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### **The Negative Effects of the Mining Industry on Mount Taylor, New Mexico**

*“Not even Indians isolated in the depths of forests are safe in our day. At the beginning of this century 230 tribes survived in Brazil; since then ninety have disappeared, erased from the planet by firearms and microbes. Violence and disease, the advance guard of civilization: for the Indian, contact with the white man continues to be contact with death.” (Galeano, 1940)*

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Since the colonial epoch, indigenous communities throughout the Americas have seen their populations be massively decimated, while their territories have *vanished* right in front of their eyes. Victims of what is barely ever acknowledged to be one the most relentless genocides in the history of humanity, native communities on the Western Hemisphere have gone from reigning over the lands of this continent, to being treated as mere intruders.

In his book, *“Open Veins of Latin America”*, Eduardo Galeano highlights how Spanish greed came to destroy some of the most intricate societies to have inhabited our lands.

Blinded by their gold-fever, the Spaniards disguised their gluttony as a religious crusade and proceeded to manipulate and deceive local leaders, exploiting ongoing animosities to knock down empires and rulers.

However, the injustices lived by these communities is not limited to the colonial era. On the contrary, Galeano underlines how for example, in 1932 or less than century ago, Bolivian indigenous citizens were still expected to bow down before white individuals before addressing them. From the Native communities in Uruguay and the Argentinian Patagonia, decimated to make room for cattle ranchers, to the Native American communities from the Sonoran Desert, exterminated in order to obtain their mineral rich lands. Indigenous communities across the continent continue to suffer due to the vast natural richness of their own territories, or as Galeano expresses it, *“la maldición de su propia riqueza”*.

Meanwhile, Boaventura de Sousa Santos' book, *“Epistemologies of the South”*, highlights how, in the case of Latin America, the disregard and institutional racism against indigenous peoples goes beyond political parties, with the participation of both the Marxist and neoliberal forces. Nonetheless, even when stigmatized and neglected, most indigenous communities are still expected to join and rejoice on the capitalist economic model. As Galeano underlines, despite having been pushed away from the main metropolis, native peoples are counted on when it comes to serving as cheap labour for the food and mining industry, among others.

In the next section we will analyze one of the biggest cases of Native American struggle and resistance against mainstream economic forces in the United States. So, we will study in depth how the uranium mining industry has affected the region of Mount Taylor in New Mexico, and how the local indigenous communities have reacted in order to preserve one of their most important sacred sites.

For the purpose of this paper, the discussion will concentrate on the reality and experiences of indigenous communities of the United States. In no way is this an attempt to delegitimize the atrocities experimented in the past and present by native communities in the rest of the world.

## 2. CASE STUDY

### *2.1. Early struggles*

In her book, *"An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States"*, Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz reminds us how throughout its history, and even to this day, US policies regarding Indigenous communities continue to be perfect examples of imperialism and colonialism tainted with the ideology of white supremacy.

Entering the topic of the particular region being studied, Dunbar Ortiz introduces us to a US Southwest, as well as the northern Mexican states of Sonora, Sinaloa, and Chihuahua, which were once home to the Huhugam, or Hohokam people. This community, which grew surplus crops in order incur in trade practices, left their imprint on the land through their impressive and extensive system of irrigation canals, which

remain to this day as a vital part of the local landscape. The system, with more than eight hundred miles of trunk lines, carried enough water to irrigate ten thousand acres in just one canal.

Moreover, the Anasazi people, ancestors of the New Mexican Pueblos, constructed more than four hundred miles of roads, which connected an approximate of seventy-five communities. However, with the arrival of the 17th century, the Spanish colonizing mission arrived at the region, brutally charging against the Pueblos and imposing Christianity over their traditional beliefs. Two decades was enough for the colonizers to decimate a total of ninety-eight interrelated states or pueblos, into an astonishing total of twenty-one.

Dunbar Ortiz proceeds to reminds us that the collision between economic development and indigenous peoples in the United States is not a new phenomena. Instead, she highlights how this type exploitation has provided the country with the basis for the growth of its wealth and power.

## *2.2. Uranium Mining in Mount Taylor, New Mexico*

*“According to dominant common sense, they deserve being silenced because they are being carried out by ignorant, inferior, backward, retrograde, local, unproductive people - in sum, by people who are supposed to be obstacles to progress and development” - (de Sousa Santos, 2014)*

Located in the southwestern region of the San Mateo Mountains, approximately 50 miles from Acoma Sky City in New Mexico, Mount Taylor, also known by the Navajos as *Tsoodzil*, is an almost 12,000 feet elevation that has served as a sacred pilgrimage site for Native American tribes as the Navajo Nation, the Hopi, the Zuni, and the Laguna and Acoma Pueblos. With the characteristic of being visible from up to 100 miles away, Mount Taylor also happens to be sitting on one of the most valuable uranium reserves in the United States, the Grants Uranium Belt.

This situation has granted the mountain a place as one of the eleven most endangered historic sites in America, according to the the National Trust for Historic Preservation. With an estimated amount of more than 100 million pounds of uranium, Mount Taylor has managed to survive two previous uranium booms (1950s and 1970s), but due to the ongoing increase in the price of the metal, the proposals for mining and exploration continue to bombard the New Mexico Mining and Minerals Division. One of these proposals corresponds to the Canadian mining company, Strathmore Minerals, and its Japanese commercial partner, Sumitomo Metals Mining. Together, they propose to developed what would be the largest uranium mine in the country.

In the next section we will discuss not only the potential benefits and disadvantages of welcoming this mining project to historical site, but also the different actors who have a voice in the conflict, the racial aspects surrounding it, and the struggle of the Native American communities to protect their sacred lands, their environment and their health.

### 2.2.1. Uranium Mining

According to the article "*Uranium mining and health*", by Dewar, Harvey, and Vakil, uranium is a heavy metal that possesses not only chemical toxicity, but also radioactivity. The ore's potential health consequences go from renal failure, diminished bone growth, and cancer to damage to the DNA, changes in fertility, and shortening of the life-span, among others. The authors highlight that these effects cannot be detected in short-term toxicologic studies, and they can be delayed not only for decades, but also for generations. What is more, according to the studies cited in the article, uranium miners have shown a substantial excess of lung cancer and a reduced pulmonary capacity.

Moreover, the article "*Virginia's Moratorium: Is Uranium Mining on the Horizon in the Commonwealth?*" by William Brice Fiske highlights that despite the potential benefits that uranium mining might have on the economy of the country, the expected environmental and health consequences are still too risky to be taken lightly. Regarding the environmental impacts, Fiske names several concerns, including the disruption of the lifestyle of the local populations, the adverse impact upon local flora and fauna, the aesthetic damage to the landscape and/or historic sites, the increase in noise pollution, the pollution of air and water resources, all of this without taken into account the devastating effects that could imply an accident at the mine.

What is more, Fiske underlines that even if the industry might play a positive role in the local and national economy, through the creation of jobs, it could also have disastrous

economic repercussions. An example of this are the effects that uranium radiation could have on local agriculture and cattle, since the author states that there are studies showing that uranium concentration in vegetation increased the amounts of uranium in the livers and kidneys of exposed cattle. This would signify a catastrophic situation for not only agriculture and livestock farmers, but also for dairy producers.

### *2.2.2. Tsoodzil and Uranium Mining*

*“The monster was born on July 16, 1945 at Alamogordo, New Mexico,*

*when the first atomic bomb exploded” (Yazzie and Zion, 1997)*

In her book, *“Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country”*, Traci Brynne Voyles discusses the experience of the Navajo country with uranium mining and how this industry has been affecting their land and traditions for decades. Voyles starts by depicting how the Laguna Pueblo, which is located directly over Mount Taylor’s summit, was the provider of more than 99 percent of New Mexico’s share of uranium production by 1977, also hosting 35 active mines in its territory by 1978. Additionally, *“Leetso: the Powerful Yellow Monster”* by Esther Yazzie and Jim Zion highlight how, from 1945 to 1988, New Mexico uranium contributions accounted for over thirteen million tons of the metal.

Furthermore, Voyles highlights how Tsoodzil’s meaning for these communities goes past being a simple historical site, playing instead a major role in the construction of their cultures and religious beliefs, and holding a high geographical and ecological value

among them. Likewise, Voyles brings to our attention the differences between the Native American description of Mount Taylor and the description made by Lieutenant James H. Simpson, after the annexation of the southwestern states. According to the author, the simple fact that Simpson's portrayal characterizes the mountain with a clear air of masculinity (Mount Taylor), while the Native American depiction positions the mountain as a female entity, is a clear sign of the competing stories and racial conflicts that have been surrounding the Mount since then.

Regarding the racial aspects surrounding the conflict, the author presents us with an image of "cowboys versus Indians"; a scenario where *white* Americans actively support the uranium mining industry in the name of economic growth and job creation, while Native American battle against the invasion of their sacred lands and the destruction of their cultures. Voyles presents us with a rivalry charged with racial tension and violence, especially after the approval of the Transmission Control Protocol in June, 2009, which stated that further mining development on the parts of the mountain declared as Native land would be subject to consultation with the review board.

The passing of this TCP resulted in a series of hate crimes against Native men, while local media demonstrated a growing concern among non-Native residents, who felt that their economic interests were being hurt in the name of protecting only one part of New Mexico's society. However, there was a severe misunderstanding regarding the TCP, due to the fact that the protocol only concerned land regarded as Native property or



non-privately held property, while any state held or private landholdings were left out of the agreement.

Finally, in early 2014 the state Supreme Court voted in favor of the tribes, ruling to maintain the mountain's Native lands as a New Mexico cultural property. However, this ruling did not prevent

Strathmore Minerals and Sumitomo Metals Mining of launching a joint venture to mine uranium on the flanks of Tsoodzil. This new project, Roca Honda Mine, is one of the largest uranium projects being developed in the country, which only adds to the controversy that surrounds it.

### 3. CONCLUSION

*“When we had taken a good look at all this, we went to the orchard and garden, which was a marvelous place both to see and walk in. I was never tired of noticing the diversity of trees and the various scents given off by each, and the paths choked with roses and other flowers, and the many local fruit-trees and rose-bushes, and the pond of fresh waterp. Then there were birds of many breeds and varieties which came to the pond. I say again that I stood looking at it, and thought that no land like it would ever be discovered in the whole world... But today all that I then saw is overthrown and destroyed; nothing is left standing.” (Cortes and del Castillo, 2003)*

Taking into account the information presented in the past two sections, we can conclude that this conflict is more than a simple economic battle, containing clear signs of racial struggle and *two* communities that have been neglected by the government for a long period of time. What is more, despite the evident levels of resistance from the part of local Native American communities, it is vital to understand that economic necessity is most likely to erode this strife in younger generations if newer sources of income are not generated in the locality. This, which is part of the manipulation game of the big economic forces in the area, should be one of the main concerns for allies and policy makers in the region.

Sadly, Galeano's crude example in the first part of this paper, which presented us with the effects of racism in the Bolivian society of 1932 are not a matter of the past. Currently, the entire territory of the Americas continues with the quiet and clandestine abuse and decimation of indigenous communities, be it through labor exploitation, neglect, lack of financial opportunities or access to health and education facilities, or simply by the perpetuation of social stigmas.

Finally, when analyzing this situation it is important to keep in mind that the needs and strife of the *white* citizens of New Mexico do not turn them into the enemies or villains of the story. Instead, it only exemplifies the level of necessities that they face, in the sense that they are willing to welcome an industry which is evidently harmful for their health and environment in exchange for a job.

This study should be seen as a gate for a further analysis of other case studies in which indigenous communities rights and territories are being violated in order give space to mining companies. Lamentably, this type of situation continues to be common all across the Americas and the world.

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