

## Unsettling Ottawa: Settler Colonialism, Indigenous Resistance, and the Politics of Scale

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### *Abstract*

The city of Ottawa is on unceded Algonquin territory and, as the centre of formal political power in what is now known as Canada, has represented an important site for local, regional, national and international Indigenous networks organizing to resist settler state agendas of dispossession and assimilation. Yet the city-region is rarely acknowledged as a deeply contested space where competing ideologies and imaginaries reproduce and disrupt settler colonial common sense and state power. Based on a critical interrogation of methodological settler colonialism, this paper proposes a decolonizing scalar lens to analyze Indigenous contestations that unsettle Ottawa. Through brief case studies of local community-building, the Algonquin land claims process, and Chief Theresa Spence's hunger strike on Victoria Island, it illustrates the contested, interconnected, and competing nature of scalar configurations and spatial ontologies and the role of "Ottawa" in settler colonialism and Indigenous resurgence.

*Keywords:* settler colonialism, contested cities, scales of Indigenous resistance, Ottawa, decolonization

### *Résumé*

La ville d'Ottawa est sur un territoire Algonquin non cédé, et, en tant que centre du pouvoir politique officiel dans ce qui est maintenant connu comme le Canada, celle-ci représente un site important pour les autorités locales, régionales, nationales et les réseaux autochtones internationales qui résiste l'agenda de l'état de dépossession et d'assimilation. Et pourtant la ville-région (Ottawa) est rarement reconnu comme un espace contesté où se dispute des idéologies et où des représentations se reproduisent et perturbent le bon sens colonial et le pouvoir de l'État. En se fondant sur une interrogation critique méthodologique du colonialisme, l'article propose une 'lentille' scalaire décolonisée afin d'analyser les contestations qui perturbent Ottawa. Par le biais de brèves études de cas de collectivités locales, du processus de règlement des revendications territoriales des Algonquins, et de la grève de la faim de Chef Theresa Spence sur l'île Victoria, j'illustre le caractère contesté, interconnecté de la nature concurrente des configurations scalaires et des ontologies spatiales et le rôle de «Ottawa» dans la colonisation et la résurgence autochtones.

*Mots-clés:* villes coloniales, résistance autochtone, Ottawa, décolonisation

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## Introduction

In the Canadian context, cities have been constructed as settler space through discursive and non-discursive practices intended to evict, displace, and invisibilize Indigenous peoples and place-making in urban areas (Razack 2002; Barman 2007; Peters 1996; Peters and Andersen 2013). Despite their foundational nature, the historical and ongoing processes of settler colonialism are largely ignored in scholarly discourses on urban space-making, mirroring settler state practices of erasure (Tomiak 2011a, 2011b). The starting point of my analysis is the contention that any examination of Ottawa<sup>1</sup>—in this special issue and elsewhere—must not reproduce the dispossessing and genocidal logic of settler colonialism, but should interrogate the relationships between “Ottawa”, the settler state, and Indigenous peoples. This critical engagement is a political imperative and, as I will argue, a methodological necessity as well.

In order to write against an unexamined reification that erases the city’s colonial foundations and ongoing project of dispossessing and disappearing Indigenous peoples, my aim with this paper is to destabilize notions that unproblematically posit “Ottawa” as an object of inquiry, as a settled, stable and knowable social, spatial, and scalar constellation, without acknowledging its deeply contested status and the ongoing relationships and responsibilities that the Anishinaabek have to the land and waters that constitute the city-region that has come to be known as Ottawa. Normalized notions of what and where the city of Ottawa is rely on a common sense that asserts space from a white settler point of view. Ottawa, however, is on unceded Algonquin territory<sup>2</sup>, as is much of Eastern Ontario and Western Quebec (Lawrence 2012).<sup>3</sup> The city is not only on deeply contested ground, but also the terrain of persistent anti-colonial Indigenous struggles for life, land, and self-determination, which include struggles over the meanings and definitions of territory, place, scale, identities, and modes of governance.

This paper uses case studies to show how anti-colonial politics of scale and Indigenous knowledges and practices contest dominant space- and meaning-making in, of, and through Ottawa. First, I discuss local community-building and scale-jumping as a key strategy of urban Indigenous self-governance. Second, a brief overview of the Algonquin land claims process in Ontario highlights how Indigenous nation-building efforts, as fraught as the land claims process is, are reframing Ottawa as part of Algonquin nation territory. Third, Chief Theresa Spence’s hunger strike on Victoria Island in December 2012 and January 2013, together with the Idle No More movement, have demonstrated the importance of cities as sites and catalysts of decolonization. Data from a number of sources inform the analysis, including interviews<sup>4</sup>, grey literature, media content, and the academic literatures on decolonization, cities, and scale. I argue that a critical scalar lens can help denaturalize the settler colonial production of urban space and the normalized structures, processes, and meanings of the settler city.<sup>5</sup>

This paper interrogates the conceptual trajectory of the urban, more generally. It addresses the lack of engagement with (urban) Indigeneity, decolonization, and Indigenous ways of knowing in the critical urban theory, political economy, and politics of scale literatures, challenging the ways in which scholarship has reinforced rather than disrupted settler colonialism and settler state power. My goals with this project of unsettling Ottawa are to: 1) disrupt methodological settler colonialism by deconstructing normalized understandings of the city; 2) critically engage the politics of scale from anti-colonial, feminist perspectives and examine what this theoretical lens can add to the analysis of Indigenous struggles and resistance to settler state politics; and 3) highlight case studies of Indigenous resistance that advance alternative socio-spatial narratives and practices and thereby illustrate the efficacy and diversity of anti-colonial scale politics. A commonality across various forms and scales of resistance lies in the centrality of asserting collective Indigenous agency and visibility, thereby refuting settler narratives that claim Indigenous peoples, as rights and title holders, do not belong and do not exist in cities.

## Disrupting methodological settler colonialism and the city

How we know Ottawa and think about the city matters. In academic and everyday praxis, methodological choices matter, because they are productive of the realities we seek to analyze. As Law and Urry (2004, 392) stress, “[...] the social sciences, including sociology, are relational or interactive. They participate in, reflect upon, and enact the social in a wide range of locations including the state.” In capturing and explaining social realities, we are also inadvertently co-producers of specific realities and relationships. In this section, I outline a theoretical stance intended to destabilize and replace settler colonial constructions of the city. It entails disrupting methodological settler colonialism—the assumptions, values, principles and ways of knowing through which

settler cities have become known and normalized.

Settler colonial city-making takes on heightened significance in the context of the national capital. As the capital, the City of Ottawa has been constructed as the centre within the socio-spatial scaffolding of formal political power in the Canadian nation-state. In this sense, Ottawa's reach in terms of governance and the production of dominant meanings is not confined to local and regional scales; the city is often conceptualized as a stand-in for national interests and federal politics. This has made the city an important site for those challenging settler colonialism. Local, regional, national, and international Indigenous networks organizing to resist settler state agendas of dispossession and assimilation have advanced agendas of self-determination in Ottawa in many ways, including through direct action, engaging the federal policy and legislative processes, and creating a permanent presence through representative organizations. To some extent, this speaks to the importance of cities, more generally. As Nicholas Blomley notes (2004, 127), given "that the city is a site of particular ideological, material, and representational investments on the part of a settler society, native contestation has a particular valence here." Ottawa is unique in this regard because of the city's role as capital. What happens in Ottawa, does not stay in Ottawa. Actions here have shaped the trajectory of settler colonialism and Indigenous-state relations like no other city in Canada.

To understand the relationship between settler colonialism and the city—and how Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations have been governed through a specific understanding of this relationship—I approach the problematic of the settler city by focusing on the production of space and the production of knowledge as closely connected and mutually reinforcing processes. I use the term settler city to denote specific, yet unstable and varied, socio-spatial formations that are at once the products and vehicles of settler colonialism and its logic of displacing Indigenous bodies, peoples, ontologies, and rights. By interrogating the settler city as a foundational essentialism of settler colonialism itself, we can begin to develop a more nuanced and relational understanding of the processes and structures that have reproduced it. De-essentializing the city in settler colonial contexts requires attention to contestation, multiplicities, competing narratives, and the connections to relations outside of the city, since, as Doreen Massey (2004, 6) notes, "any [...] city, as well as being internally multiple, is also a product of relations which spread out way beyond it." As we will see, the persistent struggles of Indigenous peoples against the settler colonial politics of disappearance are not confined to the urban scale, but (re-)connect urban and rural spaces based on Indigenous land-based ontologies and ethics.

What I mean by methodological settler colonialism is the normalization of settler-colonial ways of knowing; it refers to the processes and outcomes of meaning-making and space-making that displace Indigenous knowledges and territorializations. Mahon (2006, 457) notes with respect to methodological nationalism that "[t]he centrality of the national scale thus operates as an assumption deeply embedded in social science theory and analysis." In a similar vein Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002, 301) define methodological nationalism as "the assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world." Borrowing from these conceptualizations of methodological nationalism, I want to broaden the conceptualization of methodological settler colonialism to include the entire spectrum of normalized spatial configurations, political arrangements, and ways of knowing that have constituted the politics of dispossession and displacement of Indigenous peoples. Methodological settler colonialism has meant that the settler-colonial framing of urban space has been invisibilized. Taking the settler city for granted without problematizing its historical and ongoing formation reinforces the erasure of Indigenous peoples as peoples. Rather than treating the city as an innocent container of social relations, we need to examine its active constitution, as an object of analysis and agent of settler colonialism in its own right.

This methodological orientation also entails acknowledging the challenges of and, ultimately, complicity in reproducing language and dominant constructions of space, identities, and social relations. While it is not possible to escape methodological settler colonialism within the confines of the academic genre and the English language, Indigenous scholars (Simpson 2011; Smith 1999) and feminist geographers (Gibson-Graham 1999, 2008; Massey 2007; Roberts 2014) have encouraged a critical assessment of the connections between ideas, power, and practices. Gibson-Graham (2008, 620) suggests techniques of "ontological reframing to produce the ground of possibility" and "re-reading to uncover or excavate the possible." The ontological reframing of Ottawa (and other cities) in a settler colonial context entails making Indigenous agency visible and acknowledging the on-the-ground and variously networked Indigenous practices and narratives that disrupt settler colonialism. The case studies will foreground the possibilities inherent in Indigenous struggles over place-making, rights,

territory, and self-determination in Ottawa and beyond.

At times I place Ottawa in quotation marks to indicate that the normalized understanding of Canada's capital city is based on varied constructions of socio-spatial arrangements that are deeply settler colonial in nature. My assertion is that "Ottawa" is not a cohesive, monolithic formation, but fractured and contested. People activate different spatial imaginaries and identities when they invoke "Ottawa". The city is emplaced and embodied differently, with conflicting meanings and social relations attached to various settler and Indigenous imaginaries and practices. Similar to Massey's observation in relation to London, Ottawa "is entangled in a web of spatialities that can be addressed politically in different ways" (Massey 2007, 93). To ignore the historical production and contemporary contestations related to "Ottawa" is to entrench settler colonial power and existing injustices in and of the city—and it forecloses possibilities for different, decolonizing politics.

### Placing scale, situating the settler city

To situate Canadian cities, and, more specifically, Ottawa, in the larger context of settler colonialism, a socio-spatial analysis with a focus on scalar processes is well suited to capture the intricate and multiple connections and disconnections that have produced urban space. A critical spatial lens is appropriate, because colonialism itself is a deeply spatial project, fundamentally about "the transfer of land from one people to another," as Cole Harris (1997, xxi) puts it. The interrelated logics of the transfer of land and the elimination of Indigenous peoples have been driving the project of settler colonialism and remain at its core (Wolfe 2006; Veracini 2010). The centrality of these logics is reflected in Canada's legal apparatus and settler state practices, including foundational fictions of discovery and *terra nullius*<sup>6</sup> and genocidal policies such as those enforced through the Indian Act and other legislation intended to contain and disappear Indigenous peoples (Lawrence 2004; Razack 2002; Thobani 2007).

As Indigenous scholars, like Coulthard (2014), Simpson (2011), Simpson and Smith (2014), Alfred and Corntassel (2005), Green (2003), and others, remind us, this is an ongoing project, albeit one that has been unfolding unevenly over time and across space. That is, settler colonialism as a state and societal project is not static, but has relied on different strategies and shifting technologies of power. While specific technologies of power have changed, their purpose has not. Settler state technologies of power have consistently been employed in the service of violent dispossession, displacement, control, and surveillance of Indigenous peoples to make the transfer of land a reality—to emplace settlers and eliminate Indigenous peoplehood, nationhood, and title (Alfred and Corntassel 2005; Coulthard 2014). The settler colonial political economy of scale, both in its material and discursive dimensions, has had the purpose of bringing into existence a social, economic, and political reality that erases Indigenous peoples as peoples. In this sense, dominant scales—the settler city, the national capital region, the province, the Canadian nation—have functioned as scales of dispossession and disappearance, policed, as I argue elsewhere (Tomiak 2011a, 2011b), most aggressively in relation to cities.

In showing how Indigenous resistance and resurgence relate to the material and meaning-making processes of scale and space, I also want to address the Eurocentric assumptions of much political economy and urban studies scholarship. In these literatures, the dispossession of Indigenous peoples as the foundational modus operandi of cities in settler colonial contexts is largely ignored (see also Coulthard 2014; Blomley 2004). An important aspect of the work of making these processes and their outcomes visible lies in critically examining how space is conceptualized, divided, and governed. This is where the concept of scale provides a useful tool for thinking about how the settler city is constituted and normalized.

While it is beyond the scope of my paper to discuss the nuances in the theorizations of scale and the evolution of the scalar turn, more generally (see Marston 2000; Marston and Smith 2001; Mahon and Keil 2009; Brenner 2001, 2004; Swyngedouw 2004; Jessop 2008; Smith 1993, 2004), it is important to briefly situate how scale is understood. Radical geographers and political economists have stressed the processual and contested nature of scale, "as a container, arena, scaffolding and hierarchy of sociospatial practices within contemporary capitalism" (Brenner 2001, 592). Conventionally understood in terms of geographical extent and reach, scale is here conceptualized as a deeply relational and contested social construct that includes both hierarchical (vertical) and networked (horizontal) dimensions (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Howitt 2003; Jones 2009). Groups can "use the opportunities provided through scale to produce spaces in which localized action can be made more permanent and be inscribed in a landscape" (Staeheli 1994, 389). In short, scale does not exist outside of human agency; it is always inescapably and multiply embodied and emplaced.

As noted by Leitner and Miller (2007, 117-118), "the basic idea of scalar analysis was succinctly stated by

Neil Smith early on: the ‘scale of struggle and the struggle over scale are two sides of the same coin’ (Smith 1992, 74).” Attention to the spatial organization of power deepens an anti-colonial analysis that seeks to highlight the confining and enabling aspects of scale, how settler-colonial and Indigenous subjectivities are shaped by (competing) understandings of scale, and how discursive and non-discursive processes inform Indigenous struggles in and over urban space. Leitner et al. (2008, 157) situate scale politics in relation to practices and trajectories of contentious politics. Other spatialities such as territory, place, and networks also play a key role in shaping collective action and are co-constitutive of the positionalities, subjectivities, and stakes of struggle (Jessop, Brenner and Jones 2008). As Leitner et al. (2008, 160) point out, “such networks, deliberations and co-presence in place cannot simply be subsumed under a master narrative of scalar politics, but are suggestive of other spatialities not readily reducible to scale; socio-spatial connectivities through trans-local networks, mobility across space, and the building of social relations in place.” My intention is not to offer a reductive analysis through any single spatial master concept, but to propose scale politics as an approach that can capture multiple directionalities of power, competing spatialities and socio-spatial imaginaries and strategies, such as scale-jumping, and the contested nature of the very foundation of cities in settler colonial contexts like Canada.

The naturalization of scale as spatial units that are organized in and as hierarchies should be seen as a structural effect of state power and sets of embodied institutional practices, as Ferguson and Gupta (2002) show (see also Paasi 2004). Scale has thus been an important settler state strategy through which specific ways of knowing and governing have been normalized. As Hart (2006, 984) explains, “the material ‘facts’ of dispossession are as important as their meanings—and they must be understood together in terms of multiple historical/geographical determinations, connections, and articulations.” For an anti-colonial understanding of scale, it is key to deconstruct the discursive and non-discursive elements and effects of the dominant politics of scale. Normalized scales, or inter-scalar configurations, have performed important aspects of the ongoing work of dispossessing Indigenous peoples by displacing and invisibilizing Indigenous scales of governance.

### **Case studies of Indigenous resistance to, in, and through “Ottawa”**

I now turn to case studies of Indigenous resistance to, in, and through “Ottawa”. The three case studies cannot be discussed exhaustively here, but are meant to exemplify the diversity of anti-colonial scale politics and Indigenous resistance to settler state power and spatialities. First, I discuss local community-building and strategies of scale-jumping as a key strategy of self-governance. Second, a brief overview of the Algonquin land claims process in Ontario shows how Indigenous nation-building efforts can reframe Ottawa as part of Algonquin nation territory. The third case study I discuss is Chief Theresa Spence’s hunger strike on Victoria Island in December 2012 and January 2013. Together with the Idle No More movement, Chief Spence’s hunger strike in the heart of Ottawa also offers important insights regarding the importance of cities as sites and catalysts of decolonization. The case studies underscore that we need to understand “Ottawa” in historical and relational perspective and as contested.

### **Local community-building and scale-jumping**

There is a vibrant Indigenous community, or communities, in Ottawa. Available data about Indigenous people in Ottawa, however, are unreliable at best; Statistics Canada has chronically undercounted Indigenous populations (UATF 2007a). Depending on how one conceptualizes “Ottawa”, the National Household Survey enumerates 18,180 self-identified First Nation, Metis, and Inuit residents in the city in Ontario—or 30,570 First Nation, Metis, and Inuit residents in the Ottawa-Gatineau Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) (Statistics Canada 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). Indigenous community organizations and service agencies have persistently criticized these numbers as inaccurately low. A 2006 community report puts the number of Aboriginal residents in the National Capital Region at 35,000, at a time when the 2006 Census enumerated 20,590 Indigenous residents (Kohoko 2006, 8; see also Tungasuvvingat Inuit 2005). According to Statistics Canada, Indigenous residents in Ottawa are closer to non-Indigenous averages in terms of income and education levels than Indigenous residents in most other cities in Canada, possibly due to the large number of federal government and NGO jobs that attracted many Indigenous people to the city-region (Statistics Canada 2013a, 2013c; UATF 2007b). However, it is important to note that the available data hide a more polarized picture in Ottawa where a significant need for Indigenous-specific, especially Inuit-specific, services exists. The majority of Indigenous residents in Ottawa are First Nation people, with a great diversity when it comes to nations of origin. The city is also home to the largest urban Inuit community in Southern Canada, with well over 1,500 Inuit, according to local organizations

(Tungasuvvingat Inuit 2005; UATF 2007b).

In Ottawa, as one interview participant put it in reference to an underdeveloped institutional landscape to advance local interests, “the community was forgotten” (interview, October 22, 2008). Much of the focus of Indigenous politics and organizing in the city is on federal politics and (re-)establishing nation-to-nation relationships. Despite its co-presence, it was not until 2007, through the efforts of the Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition (OAC), that local community organizations established a formal relationship with the federal government under the Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS).<sup>7</sup> The OAC was initially an ad hoc coalition of front-line service providers in the city, which consolidated into a formal coalition around the problem of homelessness in 2001.<sup>8</sup> The goal of the OAC was “to provide a more unified or collective voice in representing the Aboriginal community to the City of Ottawa... Out of that, there was a recognition, a realization that we might have more impact if we do things as a collective in terms of approaching the City” (interview, October 3, 2008).

The activities of the OAC initially focused on accessing and building relationships with the City of Ottawa, then the federal government and, more recently, the provincial government. I characterize the collective strategy of these local organizations as scale-jumping. Scale-jumping is a strategy through which actors transcend a prescribed scale—or, in this case, assert political space despite a normalized scalar void—and use access to different scales to pressure issues at various or all scales. As Swyngedouw (2005, 2001) explains, “scale jumping is a vital strategy to gain power or influence in a multiscale relational organisation of networks of governance.” Jumping scales to consolidate a new political configuration from which to advance local community concerns occurred solely on the initiative of the OAC. As an interview participant explained, “it has all been on our part—directed, controlled, envisaged by the Aboriginal community through the Coalition. It wasn’t because government was coming [knocks on table], hey, are you interested in doing [this]?” (interview, October 3, 2008).

Before the OAC and its member organizations approached the City of Ottawa, Aboriginal issues were largely excluded from the City’s agenda. This became apparent when the City’s Social Planning Council put together its 20-year plan in 2001. Initially, “neither the official plan nor background materials prepared by the Social Planning Council included any meaningful mention of Aboriginal citizens, history, or issues” (OAC n.d., 1). Relationship-building with the City of Ottawa led to the creation of the City of Ottawa Aboriginal Working Committee in 2007, made up of representatives from the Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition, City of Ottawa—Community and Protective Services Department, United Way/Centraide Ottawa, Ottawa Police Services and the Champlain Local Health Integration Network. The Aboriginal Working Committee reports to the Community and Protective Services Department, not directly to City Council. While the OAC had pushed for the creation of a Standing Committee, the City was apparently not prepared to politicize urban Indigenous issues in this way. The City of Ottawa has not made new Aboriginal-specific funding for services available. Rather, the City has contributed to Indigenous community-building through in-kind contributions, logistical support, and networking. As a community leader pointed out, “the City is broke..., but they have supported us where they have had the opportunity... There’s in-kind contribution and leveraging. I mean they know people” (interview, October 3, 2008). Noting that “knowing people” helped establish relationships with other levels of government, particularly the federal government, a number of interview participants felt that the contributions of the City were significant. Another interview participant pointed out that, as a result of the working relationship between the City and the OAC, municipal services have changed in that there is now active outreach to Indigenous residents. She noted that “they [Ottawa child care services] even come here to register people. They’ve come here for information. They’ve gone out of their way to serve the community, so I’ve been extremely pleased with the service we’re getting from the City right now” (interview, August 20, 2008).

In addition to the City of Ottawa, the OAC also established relationships with the United Way, the federal government, and, most recently, Ontario’s Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs. The United Way and the Province began providing capacity-building funding to the OAC in 2006 and 2008, respectively. Most importantly, the OAC’s multi-scalar strategy led to the inclusion of Ottawa as a UAS site. In October 2007, Ottawa was officially designated the 13th UAS city which meant that an additional \$100,000 annually for capacity-building activity and \$400,000 annually in community funds became available (Kohoko 2006). In the news release announcing the addition of Ottawa to the UAS, then Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, Strahl, is cited as highlighting the role of the UAS “in increasing the urban Aboriginal community’s participation in the local economy” (Indian and Northern Affairs Canada 2007). While state goals in relation to the UAS explicitly center on economic participation and individual and community responsabilization, to the exclusion of Indigenous

rights, the processes and outcomes under the UAS are also significantly shaped by Indigenous actors (Tomiak 2011b). This illustrates that strategies of jumping scale can, as Mahon (2006, 459) explains, “in the process produce incremental, yet potentially path-shifting changes.”

Representatives of Indigenous services providers noted that the UAS is a step in the right direction, because it represents a forum for and recognition of urban Indigenous collective agency. A representative of an Aboriginal service provider pointed out that “it is an element that brings cohesiveness and a desire to focus on the problems that are at hand together. It’s one person like myself fighting in the wilderness, but it’s another when I have 6 or 7 colleagues at the table who have the same voice, the same needs, and the same aspirations as I do. So I think that’s a critical piece. Money, no, there’s not enough there—but the other pieces are important” (interview, October 27, 2008). By accessing resources from and building relationships with different levels of government, the OAC was able to consolidate a collective position from which to pursue an agenda of community-building—and is now seen as a legitimate political actor on the Ottawa scene. This shift as a consequence of scale-jumping was very pronounced in the city, where in 1994, Indigenous community leaders identified a *Silent Crisis*, the complete invisibility of Indigenous needs, in a presentation to the City’s Social Council. An interview participant explained that the persistent efforts of making the community visible to city officials eventually led to “a recognition that there were Aboriginal people living in the city and getting a couple of paragraphs into the 20/20 plan, the city’s 2020 plan” (interview, October 27, 2008). Asserting a collective presence and advocating on behalf of the community across scales have been central aspects of the work of local Indigenous service organizations.

### The Algonquin land claim

The Algonquin never surrendered their territory by treaty, sale, or conquest. Algonquin petitions to remove settlers from their lands and to have their title recognized date back to 1772. The Algonquin of Pikwàkanagàn (formerly Golden Lake Band of Indians) set in motion the ongoing land claims process in 1983 when they presented their comprehensive claim to the Government of Canada and, in 1985, to the Government of Ontario. It was not until 1991 and 1992 that the land claim was accepted by the provincial and federal governments, respectively. In 1994, the three parties to the negotiations signed a Framework for Negotiations Agreement, outlining shared objectives. The Algonquin of Pikwàkanagàn, the only federally recognized Algonquin community in Ontario, were later joined by other Algonquin communities located in Eastern Ontario. The only reserve community under the Indian Act; non-status communities are recognized as participants in the land claims process. The eventual recognition as a claim of the Algonquin nation in Ontario in 2000 speaks to the struggles of nine non-status Algonquin communities to be represented and included in the trilateral land claims process (Lawrence 2012; Steckley and Cummins 2007).

The Algonquin land claim<sup>9</sup> covers an area of 36,000 square kilometers on the Ontario side of the Ottawa River watershed between Hawkesbury in the South and Mattawa about 400km North. While the Kitchissippi, or Ottawa River, represents a provincial border in settler colonial mappings, it is a connector of territory and communities in Anishinaabe mappings. The claim area includes most of Algonquin Park, as well as the National Capital Region, including Parliament Hill. Although the claims process is highly contested, because it is on settler state terms and inevitably results in surrender of Aboriginal title, a settlement could potentially entail the reclamation of land and institutional and public space in Ottawa. As one interview participant explained, “there are hopes that there would be some recognition of Algonquins in the Ottawa area and we have met with Ottawa City Council members and staff and there have been some discussion around the recognition of Algonquins and some role, maybe an employment centre within the Ottawa area... There should be something in Ottawa for the members. There was some plan of a centre, not just a Friendship Centre, but something like a service centre. There’s little I can say at this point, but I’m sure there should be and there will something in Ottawa... we are going to negotiate some properties for housing, economic development, for people in the Ottawa area” (interview, January 6, 2009).

An agreement-in-principle was finalized in December of 2012 and has since been subject to community consultations, including in a number of cities such as Ottawa and Toronto. According to the agreement-in-principle, 117,500 acres of so-called Crown Lands within the land claim area will be selected for transfer to the Algonquins of Ontario in fee simple title. Of the claim area, approximately 59 per cent is privately-held patented land, 21 per cent of the land mass is within Algonquin Park, 16 per cent is land held by Ontario as public lands

and by provincial Crown Corporations, and 4 per cent is classified as federal Crown land. In addition, there are a number of provisions related to, among others, harvesting, co-management, and a capital transfer of 300 million dollars from the federal and provincial governments (The Algonquins of Ontario, Ontario, and Canada 2012). Four small properties have been identified for transfer on the outskirts or just outside of Ottawa, nowhere near prominent sites downtown. Furthermore, the negotiators agreed that no new reserves will be created on the lands that are transferred (The Algonquins of Ontario, Ontario, and Canada 2012; Tanakiwin n.d.). The lack of jurisdictional power will make it more difficult to assert a strong Algonquin presence, since, as the Government of Ontario website explains, “Algonquin lands will be subject to municipal jurisdiction, including the same land use planning and development approvals and authorities as other private lands” (Government of Ontario n.d.). In this way, settler law continues to displace First Nations rights, title, and jurisdiction through the land claims process—a process that reinforces rather than remedies the theft of land and colonial violence.

The Algonquin land claim is significant in its potential to reframe settler understandings of Ottawa as Algonquin territory and within an Indigenous scale of governance. The Algonquins of Ontario (AOO) have documented the various ways in which they have engaged, including through the proposed inclusion of Algonquin art and culture in public space and new developments, to assert a stronger presence and visibility in the city (Algonquins of Ontario 2015). The land claims process in its current form appears ill-suited to do this work for a number of reasons, including the configuration of understandings of the land in ways that exclude Indigenous law and marginalize communal land use and ownership; the process is closely aligned with settler state agendas of privatizing First Nations land, municipalizing First Nations governance, and depoliticizing colonial violence (Coulthard 2014). However, Indigenous contestations based on inherent title and sovereignty entail a fundamental challenge to the settler colonial status quo, because they have territorial implications and involve the re-drawing of settler state boundaries. Therefore, despite its contested nature, the Algonquin land claim can serve as a powerful vehicle for taking back the city, in material and symbolic terms.

### Chief Spence’s hunger strike in the heart of Ottawa

In January 2013, an editorial in the *Toronto Star* noted that “[...] Chief Theresa Spence, who is undergoing the rigors of a hunger strike right in the heart of Ottawa, has created a powerful narrative that moves people like never before” (Steward 2013). Part of the power of this narrative and why “Native people succeed[ed] in getting Prime Minister Harper’s attention” (Steward 2013), I argue, is due to the location which Chief Spence chose, Victoria Island, and its historical and ongoing significance as a sacred site for gatherings and ceremony.

Victoria Island is an island in the Ottawa River within walking distance and direct view of Parliament Hill, downstream from the Chaudière Falls. Victoria Island is part of the area referred to as Asinabka—Anishinaabe for place of glare rock—by the late Elder William Commanda. The area is considered sacred to the Algonquin people (Circle of All Nations 2014, 18). Despite industrial developments in the area, Victoria Island always retained its importance as a sacred site and gathering place. Since 2000, it has been the site of Aboriginal Experiences, an Aboriginal tourism operation that opened a “village” and runs programming during the summer months (Aboriginal Experiences n.d.).

Chief Spence began her hunger strike on Victoria Island on December 11, 2012, following a Special Chiefs Assembly (SCA) in Gatineau earlier in December. At the time Theresa Spence was Chief of Attawapiskat First Nation located on the west coast of James Bay, signatory to Treaty 9. During her tenure, she issued several state of emergency announcements due to the acute housing shortage and poor conditions of available housing in the remote community. In light of the persistent housing crisis in her community and the general decline in the relationship between First Nations and the Crown, Chief Spence indicated at the SCA that she would go on a hunger strike to draw attention to “the need for fundamental change in the relationship of First Nations and the Crown” (Chief Spence and Supporters 2014, 321) and to force a dialogue about Treaty implementation. Her hunger strike and the demand for a meeting between the Prime Minister, Governor General, and all First Nations received considerable attention—albeit with the predictably racist and sexist inflections—in the mainstream media and political circles in Ottawa. Most importantly, however, it galvanized the Idle No More movement and contributed to amplifying the movement on social media and mobilizing Indigenous and non-Indigenous people across multiple spatialities and modalities of anti-colonial organizing (The Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014). In terms of immediate impacts, Chief Spence’s six-week hunger strike led to a meeting between Chiefs and the Prime Minister on January 11, 2013, as well as a meeting of Treaty Chiefs with the



Governor General. By bringing Indigenous resistance and land-based ceremony to the heart of Ottawa—and the heart of Project Canada and settler nationalism—Chief Spence’s insistence on First Nations spatial, social, and political orders upset settler colonial common sense (see The Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014; Simpson 2013). Because of the steady stream of supporters who joined her on Victoria Island and the media attention, some commentators consider her hunger strike the most visible Indigenous presence at the site to date (Circle of All Nations 2014). For everyone who was there in the winter of 2012/ 2013, the sense of reclamation and Indigenous resurgence was certainly unmistakable.

As Simpson (2014) notes, we should understand Chief Spence’s land-based ceremony on Victoria Island as a refusal of elimination—and the body as a site and scale of resistance (see also Goeman 2014). That state violence remains a matter of life and death for Indigenous peoples and racialized bodies is illustrated through the ways in which agents of settler colonialism have policed the boundaries of settler cities (Razack 2002; 2012). It is a politics that reproduces conditions that Mbembe (2003) describes as necropolitics, conditions intended to bring about death—and that understand and enact colonized bodies, particularly female Indigenous bodies, as dying, as always disappearing (Smith 2005). In connection with the Idle No More movement which it was seen to be part of, the decolonial scale politics of Chief Spence’s hunger strike, along with fellow hunger strikers, including Raymond Robinson of Pimicikamik Cree Nation, challenged settler state power through an embodied anti-colonial refusal and alternative praxis of trans-local, international, and urban-based struggle and solidarity. Chief Spence situated settler state politics as violence and positioned Victoria Island as an oppositional space and central node in a network of decolonial activism, linked directly to her home community of Attawapiskat and hundreds of urban and reserve communities across the country. The hunger strike created a visible Indigenous presence in the city and politicized Victoria Island and Ottawa as a whole as a space of Indigenous resistance and ceremony.

### **Conclusion: The end of Ottawa as we know it**

My point of departure was a critique of settler colonial constructions of cities like Ottawa. I have argued that the normalized ways of knowing that erase Indigenous histories, geographies, and agency in relation to the urban should not be considered innocent oversights, but are central to a deliberate politics of dispossession and disappearance. Academic, state, and everyday discourses thus need to move beyond Ottawa as we know it by engaging Indigenous communities, ontologies, and politics. This is key for advancing decolonial spatial imaginations and social justice.

Through the lens of “Ottawa” we have seen how different Indigenous struggles have defied the dominant scale politics of settler colonialism which has constructed the city as white settler space, as outside of the purview of Indigenous contestation. The various struggles to decolonize the city involve not only re-asserting physical, political, and symbolic space, but are also about fundamentally re-thinking how the city is conceptualized and by whom. In this way, the city becomes visible as a contested space and space of contestation where competing ontologies and politics challenge settler colonial common sense and state power. Together, the case studies have highlighted ways in which “Ottawa” has been unsettled and reframed through Indigenous resurgence and resistance.

Regardless of the complex trajectories and contradictory outcomes of the struggles I have sketched, the stretching of anti-colonial resistance across and against settler colonial boundaries and scales is crucial in the re-politicization of the urban. In fact, local and trans-local Indigenous politics are connected in many and in different ways, so that we cannot look at the city of Ottawa in isolation from the larger contexts of Indigenous nationhood, contested sovereignties, and neoliberalized settler colonialism. A key aspect of politicizing and decolonizing cities in Canada then is to account for these historical, socio-spatial, and conceptual connections, in theory and in practice.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I want to briefly situate myself and my research. I am of mixed Anishinaabe and European descent, but did not grow up on Algonquin territory or in Canada. The focus on Ottawa is informed by research originally conducted for my dissertation and having lived and worked in the city for 10 years. Through the lens of “Ottawa” we can see how struggles that are often positioned in isolation or contradiction to each other are actually linked through networks and practices that defy the dominant scale politics of settler colonialism which has constructed the city as white settler space. The paper also seeks to make a theoretical contribution by bringing scholarship from the fields of critical urban theory, political economy, and Indigenous studies into a timely and necessary conversation focused on the decolonization of cities. The discussion in this paper forms part of a larger project; here the focus is on the deconstruction of settler colonial knowledges and scale- and city-making; a more detailed study of Anishinaabe territoriality, law, and knowledge in relation what is now known as the Ottawa area, including Indigenous ways of knowing embedded in the territory itself, is an area of future work.

<sup>2</sup> The Algonquin nation, part of the larger group of Anishinaabeg peoples, is comprised of a number of communities whose territory encompasses the Kiji Sibi (Ottawa River) watershed (Lawrence 2012).

<sup>3</sup> See Lawrence (2012, 19-37) for an overview of the history of the territory; see also Steckley and Cummins 2007; Gehl 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Between August 2008 and June 2009, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 13 representatives of Indigenous service providers, community organizations, political advocacy bodies, and First Nation, federal, and municipal governments in Ottawa.

<sup>5</sup> To be clear, I use a scalar lens not to reify the scaffolding of power that settler colonialism has imposed, but to denaturalize it. A critical scalar reading can help us make sense of the actual interconnections and inconsistencies that are made invisible in settler state discourses that divide and solidify understandings of territory, jurisdiction, and governance based on settler colonial imperatives of capitalism, structural racism, and heteropatriarchy. De-normalizing the various multi-scalar assemblages of “Ottawa” requires attention to Indigenous agency and resistance at and across multiple scales. The Indigenous Nationhood Movement offers an example of challenging settler state scales of governance by disrupting the imaginary of Canadian nationhood and the dominant scales which are recursively linked to the nation-state (see Indigenous Nationhood Movement n.d.). For Indigenous nations, the privileged sites and stakes of struggle are Indigenous spatializations, for instance, a specific Indigenous nation’s territory or Treaty territories. These scales are invisibilized by settler state politics.

<sup>6</sup> The global doctrine of terra nullius was based on the claim that land was “empty” of sufficiently organized communities (or unmodified by them); it formed the basis for asserting Crown title and sovereignty over Indigenous territories in the absence of conquest or Treaty. Sustained by the prefigurative power of settler legality, colonial agents then actively pursued “emptying” the land of its inhabitants and displacing Indigenous sovereignties (Monture-Angus 1999; Thobani 2007; Jacobs 1996; Shaw 2007).

<sup>7</sup> The Urban Aboriginal Strategy (UAS) is an important policy context for understanding how Indigenous organizations and service providers are trying to create culturally relevant and self-determined community infrastructure. The UAS, a federal initiative, began providing limited project and capacity-building funds in Winnipeg in 2003. Far from a national framework, the UAS currently funds only a small number of projects in 13 cities in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. Ottawa was the latest addition in 2007. Federal funding, currently \$13.5 million annually, is insufficient to meet the demand for Indigenous-specific programming (see Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. n.d.). The funds are framed as “strategic incentives” to create relationships among Aboriginal organizations and governments, and to leverage money from other levels of government. Federal funding is provided on a 50:50 basis with provincial and municipal funding, thereby effectively downloading federal fiscal obligations. Representatives of First Nation and Métis political organizations and governments are very critical of the UAS, because it marginalizes existing governance structures in favour of local steering committees that rely centrally on service agencies as opposed to elected leadership. For instance, the Algonquin Nation is not involved as a participant in this process, which is not nationhood-based (Tomiak 2010, 2011b).

<sup>8</sup> The OAC is made up of representatives from Gignul Non-Profit Housing Corporation, Kagita Mikam, Makonsag Aboriginal Head Start, Minwaashin Lodge, Odawa Native Friendship Centre, Ottawa Inuit Children’s Centre, Tewegan Transition House, Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health, and a Métis community representative (Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition n.d.).

<sup>9</sup> Communities in Quebec are not part of this process. This has caused tensions among Algonquin communities. At a press conference on June 8, 2011, Chief Gilbert Whiteduck pointed out that his community is “vigorously protesting our exclusion from discussion addressing Aboriginal title and rights within our ancestral territory” (CBC News 2011). In fact, there are two other competing or overlapping Algonquin land claims. In addition, the land claim also has vocal critics among non-status Algonquin in Ontario, particularly in relation to the process for determining eligibility for enrolment as a beneficiary and the fundamental problem of extinguishment of Aboriginal title in the name of “legal certainty” (Gehl 2005).

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