Life along the line: Landscape contestation and place

Among the Mohawks of Akwesasne

Kallen M. Martin, ABD
Syracuse University

Global Studies Department
St. Lawrence University
Canton, NY

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Abstract

Meanings of place are typically bound up in specific events or acts that, among indigenous peoples, are symbolic of their cultural practices. In many instances the meaning of place and culture are quite inseparable, reflecting landscapes of healing, power, and social relations. In the early half of the 20th century, rivers were highways and borders were zones of uncertainty for the Mohawks of Akwesasne, leading to multiple subjectivities and landscapes of contestation between them and the emerging politics of Canada and the United States. This article provides insight into that landscape in the context of the sweetgrass basket trade between Canadian-based Mohawk basketmakers and American-based trading store owners uniquely situated in the centre of Mohawk territory. An historical overview of borders and boundaries along the St. Lawrence River foregrounds this analysis of multiple subjectivities – as a people dispossessed of their land and river, and as producers of cultural representations that become exploited. Drawn from numerous interviews of Mohawks who lived by and along the St. Lawrence River between 1900 and 1950, the river and borders reflect their places of cultural importance.[1] Competing discourses, however, disrupt the layered relationships that defined the Mohawks.[2]

> *Places and their memory sustain us in our everyday lives; subject as these lives are to fragmentation and rupture of so many sorts* (Casey, 1987: 195).

Common among indigenous communities across the North American continent are struggles for justice. Within the recent past, brought to the Canadian consciousness has been the controversial loss of lives of First Nations people, all struggling for the recognition of indigenous rights. The Ipperwash Inquiry for example, has uncovered repeated injustices perpetrated by the Ontario Provincial Police against the Chippewas of

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[2] This paper was excerpted from a larger article submitted for (forthcoming) publication in Material History Review and its special edition on Landscape, edited by Brian C. Osborne, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.

southwestern Ontario as details surrounding the 1995 death of Dudley George have been uncovered. With the help of archival research, historical injustices extending back to the 1800s are also being unearthed. Just recently, interviewed on CBC radio were individuals associated with the production of a documentary about the 1884 lynching of Louis Sam, a 15-year old member of the Sto:lo Nation in British Columbia. In this particular case, oral history plays a central role in the remembrance of the circumstances surrounding this young man's death and the efforts of the Canadian government to investigate those who were instrumental in leading the campaign to take Sam's life. In Akwesasne Mohawk territory, similar events unfolded in 1899, when Jake Fire was shot and killed on May 1. He had been protesting the imposition of the band system mandated by the Canadian government – known as the Indian Advancement Act of 1884. Jake Fire Day, commemorating his life, death, and the symbolism of his protest, has been celebrated in Akwesasne on May 1st since 1985.

These examples illustrate not only struggles for justice but also struggles for landscape, and in First Nations communities, it is the land that provides comfort and reflects cultural identity, a sense of belonging, and contention. Struggles over landscape are then moments of contestation that offer multiple ways of understanding the relationships between land and people. In this paper, landscape is represented by ideologies and the intersection of discourse. Place, on the other hand, captures the meaning we attach to specific locations that identifies or reflects lived experiences. In some cases, landscape and place are used interchangeably. Here they reflect differential scales of engagement that can be read or represented in various ways.

The binary or dialectical nature of landscape suggests that identity is always contested and yet obscured (Mitchell, 2002: 385). Public representations of historical moments are conflated with dominance and centrality, further blurring or marginalizing the invisible landscapes of struggle or contestation (Osborne, 2001; Mitchell, 2000; Dwyer, 2000: 663; hooks, 1992). Landscapes can be textualized (Duncan, 1990), lend themselves to multiple (and theoretical) readings (See Ryden, 1992; Davis, 1990; Zukin, 1991; Mitchell, 1996), and can be characterized by levels of abstraction, through tropes, metaphors, and axioms, or through Marxist or feminist theory – thus expanding the dialectical and critical understanding of what separates us as individuals and what enjoins us as people (See Meinig, 1979; Groth & Bressi, 1997; Duncan & Ley, 1993; Bender, 1993; Stewart, 1996).

Keith Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places* (1996) contains metaphoric references to landscapes and places in the terms "shooting arrows" and "stalking stories" - both having moral and social undertones. In Toni Morrison's book *The Bluest Eye*, the various scales of place – home, community, state, and nation – are played out through the use of Shirley Temple dolls and consumption of Mary Jane candies by Pecola Breedlove and her friend, Claudia and the places where play and consumption occur. The film, *The Rabbit Proof Fence*, provides witness to the longing for and of place by three Australian indigenous girls but also to the conjunctures of oppression, deceit, and colonialism in the places where fences and white enclaves intersect. These examples illustrate what landscapes do, how landscape is produced, and how it functions (Mitchell, 1996:30), thus linking the

sometimes contrasting or dialectical relationship between landscape-as-ideology and landscape-as-morphology. The power of landscapes is that they can encompass 'all that we think should matter' (Henderson, 2003), while at the same time hiding as well as displaying that which is meaningful (Mitchell, 2000). Throughout the 1800s and early 1900s the St. Lawrence River symbolized the power of ideology as both the United States and Canada vied for dominance of the river and the flow of commerce into and out of North America.

The series of locks and canals found within the St. Lawrence River narrate a visual ideology of man's quest to control nature. For the Mohawks of Akwesasne, 'the Seaway' has come to represent cultural destruction, subjugation and erasure. This view of the Seaway is not apparent when one witnesses the river or ships traversing locks. A characteristic feature of ideologies is that they mask the influence of human effort and marginalize the less powerful. The visual ideology of locks and canals then hides from view the Mohawks' philosophical and cultural regard of the river.

In contrast to ideological landscapes, the materiality of 'landscape' results from and structures social interaction (Mitchell, 1996: 34). The more tangible qualities of the river – learning about the currents, the impact of the wind and moon, connecting types of underwater plants to specific fish species, understanding the role of bays or inlets in the spawning process, developing skills in various harvesting processes, and being part of a larger collective - were instrumental in structuring life on the river, and served as a text for cultural practices and values. The meaning of the river to the Mohawks of Akwesasne

and its role in their culture became increasingly obscured and veiled as 'the Seaway' was developed. It is the vibrancy of life on the river in the first half of the 20th century that provides multiple layered narratives which form the basis of my broader study on the river as a place of memory.

The two aforementioned views of landscape - landscape-as-ideology and landscape-as-morphology - provide multiple, supplemental, and, in some cases, oppositional ways of viewing, analyzing, and understanding social relations and the influence of power over spatial relations. Landscape-as-ideology lends itself to processes of imagining, production, and naturalization while landscape-as-morphology reflects our relationships to the land and lends structure to both meaning and social and cultural processes. These two views provide natural frameworks for theorizing and analyzing landscape.

For this presentation the landscape under study is the international border along the St. Lawrence River in the 1920s. Drawn from the lived experiences of 24 Mohawk elders and archival research, I will attempt to briefly describe the contested nature of the border some eight decades ago.

Leading up to the 1920s competing discourses between the United States and Canada were played out on the St. Lawrence River, which serves as the border between these two countries from the 45th parallel to Lake Ontario. No longer witnesses to these discourses, the Mohawks at Akwesasne began to re-experience multiple tensions this

time led by the combined effects of US legislation that affected both countries and citizens along the border, and the increased enforcement of colonial government policy. The river, border and new restrictions on movement combined to create, for Akwesasronon, a tangling of natural and social constructions that posed challenges for daily living, the least of which were geographic divisions.

Border making became a joint effort of the United States and the British in 1763, again in 1817, and yet again in the early 1900s between Canada and the US, and finally, in 1917. What is significant about the border is that the 45th parallel sits precisely at the intersection of St. Regis, Quebec and the St. Lawrence River. The town of Hogansburg, NY became the first nexus of commercial activity in Akwesasne as those crossing the river by ferry landed at St. Regis, crossed the border and two miles south were required to present themselves to the local customs house. In 1900 a customs agent had noted, *"[I]n relation to the American tariff on Indian wares crossing the boundary line into the US…I do not exact duty on such as are needed for the necessaries of life*" (DIA, Letterbooks, February 22, 1900). In spite of this apparent and gratuitous leniency, the people of Akwesasne traveled unencumbered between the islands and mainland. They often crossed what was then an imaginary line to maintain family, social, economic, and religious or ceremonial ties. This all changed with the Volstead Act also known as the US National Prohibition Act of 1920. "Life along the line has not been same since," wrote Herbert Donovan about relations between residents on each side of the border adjacent to Akwesasne. The same could be said of the Act and its impact on the people of Akwesasne as border patrol and customs agents were often seen on the American

shoreline waiting for alleged deliveries of liquor. The policing of the border that came with prohibition was designed to stem the flow of "intoxicating liquor" into the United States. In Akwesasne, however, this policing imposed a set of obstacles that affected established land and river based cultural practices. The Mohawks struggle to continue such practices despite imposed sanctions can be seen as a "struggle for landscape…[that] is at the same time [a] struggle for justice" (Mitchell, 2003: 788).

A centuries-long cultural activity of the Mohawks has been the making of sweetgrass baskets. As most Mohawk basket makers lived on Canadian-based islands in the St. Lawrence, river crossings were a natural part of their lives. The main centre in which baskets could be traded, however, was located on the mainland in Hogansburg, NY. As far back as the 1850s Mohawk baskets were bought wholesale and transported to New York City for marketing to a larger public (Seaver, 1918: 329). The river, islands and the mainland thus became important features of a broader landscape of contestation as border making became intense.

Despite increased surveillance, little prevented border crossings by boat. As a result, the river's American shoreline became a series of places, some permeable, that transitioned travelers into another set of opportunistic exchanges. While it is known that some Akwesasronon were involved in the transport of liquor across the border, more often than not, women transported sweetgrass baskets to the closest available market – that of American-based trading stores – and often during the winter months. Tumultuous as this was over wind-swept frozen rivers and through engulfing drifts of snow, river and

border crossings became a common undertaking for many families in order to survive the harsh winters that typically enveloped the area. With the enforcement of duties on transported goods, what was once explicit [in representing Mohawk culture and identity] became illicit. The sweetgrass basket trade had been forced underground and barter exchanges at trading stores were typically uneven. Speaking of her mother's experience, an elderly Mohawk woman recalled,

> *She had to sneak in there…[by a row] boat…hide behind the bushes, to get to the store…The man, his name was McKinnon, Archie McKinnon. I remember that name. I'll never forget it. She took a big bag of baskets in there and he don't give her the money. She has to buy the stuff, the materials to make dresses, this and that, groceries, too. He didn't give her money. He don't pay much. She traded her baskets for this and that.*[3]

Of the winter months, another elderly Mohawk woman recalled, "*We had to make baskets. We had to take a chance [to get them to Hogansburg] in the middle of the night. If you can get there, well that was three dollars. If not, you lose everything even the boat or horses and your baskets*."[4] Additional US legislation in 1922 gave these agents increased power to confiscate goods other than liquor that crossed the line. While this legislation (the Fordney-McCumber Act of 1922) increased regulation of products shipped from Canada to the US, in Akwesasne the general interpretation of the new law meant a complete prohibition of products crossing the border. One elderly Mohawk woman vividly recalled, "*Canadians weren't to go across and sell [baskets] at McKinnon's, Kernan's too. They had to hide. They had to crawl around the river, cross over, through the woods, carry[ing] a big bag of baskets. That was awful. It's a shame*

[3] Interview notes of an elderly Mohawk woman. August, 2002.
[4] Interview notes of an elderly Mohawk woman from Kanatakon, March 2003.

the way they was treated then."[5] Such place memories, or how places become embodied with meaning and significance by people through their lived experiences, have been testifiers for collective and social memory (Connerton, 1989; Halbwachs, 1992, also see Nora, 1994; Casey, 1987; Sturken, 1997; Foote, 1997). The river, shorelines, and trading stores in this examination of place and landscape are not only signifiers of collective memory, but also are witnesses to the creation of meaning. Such cultural landscapes have the ability to articulate that meaning through the lens of (in)justice, in this case the uneven character of borders and border making.

Complicating life along the line were Indian agents, who had been placed on each side of the Mohawk territory, enforced regulations meant to control the Mohawks' spatial movement. Land leases meant Akwesasronon were no longer free to move about their own territory. Permission was needed from the agent to leave the reserve, and if one attended college, secured legal counsel, purchased land off reserve, entered military service, or married a non-Native, they were disenfranchised. Borders and reserve boundaries thus came to symbolize imposed systems of spatial control. With their trade of baskets contingent on the cloak of darkness, which necessary to actualize an exchange, an acceptance, and a grasp of survival, the border had become a liminal space for the Mohawks.

As evidenced by the memories of elder Akwesasronon, the crafting of sweetgrass baskets was done more for economic purposes rather than for the aesthetic values they now represent. Sweetgrass basket making, of course, was contingent on the availability of

[5] Interview notes of an elderly Mohawk woman. August 2002.

black ash, a tree species that was significantly unavailable due to over harvesting for other purposes and due to their location on land that was leased. So precious was this resource, that competition for trees between Akwesasne's American and Canadian residents resulted in arrests and prosecutions (DIA, Letterbooks, July 6, 1880). An 1880 Indian Affairs regulation of reserve resources, specifically trees, regarded the cutting of 'trees, saplings [and] underwood and to remov[e] the same for sale from the reserve' by Canadian Mohawks to be illegal.

It should surprise no one that all of these restrictions were put in place at the same time that both Canada and the United States were expropriating Indian land and colonialism was in full force. Continued competition between the United States and Canada resulted in the tariff laws and later on in the 1920s new entry taxes for admission to the US. Similar measures, specifically the need for visas, were installed by the US prior to, during and after WWII so it could control the flow of its currency and build its' treasury. In the 1920s, the Depression-type and nationalistic measures of control over the border had the effect of undermining a primary cultural practice and related forms of self sufficiency that Akweasaronon had come to rely.

The borderline experiences of basket makers, land leases and the historic value of trees collectively detail some of the challenges that were extant in the first half of the 20th century. In the 1920s struggles to survive were common place and acts of social justice were rare. Then the people of Akwesasne (re)experienced their marginality and difference almost daily, and intuitively, a sense of loss and dispossession when crossing

the border. Today, the question “Anything to declare?” at the border crossing located on what was once Mohawk land, reinforces such past subjectivities. The continued crafting of sweetgrass baskets, however, reminds the Mohawks of the significance of their connection to the land, the river and the past. Sweetgrass baskets can be seen as cultural representations of localized struggles for landscape, and the Mohawk’s past encounters with and negotiation of social constructions imposed by nationalistic authorities. That they symbolize a continued struggle for justice is one such claim that has not diminished despite the heavily policed, regulated, and contested landscapes abundant in Akwesasne.

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