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Colonialism in Three Landscapes

This small collection of essays takes its inspiration for how to write about colonialism from Brett Story's documentary film, *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes*. It is a film about prisons that almost never shows a prison building. Instead, we see the world of the prison as it appears in the structures supporting its existence. We ride the overnight bus to an upstate New York penitentiary with visiting families from Manhattan. Mesmerized, we watch a California forest fire burn as an inmate describes fighting it through a prison labor program. We stand in line for hours with citizens of Ferguson, Missouri, waiting to pay fines for insignificant infractions, knowing that those who cannot pay will be locked up. The space of the prison—its geography—is unsettlingly all around us within deep social relations of inequality.

The *New York Times* describes the film as one that shows how prisons “hide in plain sight” (Catsoulis 2016). As such, these landscapes provide a methodology for seeing, for example, the over-policing of black neighborhoods in America as carceral spaces. But from whom is this reality “hidden”? In 1969, Johan Galtung coined a term undoubtedly long understood by those subject to its affects as “structural violence.” He asked, “can we talk about violence when nobody is committing direct violence, is acting?” (170). It's a kind of violence that shows up in uneven life choices, in the distribution of resources that leave some hungry and poor, some more vulnerable to discrimination and physical harm. But as Yves Winter amends, rather than its invisibility serving as the requirement for its repetition as Galtung theorized, its invisibility can be attributed to “ceaseless repetition in the open” (Dilts 2012: 192). Only some people have the privilege to be inoculated by the common sight of this violence; others must live it every day.

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Likewise, colonialism may seem invisible to many who live in North America, but its daily violence is everywhere around us. As Fanon (1968: 36) described, the “colonial world is a world divided into compartments”—schools, neighborhoods, land, language, reservations. It is “violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world” (Fanon 1968: 40). As the contributors to this *Against the Day* section of *SAQ* show, it is precisely through this ordering that structural violence can be maintained, but also disordered through what Fanon (1968: 40) called “surges into forbidden quarters.” In the pieces that follow, the ordering of Indigenous lands into parks, flooded reservoirs, and French-speaking provinces are followed by both intense disorientation and alienation, but also by the sound of hammering against these structures. From the inside of Nlaka’pamux, Algonquin, and Ithineu Nations, what “hides in plain sight” is the submergence and resurgence of Indigenous cultures, languages, and waterways.

I invited three Indigenous youth to submit these narrative landscapes for this collection. Each wrote about the way they see things from their homelands—how the daily use of their lands and waters by settlers can erase their own histories, culture, and economies. But also, how invisible to settlers can be the ongoing use and fight for their homelands. As a settler on these lands, I approach this problem of *seeing* with a different sense of responsibility: how do we stop the repetition of violence that makes colonization normal, or how can we make visible at the very least the way this repetition guards our senses from reacting to its violence? These days there are many critical conversations about what this responsibility means and how alliances can be formed with Indigenous peoples across multiple expressions of freedom, oppression, and solidarity. One way to answer the call to undo structural violence is by learning to better see colonialism in the landscape, so that we begin with the materialism of what we need to take apart and what we need to build.

References

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