Political Geography 52 (2016) 14–23

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Political Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo

Tender grounds: Intimate visceral violence and British Columbia's colonial geographies

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 14 January 2016

Keywords:
Colonialism
Slow violence
Intimate and domestic geographies
Feminist geographies
Child welfare

ABSTRACT

Ongoing colonial violence, I argue in this paper, operates through geographies of Indigenous homes, families, and bodies that are too often overlooked in standard geographical accounts of colonialism. Contiguous with residential school violence and other micro-scale efforts to eliminate Indigenous peoples, colonial power continues to assert itself profoundly through intervention into and disruption of intimate, 'tender' (Stoler, 2006), embodied, 'visceral' (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy 2008; Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2010), and biopolitical (Morgensen, 2011a) geographies of Indigenous women and children. Drawing on feminist and decolonizing theories, along with the concept of 'slow violence' (Nixon, 2011), I offer in this paper a grounded account of spatial forms of governmentality in ongoing colonial relations in British Columbia, Canada. I critique dominant geographic inquires into colonialism as being primarily about land, natural resources, and territory. These inquiries, I suggest, risk perpetuating colonial violence in their erasure of Indigenous women and children's ontologies, positing this violence as something 'out there' as opposed to an ever-present presence that all settler colonists are implicated in.
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Introduction

Sheri (names of interviewees have been changed to maintain anonymity) is a 26-year-old First Nations woman from British Columbia with two children, aged 9 and 7. As a teenager, Sheri spent more than five years as a survival sex-trade worker in Prince George, British Columbia, a city on the edge of the Highway of Tears, which is known internationally for its epidemic rates of missing and murdered Aboriginal women (Amnesty, 2004). Sheri is a former drug addict who began drinking "almost before [she] could remember" and started using drugs like crystal meth, crack cocaine, and marijuana before age 10. As a small child, Sheri was apprehended from her mother, a single parent who had also become a ward of the state in the foster care system at the age of four. By the age of 15, Sheri had been "in and out of more foster homes than [she] could count," "mostly separated from her [siblings]," and had been identified as a high risk and difficult to manage "case". Around the time of her 15th birthday, Sheri was "living mostly on the street" and was pregnant with her first child, a child who died at birth. In early 2002, Sheri joined a small but strong group of other young Indigenous girls to give evidence against a judge later convicted of and jailed for multiple violent sex crimes between 1994 and 2001 against First Nations girls, including Sheri, some as young as 12. Many of the girls, like Sheri, were wards of the state whose apprehensions the convicted Family Court judge presided over.

In late 2013, I asked Sheri if she thought her story, and the story of other First Nations women or children who she knew, could be linked with broader colonial geographies in British Columbia. Although it was a rather esoteric academic question, Sheri offered a sharp and insightful series of answers:

> Being in care I always felt lost. Like I had no home.... I had no home with my group [foster] home. I never felt like I belonged anywhere. I always felt out of place. [Then I was taken back to the community where there was evidence my ancestral family originated from]... and I felt like I was at home. And I had never had that feeling before. [I learned about where] we used to have our celebrations on this beach [and] I just started bawling. I felt like that's where I belonged and that's where I was supposed to be. Having to know that all my ancestors where there, that's what made me belong. That's what made me feel like I had a home there. And it was overwhelming. It was like this big weight lifted off my chest. Just to see where I came from, where my family came from.

Critical interventions into ongoing colonialism, I suggest in this paper, must account for the ways in which colonialism operates not only at the level of territories, maps, and resources, but also – and perhaps even more importantly – in the intimate, embodied,

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2015.11.010
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domestic, micro-scale geographies of Indigenous women and children. These "tender" geographies are deeply political and worthy of much more sustained critical attention by geographers than has previously been the case – particularly given the historical implication of geographers in the colonial work done by academic and other institutions. I argue here that geographers must recognize our always imperfect ability to do the substantive kinds of radical anticolonial political work required for meaningful intervention into ongoing colonial violence, but at the same time we must also push back against those historical and disciplinary limitations (Berg, 2012). By giving close critical attention to the everyday geographies of Indigenous women and children – as opposed to just geographies of land, territory, and natural resources – I suggest here that critical political geographers might better account for and push back against the hetero-patriarchal character of so much anti-colonial writing currently undertaken in our discipline (Berg, 2012; Holmes, 2009).

In the first section of this article I begin by critically evaluating conversations about colonialism and Indigenous geographies in British Columbia, Canada, where ongoing colonialism is marked on the bodies of many of the Indigenous women and children I have come to know over the years I have lived and worked in this area. I argue that by paying closer critical attention to the stories of women and children living the visceral experiences of colonialism, we might better recognize the complex and deeply relevant geography of the tender spaces through which the biopolitics of colonialism operate (Morgensen, 2011a). Although histories of colonialism vary across time and space, I offer here that the stories of Indigenous women and children in B.C. and Canada might shed light on the workings of colonialism in the tender, hidden places that are common to any community bearing the brunt of colonial erasure or assimilation. Although colonialism is unquestionably a spatial, geographic project, I argue that centring the experiences of women and children – their homes and bodies, their feelings and emotions – is a crucial corrective to theoretical accounts of colonialism that focus solely on the level of lands and resources.

In the second section of the article I describe how colonial policies regulating "Indian" identity have shaped the lived realities of Indigenous women and children. Since the "founding" of Canada, colonial laws and practices have been preoccupied with the "Indian Problem," itself a discursive framing of the colonial "problem" of managing dispossessed Indigenous peoples. In any of the many European colonial outposts around the world, accumulation by and for European settler-subjects required complex networks of technologies, laws, and discourses (Harris, 2004) in order to facilitate settler accumulation of dispossessed land and resources (Harvey, 2005). My questions extend David Harvey's (2004, 2005) thoughts about accumulation by dispossession, suggesting that ongoing contemporary colonialism is deeply vested in stripping Indigenous peoples' identities, especially through women and children and especially at the tender sites of re/production. I argue that, while the acquisition of land-based resources is largely premised on the successful de-Indigenization of people and lands, the former must not be continuously privileged over the latter in critical analyses of colonialism. Rather, I argue that the two must be parsed apart not solely as binaries to each other but instead as always in a co-constitutive relationship with each other. To make these arguments, which are framed with the decolonizing methodology explored in the paper's first section, I turn to a growing body of feminists and other critical theory about visceral and embodied geographies, drawing from those frameworks a series of insights I apply both to Canada's *Indian Act* and to the ongoing removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities in British Columbia.

In the third section of the paper, I use Nixon's (2011) concept of "slow violence" as a means of understanding – with an aim to critically unsettling – the ongoing disruption of Indigenous homescapes and embodied geographies. While it addresses firstly environmental destruction, I argue that Nixon's theoretical framework can and should be productively understood within longer lineages of theorizations about the operationalization of violence, especially in colonial geographies, within and through everyday ordinary and banal situations (Mbembe, 2001). I am cognizant that the very idea of violence requires further and ongoing unsettling, especially in settler-colonial countries like Canada, where slow violence gains power when it is made banal by settler-colonists distancing ourselves from its ever-present presence and working to differentiate and striate multiple forms of violence so as to never fully address any of them (see also Jiwani, 2006). Nevertheless, I suggest the utility of theorizing the violence experienced by Indigenous peoples in relation to the slowness mapped out by Nixon, a slowness which serves to make violence invisible, especially to settler-colonists.

I argue that the specific examples of "slow violence" in socio-legal categorizations of "Indians" and the removal of Indigenous children from their family homes in British Columbia contribute to larger analyses of legal violence, revealing the everyday ways in which Canadian law and its technicians maintain violent ongoing colonial power relations. Following Cover's (1986) foundational work on legal violence, I demonstrate that the slow nature of this violence is, in part, concealed through the separation between the rhetoric of legal texts (such as child welfare policies) and the actions of legal representatives (such as social workers and police). The violence of slowness, then, is a productive way of understanding ongoing colonial efforts to maintain control over, if not fully expunge, Indigenous peoples and their historically and constitutionally guaranteed rights.

In line with a decolonizing methodology that makes this slow violence more visible, I present voices and experiences of Indigenous people at the front lines of child welfare – people who, as children, were wards of the state themselves, people who work for the branch of government responsible for child apprehension, or people who are advocates and experts involved in the system. Their stories are narratives about experiencing the slow violence of family disruption and child apprehension, and work to humanize what I suggest are more abstract – and often lacking in emotion in their primary focus on resources and territory – inquiries into colonial geographies of British Columbia and beyond.

In the end, all the voices presented here corroborate the truths spoken by Sheri: as Indigenous peoples continue to navigate ongoing colonialism, the intimate spaces in which they exist reciprocally relate to macro-scale geopolitical territories of colonialism, and there is a nearly never-ending displacement of Indigenous peoples as historic colonial violences are continuously repurposed for the present. Finally, and as Sheri is also a living testament, if decolonization is to ever be anything other than a convenient metaphor that works to make non-Indigenous settlers feel better about ourselves (see for instance de Leeuw, Greenwood, & Lindsay, 2013 and Tuck & Yang, 2012), careful critical and sustained attention must be paid to the unique ways in which colonial systems of power continue to operate in the geographies of Indigenous women and children, recognizing that these places of tender geography are also spaces where healing has begun and is always possible.

The politics of a decolonizing methodology

Geographers have called for Indigenous peoples to be "more fully recognized as critical geographers, [to be] learnt from, and engaged in conversation and collaboration" (Blomley, 2008, p. 287). This is made particularly urgent in light of troubling assertions that Western scholarship, including geography, is more interested in representations of "the other" than with the messy pragmatics of colonialism (Clayton, 2001). This paper centres the voices of Indigenous people, whose grounded analyses of colonial power relations provide an

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