

# The Impact of Colonialism on Indigenous Land and Resources

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This article examines the colonial expansion that dominates and exploits Indigenous communities. The development of imperialism catalyses loss of native land and resources, social, economic, and political marginalisation, discriminatory ethnocentric laws which in turn breaks down traditional aboriginal structures. Native cultures, identities, education, languages, and more are destroyed by the intruders. Land is an economic asset which allows Native People to acquire natural resources, including farming and hunting, as well as being a spiritually and culturally significant. However, these lands are wanted for ‘development’ and ‘progress’ by colonisers. Indigenous Peoples are forced into relocation, leading to a loss of traditional life, connection to ancestors and Native identity. The destructive nature of colonialism remains prevalent in modern society.

Incorporating evidence from various academic journals and articles, personal responses and diaries, this article demonstrates persistent and ongoing consequences and hardships that the Indigenous groups face. Many Native rights activists have been murdered for opposing ‘development’ laws, essentially projects for deforestation or other equally damaging projects. This article will explain the direct and unjust consequences colonialism imposes onto Indigenous Peoples.

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‘They but forget we Indians owned the land from ocean unto ocean; that they stand Upon a soil that centuries ago Was our sole kingdom and our right alone’<sup>1</sup> (132). Emily Pauline Johnson was a writer of Mohawk descent who actively details the unjust experiences that

Indigenous peoples must encounter at the hands of European colonisers. Her work describes the process of colonialism, and she exaggerates the true ownership of the land. She continues ‘Her Indian graves, and Indian memories. For as the carmine in the twilight skies Will fade as the night comes on, so fades the race’ (40). Throughout her poetry, we gain a sense of destruction of Indigenous culture, with the representation of Native Peoples as ‘carmine’. The fading of this red pigment as the night creeps in is naturalistic symbolism for the fading of Native tribes at the hands of colonialism. The decolourisation in the sky parallels the dimming of the Native race worldwide. This fictional literature stems from a very painful and factual history.

Colonialism is defined by the practice of occupying terrain and in turn conquering and exploiting its population, as well as forcing the settlers own cultural identities on the indigenous peoples. ‘Cultural imperialism belittled the cultural traditions and values of Indigenous peoples’<sup>2</sup>. The Doctrine of Discovery was an international law in 1493 that categorised Native People as subhuman, denying their humanity, and treated their land as unoccupied and available for theft. Johnson’s poetry describes the process of imperialism, specifically in ‘A Cry from an Indian Wife’ where ‘Curse to the fate that brought them, from the East to be our chiefs- to make our nations least’ (132) is written. Imperialism catalyses the destruction of native traditional cultures, identities, education, language due to the domination of the intruders. The phrase ‘to make our nations least’ accentuates this realistic narrative of the fading of Indigenous tribes due to the settlers from the ‘East’.

Land is a natural resource which First Nations use to their advantage to live a sustainable life.

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<sup>1</sup> E. Pauline Johnson, *Tekahionwake*: E. Pauline Johnson’s writings on Native America (Toronto: Broadview Editions, 2016) Subsequent references in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup> Sean Byrne, ‘The Legacy of Colonialism Among Indigenous Peoples: Destructive Outcomes, Healing and Reconciliatory Potentials’, *Peace Research*, 49.2 (2017) p. 6.  
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Agriculture is a big part of most Native cultures, as they feel they are as much part of the land as the land is a part of them. They have a particular spiritual relationship with the land, therefore invasive attacks bring a dramatic disconnect from their culture and identity. Settlers would mine the natural fertility of the land without cultural framework of sustainable living. Even more, occupying Native land changes the ecosystems through the introduction of foreign pesticides, thus destroying and endangering Indigenous lifestyles. Johnson's 'Silhouette' narrates the starvation caused by the endangerment of the buffalo due to colonization. 'A solitary Indian tepee stands, The only habitation of these lands' (135). A colony which had once thrived off the resources of the land has now decayed, with a single person stood in solitude. Indigenous diets are discontinued, leading to starvation. Traditional ways of hunting, fishing, and harvesting were abolished or impossible to conduct due to the negative effects colonialism had on the environment. In turn, the health of the Natives deteriorates. They now

'One of the main elements of Indigenous religions is the level of interconnectedness with ... their land, plant and animal world'.<sup>3</sup>For Native cultures, nature has a spiritual dimension and is considered sacred. It is valued and depended upon; therefore, the theft of land prohibits this spiritual experience. This deep connection with nature derives from their ancestral burials, as well as traditional rituals. Johnson's 'The Re-interment of Red Jacket' details the spiritual bond tethered together by the ancestral burial of a Chief 'So still the tranquil air, one scarcely notes the falling of a leaf; But deeper quiet wraps the dusky Chief Whose ashes slumber there' (38). Johnson insinuates a metaphysical connection between man and nature, as the passing of the Chief provokes the deterioration of nature. We gain a sense of immortality with 'the falling of the leaf', alluding to the struggling survival of native Tribes because of the impacts of colonisation. Along the Red Road describes the power these rituals have as well as the importance of nature, as they 'invite the ancestors to travel across the spiritual realm

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<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Tomaselli, Alexandra Xanthaki, 'The Struggle of Indigenous Peoples to Maintain Their Spirituality in Latin

America: Freedom of and from Religion(s), and Other Threats', *Religions*, 12.10 (2021) p.2.

and join us in our ceremony. As one, we bowed our heads in the circle, sharing prayers for our loved ones and the great nations, asking for blessings for all mother earth's living and spiritual beings. We offered prayers for the animal kingdom, the plant world, and the mineral world... When we fell silent, each of us settled into the peace and harmony that had fallen over the sacred circle... Grandmother moon rose into the sky and shone her light over our circle.<sup>4</sup> This extract demonstrates the fundamentality of land within Indigenous culture. The reference of the moon as 'grandmother moon' solidifies this profound connection. Colonialism and loss of land violates this connection to ancestors and nature, which in turn breaks down traditional structures, destroying Native life. International law (UNDRIP, ILO C107, and ILO C169) declares that First Nations have territorial rights of their homeland and to cultural practices connected to their homeland. Despite this, mass corporations attempt to take such homeland for 'development' and 'progress'.

One of the greatest known colonial cases was the conquering of the Pueblo Indians by the Spanish.

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Settlement efforts began in 1598, as the troops beat, dismembered, tortured, raped, and executed the Native Peoples who attempted to maintain traditional religious practices. Such attempts instigated several synchronized united rebellions from 1640 onwards and culminated in the Pueblo Rebellion, forcing the settlers to migrate to Mexico. However, the Spaniards reclaimed the region in 1692, killing an estimated 600 Indigenous people. While some Pueblo families fled and joined allied tribes, other Puebloans remained in their towns and maintained traditions in hiding while publicly displaying Christianity as the settlers believed they should. Though not a Puebloan, Johnson details similar sufferings by the Mohawk tribe, in 'A Cry from an Indian Wife' - 'Go; rise and strike, no matter what the cost...Of white-faced warriors, marching West to quell Our fallen tribe that rises to rebel. They are all young and beautiful and good; Curse to the war that drinks their harmless blood' (132).

The Indian Claims Commission of 1946 was a judicial relations arbiter created by the American

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<sup>4</sup> John Wisdomkeeper, *Along the Red Road*, (Calgary: Books we Love Publishing Partners, 2018) pp. 4-5.

government to hear any longstanding claims of Native tribes. It was created as a way to relieve resentment caused by the United States' history of colonization of Indigenous peoples, offering economic compensation for stolen land. The commission ended on September 30th of 1978, which speaks volumes of just how many cases begged to be heard. Land claims were the dominant concern for compensation. \$1.3 billion was awarded to tribes after extensive historical research. However, the statutory authority did not permit land return to any tribes, instead Native people were awarded money based upon a net acreage figure of the land, along with the monetary market value of the acres of land. This outraged many Indigenous people, as they valued their land more than any financial compensation. The question I would like you to take away from this article is if you believe this makes up for every inch of stolen land, and the rapture in Indigenous culture, identity, and resources that colonialism caused?

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