

TOXIC DOMESTICATION IN ALBERTA, OR
HOW TO READ A CANADIAN LANDSCAPE

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Following the river east from Red Deer, Alberta, a jarring sight emerges from the prairie. It is the river itself, billowing up into the sky from a series of stacks that, at first, seem out of place in the rolling green expanse dotted with cattle and bound, here and there, by roads, railways, and fencing (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Petrochemical complex and farmland on the borderlands between Treaty 6, signed against Pitikwahanapiwiyin's counsel in 1876, and Treaty 7, described by the Siksikaitsitapi Confederacy as a peace treaty made in 1877 with the 'newcomers' and the Nakoda and Tsuut'ina nations.

How these stacks came to be here might as well be the story of the settler state itself.

Only the mind's eye can reveal what the prairie might have looked like before the treaties, the cattle, the railway, and the petrochemicals. For those steeped in story and ceremony on these lands, the image is sure to be ingrained.

For those of us who arrived during the era of colonial violence, which extends to our times, the image is more of a flash, captured in words, for example, by a historian paraphrasing a European explorer who had been welcomed at a Siksikaitsitapi encampment along the shores of Pine Lake in the middle of the 18th century:

“The camp consisted of at least 200 large teepees. They were arranged in two long rows with a broad ‘avenue’, nearly a kilometre in length, down the middle. At the one end, was the chief’s tent. It was large enough to comfortably accommodate 50 people. In the centre was a large white buffalo robe, upon which were seated 20 elders smoking grand pipes.

There was food in tremendous abundance. Boiled buffalo meat was served in large baskets. Large haunches roasted on the fire.”

A short distance to the north, at Tail Creek, were Métis settlements that swelled to 2,000 people during the bison hunt.

Large mammals – bison, and elk – roamed according to their own logics and shared the Prairie with the people who lived with and from them since time immemorial until these lifeways were systematically scraped off the prairie.

THE LAST OF THE BISON

The birth of the Dominion of Canada in 1867 coincided with the disappearing of the bison (Figure 2). The last wild herd observed near what is now Red Deer, Alberta, was reportedly spotted in the summer of 1884, a few kilometres from Pine Lake and less than a



Figure 2: A bison hide, now hanging in a reconstructed longhouse at the site of a Wendat village in what is now Southern Ontario, demonstrating the presence of East-West trade between Indigenous nations.

decade after Ottawa dispatched a general to Fort Carlton, in what is now Saskatchewan, to nail down a treaty with the Cree. Treaty 6 was signed

in 1876 against the counsel of Cree leader Pitiwakanapiwiyin, or Poundmaker.

“This is our land,” Pitiwakanapiwiyin declared during those Treaty 6 negotiations. “It isn’t a piece of pemmican to be cut off and given in little pieces back to us. It is ours and we will take what we want.”

But little pieces are just what the occupying government sought to implant with its models of industry, first in the form of real estate, cattle and railways, and later in the form of mines and oil wells, pipelines and petrochemicals.

The last of the bison were seen shortly before the pass system was imposed to keep Indigenous people confined, physically and commercially, in the new reserve subdivisions, and to enable the parcelling of the rest of the prairie for settlers. This was a decade before the opening of residential schools to which Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families, first in Red Deer – identified in a federal government report as the deadliest residential school in 1907 – and two years later in Ermineskin, a little further to the north in Maskwacis, one of the biggest residential schools in the new dominion.

HISTORIC TREATIES

“Not only has Canada’s assimilationist policies and practices resulted in cultural genocide, including the dispossession and loss of Indigenous lands, languages and cultures, these events confirm that genocide of Indigenous Peoples occurred in Indian Residential Schools.”¹

The Maskwacis Cree Chiefs, from Treaty 6 communities now based near Ermineskin (Figure 3), 150 kilometres north of Red Deer, issued this statement of condolence following the identification of unmarked graves at the residential school site on Tk’emlùps Te Secwêpeme Nation territory in what is now known as the Province of British Columbia in 2021. The Confederacy of Treaty 6 First Nations has asked the Alberta government to locate graves on the sites of the former residential schools in that province.

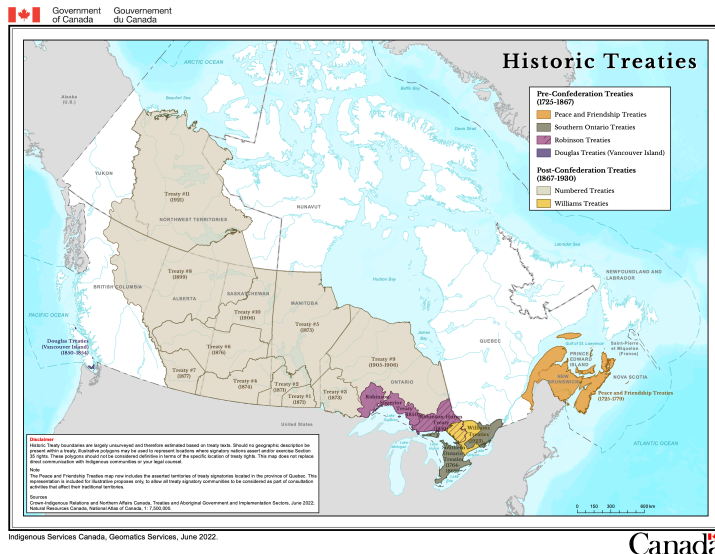


Figure 3: Historic Treaties

The last of the bison, not surprisingly, ushered in an era of hunger and deprivation that the faraway government used as a tool to control Indigenous nations and peoples on the prairie; enclosing the prairie into parcels of land organized around the accumulation of profit. Even the hunger itself presented an opportunity for private profit, as the government paid ranchers for an inadequate ration of beef, sometimes disease-infested, for distribution on the new reserves.²

TOXIC INDUSTRIOUSNESS

The hamlet of Joffre – several kilometres east of the centre of Red Deer, north of Pine Lake and southwest of Tail Creek – was established as a postal station along the railway. The place is now the home of Canada’s largest petrochemical complex, first developed by provincial crown corporation Alberta Trunk Gas Line Company in 1979 to make ethylene from the province’s natural gas stocks (Figure 4). While



Figure 4: The hamlet of Joffre, Alberta

the cattle are still there, the bison and large seasonal hunting villages are not even a distant memory.

Today, the complex produces polyethylene (plastic) polymer and other petrochemicals from natural gas. These are largely sourced from the Williston Basin and by-products of tar sands mining piped in from the Athabasca region in northern Alberta. The complex draws millions of cubic metres of water from the nearby river, known as Waskasoo Seepee in Cree and Red Deer by settlers, some of which is returned to the watershed laced with arsenic. In the 2010s alone, the facility released some 30 million tonnes of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

It seems impossible to reconcile the landscape in Figure 1 with the aims of the area's treaties interpreted by a party to Treaty 7 as a relationship "to share our territory in exchange for education, health, and other privileges to ensure the sustainability of our Niitsitapi – Siksikaitsitapi (traditional ways of the Blackfoot Confederacy) People."

One the one hand, "territory has been given to us by the Creator to live in harmony with all of creation." On the other, the land is a limitless bank of resources from which only a few benefit; a sink in which to dump the petrochemical industry's polluting products and by-products.

THE PARTS THAT REPRESENT THE WHOLE OF ONGOING COLONIZATION

Political scientist and Dene scholar Glen Coulthard has warned against accepting contemporary attempts by the state to settle matters with Indigenous people through formal apology, recognition, and negotiation. Saying ‘we are sorry’ and ‘we see you’ cannot compensate for “ongoing state access to the land and resources that contradictorily provide the material and spiritual sustenance of Indigenous societies on the one hand, and the foundation of colonial state-formation, settlement and capitalist development on the other,” he argues.³

The stacks, cattle and fence in Figure 1 are metonyms. They are parts that represent the whole of the ongoing dispossession of peoples who have not disappeared, despite successive settler state strategies to extinguish them.

While the current landscape seen in Figure 1 is an obstacle to reconciliation with Indigenous forms of life and, ultimately, all life on the planet, the future is decidedly not petroleum, plastics, and industrial beef production. Capitalist development over the last 300 years around the world has resulted in overlapping environmental crises, from climate change to biodiversity loss, that threaten the future of life on the planet. In 2022, scientists determined that we have surpassed two planetary boundaries related to industrial pollution and freshwater.

Embracing the writings of Kanien’kehá:ka professor Taiaiake Alfred and Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamoske Simpson, Coulthard posits that Indigenous resurgence “draws critically on the past with an eye to radically transform colonial power relations that have come to dominate our present.”⁴

The prairie awaits.

PHOTO CREDITS

Figures 1, 2 and 4: Karen Wirsig; Figure 3: Indigenous Services Canada

NOTES

1. Press Release of the Maskwacis Cree Chiefs, May 31, 2021, published in <https://www.samsoncree.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/volume7issue42.pdf>.
2. *Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation and the Loss of Aboriginal Life*, James Daschuk, 2013, University of Regina Press.
3. Coulthard, G. *Red Skin White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, p. 7.
4. *Ibid*, p. 157.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen Wirsig is a settler who has worked as a journalist and as a labour and community organizer and environmental advocate. She has participated in her downtown Toronto housing co-operative for more than 20 years. She has spent her adult life trying to unlearn the common belief that humans should strive for domination over each other, over other animals, and over nature itself. She can be reached at karenwirsig@gmail.com.

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