

UCLA

Thinking Gender Papers

Title

Infrastructure Gender Based Violence and Yaqui Refusal

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8db4r6vj>

Author

Gomez Quintana, Thalia

Publication Date

2020-04-01

Presenter: Thalia Gomez Quintana (*Yaqui- Yoeme*)

Paper Title: Infrastructure Gender Based Violence and Yaqui Refusal

The Yaqui River plays a critical role in the contemporary campaigns of settler colonization within the Yaqui pueblos of Sonora, Mexico. The current struggle for water in the Yaqui reserve has led to the criminalization of Yaqui men and the hyper-sexualization of Yaqui women. For six-years, the Yaqui communities have held a blockade on federal highway 15, highway 15 is a vital part of the CANAMEX corridor, which stretches from the city of Mexico across the United States and into the Canadian province of Alberta and witnesses a massive flow of Mexico's most important exports. Federal Highway 15 was built in 1952 and runs strategically through the Yaqui reserve generated in part to facilitate the surveillance of Yaqui communities. Since 2014 a new era of criminalization of Yaqui men and heightened sexual violence towards Yaqui women along with intensified federal policing of the Yaqui pueblos. The Yaqui communities refuse to comply with settler infrastructural projects that generate racialized gender based violence within the Yaqui reserve. Indigenous people challenge settler modernity through their presence in settler societies, which seek to continuously disavow their existence through violence (Razack 2015). The pathologization of Indigenous refusal and the dehumanization of Native life further justifying settler entitlement to native lands and bodies.

The neoliberal economy aids the structure of settler colonialism in promoting low-intensity warfare on Yaqui communities through infrastructural violence. The Aqueduct of Independence is a tactic of

settler colonial design by which the state of Sonora has gained access to the waters of the Yaqui river. The neoliberal government of Mexico has fostered discourses of dehumanization against the Yaqui pueblos formulating campaigns aimed at aiding settlers promote and foster structures of Yaqui dispossession and settler accumulation. The Mexican government has targeted the Yaqui homeland due the vast natural resources found within the Yaqui Territory. Infrastructural violence is a technique of settler design which affects indigenous communities in very gendered specific ways inflicting violence over Indigenous women's bodies and criminalizing Indigenous men.

The Yaqui River originates in the western Sierra Mountains and courses southwest through the Yaqui homeland in Sonora, Mexico culminating at the Gulf of California into the Sea of Cortez. The eight original pueblos of Velem, Huirivis, Rahum, Potam, Vicam, Bacum, Cocorit, and Torim are located on the west and east riverbanks outlining the Yaqui Rivers waterways, which sustain all life in our desert arid homeland. By applying traditional ecological knowledge of the Sonoran Desert and taking over highway 15 in the Yoeme pueblos have manifested their refusal to comply with the settler agenda to divert the waters of the Yaqui River to corporations north of the Yaqui homeland. In May of 2013, the Yaqui pueblos faced the diversion of their only source of water. Through the use of Yaqui modes of self-governance, the communities decided to take to the highway and form a blockade till the waters of the Yaqui River were brought back home. May 28th of this year will mark the six-year anniversary of the longest siege in the history of the Yaqui nation as well

as the longest held blockade in the history of Mexico. The diversion of the waters of Yaqui River to the city of Hermosillo has impacted long-lived relationships between the Yaqui pueblos. It has detracted from the limited water supply that used to the Yaqui pueblos, which have no running water or indoor plumbing and are entirely dependent on the surface and ground waters of the Yaqui River. The aqueduct of Independence has disrupted a relationship that has been long standing since time immemorial yet at the present time is posing serious threats to the wellbeing of the Yaqui communities inclusive of animals, the environment, and other than human beings with which we hold responsibilities to be good relatives to.

On September 13, 2009 the National Party of Action's (Partido de Action National-PAN's) candidate Guillermo Padres Elias was elected governor of Sonora. His main objective became the construction of the Aqueduct of Independence. He justified the need to construct the aqueduct under the pretence of modernizing the hydrological infrastructure of the state and boosting the growth of the Sonoran economy. The aqueduct was advertised as the answer to the capital of Sonora's water crisis, and was intended to begin operating in 2012, however due to Yaqui leadership and protests from both the Yaqui pueblos and citizens of the city of Cajeme-Obregon the aqueducts operation was halted until April of 2013 at which time the aqueduct began to fully function. Since April of 2013 the Yaqui communities have depended on groundwater and run off waters that are highly contaminated. The lack of regulations in Mexico in regard to black water and waste management has led to massive deposits of waste and black

waters from agricultural farming found to the north of the pueblos into the currently empty Yaqui Riverbed.

The waters of the Yaqui River are now utilized to help boost the large industrial sector of Hermosillo housing large multi-billion-dollar corporations such as Heineken, Ford Motor Company, and Pepsi while also producing electricity for the majority of the state. Under neoliberalism “the state openly responds to the needs of the market whether through monetary and fiscal policy, immigration policy, the treatment of criminals, or the structure of public education”.^[1] The state operates with a market economic logic, as it diverts the waters of the Yaqui River strategically generating a map for the capitalist geographical future, paired with a strategic method of producing a large migrant labour force through Yaqui migrations in attempts to also gain access to Yaqui territory. Through the implementation of NAFTA and the erasure of the communal land ejido system in 1994 the safeguards that existed prior which prohibited the sale of communal lands no longer exist post 1994. “As Deborah Bird Rose has pointed out, “to get in the way of settler colonization, all the native has to do is stay at home. Whatever settlers may say and they generally have a lot to say – the primary motive for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory”.^[2] Attempts to gain access particular geographies are always strategic and often driven by agendas of natural resource extraction. Settler colonialism is aided through a political rhetoric of neoliberalist government deregulation, the

cutting of social spending, and the privatization of natural resources such as water.

The opening of legal sale and purchase of Yaqui land with the impact of NAFTA in 1994 brought about a rift in the Yaqui communities between those who are suffering from high rates of cancer, stillbirths, skin diseases, congenital disabilities, and sterilization and those community members who no matter what the health disparities maybe are committed to staying in the Yaqui homeland regardless of the inequalities. Due to the contamination of the limited water supply that reaches the communities and the inability of many members to purchase filtered water, disease has risen which can be correlated with poor water quality available to the Yaqui pueblos. Mild to high levels of pesticides from the agricultural industries have caused a build-up of pesticides in the ground waters being pumped for consumption of the Yaqui communities. Geophysics scholars Cordova, Gonzalez, and Marin [3] estimated that the average amount of pesticides used in a day was 0.3 cubic meters. About this, Norrell writes, “Dr. Elizabeth Guillete conducted a study on Yaqui traditional lands and discovered high levels of multiple pesticides in the umbilical-cord blood of new-borns and in their mothers’ breast milk” [4]. There is a high price to pay for resistance and the refusal to be complacent with the structure of settler colonization.. The reliance on the limited ground waters of the Yaqui River for human consumption makes this level of contamination highly alarming. Women are disproportionately affected by the community’s dependency on groundwater, which has not been purified or

processed, “give that women are more susceptible to thyroid diseases and cancer than are men”. [5] Many community members have fallen to illnesses that derive from contaminants. Although at the moment there is no research that demonstrates causation for other contaminants besides pesticides, correlation can be made at this time due to the high levels of epidemic illnesses. “This is part of the neoliberal regime of economic accumulation where some voices resound over the nation and others are disenvocied”. [6] Diseases have been linked to the following contaminants other than pesticides within the Yaqui territories such as PCB’s polychlorinated biphenyls, chlorpyrifos, unidentified mixed fertilizers, trash, and saltwater. Because the Yaqui River used to culminate at the Sea of Cortez saltwater has ruined some of the territories that were previously used for farming and has sunk into the groundwater. Methods of contamination have been linked to food preparation, air, land, and groundwater pumping.

The Yaqui homeland has been the target of the settler colonial projects due to its profitable lands rich in natural resources, which are directly linked to the eliminatory politics of the Mexican government towards the Yaqui pueblos. In “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native” Patrick Wolfe discusses settler colonization as a structure rather than an event and writes, “Settler colonialism destroys to replace” and the politics of settler colonization is always to obtain land”. [8] Throughout history the Yoeme homeland has been under the eye of settler desires for its oceanfront, the Yaqui River, rich delta, fertile

agricultural land, and mountains perfect for mining within close proximity to water. The Yoeme pueblos first interactions with the Spanish were with slave raiders who saw fertile lands and a large Yaqui population which they viewed as a large “labor force”. “We have come to see land and water are closely linked to how we see ourselves and others and how we engage the world. Government pressure to define ourselves by the state definitions of purity in order for recognition and access to resources leads not only to externally imposed colonial logics but also to an internal closing of physical and cultural borders as nations and people make themselves readable to the state”. [9] These are the same incentives of the current settler colonial projects with the addition of large industrial sectors and opportunities to replace Yaqui settlements with Mexican homes and generate money from mining, and the constriction of beachfront resorts. Settler colonization and genocide are not merely issues of the past for many Indigenous communities “. . . forms of modern genocide require the centralized technological, logistical and administrative capacities of the modern state, this does not mean that settler-colonial discourse should be regarded as pre-(or less than) modern”. [10] The struggle to remain within the Yaqui homeland is exactly what settler colonization is against, as well as the existence of a Yaqui nation all together because they challenge Mexican nationalist agendas, which pride themselves in Indigenous antiquities such as the Aztecs and Mayans while repressing modern living and breathing Indigenous populations. Throughout Mexico “Representation of Indian bodies are stagnant, as is the nature of space in a majority of colonial discourses.

Documenting and simultaneously uprooting the discursive construction of Native bodies and settler places upends the state determined fixity of geopolitical space that we now sit within, a space that remains unfinished and unconquered".[11] The Yaqui culturally driven agenda to remain within the homeland in accordance to the Yaqui original cultural instructions are attacked by the everyday acts of violence and low-intensity warfare, which search to individualized and detribalize Yaqui communities.

Assimilation into mainstream modern Mexican society is fatal to Indigenous people and their communities. Under the national promotion of Mestizaje within the nation of Mexico, the state government of Sonora has used Yaqui culture as a marker of national pride, taking the deer dancer as a symbol of Aboriginal Sonora. That is, it produces the most desirable representation of the region by featuring the largest Indigenous population as state patrimony. Throughout the state, Yaqui guerilla warfare leaders are placed to illustrate Sonoran history and are used as points of pride, while the Sonoran government suppress Yaqui communities and ignore their legal obligations to the state's largest tribe and only federally recognized tribe. The state of Sonora has preconceived agendas to uphold, and these images and status are a means by which these agendas are served. Violence is dependent on visibility and, therefore, reliant on these images "... colonial impositions continually seek to reaffirm a sense of national belonging for the settler -society so as to, among other things, forestall discussion of the political implications of

the fact that Indigenous people assert a deeper temporal and spatial sense of belonging”.[12] Anyone who attends grade school in Sonora is taught about Yaqui colonial bravery and are encouraged to claim Yaqui histories of resistance during the periods of Mexican Independence and Revolution as their own patrimony. Yet most Mexicans and local Sonoran’s will never learn about the current rights and struggles of modern Yaqui peoples. The Yaqui communities are the only Indigenous group in Mexico to have rights to their ancestral homeland and fifty percent of the waters deriving from the Yaqui River along with the rights to self-governance within the Yaqui reserve. The Yaqui communities are the only native nation of Mexico able to utilize another flag that is not the Mexican flag within its territory and schools. The political economy of “Yaquiness” in Sonora is based on selling stereotypical Indian bravery an enduring leathered and feathered Indigenous past never inclusive of Yaquis existing within the present with rights to land, water, and self-determination.

Privatization of certain state functions such as water, the deregulation of corporations, and the criminalization of the poor and in this particular case Yaqui communities are a part of the neoliberal agendas, which work in tandem with settler politics. In the event of the aqueduct the health and economic growth of the capital of Sonora, Hermosillo, is prioritized at the expense of the entire southern portion of the state, which is heavily composed of Indigenous communities. Hermosillo houses the largest number of foreign investments in the state. Though the blockade at highway 15 continues to be successful it has

brought about new forms of settler violence. Yaqui men have been targeted and imprisoned for their involvement in the blockade. At times men would go missing and later reappear beaten. In some cases, men who simply were walking or biking home at night and were not a part of the blockade but simply returning from work had also been picked up and beaten. Two political prisoners Mario Luna Romero and Fernando Jimenez were both charged with murder and robbery and imprisoned without evidence. They were in jail for two years before being released due to a lack of evidence. As political prisoners Mario and Fernando both brought about an even larger awareness to the violence occurring at the blockade on highway 15 at Vicam. To the surprise of the Mexican media and the government the blockade continued, and increased support was garnered through the unjust imprisonment of Mario and Fernando. What the media never captured and what the Mexican government at the time didn't understand was that Mario and Fernando were never the leaders of the blockade but rather the selected "footmen" whom the leadership group had

Following the imprisonment of Mario and Fernando smear campaigns and the hypersexualizing Indigenous women came into full effect. Yaqui women were portrayed in the media as poor mothers who raise anti-Mexican state children who grow up to ruin the nation with their backward ideologies. Following Mexican patriarchal thoughts on child rearing all the blame for the blockade was placed on Yaqui mothers who just didn't raise their children "correctly". Tying Yaqui women into Mexican gender roles and Mexican gender scripts which presume that

mothers are the only parent responsible for their children and their actions even when their children become full adults was used as a tactic to illustrate how Yaqui failed motherhood was to blame for the current male rebels formulating the blockade at highway 15. The blockade after dark became an intensely dangerous space. The entire community had always known that highway 15 was a dangerous place to be during night fall. Women and young girls had always known the highway to be dangerous and with the height of the blockade they found themselves in even more precarious situations. Challenging settler modernity and its imposing infrastructural violence through their presence in settler society on highway 15 making demands of the state led to the violence imposed on Yaqui communities. All these forms of settler colonization are working in unison to formulate the displacement and death of Yaqui community members and open up the Yaqui homeland for settlement causing some of the largest migrations seen since the forced removal of Yaquis to sugar plantations in southern Mexico during the Diaz dictatorship in 1876. For over ten years now the homeland has seen the rise of stillbirths, sterilization, and high levels of pesticides in mother's milk, skin diseases, stomach ailments and cancer, which have led many people to migrate to other regions in Sonora and Southern Arizona.

2014 marked the new era of criminalization for Yaqui men furthering agendas of dehumanization of Yaqui people. Most Yaqui men used to farm to make a living but since the Yaqui River no longer runs through the territory many families have had to relocate to maintain themselves or are working as hired hands in large agricultural sectors who have gained

access to water through the very aqueduct that has disenfranchised Yaqui farmers. The system of Mexican settler colonization never stops encroaching upon Yaqui territory. Settler expansion evolves and becomes more covert with each successive attempt of access land and natural resources. Settler infrastructural projects aim to dispossess and erase Indigenous communities while creating landscapes of violence fuelling Native resistance movements which unsettle settler nations.

Bibliography

1. Cordova, Gonzalez, and Marin, "Hydrogeology and Groundwater Pollution of the Yaqui Valley, Sonora, Mexico," *Geofisica International*. Vol 36, No.1, (1997) <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=56836105>.
2. Goeman, Mishuana. "Disrupting a Settler Colonial Grammar of Place, The Visual Memoir of Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie." In *Theorizing Native Studies*, Edited by Audra Simpson (pgs.233-261). Durham, London, Duke University Press, 2014.
3. Norell. "Yaqui in Sonora Ban Pesticides", November 2011, accessed December 3rd, 2017 <http://bsnorrell.tripod.com/id113.html>.
4. Schwartz, Jessica, "Precarious Harmonies." Forthcoming in *Radiation Sounds* (pg. 1-22) 2016.

5. Wendy Brown, "Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," *Theory and Event* 7:1, 2003.
6. Wolfe, Patrick. 2006. "Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native". *Journal of Genocide Research*. 8 (4): 387-409.
7. Razack, Sherene. 2015. *Dying from Improvement: Inquests and Inquiries into Indigenous Deaths in Custody*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
8. Simpson, Audra. 2014. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham: Duke University Press.

[1] Wendy Brown, "Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," *Theory and Event* 7:1 (2003) 41.

[2] Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8:4, 387-409 (2009) 388.

[3] Cordova, Gonzalez, and Marin, "Hydrogeology and Groundwater Pollution of the Yaqui Valley, Sonora, Mexico", (*Geofisica International*. Vol 36, No.1, 1997), 36.

[4] Norell. "Yaqui in Sonora Ban Pesticides", November 2011, accessed December 3, 2017, <http://bsnorrell.tripod.com/id113.html>.

[5] Schwartz, Jessica. "Precarious Harmonies" Forthcoming in *Radiation Sounds*. 2016, (6).

[6] Schwartz. *Radiation Sounds*. Publication Forthcoming, 6.

[7] Brown. "Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy" 42.

[8] Wolfe. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native" 388.

[9] Goeman. "Disrupting a Settler-Colonial Grammar of Place The Visual Memoir of Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie." In *Theorizing Native Studies*, edited by Simpson, Audra (233-261). Durham, London, Duke University Press, 2014 (235).

[10] Wolfe. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native" 393.

[11] Goeman. "Disrupting a Settler Colonial Grammar of Place The Visual Memoir of Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie" 237.

[12] Goeman. "Disrupting a Settler Colonial Grammar of Place The Visual Memoir of Hulleah Tsinnahjinnie." 242.

Razack, Sherene. 2015. *Dying from Improvement: Inquests and Inquiries into Indigenous Deaths in Custody*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Simpson, Audra. 2014. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham: Duke University Press.