

approach to change, consisting in the effort to reintegrate the essential features and benefits of a reconnection to homeland and of “traditional” indigenous land-based cultural practices that have proven in many cases to be key to the reclamation of spiritual, physical and psychological health and to the restoration of communities characterized by peace and harmony and strength.

Political and social institutions, such as band councils and government-funded service agencies that govern and influence life in First Nations today, have been for the most part shaped and organized to serve the interests of the Canadian state. Their structures, responsibilities, and authorities conform to the interests of Canadian governments, just as their sources of legitimacy are found in Canadian laws, not in First Nations interests or laws. These institutions are inappropriate foci for either planning or leading the cause of indigenous survival and regeneration. Reconfiguring First Nations politics and replacing current strategies, institutions and leadership structures with those rooted in and drawing legitimacy from indigenous cultures is necessary for creating renewed environments capable of supporting indigenous ways of being. Transformations begin inside each person, but decolonization starts becoming a reality when people collectively and consciously reject colonial identities and institutions that are the context of violence, dependency and discord in indigenous communities.

It is evident to anyone who has experience living or working within First Nations communities that conventional approaches to health promotion and community development are not showing strong signs of success. Reconciliation and empowerment through economic development and as the expected outcomes of self-government processes, land claims agreements, and aboriginal rights and title legal strategies, have not materialized. This is in large part because they have proven to be weak challenges to the thrust of the colonial-capitalist enterprise: the destruction or dispersal of Indigenous populations from their homelands to ensure access for industrial exploitation enterprises and concomitant non-indigenous settlements. Conventional approaches are based on an accession to the colonial-capitalist agenda with respect to Indigenous people and their lands. The agenda is heavily promoted by largely pro-assimilationist media and mainstream non-indigenous scholars (Widdowson, 2008; Helin, 2006; Flanagan, 2006), with integration into the market economy and cultural assimilation advanced as the only viable pathways to a better life for First Nations people and communities. This perspective is also at the centre of government policy and, it is fair to say, forms the view of the vast majority of the Canadian population.

Even among First Nations leadership, there is reliance upon the promise of integration and assimilation as a panacea for the complex of colonization and its resulting social suffering. The implicit assumption being that indigenous spiritual and cultural attachments to their homelands are relics of the past, and that the land and land-based cultures are capable of providing nothing more than a touchstone for the formation of new ethnic adaptations of a dispossessed and decultured “Aboriginal Canadian” identity. But the acceptance of being such an “Aboriginal” within the larger social-cultural mainstream of Canada is as powerful an assault on meaningful indigenous existences as any force of arms ever brought upon First Nations by the colonial regime. This integrationist and unchallenging aboriginal vision is designed to lead First Nations into oblivion, as individual successes in assimilating to the mainstream are celebrated, and our survival is redefined strictly in the terms of capitalist dogma and practical-minded individualist consumerism and complacency.

Despite some celebrated successes in court cases and economic development ventures, neither of these strategies generates real transformation in the quality of the lived experience of Indigenous peoples’ lives or expands the opportunities they have for living in ways that are not harmful to themselves or their communities. There is in fact not a shred of empirical evidence that increasing the material wealth of Indigenous people, or increasing the economic development of First Nations communities, in any way improves the mental or physical health or overall well-being of people in First Nations communities (Irlbacher-Fox, 2009). On the collective level, in terms of the need to empower First Nations communities, the self-government and economic development approach further entrenches both dependency and assimilation. As financial agreements, they are framed within and consistent with government policies without any real consideration of First Nations’ needs and objectives. Structured as year to year funding agreements, they promote instability and work against long-term planning and capacity building. They also do not provide means for First Nations to develop autonomous means to generate revenue, and most self-government agreements contain significant disincentives for First Nations to even attempt to move towards developing a capacity for such, “own source revenue generation.” In fact, business development and job training and other schemes to increase First Nations participation in the market economy are irrelevant to the basic problems that are the actual causes of the social and health crises in First Nations communities and at the root of First Nations psychological and financial dependency on the state. This “suffering as a causal web in



account of indigenous involvement in coastal and inland fisheries, particularly the salmon fishery. The focus of her book is on federal and provincial regulation, and its effect on traditional fishing practices and indigenous participation in industrial fisheries. She gets beneath government claims to be regulating in the public interest – usually framed in terms of conservation – and shows how regulatory strategies were designed to assure cheap indigenous labour for canneries, and to prevent indigenous competition with the white-owned and export-oriented industry. She documents coercive and intimidating practices, including raids against fishing camps and the destruction of traps and weirs along salmon-spawning rivers, and also describes the ignorant destruction of harvesting grounds through blasting designed to “improve” river spawning sites. She also documents how subsistence economies were negatively affected as policy changes made indigenous communities into ever more marginal players in the fishery over time. After WWII, the government’s fisheries policies were designed with the more rapid development of forestry and mining in mind, and were coordinated with other policies designed to encourage Indigenous people to migrate into cities and away from reservations. A particularly effective government tactic was to deny services to remote communities in order to spur migrations to urban centres. Putting this history of one activity in one region into a larger frame gives us a picture of the basic strategy and tactics used by the colonial regime in its sustained attack on indigenous economic autonomy and even subsistence livelihoods throughout the country (Newell, 1993).

Most Canadians are completely unaware of this history. This is lamentable, but not surprising, given that it is a common characteristic of colonial societies is the settlers’ entrenchment in irrational notions of racial and cultural superiority. Canadian culture and dominant notions forming the Canadian nationalist self-perception are loaded with colonial privileges and the most ludicrous of self-deceptive lies (Alfred, 2005, pp. 106-109). In terms of government and law, this is manifested in fictive legal constructs that legitimate white people’s usurpation, and a feigned legitimacy is constructed to normalize the structure of racism built into notions of Indigenous peoples’ land tenure and political rights. As an intellectual project, imperial arrogance takes the form of literature, scholarship and art to demonstrate the eminent merits and to replicate the simple fabricated facts and narratives needed to justify colonial privilege. Liberal, conservative and racist reactions across the political spectrum are the same and distinguish themselves from each other only in their varying intensities and styles. The unquestioned normalcy of the set of uninformed

and fundamentally racist beliefs and assumptions held by non-indigenous Canadians must be challenged for decolonization to begin in earnest. The behaviours that flow from them must be linked to their roots as a way of tracing the imperial mentality to its source. As it stands, within the paradigms of Euroamerican arrogance, injustices and the evident effects of colonial oppression and indigenous social suffering are explained away through deflective strategies of denial, projection, or misappropriation. Health crises, racial discord, criminality, physical violence, and all other manner of conflict are attributable to strictly material causes or to dysfunctions within First Nations communities. Yet informed opinion on the matter is clear, as the most recent compendium of top-level medical and social science research on mental health issues in Indigenous populations confirms that it is not indigenous dysfunction that is the root problem, but the dispossession of Indigenous people from the land and their subsequent oppressive treatment on reserves in the *Indian Act* system and in residential schools, and through other government policies:

Although it is difficult to prove a direct causal link, it is likely that the collective trauma, disorientation, loss, and grief caused by these short-sighted and often self-serving policies are major determinants of the mental health problems faced by many Aboriginal communities and populations across Canada (Kirmayer & Valaskakis, 2009, p. xv).

In the face of this fact, self-government and economic development are ineffective ways of confronting colonialism. Rather than attacking the roots of the problem, they perpetuate a dualistic and dependent relationship between First Nations and the state. The pathways open to First Nations in this paradigm, because they require further movement away from the land and more dissolution of community and accept psychophysiological problems as normal, in fact imply a long-term surrender of indigeneity. Enforced isolation and poverty on reserves is no different from the destructive exploitation of the land from an indigenous perspective; both decimate the possibilities for living life according to indigenous cultural values and spiritual mandates. Similarly, discriminatory laws stacked against Indigenous people are paradoxically very similar in their ultimate effect on First Nations to constitutionally entrenched rights and privileges because each of these mean nothing more than changes in degree or a reversal of roles in a relationship that preserves its oppositional essence and in a system that remains the same and annihilates us spiritually



and culturally no matter what the strategic outcome of the struggle.

Meaningful change, the true transcendence of colonialism, and the restoration of indigenous strength and freedom can only be achieved through the resurgence of an indigenous consciousness channelled into contention with colonialism. Indigenous people need to challenge the continuing conquest of the land and our people, but doing so through the futile delusions of money or institutional power can only bring cultural stasis enshrined in law or further conversions to capitalist-consumerism. These outcomes do not reflect the ideals of peace, respect, harmony, and coexistence that are at the heart of indigenous spiritualities and philosophies. The struggle to live in the face of colonialism must be done in an indigenous way according to indigenous needs, values and principles.

Such a renewed consciousness has the possibility to become the sacred knowledge that guides First Nations out of fog of confusion that has enveloped our people. The resurgence of an indigenous consciousness is an explosive potential capable of transforming individuals and communities by altering basic conceptions of the self and in relation to other peoples and the world. Its elements are the regeneration of identities consistent with the sacred teachings that come from the land, commitments to stand up for ourselves, and just restitution for the harms that our people have endured. There is no apparent alternative capable of helping First Nations build better relationships within communities, restore regimes of peace, respect and responsibility, and to lead Indigenous people to courageously counter the legacies of historical trauma and still-present threats to our existences.

THE EFFECT OF COLONIZATION

The situation facing Indigenous people in North America is not unique – neither in the present or in terms of the dynamics of a relationship between invader/oppressor and the subjects of colonization. Frantz Fanon, a medical doctor, used the tools of psychoanalysis to explain why black people lacked the individual and collective confidence in the French Caribbean colony Martinique. Fanon attributed these problems to racist assumptions held by both black and white people. These assumptions placed white people at the apex of civilization, and measured everyone else against white cultural standards. Accordingly, only those black people who assimilated into French culture were deemed to be civilized. Those who did not assimilate experienced a form of perpetual ridicule, which resulted in feelings of personal

inadequacy. In Fanon's analysis, colonized people who mimic the ways of the colonizer – who assimilate to the mainstream – and suppress their natural selves on a conscious and unconscious level begin to suffer from various psychological disorders (Fanon, 1982). There is certainly no evidence that the issues around assimilation and psychopathology are any different for Indigenous people. And, regarding the specific effects of colonization in Canada, Kirmayer and Valaskakis report that “it is likely that the collective trauma, disorientation, loss, and grief caused by these short-sighted and often self-serving policies are major determinants of mental health problems faced by many Aboriginal communities” (Kirmayer & Valaskakis, 2009, p. xv), clearly verifying that a Fanonian perspective on the psychological stresses of colonialism are present in Canada today.

Drawing on his research among the Kluane First Nation in the Yukon, Paul Nadasdy has described the harmful effects of colonialism, manifest as modern land claim processes and wildlife co-management initiatives, on First Nations communities as collectivities. His conclusion is that the most significant changes forced on First Nations relate to the emergence of various bureaucratic structures, such as wildlife co-management boards and the various negotiating tables involved with land claims, which have supplanted indigenous governing structures in the community. This increases the social stratification between those educated and technically qualified to navigate government bureaucracies and those who maintain an existence on the land and who engage in traditional land-based practices. It also changes the community's relationship with the land, eroding relationships based on indigenous spiritual teachings to a framework of individual private property. It alters the people's relationship with animals, where over time Indigenous people begin to view and treat animals no longer as sacred beings worthy of respect but as natural resources and marketable commodities (Nadasdy, 2003).

The geographer Cole Harris' work on the economic, social and health consequences of colonial and reserve policy for Indigenous peoples elaborates on these themes. Harris links the imposition of a private property rights regime with ideas on the superiority of the white race and European culture, as well as with the imperatives of the state itself, most notably the requirements of the state for surveillance and discipline of dysfunctional or minority populations. He notes that in the early period of contact and settlement, Indian agents responsible for monitoring and managing the colonial regime's law and policy in relation to First Nations were often times unable accomplish their objective of total surveillance of Indigenous peoples, especially in



imposition of the *Indian Act* and the forced settlement of Indigenous populations on reserves:

1. **Disorientation** – caused by the lack of self-government and management capacity appropriate to the imposed bureaucratic and capitalist environment.
2. **Disempowerment** – due to coercive enforcement of colonial laws and policies by government authorities.
3. **Discord** – resulting from people's inability to fulfil traditional, social, cultural, and spiritual obligations.
4. **Disease** – caused by inferior nutrition and the sedentary nature of reserve life.

The experience of Indigenous people in the urban context has not been extensively studied, but even the limited research by Jim Silver on urban indigenous political participation does shed some light on the particularities of their situation. Silver links the urban Aboriginal experience, characterized by experiences of overt racism and social exclusion, with an ongoing colonial relationship that equates, in experiential terms, to the removal of a normative framework for life leading to anomie suffered by reserve-based First Nations. There is, then, evidence of significant commonalities of effect between the urban and reserve in spite of the obvious difference of circumstance in geographic and socio-economic terms. Confinement to rural reserves and confinement to economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods in urban centres lead to the same results in the negative life experiences of Indigenous people.

The main differences between the two situations are that in the urban context Indigenous people's lives are affected by their experience of economic and racial discrimination – most cannot afford to live anywhere but in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and once there, the dynamics of enclave ghettoization and racism keeps them from locating elsewhere. Furthermore, just like in the reserve setting historically and in the contemporary period, the needs of Indigenous people living in indigenous enclaves or in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Canada's cities are neglected by the federal and provincial governments (Silver, 2006). Thus, for the purposes of understanding colonialism and its fundamental effects on Indigenous peoples in Canada, there is no basis for distinguishing between urban and reserve populations.

Compounding the psychophysical and cultural effects of separation from the land and dissolution of

community, there is the actual experience of harm and the multigenerational reverberations of the violence used in and associated with the oppression of First Nations. The historical traumas experienced by Indigenous people in the process of being removed from the land and in the construction of a colonial regime predicated on their marginalization are another factor at the root of the crisis of dependency (Whitebeck, Adams, Hoyt, & Chen, 2004, pp. 199-130). The spectrum of psychophysical effects being manifested in First Nations in Canada are the same ones that have been directly and causally linked to experiences of oppression in the research on Holocaust survivors and their families – recent research indicates that the direct effects and multigenerational legacies of the experience of colonialism has created similar effects on First Nations people as experiencing the Holocaust had on Jewish survivors (Yellow Horse Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). Conceptualized as the source of “historical unresolved trauma,” the pattern of colonization in Canada as experienced by Indigenous peoples has three identifiable features:

1. Ongoing multigenerational processes of dispossession and oppression;
2. Violent and systematic marginalization and assimilation; and,
3. Forced acculturation to Christianity and forced integration to market capitalism.

Whatever the particular situation, Indigenous people's basic relationship to the state is as members of nations in a colonial relationship with a dominating external power. All Indigenous people's personal interfaces with the state are channelled through and shaped by the collective relationship that their nation has, historically and currently, with the colonial regime. The laws and other types of institutions that give shape to First Nations life in Canada, and through which state agencies relate to Indigenous people, operate in a context that is historical and political and which reflects the objectives of the state in regard to the collective entities that make up the indigenous reality of Canada as economic, political and social facts. As such, the relationship between First Nations and the Canadian state remains colonial and is for the most part one of conflict rooted in the state's imperative to maintain its control over indigenous lands and to limit the power of First Nations.

In such a colonial relationship, impositions of power and authority by the regime may be absorbed, tolerated, or accommodated by Indigenous people in various ways over time, but the conquest of the Indigenous population



are conflated with these historical processes, and therefore set in time and unchangeable. Since Aboriginal identities, legal constructs and policies are premised on these *historical* notions, politics cannot address the social suffering that results from *ongoing* injustice, and they become simply band aids for the symptoms of ongoing colonization. If aboriginalism were to become the main framework for indigenous identity and for constructing relationships between Indigenous peoples and state, it would lead to the complete erosion of First Nations as political and culturally distinctive entities. Such a result would no doubt deepen the crises facing First Nations.

As a political program and set of cultural assumptions, aboriginalism manages to gently step through the minefield laid by formal definitions of genocide in international law. But this psychological and legal security exists only because the Canadian government's agenda and policies are not critically scrutinized in the public discourse or by most mainstream scholars. The severe destructive and disintegrating effects of colonization in indigenous communities and the momentum towards assimilation, combined with the active construction of aboriginalist structures to support the elimination of authentic indigenous existences, make such self-examination unlikely. Instead, accommodations with colonialism are sought.

Indigenous people who embrace aboriginalism become cultural mirrors of the mainstream society, and because they aspire to elevate their status inside settler society, they are afforded opportunities to usurp the voice and privileges of legitimate representatives of First Nations. Governments promote, and the general society accepts, the aboriginalist voice in politics and the arts, scholarship, media, and other public forums because it is the voice of accommodation and acceptance of the situation and allows settler society the hubris of its mistaken notion that indigenous dysfunction is responsible for First Nations dependency and suffering. This misappropriation of voice and subtle manipulation of the constitution of First Nations leadership in Canada is another powerful attack on the ability of First Nations to regenerate culturally and politically as collectives. From an indigenous perspective, it is not the Indigenous bureaucrats, businessmen, politicians, and lawyers holding positions of influence in state agencies or government-sponsored negotiation processes that have the right and responsibility to represent First Nations on the basic questions of indigenous identity and rights, cultural knowledge, traditional law and governance, or spirituality. It is the Elders and those who have been recognized as traditional knowledge holders or spiritual leaders that have that right and responsibility; and, it is theirs whose voice is being

ignored, appropriated and manipulated in the advancement of the aboriginalist agenda.

Indigenous Elders, knowledge holders, and spiritual leaders are consistent in their conclusions on how indigenous cultures have changed in the wake of colonization. In the culturally and spiritually rooted indigenous perspective, the most significant issues are not legal, political or financial in nature, they relate to the destruction of languages, spiritual practices, and social institutions (family, community, and governing structures), and the importance of restoring these things in order to re-establish a sense of personal identity and belonging for contemporary Indigenous peoples (Kulchyski, McCaskill & Newhouse, 1999). The respected Okanagan Elder and teacher Jeannette Armstrong describes how colonialism has led to the "slow internal disintegration of the survival principles developed over thousands of years;" and she tells how community focused relearning of traditional ways and governance systems (*enow'kin*) and a renewed focus on spiritual practices is the "backbone of the movement" to recreate solidarity within First Nations communities (Lobo, 1998, pp. 235-239).

Based on these understandings, from a solutions-oriented perspective, colonialism is best conceptualized as an irresistible outcome of a multigenerational and multifaceted process of forced dispossession and attempted acculturation – a disconnection from land, culture and community – that has resulted in political chaos and social discord within First Nations communities and the collective dependency of First Nations upon the state. This harm has resulted in the erosion of trust and of the social bonds that are essential to a people's capacity to sustain themselves as individuals and as collectivities.

Disconnection is the precursor to disintegration, and the deculturing of our people is most evident in the violence and self-destruction that are the central realities of a colonized existence and the most visible face of the discord colonialism has wrought in indigenous lives over the years. Cycles of oppression are being repeated through generations in indigenous communities. Colonial economic relations are reflected in the political and legal structures of contemporary indigenous societies, and they result in Indigenous peoples having to adapt culturally to this reality and to individuals reacting in destructive and unhealthy (but completely comprehensible) ways. These social and health problems seem to be so vexing to governments; large amounts of money have been allocated to implement government-run organizations and policies geared towards alleviating these problems but they have had only limited positive effect on the health status of our communities.



of settler settlements in their territories. The example of the James Bay Cree families provides a working model of a means of cultural survival for today and for the future (Tanner, 2009).

The traditional gathering or seasonal “bush camp” used by the James Bay Cree – and many other nations – provides a solid set of principles for conceptualizing efforts to preserve the crucial linkages between people, and between people and the land, that can sustain and even recreate strong and healthy indigenous identities and ways of living in the world (Tanner, 2009, p. 254). This model has three basic elements:

1. Re-establish family presence on the land in seasonal, ceremonial, or annual cycles;
2. Provide financial support to assist families in maintaining themselves based primarily using traditional land-based practices; and,
3. Restore traditional forms of community and cultural teaching on the land.

The holistic reconnection of people to each other and to the land, affording reserve-based and urban populations the opportunity to engage with each other and their homelands, will be the foundation of individual psychophysical health and community resurgence. Once people have their basic connections re-established, they will have the strength and confidence and support to figure out ways that work for them and their communities to sustain themselves and begin to make empowering decisions that fit the circumstances of their lives and situation vis-à-vis the colonial regime.

There is no one solution, so a multiplicity of strategies and tactics must be developed with respect to First Nations’ particular colonial experiences and situations.

Yet among all First Nations in Canada, it is the very foundation of their existence as Indigenous peoples that has been eroded by colonialism, and it is the rebuilding of this foundation that must be the focus of First Nations organizations and government policy efforts in order for First Nations to overcome the effects of colonization and to begin to engage the wider society and the world as self-sufficient and stable communities again.

We must realize that government policy cannot solve the problem.

It is crucially important for Indigenous people themselves to take the initiative to begin changing their own lives and to contribute to the rebuilding of their communities. The idea of engagement is an important

one. Indigenous people alive today have been successful in surviving physically against the worst abuses of the colonial regime. Survival as nations and communities, though, demands that we act on our deep connections to the land and our sacred heritage of resistance to colonialism. Our ability to do this has been severely affected by the harms and losses we have suffered because of the negative forces brought into our communities by settlers and the colonial regime.

Finally, the willingness to fight for survival in all sense of the word, and for the right to exist free and healthy and fully as an Indigenous person in one’s homeland must be recognized and supported as a means of recovery as well.

It is through political and social action in defence of the land and the political rights of First Nations that many colonized Indigenous people regain knowledge of their history and culture, and the confidence to demand and affect change in their lives and in the larger society. As Kirmayer and Valaskakis surmise, in their review and comparison of various strategies of promoting mental well-being and the psychological recovery from the effects of colonialism:

Political and social activism can be a path toward healing. Activism shifts the focus from “blame the victim” to recognition of oppressive systematic structures. Engagement with the aspirations of a community or a people offers an immediate sense of purpose and direction. It requires building functional ties to community to develop solidarity and both individual and collective efficacy. If successful, such activism brings great rewards not only in terms of social recognition, power and economic resources but also in terms of a renewed sense of both individual and collective agency (Kirmayer & Valaskakis, 2009, p. 458).

The message from traditional teachings and from the academic research is consistent and clear: return to the land and re-learn how to live as Indigenous people according to the original teachings that sustained people and the earth for thousands of years. Even the Supreme Court of Canada, starting with the *Delgamuukw* decision and in numerous decisions since, has mandated the protection of traditional cultural uses of the land by Indigenous people. This provides the basis in Canadian law for a broad based social, cultural and political movement to re-assert indigenous presences on the land. It is this pathway that will generate a new indigenous reality for First Nations people and communities in Canada.



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