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Anxious Atmospheres of the Apologetic State

The Reconciliation Narrative and Contemporary Settler Colonialism

Seraphine APPEL¹

Abstract. This article explores how atmospheres in Canada are informed by a colonial attitude, logic of replacement, and hegemonic narratives of relationships to place to suggest that the inconsistencies between the politics of apology and the colonial response when the spatial order is challenged generates settler anxiety. This provocation is offered by considering the ongoing reconciliation rhetoric and decolonial resistance. The former illustrates the stage-value of the aesthetics of reconciliation manifest in politically charged sensitive atmospheres and the latter shows how colonial reaction to the deviant or resistant body illuminates the political potency of corporeal space.

Keywords. Settler Colonialism, Atmosphere, Political Apology, Reconciliation

Colonial Space

The emotional tones of a space are created and altered by traces of what has passed through, by which histories are affirmed and which are erased, and by physical and narrative constructions of how people relate to the land. In settler colonial spaces, the atmospheres that this manifests enforce descriptions of relationships to space that are informed by the replacement of people and place. In Canada, this is an ongoing and intentional project, and is coupled with the staging of a soft colonialism: a sustainable green aesthetic, colonial apology, and rhetoric of recognition and reconciliation. I suggest that the inconsistencies between this narrative and colonial responses to decolonial resistance generates settler anxiety and demonstrates the politicality of the body.

Distinct from enterprise colonialism, the project of settler colonialism is not only to profit from the land but to replace the existing population. Patrick Wolfe (2006) calls this the 'logic of elimination'. Armand Garnet Ruffo articulates that "[w]hen you have a people whose values are at odds with the fundamental structure of the society, a society built on the exploitation of people and the land, then that society can only do two things to accommodate those people: eliminate them - incarcerate them, for example - or assimilate them, pay them off" (Dewar in Robinson et. al., 2016, 225). In Canada, the explicit colonial relationship has been re-written, and has shifted "from a more or less unconcealed structure of dominance to a form of colonial governance that works through the medium of state recognition and accommodation" (Coulthard, 2014, 25). Despite the reconstructed benevolent identity, the colonial state relies on continual Indigenous disenfranchisement through tools of law, urban planning, and industrial development which physically, narratively, and legally alter

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connections and claims to space. The examples that follow illustrate how the notion of reconciliation is aestheticised, and how alterations of natural and built landscapes affect the atmosphere through redescribing relations to space.

Reshaping the Land

The Okanagan Valley is an arid desert-like grassland landscape, but was marketed to settlers in the early 1900s as a lush Eden-like oasis. John Wagner (2008) shows how Okanagan fruit boxes quickly coalesced around the image of orderly rows of sun-drenched fruit trees backed by panoramic views of the lake and mountains. As well as the displacement of the people that lived there, creating this rentable aesthetic required extensive irrigation and other physical alterations such as the straightening of rivers, resulting in an environmentally unsustainable aesthetic. Agricultural development which began as a tree-fruit industry has now shifted to vineyards, and the new leisure economy of wine tourism and golf courses in addition to the orchards represents a variation on the theme. This oasis aesthetic serves a colonial economy and contrasts with the arid landscape known by the Syilx who are Indigenous to the valley.

Replacing the natural landscape with marketable landscape aesthetics alters subjective emotional relationship to land. It was developed as a marketing tool to attract settlers, providing a ready-made European perspective as well as a charter for colonisation and ecological transformation (Wagner, 30), securing settlers to the aesthetics of space because their arrival is intrinsically linked to its existence. Settler land use has also been described as superior, as Indigenous land use has often been characterised as seasonal, nomadic, non-agricultural, or otherwise not intrinsically linked to specific plots of land, whereas agriculture is inherently sedentary, and its connectedness to land has made it a tool to organise space and a symbol of settler identity.

Staging, Renaming, and Historical Erasure

One of Canada's most visited attractions is a group of nine totem poles at Brockton Point in Stanley Park, Vancouver. This is unceded territory of the Coast Salish peoples; home to the Squamish, Musqueam and Tsleil-waututh, it was never signed over in treaty. The villages of Xwáyxway and Chaythoos were first occupied in 1888 and the last residents lost their land claim at the Supreme Court in 1925 (Barman, 2007). The Totem poles were bought from Indigenous groups elsewhere and the only local totem pole, by Robert Yelton of the Squamish Nation, was erected in 2009. Yelton (2015) describes the battle over the placement at Brockton Point, where he asserted that he would only situate it there, in front of where his grandparents' home once was, where his mother was born. He expressed the importance of the connection to place, while the city pushed for an alternative location, prioritising spectacle.

Indigenous art and aesthetic symbols are featured prominently in imaginal space, and I suggest that this functions to bolster the image of the inclusive state as well as to incorporate indigeneity into national identity to legitimate the country's heritage. This symbolic prominence functions to strengthen the politics of allowance and apology as well as the elimination/preservation logic that Wolfe observes, which is necessary for the logic of replacement. Where there is a replacement of people and environment, symbolic indigeneity is reinstated to legitimise the colonial state. Renisa Mawani argues that these visible markers are a reminder "that while Canada no longer [has] an 'Indian problem', it [does] indeed have an 'ancient past'" (2004, 44). Natalie Baloy (2015) conducted interviews with Vancouver residents on the Squamish Nation's proposal to change the name of Stanley Park back to Xwáyxway, and many of the responses

illuminated the anxiety generated by the inconsistencies between the ‘politically correct’ identity of the benevolent state and the emotional importance of naming. That this was not even a land claim but a name reclamation proposal exposed how crucial and thorough the attitude of replacement is to the project of colonialism and how destabilising is the reminder or creation of Indigenous spaces. Baloy observes that the “spectral colonial past and uncertain future make space and time feel uncanny and ‘out of joint’ in the city” (227), gesturing to the palpability of this affective atmospheric anxiety in the felt body.

Aesthetics of Reconciliation

The physical stage and the narrative backdrop of Canada’s reconciliation rhetoric, I suggest, largely aestheticises reconciliation in a perpetuation of the colonial project. Examples of this can be identified in the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).² The mandate states that there is “an emerging and compelling desire to put the events of the past behind us so that we can work towards a stronger and healthier future.”³ David Garneau argues that when read as a colonial desire, this constitutes a continuation of the settlement narrative (in Robinson et. al., 2016, 31). This is not to say that the intention is insincere nor that the initiatives are not constructive; many have expressed that they have offered rich opportunities for healing. However, because it was a legal settlement rather than a state-led initiative, testimony came almost exclusively from survivors.⁴ Intimate stories and communication through the arts were highlighted throughout, the visceral impact of which can lead to a settler-witness consumption of Indigenous trauma which offers what Roger Simon describes as “idealisations of empathy, identification, and facile notions of solidarity that simply promote settler state citizenship” (2013, 136), collapsing the distance that might otherwise cause them to question their complicity (Robinson and Martin in Robinson et. al., 2016, 12). Dominick LaCapra argues that this can lead to ‘empathic unsettlement’, which “places in jeopardy harmonising of spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance or a benefit (for example, unearned confidence about the ability of the human spirit to endure any adversity with dignity and nobility)” (2001, 41-42). Individuals may absolve themselves if they are confident that the government and churches are paying compensation. As stated by Taiaiake Alfred, “without massive restitution, including land, financial transfers and other forms of assistance to compensate for past harms and continuing injustices [...] reconciliation would permanently enshrine colonial injustices and itself a further injustice” (2005, 152).

Moreover, the ways that acts of apology are linguistically and culturally constituted are reflective of worldviews embedded in language - in this case, an inherent settler ontology. The language of ‘healing’, ‘forgiveness’, and ‘moving on’ place the burden of restoring relations on survivors and Indigenous peoples (Robinson and Martin in Robinson et. al., 6), but even more deeply-rooted are the underlying belief systems.

2. Active from 2008 to 2015 and established as a mandate of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement of 2007 between various residential school survivor groups, the Assembly of First Nations, various Church bodies, and Canada. The residential school system was a violent state- and church-led effort to destroy Indigenous communities and assimilate the children into Euro-Canadian society. Children were forcibly removed from their families to attend Christian boarding schools, and the physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, death, malnutrition, disease, and loss of culture and language are well documented, as is the subsequent intergenerational trauma. The last residential school closed in 1996.

3. See at: <http://www.trc.ca/about-us/our-mandate.html>

4. It could not accuse or hold perpetrators accountable as it had no powers of subpoena nor to offer amnesty.

Garneau argues that while “it acknowledges that the abuses were the result of (past) systemic policy, Canada does not do anything that would risk the integrity of current dominant structures. Because the system is premised on the eventual elimination of the Indigenous, it is cautious about recognising that it is in a perpetual relationship with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, and so it imposes a time limit on ‘healing’” (in Robinson et. al., 33). Furthermore, ‘reconciliation’ itself is constrained by Christian concepts such as the spectacle of individual accounts (confessions) and healing narratives (forgiveness and penance), and non-Indigenous understandings of healing and closure (ibid.).

The physical stage of the proceedings also upholds assumptions of impending closure. Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin consider the sensory provocations of the aesthetic choices such as the ambiance of rooms, the music and art included in the proceedings, and the arrangement of chairs to argue that the resulting “connection, interest, empathy, relief, confusion, alienation, apathy, and/or shock [...] worked powerfully to shape participants’ engagement” (2) and affect the bodies moving through these spaces. Knowledge is produced, conveyed, and understood through the body (11), and exploring “the actions of telling, making, talking, walking, sharing, giving, and receiving [...] [and] the ways in which such actions were read, witnessed, and understood by the multiple audiences that experienced them” (9) revealed unsurprisingly that the sensual experiences and responses differed in those carrying different personal and inherited experiences. As Gernot Böhme notes, an audience that experiences a stage set in roughly the same way must have a certain homogeneity, “a certain mode of perception must have been instilled in it through cultural socialisation” (2017, 30), and so it is crucial to question who has created these spaces, and for whom.

Decolonial Disruptions and the Body as a Site of Resistance

To resist the colonial attitude that desires full access, ownership, and visibility, Garneau emphasises the importance of cultivating distance and spaces of non-Indigenous inaccessibility, of creating ‘irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality’ which includes a refusal of translations and full explanations (in Robinson et. al., 23) and disrupts this monopoly on ambiance.

Narrative Reclamation

In one potent moment of guerrilla revision, a residential school survivor identified the photographed children in a TRC archive display and began to add their causes of death with Post-it notes. Others began to do the same: correcting names, re-identifying former students in terms of their kinship relations rather than their status as institutional wards, identifying those who never returned home, and adding stories of what happened later in life (Angel and Wakeham in Robinson et. al., 2016, 119). These Post-it amendments disrupted both the archival nature of the museum-like spatial structure and the colonial narratives in what had been framed as a benevolent sharing of images from a nurse’s personal archives.

In Robinson’s encouragement of public expressions of sovereignty that illuminate the colonial erasure of Indigenous spaces, he cites the group Ogimaa Mikana, who visually redescribed the landscape by renaming street signs and historical plaques in Toronto with Indigenous histories of place. They directly address the public through signage that asks: “‘Welcome to our community. How do you recognise it?’ Through this address, the readers are asked not whether they recognise Anishinaabe sovereignty and history of the location, but rather how they do” (2016, 61). This reclamation work contrasts with the state-sanctioned memorial plaques which, although they acknowledge Indigenous histories, read as odes rather than recognition of contemporary

Indigenous presence. “As Maria Campbell states with reference to a commemoration ceremony held at Batoche: ‘There’s a plaque, but the people still have no land’” (Robinson and Martin, 1).

The Disobedient Body

Disruption of colonial space and insistence on illuminating its inherent violence is continually being enacted through the disobedient bodies of decolonial resistance. The state asserts itself by monopolising space, demonstrating its unwavering ownership, and policing spatial social structures. Saladdin Ahmed (2019) argues that the state affirms its omnipresence through the visual proliferation of its marks that often function solely as a reminder that the state oversees that space: a sign in the forest, statues and monuments in public squares, the imposing architecture of government buildings (92); and “[t]he body is free to be in public space only insofar as it does not represent a threat to the ownership of the means and relations of spatial production” (59).

The marginalised have long been aware of the politicality of the body, that the mere presence of their bodies can expose the fragility of the spatial order. Indigenous assertions of sovereignty often reject the colonial state’s jurisdiction over physical and legal space, such as ignoring the international border and blockading economically-important sites. Negating the state monopoly on space and illuminating the spatial foundations of these systems of oppression, the space of the deviant or resistant body comes under attack when it questions the demarcations of the legitimate use of space and the body’s place in it. The disobedient body is met with disproportionate militarised force, as we have seen throughout the history of decolonial resistance and most recently in the colonial response to the Wet’suwet’en-led resistance of 2020. The precarity of the state’s spatial economy is revealed when its ownership is challenged through demonstration or through simply living in a way which accomplishes any de-bourgeoisification of space (Ahmed, 58).

Settler Colonial Atmospheres

Atmosphere - “feelings poured out into the surrounding space” (Griffero, 2014, 10) - mediates between the environment and the body. This can be violent, fostering the participation of certain bodies and exclusion of others, and the state desires to control this atmosphere to enforce which kinds of lives can be lived comfortably and safely. Physical and narrative alterations of space and history, such as those illustrated in this article, redescribe connection to land to discredit Indigenous ownership, and space and time are further redescribed through the historicisation of colonialism which obscures ongoing colonial efforts with an aestheticised staging of reconciliation. The project of replacement continues today through attempted assimilation, segregation through city planning, incarceration, enforcing poverty-inducing conditions, and the crisis of uninvestigated murders and disappearances. I argue that the orchestrated replacement of Indigenous people and spaces with a spectacularized aesthetic manifestation of manicured Indigenous presence - such as in the case of the totem poles at Brockton Point - is a phenomenon that plays prominently in this politics, and that this historicisation of colonialism is further reinforced by the closure that reconciliation promises. The dissonance between the stage-value⁵ of the polite state and the reactions to decolonial resistance generates perceptible insecurity which becomes clear whenever the colonial state is challenged, and manifests in colonial expressions of

5. Gernot Böhme (2017) proposes that the new production of stage-value bolsters aesthetic capitalism, offering an economic understanding of a staged space or lifestyle, which I suggest is applicable to national identity and the apologetic state.

defensiveness and emotional uneasiness in the state itself and in individual settler citizens. This was exemplified by the responses of Vancouver residents to Baloy's questions about place renaming, revealing the anxiety caused by this tension between their acknowledgement of Indigenous connection to land and, perhaps, fear of land repossession (219). Atmospheres are not the causes of emotional influence but the influence itself (Griffero, 120), and it is significant who has created our environments and who they have been made for. I have suggested the atmospheric violence of the Canadian state, that reactions towards the disobedient body reveal colonial insecurities, and that the body which challenges the spatial order is an existential threat to colonial claims to space and its structures of atmosphere.

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