

The Struggle for Reconciliation and Decolonization:  
Navajo Uranium Miners

As a form of inspiration for this essay, I opted to use Sherene H. Razack's *Gendering Disposability*, a text that provides a frank outlook on how colonial powers utilize excessive violence to leave a permanent imprint on Indigenous bodies. Razack's text goes into further detail about the sexualization of Indigenous bodies, referencing the murder of Cindy Gladue and the mistreatment of her body during the trial. While this essay won't be discussing the sexualization of Indigenous bodies, it will focus on the eagerness of colonial powers to dispose of Indigenous bodies in pursuit of capitalist gains for their respective settler states. This discussion will take place under the context of understanding the colonial enclosure of Native American land and subsequent ownership of natural resources within their territory. In the broader spectrum, almost every settler-colonial state has seen the usage of Indigenous bodies to help achieve a certain capitalist-based goal, the trans-Atlantic slavery network being a significant example.

This text will be using the examples of labour in residential schools and the usage of Navajo workers in uranium mines in the Colorado Plateau to demonstrate the aforementioned disposability of Indigenous bodies for capitalistic gains. While both cases feature relatively similar examples, they differ in the paths taken for reconciliation and ultimately decolonization. In this paper, I will present the argument that for the Navajo Nation to achieve genuine reconciliation a genuine dialogue must emerge between the Navajo and the United States government that goes beyond the passing of legislation. Furthermore, it must also include the acceptance that decolonization should be considered a success through the cleanup of abandoned mines and contaminated soil and water. It's unfortunate that the Navajo would have to settle in this regard, but to achieve this form of decolonization over no progress at all is still a victory in its own right.

## *Overview of Labour in the Residential School System*

Beginning in 1892, Indigenous children were removed from their families and communities and placed in institutions that posed as schools run by the Roman Catholic and Presbyterian churches, as well as the Church of England, with the Canadian government soon joining<sup>1</sup>. The intent of these institutions was to commit cultural genocide by dissociating Indigenous children from their culture and language, converting them to a Western religion, and ultimately assimilate them to meet the acceptable standards of European culture. This act of cultural genocide represents a clear attempt to re-integrate these children into Canadian society with the intent of them being able to positively contribute to the country's economy<sup>2</sup>. This was but one of the multiple ways in which we witnessed the disposability of young, Indigenous bodies through excessive violence for capitalist profit. For indigenous children within these institutions, the disposability showed itself in smaller details as well, outside of the larger aim of assimilation. An example of this would be Gilles Petiquay, who upon their arrival to Pointe Bleue Residential School, was given a number as opposed to being referred to by name<sup>3</sup>, removing the value from an Indigenous body and watering it down to a number.

In an attempt to justify these institutions while still manage to run less of a deficit was to implement an "industrial school incentive." Introduced by J.S. Dennis, the former deputy minister of the Department of the Interior, the aim was for those who attended the institutions to learn skills in farming and mechanical trades to render the institutions self-sufficient, but also to

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<sup>1</sup> Brenda Elias et al., *Trauma and Suicide Behaviour Histories among a Canadian Indigenous Population: An Empirical Exploration of the Potential Role of Canada's Residential School System*, *Social Science and Medicine* 74, no. 10 (May 2012): 1561.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1561.

<sup>3</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Committee, *What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation.*, report (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), 12.

ensure that upon their release from the residential school, they would be fully capable to integrate into the Euro-Canadian society<sup>4</sup>. This initiative was also shared by former-Indian Commission, Edgar Dewdney, former-Indian Affairs Deputy Minister Lawrence Vankoughnet, and members of the Anglican church<sup>5</sup>. Due to the residential schools being severely underfunded, these methods were essential to ensure the institutions remained open and functional and to successfully achieve the goal of cultural genocide.

Through the model of the industrial school incentive and the overall goal to limit the deficit caused by the residential schools, we see, once again, the disposability of Indigenous bodies. The first was through the use of forced labour that was often unpaid by Indigenous children, often in harsh conditions and with little nutrition to support the harsh physical demands placed on them. The second was the little value placed on the education they would receive while at the school through the lack of funding for missionaries who functioned as educators. Lastly, basic health was neglected at residential schools, especially following the inflation during WWI<sup>6</sup>. In comparison to other boarding schools in the country and with similar style residential schools in the United States, Canada spent by far the least amount per student.

Through the establishment of residential schools, to the implementation of the industrial school initiative and the cost-cutting methods which led to unpaid student labour and poor health conditions, it is clear that the residential school system functioned as a violent colonial institution that had shown the disposability of Indigenous bodies and led to an extreme amount of accumulated violence seen in the subsequent years following the release of those who survived

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 26

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>6</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Committee, *What We Have Learned*, 30.

residential schools and the final closure of the Gordon Indian Residential School, Saskatchewan in 1996.

### *Overview of the Navajos and Uranium Mines*

Prior to discussing the uranium mining industry in the Navajo Nation and the subsequent effects it has had in the development of accumulated violence and need for decolonization, it is important to develop the context of the economic and social realities of the Navajo nation in the years prior to the beginning of uranium development in the late 1940s. The Treaty of 1868, also known as the Treaty of Bosque Redondo, assigned the federal government the responsibility of maintaining the needs of the Navajo in regards to education, in which they would provide a teacher assuming the Navajo would be sent to school for 10 years and provide supplies for farming to help create self-sufficiency within the community<sup>7</sup>. The treaty also, however, required the Navajo to relinquish any land claims outside the reserve and they were forced to allow the construction of railroads within their new territory<sup>8</sup>. As you can imagine, this treaty mimics many that were developed in Canada.

In the subsequent years following the Treaty of Bosque Redondo, the Navajo Nation also witnessed a transition into a wage-based economy and the first intrusion of capitalism into their agrarian society. The main source of wage employment for the Navajo was with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), along with inter-reservation trade and business with communities close to the boundaries of the reserve<sup>9</sup>. To achieve employment with BIA, however, it was largely based

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<sup>7</sup> <https://americanindian.si.edu/static/nationtonation/pdf/Navajo-Treaty-1868.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1016

<sup>9</sup> Doug Brugge, Timothy Benally, and Esther Yazzie-Lewis, "'So a Lot of the Navajo Ladies Became Widows'," in *The Navajo People and Uranium Mining* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006), 2.

on education-level, resulting in the workforce being 90% white<sup>10</sup>. As a result of the poor and limiting economic developments in the Navajo Nation, the opening of uranium ore mines provided an opportunity for Navajo men to obtain wage-based employment and remain close to their communities. With that in mind, however, the lack of proper transport for the impoverished Navajo, uranium mining was simply the only option for job stability.

The introduction of the Navajo people to the uranium mining industry began during WWII following the 1948 announcement by the US Atomic Energy Commission that the United States government would become the sole purchaser of uranium ore within the federal territory<sup>11</sup>. This led to a rush in mining development where uranium was situated, including the Colorado Plateau, an area that was and is currently inhabited by the Navajo Nation. During this boom in the 1950s, roughly 750 uranium ore mines were in operation across the United States, with four major mining development opening in Navajo territory, located in Kayenta, AZ, Church Rock and Shiprock, NM, and Monument Valley, UT<sup>12</sup>. While mining was not unknown to the region, with radium and vanadium mines already in operation, the uranium expansion into the territory presented various new and promising economic possibilities for the Navajo who would have previously needed to travel outside their communities for paid work<sup>13</sup>.

The reality of the uranium miners for Navajo workers did not lead to economic prosperity, but rather the disposability of their male, Indigenous bodies. The first indication of this was the wage offered to male miners, roughly \$0.81-\$ 1.00/hour, was considerably lower than the salaries of the white employees, who were primarily in managerial positions<sup>14</sup>. The

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>11</sup> Doug Brugge and Rob Goble, "The History of Uranium Mining and the Navajo People," *American Journal of Public Health* 92, no. 9 (September 2002): 1411.

<sup>12</sup> Brugge and Goble, "This History of Uranium Mining", 1411.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 1411

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1411

second and most profound factor that confirms this argument is that due to the Navajo speaking little to no English, nor having a word for radiation in the Dine language, “thus, the Navajo population was isolated from the general flow of knowledge about radiation and its hazards by geography, language, and literacy level.”<sup>15</sup> In interviews conducted by Doug Brugge, “virtually all of the Navajo miners report that they were not educated about the hazards of uranium mining and were not provided with protective equipment or ventilation.”<sup>16</sup> This is despite the fact that by 1952, the scientific community was well aware of the risk of lung cancer, among other health conditions, that were linked to prolonged exposure to radon during the process of mining uranium. Ultimately, the main health risks surrounding the mines and the waste that followed was prolonged exposure to uranium, which causes damage to kidneys and birth defects, radium, which can lead to bone cancer and leukaemia, and arsenic, which can cause both lung and skin cancer<sup>17</sup>. In a study that was conducted that examined the mortality risk of Navajo uranium miners between 1960-1990, 303 of the 757 miners had died due to lung cancer, pneumoconiosis, and other respiratory diseases<sup>18</sup>.

The development of accumulated violence caused by uranium mining and the disposability of Indigenous bodies has manifested through three separate channels. The first is the forced shift in the Navajo nation from functioning as a traditional grazing economy with strong ties to a family clan lifestyle to a modern wage economy and the withdrawal from the family clan system, leading to what has been colloquially titled the “Shiprock Syndrome.” While mines were situated in the Navajo Nation, a portion of the workers were required to travel outside of their rural communities for work. This removed individuals from their former familiar

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 1411

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 1411

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family and work environment, leading to a likely disassociation from traditional Navajo values. This infiltration of foreign bodies also led to problems in the communities near the mines. The “Shiprock Syndrome” discusses the phenomena where you have these workers come from outside of their communities and become submerged in a non-familiar culture that operates within the wage economy and lacks the traditional family clan system. The end result features fights surrounding wages, an infiltration of alcohol from nearby communities into the traditionally dry Navajo communities, and an increase of domestic abuse towards women.

The second form of accumulated violence has been the trauma inflicted on the Navajo women, especially those who lost their husbands due to illness as a result of working in the uranium mines. The increase of widows in the Navajo communities meant that women and children were forced to take up responsibilities in the home that would have traditionally have gone to men such as chopping wood and hauling water. Physical exertion aside, the most immediate impact was the trauma, which was often worsened by the fact that the husband most likely suffered before death and died prematurely, the knowledge that the death could have been preventable if proper measures had been put in place, and the lack of willingness of a social entity to take responsibility for the death<sup>19</sup>. These women are now not only short of an additional household income but also were the ones responsible for advocating for change in their communities.

The final form of accumulated violence is the combination of the previous two factors on the current generation of the Navajo people. The lack of action from the United States government to clean up the now abandoned mines and contained soil and water sources has continued the trend of uranium-based health conditions in the area. As examples, 40% of the



Navajo Nation lacks fresh running water, resulting in mothers using potentially contaminated tap water and in a group surveyed 27% had high levels of uranium in their urine, dangerously high when compared to the national average of 5%<sup>20</sup>. Other elements of accumulated violence on the current generation of the Navajo is the potential childhood without a father figure and the burden of having to advocate to various forms of government to ensure proper compensation is received and legislative action is put into place to clean up contaminated sites within the Nation.

### *Reconciliation, Decolonization, and Moving Forward*

When discussing the idea efforts of reconciliation thus far in the Navajo Nation, it is complicated to compare it with the process taken by the survivors of residential schools. As it currently stand, there has been no official apology issued by the United States or the states that the Navajo inhabit. Nor has there been a widespread movement outside of the Navajo community to achieve reconciliation. This is not to say that the public would not support reconciliation efforts, but rather there is no pressure on the government to issue an apology. As a whole, the United States has a poor record for apologizing to Indigenous groups. In 2009, the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs issued resolution 63 which was “to acknowledge a long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes and offer an apology to all Native Peoples on behalf of the United States.”<sup>21</sup> While admirable, this apology fell short in inspiring increased dialogue to promote reconciliation with Native Americans.

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<sup>20</sup><https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/04/10/473547227/for-the-navajo-nation-uranium-minings-deadly-legacy-lingers>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.congress.gov/bill/111th-congress/senate-joint-resolution/14/text>

Reconciliation is more than just an apology, however, as reflected in the principles of reconciliation brought forward by the TRC. These include utilizing the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP), having processes for healing that include public truth sharing and apologies, and constructive action on addressing the ongoing legacies of colonialism<sup>22</sup>. In the Canadian context, we have embarked on the process of reconciliation by forming the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, tentatively agreeing to implement UNDRIP, and the Trudeau government has begun the process of implementing some of the Calls to Action produced in the final TRC report. Despite this, there is still a long path ahead if Canada is to achieve decolonization.

In regards to the Navajo, their reconciliation (it's a stretch to even call it that) has taken place through legislation, primarily the *Radiation Exposure Compensation Act* (RECA) which was passed by the United States Congress in October 1990. I chose to include RECA as the leading form of reconciliation because the act states "The United States should recognize and assume responsibility for the harm done to these individuals.", in this case individuals are not solely the Navajo, but rather all "atomic veterans" whose work environment featured high levels of radon and uranium and fell ill because of it<sup>23</sup>. RECA also issued an apology to those affected, but this included once again all workers<sup>24</sup>. Despite the intent of RECA and the generous compensation that was issued, up to \$100,000 for uranium miners, there was criticism from the Navajo. One of the main concerns from the Navajo miners and their families was that RECA failed to compensate many claims, with 9,869 of the 25,084 claims being rejected<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup>file:///home/chronos/u-4462cdb7b6b33c91bf16d58038aa4f2157ffa8da/Downloads/What%20Have%20We%20Learned\_.pdf (p.4)

<sup>23</sup> p. 138 of the book

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 138

<sup>25</sup> [https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/civil/legacy/2014/10/20/Tre\\_SysClaimsToDateSum.pdf](https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/civil/legacy/2014/10/20/Tre_SysClaimsToDateSum.pdf)

With the United States showing little interest in participating in the reconciliation process and RECA being the only tangible piece of legislation when it comes to reconciliation, I propose that it would actually be easier to work on the decolonization efforts with the Navajo Nation. To achieve decolonization, I opted to use the principal of removing violent colonial institutions from Indigenous land. In the case of the uranium mines in Navajo territory, it would involve the clean up of former uranium mines, the decontamination of soil and water sources for currently affected communities, and the continued issuing of financial compensation. While further decolonization should be achieved, this is a respectable option given the scope of this essay. Furthermore efforts are currently underway with projects funded by the Environmental Protection Agency. In May 2011, a cleanup project began at Oljato Mesa and over \$80 million has been allocated to find alternative water sources and to identify contaminated homes and mine sites<sup>26</sup>. If these measures are followed through and successful, it would be appropriate to say a level of decolonization has been achieved.

### *Conclusion*

This essay began with the Sherene H. Razack's claim that colonial powers utilize excessive violence to leave a permanent imprint on Indigenous bodies. This claim was used in the intersection with the violence of capitalism and the disposability of Indigenous bodies. Reviewing the cases of residential schools and the Navajo uranium miners, this is simply what has happened. By lowering the operating costs of the schools through the forced labour of Indigenous children, providing limited health care, poor education, and the abuse suffered, we witness the development of accumulated violence that has had cross-generational effects. The

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<sup>26</sup> P. 8 of Kenney reading

same can be said with the Navajo miners who were subjected to unhealthy working conditions in uranium mines, being disadvantaged and treated in a disposable manner by not being told about the dangers of the mines. Moving forward, there are ways to deal with the accumulated violence in the Navajo communities. While RECA has been a small victory, advocacy must continue and the United States must engage in dialogue with the Navajo outside of the legislative field, a no easy task. It's for this reason that I had proposed to instead put value in the tangible aspects of decolonization. While no means perfect, it places the Navajo Nation on the path to truth and reconciliation.

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