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A Capitalist and Commodified New England Landscape

The differences of Indian and colonial interactions with the land are best seen through the stories told through the wampum belts created by the Indians of Long Island Sound and the fences built by colonial agriculturalists. Wampum belts were a symbol of status among Indian populations and began as a symbol of unity among Haudenosaunee nations. Fences were built by colonial agriculturalists to segment their farmland and increase agricultural yield and profits. The Indian peoples of the eastern seaboard of Turtle Island engaged in a symbiotic relationship with the land and viewed it as a communal resource, while the Europeans viewed the land as something to be commodified in order to further a capitalist agenda. However, the spread of colonialism facilitated with it the spread of capitalism and necessitated that Indian populations restructure their economic systems to match those of the Europeans. The colonial view and pursuit of commodification and its accompanying effects on economies, relationships to the land, and community connections demonstrate the differences in how Indians interacted with the land as opposed to European colonists.

The Indians of the eastern seaboard of Turtle Island viewed the land as a gift and viewed themselves as part of the ecosystem. Meanwhile, the European colonists viewed the land which they were colonizing as something to be commodified with the intention of replicating a European landscape. The role of wampum belts speaks to this viewpoint. Susan Hill writes about the origins of the wampum belt in *The Clay we are Made of* and describes wampum as a rare tribal indicator of status with roots as a symbol of a unified Haudenosaunee territory. Hill writes that "Ayenwahtha strung the wampum into a belt that recorded the agreement of a unified territory and marked the relationship between nations that would flow from that agreement,"

(Hill, 32). Wampum functioned as anything but a commodity, and was something earned, not bought. William Cronon writes in *Changes in the Land* that wampum was "exchanged mainly at well-circumscribed ritual moments," (Cronon, 95). Once a rare and precious item for its indicator of tribal status and unity, the wampum grew to indicate economic wealth.

The wampum exploded in production into a commodified high value trade item used for political power with the European fur trade. The capitalist success of this product led many Indians to believe in commodities by being rewarded with high status European goods through trade. Cronon writes that "competition for [wampum] acquisition established new leaders, promoted dependence on European traders, and helped shift the tribute obligations which had previously existed among Indian villages," (Cronon, 96). Wampum belts morphed not only the Indian economy "less by its new technology than by its new commercialism," (Cronon, 97), but also the land of New England by aiding in expansion of European trade and production. The new capitalist economy pushed onto Indians by Europeans coupled with European fur trade expansion ultimately led Indian people to kill more mammals than they needed to, leading to the decline in many animal populations. The commodification of the eastern seaboard transformed Indian symbiotic relationships to the land to become relationships of destruction.

The morphing of New England land to be divided by fences further accentuated the commodification of the landscape. The fence was a way to designate private property and aid in agricultural development. While "Indian property systems granted rights of personal ownership to an animal only at the moment it was killed," (Cronon, 130), English colonial property systems necessitated the ownership of animals. Hill elaborates on the eastern seaboard Indian mindset of ownership with the law of "dish with one spoon," (Hill, 43). In contrast to colonial fences used to designate private property and ownership, "[u]nder [the law of dish with one spoon], the bounty

of the shared hunting grounds is meant to be enjoyed by all; land and the benefits of land belong to everyone," (Hill, 43). The Indians of the eastern seaboard did not own the animals which they ate because the land's bounty was a communal gift.

Fences allowed further manipulation of the landscape in order to maximize yield of production. Rather than a system of permaculture wherein all organisms contributing to a farm plot function in a symbiotic relationship, the fence separated each species from one another to develop monocultures and to stop farm animals from damaging crops. This short-sighted practice of compact and compartmentalized agriculture rapidly depleted soil fertility. While soil exhaustion was conducive to the mobile Indian lifestyle, the colonial lifestyle of fixity necessitated further destruction of one large area as opposed to dispersed agriculture. Colonists were responsible for much more ecological destruction through agriculture than Indian populations (Cronon, 146-151).

Additionally, the heavy usage of fencing reflects the way that colonists place a high value on labor and a low value on ecological resources. In contrast to the Indian populations who built few items to last a long time which use minimal resources, like wigwams, colonists would build fences which were timber heavy and rotted quickly, as seen on the cover of *Changes in the Land*. Though these types of fences were the fastest to build, the bottom fence posts would absorb water and rot. Cronon writes that "[l]abor cost alone operated as a constraint on [colonial] exploitation, since colonists could consume natural wealth as a substitute for capital," (Cronon, 168). Timber was abundant in New England and therefore was commodified in order for colonists to spend more time developing other aspects of their economy. This makes a clear contrast to the Haudenosaunee law of the bowl with one spoon, which serves as a reminder that "the future generations come from the earth. People are instructed to walk carefully on the

ground as the ‘coming faces’—the children yet unborn—are just below the ground’s surface,” (Hill, 37). The short-sighted view of minimizing labor in the present and carelessly exploiting resources of the land is a staple of the capitalist ideal.

Both the fence and the wampum served to represent the colonial spread of capitalism and the ecological destruction that comes with it. The intensity of a growing capitalist economy in New England necessitated the commodification of the traditional Haudenosaunee cultural item, the wampum. Colonists manipulated the Indian economy as well as Indian relationships to land with the trade of the wampum as part of the fur trade. Likewise, the colonial implementation of the fence into New England agriculture visually and ecologically segmented the land to allow for further resource exploitation. Haudenosaunee laws of shared resources of the land, or “dish with one spoon,” serve as a distinct contrast to the colonial privatization of animal agriculture. The combination of the wampum and the fence represent the largest differences in Indian and colonial relationships to the land: commodification. The colonization of the eastern seaboard by Europeans brought with it the colonization of Indian economies, ideals, and land. The spread of capitalism brought destruction to the once flourishing land of Turtle Island.