

Ecocriticism of the Indian Relocation Act of 1956

For hundreds of years Native Americans have been the victims of continuous injustices beginning with the discovery of their presence in North America. Colonizers have attempted to exploit and take complete control over indigenous people's land and resources. After several efforts to either assimilate or terminate Native Americans, Native communities still struggle with social issues, such as lack of education or healthcare. One particular policy that allowed for more injustices to be committed is the Indian Relocation Act of 1956, which is a law encouraging Natives to relocate to more urban areas. In order to fully understand the reasoning and long-term effects of the Indian Relocation Act of 1956, the act should be viewed through the lens of racial ecology.

Ecology can be viewed through several lenses to explain human behavior or decisions. It has been studied for decades and continues to be relevant. Established sociologist and author Nathan Hare defines ecology as:

The concept is borrowed from biology, where it means the study of relations between organisms and environment. In biological usage it includes relations between individual organisms and environment (autecology) and between groups and environment (synecology). In social science, it is restricted to human synecology, that is, the study of relations between human groups (or populations) and their respective environments, especially their physical environments. (Hare)

His description visibly highlights the vast array of relationships ecology can examine. This field not only explores nature itself, but also the dynamics and connection between other living beings and their environment. For example, women are historically often compared to nature in literature due to their beauty and birthing abilities. While this is an instance of the environment

being connected to gender, the connection between humans and their surroundings can be applied to other categories as well, such as race.

Racial ecology delves into the relationship and associations between specifically race and nature. Stereotypes can be formed based on these perceived connections between race and the natural, which can be harmful and cause lasting damage to the affected community. Furthermore, historical actions, such as colonization, can be investigated through this lens and provide a new angle of analysis for the event. Seeing as racial ecology studies significant issues that affect areas ranging from politics to social concerns, it is important to consider this perspective when examining matters.

Both historical and modern issues can be analyzed through racial ecology. For example, the Toni Morrison novel *Tar Baby* uses racial ecology to elucidate the relationship between race and colonialism. Valerian Street is depicted as the colonizer, who exploited sugar and natural resources to earn his wealth and lives as the leader of his estate. Despite being far from his Philadelphia home, he clings onto his European values and employs black employees to help run his household. As seen by his inability to make the plants in his greenhouse grow, Valerian is not very connected to the natural. He wants to control his greenhouse and control the estate, cementing his status as the colonizer. On the other hand, the black characters are an extension of nature and embrace the island's traditional culture, showing their position as the colonized. They are natives of the land and understand it, such as Son's ability to make Valerian's plants bloom. Similarly, in the film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, the Bathtub is a setting that embodies the wild. Hushpuppy and the other people living there are immersed in nature and live far more uncivilized and natural than the people living on the other side of the wall. Considering most of the inhabitants of the Bathtub are black, it draws the connection between racial minorities and

nature. Even in modern times, there is a link between race and health problems caused by the physical environment. An excellent example of this is the amount of health burdens on African American communities compared to white communities. Sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois conducted a study showing minority neighborhoods have higher health risks due to being “in the most unhealthful parts of the city” (Du Bois 148). Health issues in these communities, such as lead poisoning, tend to get neglected, such as the water crisis in Flint Michigan. From the perspective of racial ecology, this could be analyzed as a historical ecological inequity toward minorities. Black people are often viewed as more connected to nature and uncivilized, which led to their colonization. This colonization then turned into more forms of inequality, such as segregation and redlining. As a result of this, they are often left in undesirable environments. Racial ecology is valuable because of how it can be applied to examine many significant situations that have effects on populations still today.

These discriminatory injustices have affected the Native American community particularly hard. On August 3rd, 1956 President Eisenhower signed the Indian Relocation Act of 1956 into effect. The government had been decreasing subsidies to Native reservations and the law was intended to integrate the people from these reservations into urban society. The choice of city would be chosen by the government, who would also take care of the moving expenses and moving process. Additionally, they would provide job training and ensure a sufficient amount of jobs available in the city. Benefits such as health care or grants to purchasing new household items were also included. Relocation officers were given quotas to meet and they were dedicated to achieving them. In return, the Native Americans were expected to integrate and contribute to the economy. There had been several relocation attempts by the government in previous years, but they were highly criticized for not providing enough opportunities for jobs

and proper housing. With these new incentives, the act was intended to be more successful at relocation with less criticism.

From the perspective of the government, this act was meant to benefit them in a tough postwar economy. Rather than having to pay subsidies to reservations, that land could become taxable and provide an opportunity to sell it or put it to a lucrative new use. Furthermore, the Natives would then be working in urban areas making money and paying taxes, instead of contributing to federal spending. Many government officials also believed that the Natives would feel more successful and happier in a more urban society. At first, Native Americans were open to it and the relocation officers often exceeded their quotas. By 1960, 31,000 people had left reservations since 1952. Natives did not know what to expect and were enticed by the promises they had received. Prominent western history author and professor Kenneth R Phillips explains some of the negative consequences faced. In reality, they often faced culture shock in the sprawling urban environments they were moved to and did not receive the benefits they were guaranteed with little chance to return to the reservation. Relocation officers specifically chose cities far from the reservations so it would be difficult for them to find transportation back. Several people could not find employment and if they did it was low paying and little opportunity for upward mobility. The sense of community they had grown accustomed to was gone in the fast paced city life and they usually faced discrimination due to their minority status. Redlining was in full effect at this time and minority groups became the targets of it, putting them in a disadvantaged and unstable position. Long term, it put Native Americans on a path toward poverty and discrimination when they were expecting new opportunity.

Through the lens of racial ecology, this unjust policy is a reflection of the perceived relation between colored people and nature. Typically, white people are associated with the

exploitation and destruction of nature, while colored people are viewed as more in accordance and harmonious with nature. Native Americans especially are often depicted as wild and savage from the perspective of white colonizers. Indigenous researcher Dina Gilo-Whitaker describes their image as being the “original environmentalists.” Natives have historically not only been more knowledgeable about the land, but also valued nature more and built a stronger connection with the land. Gretchen Legler, an author specializing in ecology and spirituality, describes Natives’ concept of nature as a “spiritual being containing a multitude of natural deities.” On the other hand, colonizers have historically considered nature as something to exploit and find valuable resources in. These contrasting definitions display the way Native Americans are emotionally closer to their environment and could be seen as an extension of the land.

Since the first European settlers discovered indigenous communities, Natives have been regarded as part of the land and just another challenge to overcome in the colonization process. In the same way pesky animals or unfertile land are an obstacle for colonizers, indigenous people were also viewed as a natural interference that has to be managed. In the Indian Relocation Act of 1956, the government maintained this perspective and needed a method to remove this natural obstacle and exploit their land. Despite ensuring indigenous communities a successful urban life, the government ultimately did not feel a responsibility to ensure these standards due to the perception of Natives as merely animals. In the unstable postwar economy, this administration considered the wealth and wellbeing of themselves and other white Americans. Indigenous people and other minorities were not included in that group since they were solely another aspect of nature. The longstanding concept of colored people being so immersed in nature that they become part of it leads to inequitable decisions like the Indian Relocation Act of 1956.

While the Indian Relocation Act of 1956 can be analyzed from many valuable angles, the racial ecology perspective is important due to the patterns identifiable through it. When understanding the relationship between colored people and nature, it allows the decisions made toward these people to become more clear. Whiteness is associated with colonization, while colored people are associated with nature and the wild. As a result, minorities are often dehumanized and exploited. This mindset can be traced throughout many actions in history. For example, all accounts of colonialism could utilize racial ecology to provide a critical analysis of these events. Oftentimes colonization is explained through the desire for money or power, but nature is rarely included. However, interpreting situations from a racial ecology perspective introduces a new layer of analysis and critical thinking. This point of view can provide significant insight and a way of understanding the depth of connection humans have with nature. Therefore, it makes sense to analyze a consequential policy like the Indian Relocation Act of 1956 through the lens of racial ecology.

Along with other harmful policies, the Indian Relocation Act of 1956 put Native Americans in a disadvantaged position that the community still struggles with today. Still currently indigenous people have less access to adequate healthcare and education than their white counterparts. Unquestionably Native rights have been a continuous issue and in order to make progress, the past has to be fully understood to break unsuccessful patterns. Therefore, it is crucial to analyze the act through racial ecology in order to understand the reasoning behind it.

Works Cited

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