The Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk Nation) at Akwesásne: Clashing Discourses, Environmental (In)justice, and Geographies of Resistance

Despite the extreme juridical complexity of straddling the borders of New York, Ontario, and Quebec, the Mohawk Indian Nation at Akwesásne considers itself sovereign.

Settler Colonial Interventions

- Port of Entry
- Industrial Rent
- Federally Recognized Reservation
- Kanien'kehá:ka Land Claims

Cross-Border Route Between Medical Facilities

- Current River Configuration
- Pre-Dam River Configuration
- EPA-Designated “Area of Concern”

Settler colonial discourse materialized in borders transforms the Mohawk homeland and undermines indigenous well-being. While the US-Canada border originally redefined the river as a zone of uncertainty, the international boundary is now militarized by maritime, land, and drone surveillance systems. These defensive architectures impose settler state power and repudiate Mohawk sovereignty. While guarding their own boundaries that have been chipped away, the Mohawks also ask that their traditional land should not be bounded at all. Jurisdictional complexities complicate healthcare delivery in the Akwesásne community, as Mohawks must argue that their traditional land should not be bounded by arbitrary (EPA) boundaries and primarily spread via mothers’ breast milk.

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The Ahkwesásne landscape is a materialization of competing discourses — constituted by layered knowledges, power relations, subjectivities, and identities formalized in space. By disrupting settler states, direct action to reclaim indigenous space challenges the destructive forces of colonization in today’s shifting Ahkwesásne landscape.

Ahkwesásne Mohawks challenge settler colonial discourses of planning and boundaries by appropriating the architecture of the bridge as a strategic site of resistance. The Mohawks long opposed bridge construction over the river on Ahkwesásne territory, and restrictions on Mohawks’ legal rights to free cross-border passage as guaranteed in Article III of the 1794 Jay Treaty. As early as 1968, the Mohawks staged protests on the Seaway International Bridge as the international boundary the bridge traversed became the center of decades of activism. Through occupations, Mohawks have materialized their own visions such as relocating the Canadian border checkpoint from indigenous land in 2009, participating in the ongoing transformation of the dominant discourse. By disrupting settler states, direct action to reclaim indigenous space and defend inherent rights confronts the destructive forces of colonization in today’s shifting Ahkwesásne landscape.

References and Further Reading:

Research & Design: Oliver Oglesby, Middlebury College '18