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# “Canada under Attack from Within”: Problematizing “the Natives,” Governing Borders, and the Social Injustice of the Akwesasne Dispute

*Lisa Monchalin and Olga Marques*

Aboriginal peoples in North America have a long history of destitution and adversity, stemming in large part from seizure of their lands and attempted assimilation of their culture into European customs and practice. Policies such as Canada’s Indian Act that repress customs, language, and culture, together with numerous abuses that were suffered in residential and Indian boarding schools, have had desolate effects. The legacies of centuries of destruction and oppression are reflected in Aboriginal peoples’ overrepresentation in crime, violence, disconnected families, high residential mobility, and poverty, with past governmental policy decisions playing a significant role.<sup>1</sup> In response, Aboriginal people have been actively trying to regain rights to their land and retain equal treatment. Spearheading protests and garnering public and media attention for various acts of dissent that range from marches and demonstrations to standoffs with authorities, several hundred instances of Aboriginal collective action have been documented since the 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

Despite comprising only 4.3 percent of the Canadian population in 2011, and 0.9 percent of the American population in 2010,<sup>3</sup> the collective actions taken by Aboriginal people against social and political injustice have been frequent and ongoing.<sup>4</sup> Previous empirical research provides insight into the

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broader general population's perceptions and attitudes towards Aboriginal peoples, as well as the attitudes of non-Aboriginal people more specifically.<sup>5</sup> Research has also assessed the causes behind Aboriginal protests,<sup>6</sup> as well as media coverage of protests and differential ways Aboriginal collective action is packaged.<sup>7</sup>

A May 2009 protest at the Akwesasne border crossing between Canada and the United States serves as a productive site to examine resistance and dissent, as a result of the vast media attention and public outcry it garnered. Although major moves forward and concrete actions have been taken, it is uncertain whether we have seen a widespread change of societal consciousness. This research seeks to uncover the opinions about Native peoples and public acts of resistance held by news commenters, people who post opinions to news websites. Drawing on the border dispute, this paper aims not only to examine news readers' perceptions of Aboriginal peoples, but at the same time to uncover the degree to which impressions left by European colonial forefathers prevail in the context of Aboriginal protest and activism. Using discourse analysis, we examined 657 comments that had been posted to a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) News article on the May 2009 Akwesasne border protest (see appendix). Using this data, we asked, what are news commenters' perceptions of Aboriginal protests? Also, in a post-911 world, what are news commenters' perceptions of acts of resistance against the state? In answering these questions, we were particularly interested in examining if, and how, colonialist discourses remain embedded in talk surrounding indigenous acts of resistance and dissent in regard to news articles.

After contextualizing the May 2009 protest, this paper will outline literature on previous significant instances of Aboriginal collective action, public perceptions of Aboriginal peoples, and North American media coverage of such collective action. An overview of the discourse analysis research method will then introduce our discussion of the prominent discourses emerging from the data; namely, problematizing "the Natives" versus "the state," risk, securitization, sovereignty and citizenship, and colonialist discourse.

## CONTEXT OF THE EVENT AND THE ISSUE OF LOCATION

On June 1, 2009, in accordance with the Ministry of Public Safety's 2006 border security policy permitting border officers to carry 9-mm Beretta pistols, Canada Border Service Agency (CBSA) guards at Akwesasne were scheduled to be armed. Tensions in the community arose as the deadline approached. The Mohawk Council of Akwesasne, the local government on the Canadian side of the community, insisted that the Ministry either put off the arming of

the border guards until meaningful consultation happened or cease equipping border guards with guns. At the same time, feeling that their territorial sovereignty was being violated, the Mohawk Warriors Society became progressively vocal and said that if the proposal were put into action, they would enter the CBSA facilities.<sup>8</sup>

On May 31, 2009, four hundred community members gathered around the CBSA facilities, lighting six bonfires representing the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.<sup>9</sup> Citing safety concerns, ten minutes before midnight the border officers walked off the job and drove off the island. Their union president stated that the border was too risky to allow officers to return, and that officers were intimidated by some people in Akwesasne who were covering their faces with scarves. Mohawk protesters stated that allowing border guards to be armed with guns violated their sovereignty and intensified the possibility of violent altercations or conflicts. The Akwesasne Mohawk people further stated that they were opposed to border officers being armed at the Cornwall border post because of its location in a residential area at a major crossroad, where a bus stop, a play area, recreational fields, and several small businesses are situated.

Akwesasne runs along the banks of the St. Lawrence River and straddles the intersection of the international borders of the United States and Canada, as well as the Canadian provincial borders of Ontario and Quebec. Although located on land divided by many borders, residents consider themselves one community. While in the mid-eighteenth century Akwesasne was one of the smallest Mohawk communities on the St. Lawrence, today it has 13,000 residents, which in Canada is a very large First Nation community. Other than the issue that Aboriginal peoples do not recognize land borders per se, the central focus in 2009 was the Canadian border post's original location on Cornwall Island, all of which is Mohawk Territory.

Peoples of Akwesasne never surrendered their sovereignty at any point in history up to the present. For many Mohawk peoples, they were, and will always be, their own sovereign nation. The borders created by Euro-Canadian/American governments were neither of their making, nor necessarily something that the community's peoples wanted. Given their unique geographical situation, the community of Akwesasne has been internationally identified as a smuggling passageway.<sup>10</sup> Smuggling has included illicit drugs, such as marijuana and other controlled substances, and weapons. The issue of smuggling received, and continues to receive, media attention that usually frames peoples of Akwesasne in a negative light.

Despite this negative perception, a 2013 research report released by the MacDonald-Laurier Institute on smuggling and illicit drug trade in Akwesasne noted that researchers "found little evidence of extensive smuggling of drugs,

weapons, and humans in recent years, and the large-scale involvement of organized crime appears to have been curtailed.”<sup>11</sup> Mohawk Council of Akwesasne Grand Chief Mike Kanentakeron Mitchell was quoted in reference to this study as stating that “While components of this study are accurate, the overall position seems to be pushing an agenda using all too familiar scare tactics . . . for example, there is no evidence that tobacco smuggling in this area contributes in any form to terrorism or mafia crime.”<sup>12</sup> The Mohawk Council of Akwesasne noted that researchers of the study did not use any Akwesasne media sources or publications, only Canadian Internet-published articles.<sup>13</sup>

Protests and social action are not new to Akwesasne. For example, in December of 1968 a high-profile event took place, resulting in forty-seven Mohawk people being arrested for blockading the Cornwall International Bridge between the two countries.<sup>14</sup> They were protesting the failure of the Canadian government to honor the Jay Treaty of 1794 between Canada and the United States, which allows “Indians” freedom to freely pass into the respective countries and freely carry on trade and commerce with each other.<sup>15</sup> The government was demanding that Mohawk people pay tolls to use the bridge, as well as customs on goods brought back from the United States. When authorities sent tow trucks to clear the wall of Mohawk people and their cars, Mohawk people let the air out of the tow truck tires and carried signs saying: “This is an Indian Reservation, No Trespassing.” Ultimately, the Canadian government dismissed the charges, and after a sit-down in February 1969 and a lengthy sequence of discussions, the Canadian government agreed to the creation of a second lane of entry for Cornwall Island Mohawk people returning from the United States.<sup>16</sup>

During the frenzy of protest surrounding this late 1960s confrontation, the Mohawk newspaper *Akwesasne Notes* was created in an effort to publicize news regarding crises and crimes affecting Aboriginal peoples worldwide. The first two issues were simply newspaper clippings photocopied on legal-sized paper, with the next set of clippings done on a webpress. The next issue, Volume 1 no. 4, was titled “*Akwesasne Notes*.” By the time its 50th issue was published in 1977, *Akwesasne Notes* reached a circulation of 100,000. Avoiding the term “Aboriginal,” it had a traditional and activist bias, although no particular group utilized the newspaper as a voice. It was independent-minded, carried no advertising, and sought out the truth of what was happening. While certainly Aboriginal peoples were a natural target audience, the newspaper also sought to promote righteous interest from non-Aboriginal peoples and organizations. As a result of the coverage in *Akwesasne Notes*, Cornwall Bridge became a well-known topic of discussion for Aboriginal people across North America.<sup>17</sup>

## REVIEW OF ABORIGINAL PROTEST, PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS, AND MEDIA COVERAGE

### *Collective Action by Aboriginal Peoples*

By the late 1960s and early 1970s Aboriginal peoples in North America had a long and effective tradition of political action and social movements.<sup>18</sup> Many concerned tribal-specific land issues. Others were intertribal, led by various nations uniting together.<sup>19</sup> For example, the American Indian Movement (AIM), a movement founded in Minneapolis in 1968 that quickly launched chapters in numerous cities throughout the United States, had concerns in common that included education, urban ties, colonization, and Indian ethnic identification. AIM's first attempt at a national protest came on US Thanksgiving Day of 1970, when AIM members seized the replica of the Mayflower II in Plymouth, Massachusetts to contest a commemoration of colonial expansion.<sup>20</sup> Actions that followed thereafter include a brief occupation of Mount Rushmore in 1971; the "Trail of Broken Treaties," an occupation of the Bureau of Indian Affairs headquarters in Washington, DC, in 1972; in 1978, the "Longest Walk," a spiritual walk across the country from San Francisco to Washington, DC, to advocate for tribal sovereignty as well as draw attention to eleven pieces of anti-Indian legislation; and in the 1980s, the Yellow Thunder encampment in South Dakota's Black Hills, among others. One of AIM's most well-known protest actions in the spring of 1973 came to be known as "Wounded Knee II." On Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, tribal chairman Richard Wilson was viewed as a fraudulent marionette of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. An effort to impeach him turned into a series of roadblocks and shootings that left two Aboriginal people and one FBI agent dead, with some AIM members spending the next few years in litigation, prison, and exile.<sup>21</sup>

Another major movement took place during this same time period. From 1969 to 1971 Aboriginal activists occupied the deserted federal prison on Alcatraz Island as a form of protest. According to Vine Deloria Jr., "Alcatraz was more than a protest against oppressive conditions under which Indians lived. In large part, it was a message that we wanted to determine our own destiny and make our own decisions."<sup>22</sup> From the beginning of the Alcatraz occupation to the Longest Walk in 1978, Aboriginal activists re-seized more than seventy properties.<sup>23</sup>

Protests continue today, due in large part to Eurocentric governance actions driven by an entrenched colonialist mind-set. Yet at the same time, after years of continued efforts, protests and public outcry have helped change wider society's impressions of Aboriginal people. After the major events described above, improvements were made, such as increased enrollment of Aboriginal students

in college. For example, in May 1976, the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations entered into a federation agreement with the University of Regina to establish the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (SIFC), which later became the First Nations University of Canada; by the early 1980s there were more than a hundred American Indian studies programs in the United States. Many Aboriginal museums opened, and more North Americans became familiar with Aboriginal issues in general.

More recently we have seen the rise of the Idle No More (INM) Movement in Canada, which receives support from around the world. Now an ongoing movement, initially INM was formed in opposition to the passing of the Jobs and Growth Act. Provisions of this bill failed to fully recognize Aboriginal lands, peoples, treaties, and the right to self-government. Despite protests and opposition, the bill passed on December 5, 2012. Protests included hunger strikes, flash mobs, round dances, and peaceful rallies. The current goals of INM continue to center on Aboriginal people's inherent rights, as well as recognition and compliance with the peace and friendship foundations of original treaties. This includes respectful sharing of lands and meaningful consultation with Aboriginal leaders and peoples. Yet for those of the Canadian and American public who do not really know what INM stands for, it has become thrown into the mix of organizations that are a general threat to Canadian peace, order, and good government.

### *Public Perceptions and Attitudes*

Aboriginal issues in general have yet to be fully understood by all members of the public. The company Environics Research Group has been following perceptions of non-Aboriginal Canadians in regards to Aboriginal people using two major studies. One study has been completed quarterly since 1976, and the other, more focused on the North, has been collecting data annually since 1999. Throughout the course of these studies the obvious trends have been the growing awareness of a presence of Aboriginal people in urban areas, and prioritizing those issues related to urban Aboriginal people over other issues, such as resolving land claims.<sup>24</sup>

A recent study by the affiliated Environics Institute conducted 2,614 in-person interviews between March and October 2009 with First Nations peoples, both status and non-status, Métis, and Inuit, in eleven cities across Canada: Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Regina, Saskatoon, Winnipeg, Thunder Bay, Montreal, Toronto, Halifax, and Ottawa (Inuit only).<sup>25</sup> A telephone survey from April to May 2009 with 2,501 non-Aboriginal urban Canadians living in these same cities (excluding Ottawa) was also conducted.<sup>26</sup> This study touched on various issues affecting and concerning urban Aboriginal

people in Canada, among them including urban Aboriginal identity, culture, and sense of place, as well as political identity, engagement, and justice. Of most relevance to this paper is this study’s investigation into non-Aboriginal people’s perceptions of Aboriginal people, as well as Aboriginal people’s views of how they feel non-Aboriginal people perceive them.<sup>27</sup>

Data showed that, to a large extent, most urban Aboriginal people surveyed thought that non-Aboriginal people viewed them in a negative light (71 percent). Only a small group (14 percent) thought that the impression was positive, with a smaller number feeling that non-Aboriginal peoples’ perceptions of Aboriginal peoples was neither positive nor negative (11 percent).<sup>28</sup>

TABLE 1. ABORIGINAL PERCEPTIONS OF NON-ABORIGINAL PEOPLES’ IMPRESSIONS OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

Do you think non-Aboriginal people’s impression of Aboriginal people is generally positive or negative?	Percentage of Total Responses (2589 Total Responses)
Generally positive	14%
Generally negative	71%
Neither positive/negative	11%
Don’t Know/Not Applicable	4%

Source: Environics Institute, *Main Survey: Tables Banner 3*, 2010.

This study showed that to a large extent, Aboriginal peoples felt that non-Aboriginal people hold a wide range of stereotypes, with only 1 percent of urban Aboriginal people surveyed feeling that non-Aboriginal people held no stereotypes. When Aboriginal people were asked what they felt were the most common stereotypes, they cited having addiction problems, followed by being lazy/lack of motivation, among others. However, Aboriginal people also believed that impressions are changing for the better, with 40 percent holding this belief. Forty-one percent of people felt that it stayed the same, and only 16 percent felt that the situation was worse.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to asking Aboriginal peoples about perceptions of negative behavior, the survey also asked Aboriginal people if they experience unfair treatment and negative behavior. Many Aboriginal people reported experiencing insults and teasing because of their Aboriginal background, with 37 percent reporting that they strongly agreed with experiencing this, and 33 percent reporting that they somewhat agreed.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the prevalence of views of adverse behaviors and biased treatment, urban Aboriginal people expressed feeling accepted by non-Aboriginal people, with 36 percent strongly disagreeing with the statement, “I don’t feel accepted



by non-Aboriginal people,” and another 26 percent somewhat disagreed. Twenty-eight percent somewhat agreed with the statement, and 8 percent strongly agreed.<sup>31</sup>

TABLE 2. ABORIGINAL PERSONS WHO HAVE BEEN INSULTED OR TEASED BECAUSE OF THEIR ABORIGINAL BACKGROUND

I have been teased or insulted because of my Aboriginal background.	Percentage of Total Responses (2589 Total Responses)
Strongly agree	37%
Somewhat agree	33%
Somewhat disagree	10%
Strongly disagree	18%
Don't Know/Not Applicable	2%

Source: Environics Institute, *Main Survey: Tables Banner 3*, 2010.

Other key findings from the Environics Institute survey study included non-Aboriginal peoples’ perceptions of Aboriginal people. Non-Aboriginal Canadians were found to be somewhat divided on whether they believed Aboriginal people received unique privileges and rights. However, a majority (54 percent) did express the view that Aboriginal people received unique rights and privileges as the first inhabitants of Canada. On the other hand, 39 percent felt that Aboriginal people received the same rights and privileges as other cultural or ethnic groups in Canada.<sup>32</sup>

TABLE 3. NON-ABORIGINAL PERCEPTIONS OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

Which of the following two statements best represents how you think about Aboriginal people?	Percentage of Total Responses (2501 Total Responses)
Aboriginal people are just like other cultural or ethnic groups in Canada’s multicultural society	39%
Aboriginal people have unique rights and privileges as the first inhabitants of Canada	54%
Both	3%
Don't Know/Not Applicable	1%

Source: Environics Institute, *Non-Aboriginal Peoples Survey: Tables Banner 2*, 2010.

Of non-Aboriginal Canadians, 52 percent felt that problems facing Aboriginal people today are attributable to attitudes of Canadians and policies of government. On the other hand, 24 percent still voiced that Aboriginal people have brought their problems on themselves. Another 17 percent felt that both were equally responsible.<sup>33</sup> Whether Aboriginal presence was viewed

as a negative or positive by non-Aboriginal peoples was also investigated. Of the 2,501 people interviewed, 44 percent thought that the presence of Aboriginal people was positive for their city; a similar proportion, 45 percent, expressed that they were neutral; and 9 percent viewed Aboriginal presence as negative.

The Environics Institute did not include a specific focus or question regarding reflections on Aboriginal protests or social movements, and thus the types of feelings sparked by this issue were not accounted for. Although polls or surveys have brought up or have mentioned this issue briefly, it has never been used as a catalyst for opinions (such as other Environics polls). Furthermore, we argue that public perceptions drawn out of a protest allow for the opportunity to bring forth a greater variety of viewpoints possibly missed and/or unstudied in the current literature.

### *Media Coverage of Aboriginal Protests*

The Environics Institute study also found media, television, and newspapers to be the main source of learning for non-Aboriginal people regarding Aboriginal peoples.<sup>34</sup> A 2011 study by Mark Cronlund Anderson and Carmen L. Robertson examined historical news coverage of Aboriginal peoples in English-language newspapers in Canada from 1867 to 2009, finding that overt racism existed and still exists: they find the same patterns of racism and subjugation dominating even in contemporary newspapers. Essentially, newspapers simply reinforce the status quo, are entrenched with colonial images and stereotypes, and reveal numerous misguided assumptions.<sup>35</sup> Thus, how the media covers and frames Aboriginal issues may have impacts on people's perceptions.

A study by Rima Wilkes and Danielle Ricard examining newspaper coverage of Aboriginal protests in Canada from 1985 to 1995 showed that Canadian news media are very interested in Aboriginal protests. In just two years, seven Canadian newspapers published more than 700 articles about forty-three protests.<sup>36</sup> In light of this interest, Tim Baylor studied how media frames Aboriginal protests by examining US National Broadcasting Company (NBC) news stories from 1968 to 1979, and found that media often relayed information about Aboriginal protests in dysfunctional ways. Regrettably, there is limited research on the topic of media coverage of Aboriginal protests. Although Baylor's study is dated, it shows that many times Aboriginal people are labeled as "militant," with a focus on violence and a breakdown of law and order on the part of Aboriginal people.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Baylor cautions that confrontational events to gain media attention are a risky choice, given the nature in which they might be covered.<sup>38</sup> Howard Ramos identifies several causes of Aboriginal protests in a content analysis of newspaper coverage of

Aboriginal protests in Canada from 1951 to 2000. Among the reasons noted is the successful resolution of land claims, as well as attempts to gain media attention.<sup>39</sup>

In examining Aboriginal protests in the 1990s against inappropriate or derogatory use of names and culture in US national sports, Jackson B. Miller also argues that protesters should be careful what they do in order to get their message across.<sup>40</sup> Miller gives the example from a World Series baseball game where protestors wanted to demonstrate why it is offensive to dress up like an “Indian.” To make this point, some protesters dressed up as the Pope or Al Jolson, but to some degree this tactic might have backfired. Rather than teaching an effective lesson by likewise causing offense, the protest may have simply reaffirmed the fan belief that dressing up as an “Indian” is harmless fun.<sup>41</sup> Clearly, perceptions regarding Aboriginal people and protest remain a disputatious issue—one that has yet to be thoroughly investigated.

## RESEARCH METHODS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The May 2009 Akwesasne protest garnered much media attention and public outcry, evidenced by the 657 comments readers posted to a June 1, 2009 Canada Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) news article titled “Border Authorities Shut Down Akwesasne Crossing” (see appendix). Less than 500 words, the brief CBC article outlines events leading up to the protest and why the border guards left their post. Accompanying the article are three pictures: a protest sign reading “This is Mohawk Land”; John Boots, a Mohawk person who is quoted as saying “guards are ‘nasty’ to his people”; and a bonfire with community members gathered around it.

Presumably, comments on the article were posted by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The comments were examined through discourse analysis facilitated by NVivo data management software. As qualitative research using such unobtrusive measures, our data, comments to a news story, are not meant to be generalizable to the public. Rather, we are presenting this data with the aim of uncovering meanings and individuals’ understandings of particular social phenomena.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, we are cognizant that every media source is politically and ideologically biased.<sup>43</sup> However as Canada’s national public broadcaster, we selected the CBC because of its stated commitments to accountability and transparency, its more than 90 percent Canadian content, as well as its being a news source accessible across Canada, as opposed to being specific to a municipality or province.

Given the pervasiveness of the Internet, a web-based approach to data seemed ideal for this type of research. Individuals are increasingly

communicating via online methods such as social media; thus, researchers should aim to incorporate research methods that reflect this reality.<sup>44</sup> Rather than in-person interviews, we believed that using anonymous comments posted to the story would allow better access to more authentic opinions. Utilizing web-based data collection has many other benefits, but anonymity is first and foremost. Because people can use made-up usernames, they are given the opportunity to express how they feel without any risk of repercussion. Respondents post their comments to message boards of their own accord, which minimizes the role of researcher presence on data collection. In some studies the researcher's presence or contact with research subjects can have a problematic effect, sometimes referred to as the "Hawthorne Effect."<sup>45</sup> Finally, there is much value in collecting data in this unobtrusive manner when researching a highly politicized issue.

Limitations of this mode of data collection include possibly collecting data merely from Internet "trolls," those who spread discord on Internet blogs and chats by beginning arguments or trying to deliberately offend people by posting inflammatory, superfluous, or off-topic remarks. We took this possibility into account while coding the data, and anything that seemed off-topic or did not fit with the regular flow of conversation was not considered. Consideration was also given to the number of posts made by the same person, and if one person repeatedly made superfluous posts, these data were disregarded. In fact, people are quick to call out trolls in online conversations, and in many cases a website moderator removes them.

All quotations used in this paper retain the authors' original grammar. This is because the interpretative reliability of data can be seriously weakened by a failure to rephrase or translate information in a way intended by the original data. Recording data adequately is essential for ensuring one does not lose any important information.<sup>46</sup> What may seem trivial to some, we argue, is a crucial part of keeping the data's authenticity.

The grounded theory approach was used to analyze data, an approach coined by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss in 1967.<sup>47</sup> With this approach there is no preconceived hypothesis; rather, grounded theory methodology involves discovering a theory through analysis of data. As described by John W. Creswell, grounded theory is "a qualitative strategy of inquiry in which the researcher derives a general, abstract theory of process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants in a study."<sup>48</sup> Thus, an inductive approach is taken, whereby the theory emerges from examination of the phenomena.<sup>49</sup> Theory emerges from data throughout the process of conducting research.<sup>50</sup>

Grounded theory method allows for building a theoretical analysis on what is discovered to be relevant in relation to the research questions. The

inductive nature of this method allows for openness and flexibility, letting key issues surface rather than forcing them into predetermined categories. Coding categories are identified from discourse analysis as they became evident.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Five key themes were identified throughout the analysis. These themes included: (1) Problematization—“the Natives” v. “the State,” with “the Natives” and “the State” as two sub-themes; (2) Risk—Canada Under Attack from Within; (3) Securitization; (4) Sovereignty and Citizenship; and (5) Colonialist Discourse. While other messages were also categorized, they were excluded for the purposes of this research as they were off-topic, or new conversations that were started within the message boards on completely unrelated issues. Each of the five key themes identified is further explained in the following sections. Table 4 below outlines the total number of comments catalogued under each theme.

TABLE 4. KEY THEMES FROM COMMENTS POSTED TO CBC NEWS STORY  
“BORDER AUTHORITIES SHUT DOWN AKWESASNE CROSSING”

Identified Themes	Number of comments
Theme 1: Problematization—“the Natives” v. “the State”	54
• “the Natives”	37
• “the State”	17
Theme 2: Risk—Canada under Attack from Within	65
Theme 3: Securitization	34
Theme 4: Sovereignty and Citizenship	67
Theme 5: Colonialist Discourse	49

### *Theme 1: Problematization—“the Natives” v. “the State”*

Given the nature of the story topic, people were posting comments about whom they regarded as being the “problem” behind this dispute, wherein two “sides” emerged. When people discussed this, typically they would frame the problem as being either “the Natives” or “the state.” The majority of messages indicated that “the Natives” were the problem behind the dispute, with a total of thirty-seven messages being coded under this category. A total of seventeen messages indicated that “the state” was the problem behind the dispute. Messages coded within these categories took either one stance or the other—typically without any leniency or acceptance from the other view.

The messages that described Aboriginal peoples as being “the problem” typically expressed the view that Aboriginal peoples were an obstacle and a hassle for Canadian governments as it was felt that they were impeding the Canadian government’s “rightful” duties. For example, in discussing “the Natives” as the problem, the following commenter stated:

These so called “warriors”, should be called terrorists, show up wearing fatigues and bandanas covering their faces....Border Services Officer’s are federal appointed, rigorously trained, psychologically tested, and background checked Federal Peace Officers. They are entitles to carry use of force equipment authorized by the Government Of Canada. Nowhere in the Criminal Code does it state that a Peace Officer needs “mohawk tribal approval” to carry their use of force equipment.

This message reveals that, in regard to the border dispute, “the Natives” are “the problem” and also clearly identifies the border services officers as being in “rightful” positions working for the Canadian state. The following message similarly declares Aboriginal peoples to be “the problem,” again showing a clear divide between “the state” and “the Natives”:

These guys are peace officers, not mall cops, or “border guards”. They are Border Services Officers, who step out on the front lines to protect our National interests. Give them the respect they deserve, and the support they need to do their jobs. AS for the criminals abusing Cornwall, YOUR DAYS ARE NUMBERED.

Not only does this commenter clearly identify the state as being in important positions in order to protect “national interests,” but this individual even goes so far as to say that the protestors are criminals. That protestors are criminals and/or threats is another major theme that emerged; we will further discuss this idea below.

Commenters took the opposite view when the state was indicated as being “the problem.” In these comments, authors indicated that the Canadian state perpetuates the problems and/or is creating problems by wanting to have border guards carry guns, and thus were on the “side” of Mohawk peoples. For example, this is prevalent in the following message:

Right on, way to go Mohawks! More of us need to start standing up for our country and our rights. The Canadian govt. has become nothing more than a dictatorship, mafia at best. This govt. needs to start listening to the people, something that hasn’t been done in some time. We the people, the taxpayers of Canada are being robbed by our government, beaten and often killed by our police, our heritage is being watered down by the droves of immigrants over the last 20 years. . . . I dont know about the rest of you but I know I’m sick of the status quo in this “new” Canada and I too am ready to take strong action against our govt. and the RCMP.

As seen above, this author is clearly problematizing the issue as resting with the Canadian government. The following statement clearly takes the “side” of Mohawk peoples:

We don't need guns at the boarder crossing on our own territory, Our people are concerned about the safety of our children and families that cross the boarder on a daily basis.I am a proud mohawk women who has been harassed on regular basis just trying to get back to akwesasne, I've been arrested and detained in the customs for 6 hrs or more because of mistaken identity (my twin). I've never treated so badly in my life before. so before you judge us try to walk a day in our shoes.

### *Theme 2: Risk—Canada under Attack from Within*

Another major theme identified in the data was that Aboriginal people are a threat to Canadian peoples and the state. In many cases protestors were defined as being terrorists who needed to be dominated and controlled. For example, as one commenter expressed:

Mohawk “warriors”? More like Mohawk terrorists.  
Round 'em up—and charge them if they even remotely threaten the Border Services Officers. Time to play hardball.

The following commenter also expresses a similar opinion:

I guess the old saw is true . . . you can't negotiate with terrorists. . . . finally do something against these terrorists. Perhaps we need barbed wire around reserves with talk like this.

Many comments relayed terrorism in a way that deemed Canada as being attacked from within. For example, as one author stated:

. . . I hope the army comes in and kicks their asses. These are our own home-grown terrorists. And their motive is greed.

This comment contains the idea that Canada has homegrown terrorists against whom Canada needs to be protected. Similar ideas are also expressed by the following comment:

This is Canada 2009 not some little 1858 indian village with a bunch of teepees in the middle of nowhere. Arm up our border gaurds up ,bring in additional support. Open the ports . . . let them come. We shud not cave into this bunch of pseudo terrorists. If they don't like living in Canada . . . they shud get out.

Yet again, the comment above labels the protestors at Akwesasne as “terrorists” and makes explicit the view that Canada needs to protect itself against such a threat. These beliefs—which frame Aboriginal people as homegrown threats

to Euro-Canadian social order and peace—show that colonialist discourses are still in existence today.

### *Theme 3: Securitization*

According to Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, “securitization is the discursive and political process through which an intersubjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat.”<sup>51</sup> We have seen a fundamental discursive shift in how we discuss issues of state protection and security since the September 11 attacks. The initiative to arm Canadian border guards came post-9/11. The discursive shift is not an expression of traditional responses to a rise of insecurity, crime, terrorism, and the negative effects of globalization; it is the result of the creation of a continuum of threats and general unease in which many different actors exchange their fears and beliefs in the process of making a risky and dangerous society.<sup>52</sup> As Ulrich Beck contends, we live in a risk society.<sup>53</sup> Evidenced in the previous discussion, part of the larger debate surrounding risk and securitization is the labeling of the “other,” as “terrorists” in particular. Anyone deemed to have views or behaviors different than those of the dominant culture automatically is considered a terrorist, especially if there exists a differential in race. One commenter, for instance, while recognizing that we are living in a society of risk, stated:

In today’s world, it would be insane not to arm the border guards. Aboriginal sovereignty is a patently false issue in this case, as it does not exempt these communities from complying with the laws of Canada. The only rational explanation for opposition is so that the smuggling can continue unabated.

As was evidenced in the months after the September 11 attacks, citizens increasingly allowed more state intrusion in an exchange for more security. This type of sentiment was also found in some of the comments. Some commenters were quick to call in law enforcement to deal with so-called terrorists or criminals: no questions asked, no chance for explanation, just send in the army to deal with this issue. For instance:

#### Simple Solution

1. Call in the army and break up the protest.
2. Arrest anyone who disobeys a direct order.
3. Anyone who uses force against Canadians on Canadian territory must be dealt with to the fullest extent of the law.

If these people think they have a right to challenge the law of Canada on Canadian territory they need to be treated as common criminals and locked up.



The following author also expresses a similar opinion:

Give me a break. These border guards are there to defend all Canadians against bad stuff and bad people, including the Indians. Move the army in and disband these people. Enough of this nonsense!!

Only a few commenters spoke out against securitization, applauding the Mohawk peoples for standing up to increased militarization and armament of the state:

Since when do Canadians stand for arms at a border. As a Canadian do we really want to create a situation that is going to give opportunity to another gov't gang to murder? I deal with the public every day so I should carry a gun? The Native people are the only group of people in North America that have the balls to stand up and make a difference. Go Mohawks stand for your people and the average Canadian that are just like you.

Ultimately, the large majority of comments relating to securitization were in relation to a need for increased security and the implementation of measures to prevent any possible "terrorist-related" risks.

#### *Theme 4: Sovereignty and Citizenship*

Central to the dispute is the issue of territorial sovereignty. It is an issue sensitive for both Mohawk people and the Canadian government. Conflicts concerning jurisdiction over territory have ignited several crises over the years, occasionally leading to violent conflicts.<sup>54</sup> For Canadian and American governments, discussions of territorial sovereignty are irrational. To them, the land is indisputably Canadian or American on their particular sides of the border, which they believe has been afforded to them by treaties, legitimate takeover or conquest, and/or through the permission or approval of Aboriginal ancestors.<sup>55</sup> From many Haudenosaunee viewpoints, treaties that the American and Canadian governments reference are fraudulent, misconstrued, or signed under intimidation.<sup>56</sup> The original foundations of the Peace and Friendship treaties, such as the Two-Row Wampum Belt agreement, are not being followed or considered.<sup>57</sup> These are agreements in which sovereignty was not given up, whereby Aboriginal and European Nations each would go about their own business without interference from the other.

Within issues of sovereignty is also embedded the issue of citizenship. If we take the government of Canada's word that Cornwall Island is Canadian land, it would imply that all residents are Canadian citizens and therefore subject to Canadian law. However, if we take many of the Mohawk peoples at their word that the island is Mohawk Territory, then they are not only not

completely subject to Canadian law as it relates to their territory, but questions also arise about whether they are Canadians or Mohawks. Particularly because they underlie the whole dispute, these questions and tensions—“Where is Canada?” and “Who is Canadian?”—comprise a significant portion of the comments. Questions of sovereignty were expressed in sentiments such as:

all these comments about “Mohawk Territory” and “Native Land” give it a rest already, ITS CANADA, follow Canadian law!

The following commenter expresses a similar opinion:

Is this land part of the Canada’s sovereign nation? The border is regulated under agreements between Canada, sovereign nation, and the United States of America, sovereign nation. I do not recall any agreements between the Mohawk, and anyone else to administer our international border. Send in the police, and army. These Mohawk terrorists are now directly challenging Canada’s sovereign nation status.

Other commenters appeared to “want to teach the Native people a lesson,” so to speak. If Aboriginal peoples express that they are autonomous within their own territory, the attitude was “let’s show them”—isolate them and sever all ties:

Give them their sovereignty. Make them a separate country, put a fence around their lands and make them show passports when they want in or out. Inspect their vehicles like any other crossing. Cut off the flow of federal money and let them be a completely free and independent nation and see how they like it. Armed guards on a mohawk reserve are bad for the smuggling business. Of course their upset. . . .

Another comment expresses a related opinion:

you know what, you dont want anyone coming on “your” land without your say so then stay off all other land. you can have your shitty reserves. stay there and dont bother everybody else. and as for any threats being made when and if it all came down to it the native people wouldnt stand a chance. be happy the english and french didnt wipe you out all together when they came to the country in the first place. canada is for ALL canadians. and ALL canadians are under the same law. the native people cannot continue to have their cake and eat it too. for too long you have wanted everything both ways. enough is enough. arm the guards just like everywhere else in canada and if they want to get violent they will get treated like every other violent criminal.

An interesting aspect of analyzing comments posted to a message board is that many commenters engaged in discussion with each other. This was extremely evident in discussions surrounding sovereignty and citizenship, such as in this exchange:

(Commenter 1): The customs border is on Mohawk land which is sovereign territory and not part of Canada.

(Commenter 2): Alright, close the border, don't give in to these illegal demands, and take away there illegal smoke border crossing. They protest guns, but last year announced that they had a cache of guns nearby to be used to "defend" themselves. Also, if this is truly "sovereign mohawk territory", how many of these guys are illegally accepting welfare checks from Canada, let me guess, that time of year your a Canadian, but as soon as its convenient, you not. If you don't want to be Canadian, fine, but then why are you making demands to Canada, since your not Canadian, you are not our concern.

In this quote we see not only elements of stereotyping and "othering," but also discussions of both sovereignty and citizenship on each end of the debate.

However, not all discussions regarding sovereignty and citizenship were one-sided, nor were all comments against Aboriginal sovereignty and citizenship, as highlighted by this comment:

Apparently (judging from the comments here) sovereignty is only for white English males and natives aren't entitled to it.

Moreover, as one poster pointed out, such discussions should not be limited to dichotomous conceptualizations:

To say that being "Canadian" is not a contentious issue, is clearly showing you as someone who doesn't live in this country. You obviously don't understand our socio-historical context to say something like that. It is a very complex thing, one person's "Canadian" is entirely different for another person. We have many different cultural identities and nationalism is not the best marker for identity in this case. Talk to any scholar about Canadian identity or our sense of culture and they'll tell you the exact same thing.

### *Theme 5: Colonialist Discourse*

Many messages revealed that persons are still very much implicated in continuing colonialism and contribute to an ongoing colonial discourse. According to Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel, "colonialism is a narrative in which the Settler's power is the fundamental reference and assumption, inherently limiting indigenous freedom and imposing a view of the world that is but an outcome or perspective on that power."<sup>58</sup> Put another way, and specifically in terms of the North American Aboriginal experience, colonialism involves ignoring Aboriginal people's history, including their culture, their voices, and their traditions. It involves the dislocation and disconnection of Aboriginal peoples from traditional territories. This includes domination and subjection,

the stripping away of identity and rights, and forcing peoples under the control and governing influence of, in this case, the European settlers.

Colonialism is established and expressed via control and influence over Aboriginal people, their lands, and population at large. Colonialism is then rationalized and vindicated through the civilized/uncivilized dichotomy created through European supremacy and control. Colonizers, in their creation of their own “truth,” have come to represent the “progressive civilization” while the colonized become considered as exemplifying “backwards savagery.”<sup>59</sup> Roots of this embedded colonial discourse can be traced back to a time forty years before Europeans even reached the Americas, when a collection of theological and legal rulings had been established—collectively known as the “Doctrines of Discovery”—giving Europeans the right to dominate any non-Christian peoples and justifying the explorer’s colonization efforts.<sup>60</sup> Without any consent from Aboriginal people who were living on these lands, colonizers used these documents to gain governmental, political, and commercial rights over Aboriginal people, believing that they had a right to conquer and control anyone who might pose as a threat to European civilization and Christian goals and norms.<sup>61</sup> Colonizers felt that they had a duty to “civilize” what they thought was an uncivilized world. This discourse entered into, and has continued to influence, social practices in North America, and it has become deeply implicated in those practices. Hence, the recurring theme that framed many of the posted messages was that of a very dominant, prevalent, and embedded colonialist discourse.

Although many messages already cited above exhibit aspects akin to colonialism, a total of forty-nine messages particularly stood out as colonialist discourse. Those clearly identifiable messages make comments and remarks that exclude and disregard Aboriginal peoples’ history, voices, identity, and/or rights, thereby creating a situation in which the prevailing discourse becomes unilaterally defined by one dominant and colonizing group. The messages also reflect a belief whereby only Canadian norms, culture, and perceptions are deemed as acceptable. For example, one message coded under this category states:

Its long overdue that we send in the military to teach these people that the land they live on is Canada not mohawk land. If they disagree then let them hide behind their women again. Perhaps these mohawks should be moved to another part of the country where they might not cause as much trouble. The soviets used this strategy with great effect. The north needs populating.

This comment clearly shows that Aboriginal territories are not acknowledged. Furthermore, this message exhibits the belief that Aboriginal peoples should be moved “out of the way,” as they are seen to be impeding on Euro-Canadian

ways of life. This white westernized framing of Aboriginal peoples as an obstacle to Euro-Canadian customs and norms was prevalent in many messages coded under this category. Some messages also relayed this attitude in the way the authors discussed how they felt Aboriginal people need to assimilate in the same way other races and cultures had done, as seen in this message, for example:

. . . Other cultures come to Canada (Eastern European, East Indian, Chinese etc) and are able to both integrate into the larger Canadian society and retain their traditions and heritage. How is hanging tenaciously onto a—in some cases—remote piece of wilderness part of your cultural heritage? More importantly, has that strategy worked in improving the lives of your children? Clinging to the same worn out race baiting strategy of victim-hood has not worked so far, why would it work now?

This message also shows lack of knowledge with respect to actual Aboriginal traditions and/or cultures; instead, they are downplayed as insignificant. Another message that displays related colonialist conceptions stated:

. . . You should be grateful that Canadians gave you land, and protected you when you ran away from your land in fear of your lives. So in fact, we (Europeans) were here first, and you are living on our land thanks to our generosity. This may not apply to all reserves, but it would seem yours makes this biggest stink, and has no right to.

A similar message coded under this category stated:

Ive heard so many people saying “we took their land illegally”. I for one do not know anyone today who has taken land from these people. And the manner in which the land was taken was war. So how about we give Quebec back to France as well. It was taken “Illegally as well”. This happened many years ago. its time for the Mohawk communtiy to either join Canadian society and stop dictating to a govenment they dont even achnowldge. Or cut all federal funding and let them live alone. Every time I turn around they are whining about some land treaty. Give it up.

The fact that Aboriginal peoples did have their land taken is regarded as false by these commenters, demonstrating how they contribute to the ongoing colonial discourse and are thus implicated in continuing colonialism. Furthermore, similar to the previous message suggesting that Aboriginal peoples must assimilate, this author also states that he feels Aboriginal people need to join the dominant Canadian society.

Ultimately, this theme revealed by the data reinforces that we are living in an era that can be described as “contemporary colonialism.” According to

Taiiaki Alfred and Jeff Cortassel, an era of contemporary colonialism is “a form of post-modern imperialism in which domination is still the Settler imperative but where the colonizers have designed and practice more subtle means (in contrast to the earlier forms of missionary and militaristic colonial enterprises) of accomplishing their objectives.”<sup>62</sup> The legacy from original European settlers continues to live on among latter generations.

### *Aftermath of Event*

The border crossing was relocated from Cornwall Island to Cornwall in July 2009. The Canadian government released a statement stating that they spoke with Mohawk leaders about Aboriginal participation in the construction of a new bridge that would link the City of Cornwall, Cornwall Island, and New York State.<sup>63</sup> These talks are a result of the Mohawk peoples’ renown as iron-workers and crane operators who have built bridges and skyscrapers in both Canada and the United States. The new bridge is expected to be completed in late 2016.

The push for reform efforts might appear to have had significant effects, such as the initial response of the border guards who left their posts in response to the protest, the bridge shutdown, and, more recently, in 2011 the CBSA’s hiring of the first Aboriginal liaison officer in Cornwall.<sup>64</sup> Yet in reality, not much actually changed. As the colonial government never agreed to an exception and refused to amend the policy regarding border guards carrying 9-mm handguns, it was left with the ultimate say—even though the Mohawk peoples of Akwesasne have never renounced their sovereignty. Instead, without any serious attempts at consultation of the Mohawk peoples of Akwesasne, the CBSA facilities were moved onto the Canadian side of the mainland. Rather than meaningful consultation with the sovereign peoples of Akwesasne, the CBSA Canadian government agency addressed the issue in the way they saw fit.

## CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

In answer to the first research question, “how are Aboriginal peoples in North America regarded by those posting comments to this news article?,” we found that some of these news commenters still regarded Aboriginal peoples as a “lesser” people. In many ways Aboriginal people are still regarded as “the other” and as people who need to stop resisting against the Canadian state. A resilient colonizing discourse is still strong—and, for some people, unchanged from the discourse of their white settler forebears.

Research question two asked: “in a post-911 world, what are commenter’s perceptions of acts of resistance against the state?” We found that news commenters regarded acts of resistance against the state as criminal and demanded increased security to defend against any threats to Canada. Some deem protestors to be threats to the Canadian state, and some people felt that any measures to protect “Canada” must be implemented, at any cost. This mentality assumes that Canada is under attack from within.

The final question asked, “what are these news commenters’ perceptions of Aboriginal protests?” Many commenters perceived Aboriginal protests as a nuisance. Some people still fall back on notions, ideas, and understandings of Aboriginal people that are similar to understandings of Aboriginal people in the early days of colonization. The belief still exists that Aboriginal people should have assimilated by now and hence that these protests are simply a bother, as well as threat, that menaces Canadian power structures, authority, and sovereignty.

Some of these commenters lack understanding about Aboriginal issues in general, perhaps because for non-Aboriginal people, media such as television and newspapers have been the main source for learning about Aboriginal peoples.<sup>65</sup> A still-existing mentality denies ongoing colonialism and feels that Aboriginal people need to “just get over it,” stop resisting against the Canadian state, and assimilate. Thus, this research demonstrates that colonial assaults on Aboriginal people’s existence are still present.

There are limits to discourse analysis. Notably, our results are not generalizable to other situations.<sup>66</sup> There is no evidence to support that this analysis is representative of the broader public sentiment on issues of Aboriginal dissent and protest, particularly with respect to the Akwesasne border dispute. We also realize that our sample is not representative of those who comment on news stories, and we do not claim that this sole examination of comments to one article is representative of the public, nor is it representative of all those who might post to news articles. As qualitative research, the aim of data analysis is not to generalize findings in this manner. However, it does provide insight into the types of comments that might be found in articles regarding Aboriginal protest. This is worthy of examination: our findings reinforce that no matter how few or how many people might be posting these comments, we were able to show that, in fact, ongoing colonialism is still a living reality.

For many, this might seem like a very predictable conclusion; however, it is necessary to highlight this fact, as these findings contribute to a discourse that proves still-ongoing colonialism. Because not everyone realizes contemporary colonialism, or believes it to be a reality, we argue that this is an important discourse in need of continued contribution. For example, on September 27, 2009, Canada’s Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced to international

community members of the G20 Summit that Canada is unique because it is not tarnished by a history of colonialism, stating to world leaders, “we have no history of colonialism.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, this research contributes to making visible what, to some, might be invisible. Exposing a case in which we find colonialist ideas and stereotypes running rampant provides evidence to back up the reality that colonialism and racism against Aboriginal peoples do still exist.

In March 2013, a group including many Cree Nations made a complaint to the UN Committee on Racial Discrimination about the lack of government response to the rabid virulent expressions of hatred found in news media surrounding the Idle No More Movement. A sampling of articles was reviewed showing that news media materials regarding the movement continued the colonial legacy. Significant and persistent patterns of racial discrimination within some of Canada’s news media outlets were identified, and Canada’s outright inaction to such media was highlighted.<sup>68</sup> Thus, our current study contributes to raising awareness of this discrimination facing Aboriginal peoples through an additional related facet of media—online posting to news articles—a reality which government is not acknowledging to any significant extent, if at all.

Furthermore, with the rise of Internet sharing and social media websites such as Twitter and Facebook, we are witnessing an information shift in which people are posting and creating their own faucets of “news” through status updates, tweets, blogs, and other posts. This shift requires further examination. For example, one such further investigation would compare official news sources—news stations such as CBC or CTV, or newspapers, both nationally and regionally—with non-official “news” faucets, such as blogs, posts to news stories, and tweets.

## NOTES

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5. See J. Rick Ponting, "Conflict and Change in Indian/Non-Indian Relations in Canada: Comparison of 1976 and 1979 National Attitude Surveys," *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 9, no. 2 (1984): 137–58; Jackson B. Miller, "'Indians,' 'Braves,' and 'Redskins': A Performative Struggle for Control of an Image," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85 (1999) 188–202; *Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study: Main Report* (Toronto: Environics Institute, 2010).
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7. Tim Baylor, "Media Framing of Movement Protest: The Case of American Indian Protest," *The Social Science Journal* 33, no. 3 (1996): 241–55; Rima Wilkes and Danielle Ricard, "How Does Newspaper Coverage of Collective Action Vary? Protests by Indigenous People in Canada," *The Social Science Journal* 44 (2007): 231–51.
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16. Hauptman, "Seven Generations of Iroquois Leadership," 180.
17. Ibid, 180.
18. Johnson, et al., "American Indian Activism and Transformation," 19.
19. Ibid., 19.
20. Ibid., 34.
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23. Johnson, et al., "American Indian Activism and Transformation," 9.
24. *Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study*, 141.
25. *Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study*.
26. From June to July 2009, an online survey of 182 previous and current National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation scholars was also conducted. Ibid., 7.
27. For selected questions used in the *Urban Aboriginal Peoples Study* that coincide with the following data presented in this paper, see Appendix.
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29. Ibid., 74–75.
30. Ibid., 78.
31. Ibid., 79.
32. Ibid., 148.
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37. Baylor, "Media Framing of Movement Protest," 33.
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55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. See the Mohawk Council of Akwesasne for further description of the Two-Row Wampum Agreement, <http://www.akwesasne.ca/node/118>.
58. Taiiaki Alfred and Jeff Corntassel, "Being Indigenous: Resurgences Against Contemporary Colonialism," *Government and Opposition* 40, no. 4 (2005): 597–614, 601.
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## APPENDIX: CBC NEWS ARTICLE CAUSING THE POSTED COMMENTS ANALYZED

# Border authorities shut down Akwesasne crossing

CBC News

Posted: Jun 01, 2009 7:39 AM ET

Last Updated: Jun 01, 2009 4:54 PM ET



Mohawks gather near the Seaway International Bridge to protest the arming of border guards (Rebecca Zandbergen/CBC)

Canadian authorities shut down a border crossing into the United States at Cornwall, Ont., Monday morning after Mohawk leaders from the nearby Akwesasne territory warned they would not tolerate guns in their community.

Talks on the weekend between Mohawk officials and the Canadian Border Services Agency broke down over the issue of arming guards assigned to posts on Cornwall island, which is in the middle of Akwesasne, a territory that straddles Quebec, Ontario and New York State.

The border guards in Cornwall were set to start carrying 9-mm handguns Monday morning, under a new federal policy enacted across the country. Instead, guards left their posts at midnight Sunday, citing safety concerns, after hundreds of Mohawks set up camp near the border to protest the gun policy.



John Boots, a Mohawk from Akwesasne, says border guards are 'nasty' to his people ((Rebecca Zandbergen/CBC))

Border authorities later closed the border altogether, allowing no vehicles to cross the Seaway International Bridge.

The Mohawk protesters are angry about guards being allowed to carry guns, because they say it violates their sovereignty, and increases the likelihood of violent confrontations.

“Their biggest fear is that because of the animosity that exists right now, that one of them young people that has guns in there [and] three weeks of training, probably no psychological testing either – that one of them is going to lose it in there and kill one of our people,” said Cheryl Jacob, district chief at the Akwesasne Mohawk Council.

Hundreds of protesters near the border crossing gathered around a bonfire and held signs that said “Guns kill,” “This is Mohawk land” and “Honk for no guns,” said the CBC’s Lauren McCallum, reporting from the scene.

The Mohawk protesters reportedly cheered when news of the border guards’ departure became known.



Protesters built a bonfire near the customs border crossing office ((Lauren McCallum/CBC))

“They’re so nasty and harassing our people that we can almost feel ... their finger being itchy on the trigger,” said John Boots, a Mohawk from Akwesasne. “That’s how bad those people are. The customs officers.”

“We’re no more of a threat today than we were yesterday,” said Anenhainton, another Akwesasne resident. “So, why all of a sudden do they need guns?”

Boots warned that people are not going to back down from the issue. “If they say they’re going to arm the guards, we’re going to stay here, and we’re going to stop them whenever we see them coming,” he said.

It’s not clear when the blockade would end and the border reopen.

People who “want to leave the reserve are allowed to leave, but they’re not allowed to return” for as long as the conflict lasts, said Cornwall police staff Sgt. Pierre Pilon.

Public safety minister Peter Van Loan said the gun policy will be applied to all Canadian border crossings, with no exceptions.