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Parallel stories of two mountains

Birds I View

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A 19th century portrait of Demasduit, a Beothuk woman, who was taken captive by John Peyton Jr. after he killed her husband Nonosabsut in 1819 at Red Indian Lake.

Apartheid images of police brutality directed at unarmed Black people throughout the US have hit a collective nerve and spawned waves of protest. Enough is enough is enough.

Systemic racism and colonialism have to be rooted out. Statues of historical figures with questionable legacies are being desecrated and torn down. Close to home questions have been raised about the Confederation Building statue of Corte de Real whose legacy includes enslaving aboriginal people. The renaming of Discovery Day is in the works and concerns have been raised about our provincial name - Newfoundland.

History cannot be ignored. We must however be vigilant about its source and motivation. Here are two different but in some ways parallel histories - one in the U.S. and one here - about imperial interactions with aboriginal people and their land.

The Black Hills

In 1868 the United States signed a treaty with the Sioux (Lakota) giving them exclusive right to territory in Wyoming that included the Black Hills and adjacent lands. Article 2 of the treaty held that “The United States agrees that the following district ... shall be ... set part for the absolute and undisturbed use and occupation of the Indians ...”

That was six years before gold was discovered in the Black Hills in 1874. The gold rush was on. Get-rich-quick prospectors and miners swarmed the Lakota territory – sluicing streams and rivers, blasting and digging mines, clearing forests. The US army did nothing to uphold the treaty and economic frenzy prevailed. (see *The Inconvenient Indian* by Thomas King).

Violence was common and the situation became intolerable. In 1875 the Lakota went to Washington D.C. and requested that President Ulysses S. Grant enforce the treaty. They were offered a new treaty which would pay \$25,000 for the Black Hills and require them to move.

The Lakota refused. They persisted in claiming their treaty rights. Consequently though more than a century later in 1980 in a case before the U.S. Supreme Court, the United States vs the Sioux Nation of Indians, they won. Yet the legal victory was one thing, and the return of the Black Hills was another. The Lakota were reoffered the original \$25,000 with interest accrued - \$106,000,000. Again they refused.

Beyond these legal wranglings, other events were ongoing. In 1885, Six Grandfathers' Mountain, a sacred place for the Lakota in the Black Hills, was renamed Mount Rushmore after a New York lawyer. Then in the late 1920s, President Calvin Coolidge authorized the sculpting of massive busts of four US presidents (Washington, Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, Lincoln) into the granite face of the mountain.

Mount Rushmore is a US icon, and each year on the 4th of July people gather to celebrate U.S. Independence Day. This year was no exception, in fact it was exceptional. President Trump was on hand to orchestrate the festivities. And while Mr. Trump was not expected to give a reconciliation speech, perhaps an acknowledgement of aboriginal presence would be in order.

Here is some of what President Trump said “There could be no better place to celebrate America’s independence than beneath this magnificent, incredible, majestic mountain and monument to the greatest Americans who have ever lived. ... I am here as your President to proclaim before the country and before the world: This monument will never be desecrated — (applause) — these heroes will never be defaced, their legacy will never, ever be destroyed, their achievements will never be forgotten, and Mount Rushmore will stand forever as an eternal tribute to our forefathers and to our freedom. (Applause.) And that which God has given us, we will allow no one, ever, to take away — ever.” (Applause.) ... “the American people ... will not allow our country, and all of its values, history, and culture, to be taken from them.(Applause.) AUDIENCE:”USA! USA! USA!” ... “And obviously, that includes our beautiful Mount Rushmore.” (Applause.).

Native protesters and others had temporarily blocked roadways leading to the event. As Trump supporters drove past them some yelled “Go back to where you came from.”

Blue Mountain Tolt

In 1820 Governor Charles Hamilton renamed a prominent mountain in central Newfoundland in honour of John Peyton Jr., a known Beothuk murderer. In a provocative opinion piece on the CBC website, Roger Bill highlighted this long-standing issue (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/mount-peyton-blue-mountain-1.5625375>). The mountain formerly referred to as Blue Mountain Tolt may have had aboriginal names of which we are unaware.

Paton’s honor derived from an expedition that the governor had commissioned the previous year in 1819. The apparent objectives of the venture were to recover stolen fishing gear and to capture a Beothuk alive. Peyton led his party that included boastful Beothuk killers to a raid on a village on Red Indian Lake.

During a panicked and frantic daybreak pursuit of Beothuk through the snow on the morning of 5 March 1819, Peyton captured the young woman Demasduit. As she pleaded and tried to escape, her unarmed husband Nonosabasut approached the 10 armed perpetrators and attempted to negotiate her release. His efforts went unheeded, and as Peyton pulled Demasduit whose hands were tied towards a wigwam, Nonosabasut fought for his wife’s release. He was bayoneted in back then shot by Paton at close range with a pistol

Governor Hamilton brought Nonosabasut’s death before a grand jury. They decided that Nonosabasut’s “attack” and “obstinacy” warranted Peyton’s defensive action. The governor concluded that Petyon’s posse was “fully justified in all circumstances in acting as they did.” (see Ingeborg Marshall A History and Ethnography of the Beothuk)

A plan was launched to return Demasduit to her village. She unfortunately died before the opportunity arose. And it was Peyton who led the return of her body to lay beside that of her husband. And for this final task he was so honored.

Reconciliation with the vanished Beothuk is of vital importance for everyone in Newfoundland and Labrador. We walk on their land and we must embrace it as they would have.

Birds in the area

Thousands of gannets along with flocks of shearwaters have been feasting with the humpback whales in St. Vincent’s. Cedar waxwings have been enjoying our holy berries (Janet Montevecchi), and an eastern kingbird visited a yard in Portugal Cove (Nicholas Montevecchi).

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