rather than simply homogenizing people into docile, mouldable populations, the goal of today’s elite is also focused on the extraction of natural resources for profit and will poison environments and people to reap those rewards. The historical component of these current expulsions is important to understanding the populations that get expelled. These developments do not happen in wealthy neighbourhoods but in areas whose populations have already been assigned zero value. To understand how Nalcor could knowingly poison a community of 2,000 people and continue its development of Muskrat Falls, we must first understand the perceptions that the white settler government has of them.

The Beothuk

The Beothuk were one of several indigenous groups that resided on the island of Newfoundland when Europeans began fishing off the coasts in the 15th Century. Relations with Beothuk were varied and sometimes hostile (Marshall, 1989; Holly et al, 2010). The Beothuk were often accused of raiding Europeans camps’ for goods, and this was often used as an excuse to raid Beothuk camps. Whether by accident or intent, these raids often ended in death (Kitchen, 2012). These deaths did go to trial but government authorities always acquitted the white men. In one famous example, Thomas Peyton heard of a bounty on captured Indians and set off to grab his own. He
and his crew raided a Beothuk camp, stole Shanawdithit, and killed the man who tried to save her. In the court hearing, the colonial government found their actions justified because “the Indian came to his death in consequence of his obstinacy in not desisting in his attempt to take back his captured wife” (Kitchen, 2012:131). In the government’s bounty on captured Beothuk and the court decisions we see a clear disregard for Aboriginal life and an aggressive attitude towards colonialism that haunts the province to this day.

History textbooks have tended to concentrate on the Beothuk in Newfoundland and how they were murdered into extinction (Harris, 1968; Marshall, 1989). This singular focus has effectively ignored the rich culture and history of the Mi’kmaq, Innu and Inuit that call this province home. By concentrating on the death of an indigenous group, rather than learning about the lively culture of the other groups, the provincial government is removing these groups from the provincial paradigm.

Furthermore, recent evidence suggests that the Beothuk are not extinct. There is evidence of Mi’kmaq groups adopting and raising orphaned Beothuk children, and indigenous groups and other communities are finding Beothuk remnants in their DNA (Kitchen, 2012; Brake, 2016). This suggests that efforts to cast this group as extinct were really ignoring the relationships that the Beothuk had with indigenous peoples and colonial settlers, and that white authorities simply preferred to cast them off as dead as it fit better into their paradigm that indigenous cultures were dying in the face of modernism. This fits well into the biopolitical paradigm of changing the population into capitalist-driven, docile bodies as Aboriginal cultures has tended to be something that must be changed in order for the population to modernize and advance.
These attempts to eliminate Aboriginal peoples in Newfoundland and Labrador can be understood as part of a white settler paradigm that views Aboriginals as inferior, something to be removed and replaced for the assertion of Western cultures and economies. By ignoring their cultures and pretending they are already extinct, it becomes easier to harm them, as in the case of Muskrat Falls.

Residential Schools

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples found that “residential schools did the greatest damage” to the Aboriginal culture and people (INAC, 2010). Students were forbidden from speaking their language, were taught their culture and heritage were wrong, and were sometimes physically abused and experimented on. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) referred to Canada’s policies towards Indigenous people as “cultural genocide” (1).

The residential school system has been of particular interest to those who have studied Foucault and Agamben, and much has been written about the reasons for the school’s cultural aggression. Established in 1847, these schools were created “to assimilate Indians into becoming civilized people” (Kallen, 1982:116). Woolford and Gacek (2016) argue that residential schools were not simply spaces for bare life to die like the concentration camp, but were microsettings for governments to fashion “identities from what was perceived as bare life...The Indigenous child was considered to already be in a degraded state and the residential school was a solution to this ‘problem’” (408).

Carr (2009) takes an architectural approach to understanding the residential school as a biopolitical tool in focusing on how the structure and location of the school worked to estrange children from their family and home with the intention of alienating
them from their culture. This isolating logic appears in how far the schools were located from the reserves and in the separation of boys and girls within the schools, which worked to separate families, and in the architecture of the visiting rooms, which were tightly supervised to limit contact and prevent families from speaking their indigenous languages. The schools tended to be poorly maintained as well. Cold and crowded, students were often malnourished, poorly dressed, and not given proper medical treatment. This created a deadly environment and the TRC estimates that 6000 children died while attending these schools (Tasker, 2015).

The nutritional experiments performed in Aboriginal schools are particularly reminiscent of Agamben’s discussion of the experiments performed on Jewish people under the Nazi regime. In these experiments children were kept on “starvation-level diets, and given or denied vitamins, minerals and certain foods” (CBC, 2013). These children were denied dental hygiene as well, as doctors were worried they may “skew results” (CBC, 2013). In these experiments one can see the integration of medicine and politics as described by Agamben that occurred under the Nazi regime. These experiments were allowed to happen because, similar to the Jews in the Holocaust, these Aboriginal children had no rights and their lives were considered to have no value. Similar to the camp, the residential school was a state of exception inhabited by bare life.

Residential schools were littered across Newfoundland and Labrador, and attendance was mandatory. These attempts to eliminate Aboriginal cultures have had extremely damaging effects on those who attended the schools, their parents, and their children. This is an important example of the disregard that the provincial government has historically had for Aboriginal lives and that same disregard continues to this day.
Living Conditions in Labrador

The Royal Commission of Aboriginal People found that “the homes of Aboriginal people are more often flimsy, leaky and overcrowded” and that “water and sanitation systems in Aboriginal communities are more often inadequate” (INAC, 2010). More specifically, the Royal Commission on Labrador found numerous examples of poor living conditions of Aboriginal peoples in Labrador, and many of the issues described forty years ago remain today (Snowden, 1974).

The report found numerous problems in Northern Labrador that showcase the extreme poverty that Aboriginal people lived in people lived in. Few homes had water piping or indoor sewage systems, and many had to walk kilometres to fetch water and would dump their sewage outside their homes. Many homes were overcrowded with more than one person per room, and were often described as being of poor quality, with wind coming through the doors and bare wires hanging from unfinished lights. One of the most significant findings was the stark contrast between the houses of those working for the government or church and the Aboriginal residents as the latter tended to have fully functional indoor utilities and well-built homes, while the former lived in squalor. The Report found that in communities like Nain, water pipelines even ran right in front of some people’s homes but were not connected. The most striking community under investigation was that of North West River, which was clearly divided by racial and religious lines, as Europeans and “Eskimos” lived on the north side of the river while “Montagnais and Nauscaupi Indians” lived on the south side. Half of the town had water and sewage utilites, and “virtually all of them were on the north side of the river” (Snowden, 1974: 359).
The situation was hardly better in Southern Labrador. The report explicitly refers to Black Tickle as having the worst housing conditions in Labrador and all water in the town had to be boiled (Snowden, 1974). A more recent report profiling Black Tickle-Domino found that there is still no water piping or sewage system and residents have to travel over 1 km to Domino to get water from a potable water dispensing unit (PWDU). The PWDU uses water from a local pond that has been found to be of poor quality and residents have to pay to purchase treated, drinking water. As the federal government refuses to recognize the Southern Inuit population, the province funds this service, but funding is not always guaranteed and this has resulted in years when the PWDU was not treated at correct levels (Hanrahan, 2014).

The report also discussed the unplanned resettlement initiatives that were conducted in Labrador, often with terrible results. In the case of northern communities, the government unilaterally decided that they would be resettled. Rather than consulting with the communities, the government simply closed the retail stores in those areas, forcing locals to move. The communities where they were encouraged to resettle were often already over-crowded, lacked basic utilities like indoor plumbing, and had small economies, so the addition of new immigrants was often met by resentment from those who were already settled. In Davis Inlet, for example, the government built 33 modern homes for the 190 nomadic indigenous people of the area. These houses, however, were not furnished and no furniture was sold in local stores. Furthermore, despite the report’s assessment that the sandy ground made the installation of piped water and sewer services easy, only five homes had piped water and none were occupied by an indigenous family.
The provincial and federal government have consistently neglected the impoverished living conditions of Canada’s Aboriginal peoples who continue to live in conditions unimaginable for a thriving G8 economy. Yet when we consider the white settler, biopolitical paradigm that is exerted on Aboriginal peoples, we see that these towns exist in a state of exception and all the inhabitants have a bare life where they lack even the basic rights of clean water and warmth that are afforded to the white residents of their communities. The Canadian government has tended to refer to Aboriginal people as wards, children, and animals, reducing them to their *bios* or bare life. Our government considers Aboriginal people as *Homo sacer* and are less willing to treat them with the same respect as the white population. The impoverished living conditions of Aboriginal peoples living in Labrador clearly demonstrate this utter lack of respect or concern for the lives of Aboriginal peoples. By treating them as lives without value, the government is able to ignore the concerns raised by these reports and overlook the deplorable living conditions of those in Labrador.

**Muskrat Falls**

The recent construction of the hydroelectric dam, Muskrat Falls, similarly exemplifies the disrespect that the government has for Aboriginal lives. In their attempt to build a dam that feeds the needs of a mining company, and the residents of Newfoundland, the provincial government pursued a project that would poison the environment, and those who rely on it. Their slow response to fears that the dam would poison the surrounding population exemplifies their view that Aboriginal lives are without value, and can be damaged without political consequence.
Muskrat Falls is located on the lower Churchill River in Labrador. In their proposal to the PUB, Nalcor did not discuss the risks of the construction of the dam to the Inuit people and referred only to the ratification of the New Dawn Agreement of an example of how this was the “right time” to develop (Nalcor Energy, 2012). A number of studies have similarly ignored the effect of the project on the Aboriginal people. In his analysis of the opportunities and risks of the hydro project, Lee (2012) doesn’t mention them at all. Neither does Ernst & Young (2016) on their review of project costs, schedule and related risks. This is in spite of the high levels of damage done by the earlier Churchill Falls hydroelectric dam where scientists have found high levels of mercury concentration in the flooded lakes that they were able to date back to the development of the dam (Teisserenc, 2014).

When the project was approved and construction began in 2012, the Nunatsivaut government began raising alarm about the risk of methylmercury (Bailey, 2012). While Nalcor insisted that their data showed no evidence that methylmercury concentration would increase, the Nunatsivut government hired their own scientists to test the water and found “Soil flooding experiments indicate that near-term changes expected from reservoir creation will increase methylmercury inputs to the estuary by 25–200%” (Schartup et al, 2015).

Natural Resource Minister Jerome Kennedy dismissed the Nunatsiavut government’s fears, arguing that mercury was simply an unfortunate result of hydro dam development. He even attempted to remove their ownership by highlighting that Muskrat Falls was outside the Inuit land agreements. This statement ignores the fact that many Inuit people live downstream and rely heavily on Lake Melville and the fish and animals that live in the area (Bailey, 2012).
As the years went by and construction continued, the provincial government continued to ignore the concerns raised by the Nunatsiavut government. As Nalcor prepared to flood the Lake Melville region, the situation became dire and protests against the project swelled. Rather than heeding concerns and meeting with protesters, the RCMP were sent out to arrest and remove them (Delaney and Boone, 2016).

Speaking to the media, those protesters defended their actions by discussing the harm that the dam would cause to their way of life. “We’re fighting for our land and our food,” said one protester; “I want to keep my culture safe,” claimed another (Wall, 2016). The focus of the protesters on how flooding the reservoir would damage their environment, and the importance of that environment to their culture highlights that these people continue to participate in traditional Aboriginal culture, and it is this culture that is being attacked by the provincial government.

In response to protests, MP Nick Whalen, recommended that the locals simply “eat less fish” (Lum, 2016). Stan Marshall, CEO of Nalcor Energy, belied the protests as costing the corporation hundreds of millions in delays (CBC, 2016). This is the kind of rhetoric that we come to expect from the white establishment, who would prefer that Aboriginals participate in their capitalist paradigm, buy industrially produced foods from supermarket chains and assimilate into the ‘modern’ Canadian culture.

The construction of Muskrat Falls is a key example of the expulsion that Sassen discusses in her book both in terms of corporations caring more about profits than people and in terms of expelling the animals and people from the land by making it uninhabitable. Muskrat Falls is being constructed largely to meet the needs of mining companies in Labrador that are owned by foreign investors. Nalcor and the provincial government care more about meeting the needs of the capitalist’s energy consumption
than the health of its residents. Profit breeds profit and those with money tend to protect their own at the detriment of the lower classes that are expected to grin and bear it. This democratio-capitalist project is effectively eliminating the poor classes who can’t move, but are forced to drink the contaminated water and eat the poisoned fish and birds, as they have no other option.

Conclusion

As a colossal structure extracting natural resources and poisoning the surrounding environment and Aboriginal population to create profit for the metropole, Muskrat Falls is a giant metaphor for modern-day colonialism. Muskrat Falls is an example of corporations seeking to expand its extraction of natural resources for profits and arresting and fighting against those who live on the land, who will be poisoned by the developments and whose lives are considered to have less value than the pursuit of profits.

Sassen argues this drive for greed is part of a larger trend in global income inequality and hints at subterranean trends that are guiding the pursuit of hyperprofits and the subsequent environmental destruction it brings. As we discuss why environments and peoples are being expelled, we must also consider who is being expelled.

Throughout his work, Foucault describes the construction of Western-styled homogenous, capitalist populations, docile to and managed by the rule of law, which was imposed by an elite upper class trying to measure and improve it for maximum productivity and profitability. Agamben shows how this goal of homogeneity and perfection played out in the elimination of certain peoples, which was allowed by the
rule of law through states of exception and the creation of bare life. Stoler’s study on Western settlement of the Indies exemplifies how the paradigms discussed by Foucault and Agamben played out in settler colonialism through the artificial erection of a supreme European man who decided on the life or death of indigenous peoples. In Canada, Aboriginals have historically been treated as bare lives that the government has the right to change or remove. This can be seen in their disregard for Beothuk lives and living Aboriginal cultures, in the assimilation policies and experiments conducted in the residential schools, and the abject poverty that Aboriginal peoples in Labrador continue to live in today. Already labeled as lives without value, the construction of Muskrat falls highlights how white settler paradigms continue to influence government’s actions as revealed through their belief that poisoning Aboriginal lives is easier to do than changing the construction plans of a hydroelectric dam.

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