

Spatial and Spiritual Exile

Factsheet by Cat Watt

Glossary

- **askîhkân** = reserve; literally “fake land”:
- **ê-kî-mistâpâwêhisocik** = they drown themselves.
- **ê-mâyihkamikahk** = where it went wrong, the Northwest Resistance of 1885.
- **iskonikan** = reserve; literally “left-over”.
- **kôkôcîs** = Peter Vandall, Neal McLeod’s great-grandfather.
- **mihkomin sâkahikan** = Redberry Lake.
- **mistasiniy** = grandfather stone(s); literally “big stone(s)”.
- **nêhiyawak** = Cree people.
- **nêhiyawaskiy** = Cree territory.
- **nêhiyawêwin** = Cree language.
- **nêhiyâwiwin** = Cree-ness.
- **nicâpân** = “my great-grandparent”; Neal McLeod’s great-grandfathers Peter Vandall and Abel McLeod.
- **nimosôm** = Neal McLeod’s grandfather John McLeod.
- **okihcitâwak** = warrior(s), worthy young man (men).
- **pâstâhowin** = ‘transgression’; bad karma ‘when one does something wrong it comes back to him’.

- In “Spatial and Spiritual Exile,” Neal McLeod focuses on Treaty Six, which covers lands currently known as central Saskatchewan and Alberta.
- McLeod connects the worsening circumstances for *nêhiyawak* (Cree people) in the late 19th and early-mid 20th centuries to the 1876 treaty and to the Northwest Resistance of 1885.
- McLeod discusses the creation and impact of the treaty, reserve, and residential school systems in western Canada through oral history from his family, focusing on the experiences and memories of his relatives *kôkôcîs* (his great-grandfather Peter Vandall), *nicâpân* (his great-grandfather Abel McLeod), and *nimosôm* (his grandfather John McLeod).
- The use of *nêhiyawêwin* counters the original colonial project to colonize Indigenous Being, and demonstrates the continued existence of the *nêhiyawak* and *nêhiyâwiwin*.

Dwelling in the Familiar

- **“Being home”** means to be a nation, have access to land, be able to raise one’s children, and have political control. It involves having a sense of collective dignity.
- “Being home” is to dwell in the familiar landscape of collective memory. This includes relationship to land as well as the language, songs, ceremonies, and the stories of a people, including their oral history.
- **Oral history** is storytelling, recordkeeping, and a form of spiritual connection. It is a way of understanding the world.

Exile

- “Colonizer” describes the dominating group in power attempting to impose their narratives on the “colonized” group, the dominated group who lose some of their narratives. These terms are dynamic and relational rather than static and absolute.
- British control over *nêhiyawaskiy* (Cree territory) radically restricted the *nêhiyawak* (Cree people) ability for self governance and perpetuating stories.
- The systematic attempt to alienate the *nêhiyawak* from their land and collective traditions occurred through the interrelated processes of **spatial and spiritual exile**.
- **Exile** involves the removal of a people from their land.
- **Spatial exile** is the physical removal of a people from their land and their home. This removes them from autonomy, sovereignty, dignity, and their traditional way of life.
 - Spatial exile for the *nêhiyawak* (Cree people) accelerated with the initiation of the treaty process, which was accompanied by increased settlement.
- Spatial exile alienated *nêhiyawak* (Cree people) from sacred places and spiritual lands such as *mihkomin sâkahikan* (Redberry Lake) and *mistasiniy* (grandfather stone).
- The removal of *nêhiyawak* (Cree people) from *nêhiyawaskiy* (Cree territory) was central to the Canadian settler project which aimed to alienate *nêhiyawak* from their land and collective traditions– from *nêhiyâwiwin* (Cree-ness).
- **Spiritual exile** can be defined as the alienation of a group from its stories and languages.
- The *nêhiyawak* (Cree people) were spiritually exiled through coercive government policies including the 1895 Indian Act which outlawed their religious ceremonies, and policies that mandated attendance at residential schools.

Spatial Exile: Treaty and Reserves

- The colonization of Indigenous Being (of Indigenous worldview and life-world) is the imposition of a new colonial order and a new way of making sense of the world onto ancient peoples.
- This involved the political, ideological, and economic overwhelming of Indigenous groups by the Canadian state.
- Exile and colonialism began for the *nêhiyawak* as the British extended their reach of influence to western Canada through the treaty process between 1871 to 1876, and created the numbered treaties that divided Indigenous territory.
- Many *nêhiyawak* and members of other tribal groups accepted treaty because they saw it as the best chance for survival.
- Treaty Six was negotiated during a time of food scarcity as the buffalo were dwindling in numbers, and the treaty promised help in the form of a “transitional agricultural community”.

New Order upon the Land

- McLeod draws from the stories of *kôkôcîs* (Peter Vandall), showing how conditions only worsened following the creation of Treaty Six.
- Between 1878 and 1885, the *nêhiyawak* (Cree people) were starving as buffalo neared extinction, and treaties and European incursions upon the *nêhiyawaskiy* (Cree territory) transformed the land.
- The words for reservation— *askîhkân*, meaning “fake land,” and *iskonikan*, meaning “left-over(s)” — reflect the process of alienation, exile, and confinement.
- As *nêhiyawak* were alienated from *nêhiyawaskiy* and exiled to reserves (*askîhkân* and *iskonikan*), so too were the buffalo subjected to increasing confinement.
- Thousands-strong herds of buffalo moved to *mihkomin sâkahikan* (Redberry Lake) while the ice was thin, inevitably breaking through and drowning. *kôkôcîs* used the expression *ê-kî-mistâpâwêhisocik* (“they drowned themselves”).
- This time of change is described with the term *pâstâhowin* (transgression, bad karma, or retribution), referring to the changes brought by Europeans that caused various beings to retreat back into the earth.
- Not only *nêhiyawak*, but all life— human, animal, and spirit beings— was subjected to the changes caused by the divisions implemented by treaty and European excursions on the land.

Northwest Resistance of 1885 and *ê-mâyihkamikahk*

- McLeod refers to the event as The Northwest Resistance of 1885, highlighting the sovereignty of *nêhiyawak* (Cree people) and their fight against colonial control.
- Despite the effort to resist colonial power, the Northwest Resistance of 1885 strengthened colonial grip on *nêhiyawaskiy* (Cree territory).
- Afterwards, Canadians dominated the new region and imposed a new colonial order, signalling the end of freedom for Indigenous people in western Canada.
- The term for the events of 1885, *ê-mâyihkamikahk* (“where it went wrong”), represents the culmination of spatial exile.

Spiritual Exile and Residential Schools

- Spiritual exile of the residential schools depended on the spatial exile from community and language, as well as the transformation and mutation of pre-existing ways of life.
- With the limitation of the reserve, any opportunity to leave confinement was seen as desirable, even if it meant leaving behind familial, community, and cultural ties.
- McLeod notes how *nimosôm* (his grandfather, John McLeod) was initially excited to attend the residential school.
- Once he arrived, *nimosôm* (John McLeod) witnessed the reality of treatment in residential schools. Children were abused, and were separated from their ways of life and given colonial “education” from strangers.
- He escaped and told of his experience to his father Abel, who tried to prevent the Mounted Police from returning his son to the school when they came for him.
- They forcibly removed twelve-year-old *nimosôm*, who spent the next three nights in jail as he was taken back to the residential school. He escaped again.
- This experience exemplifies the process of spiritual exile; alienation from the land, political pressure, and the use of force were parts of a larger, but ultimately unsuccessful, effort to destroy *nêhiyâwiwin* (Cree-ness).

Remembering and Surviving

- Within *nêhiyâwiwin* (Cree-ness), people weave together personal and traditional narratives. McLeod’s own family stories are about remembering and surviving.
- *kôkôcîs* (Peter Vandall) lived at a time when he was able to sit with first-hand witnesses to the immense changes of the 1870s and 1880s and share their stories.
- *nimosôm* (John McLeod) directly experienced the impact of residential schools and shared his experience with his father.
- *nicâpân* (Abel) resisted against the Mounted Police, and later partook in the political struggle for Indigenous rights, going to Ottawa in 1932 along with John B. Tootosis and five others, despite the 1927 amendments to the *Indian Act* that made it illegal for Indigenous people to hire legal representation and fight for treaty and land rights.
- McLeod implicitly includes the survivors of residential schools in the collective of resistance, noting how many of them are modern-day *okihcitâwak* (warriors) fighting against the memories of the residential schools.
- McLeod uses oral history and *nêhiyawêwin* (Cree language) to center personal experience and *nêhiyâwiwin* (Cree-ness).
- McLeod demonstrates that the creation of colonial Canada was not peaceful, that Indigenous people had agency and actively resisted against colonization, and that Indigenous life, culture, and memory continues on today.