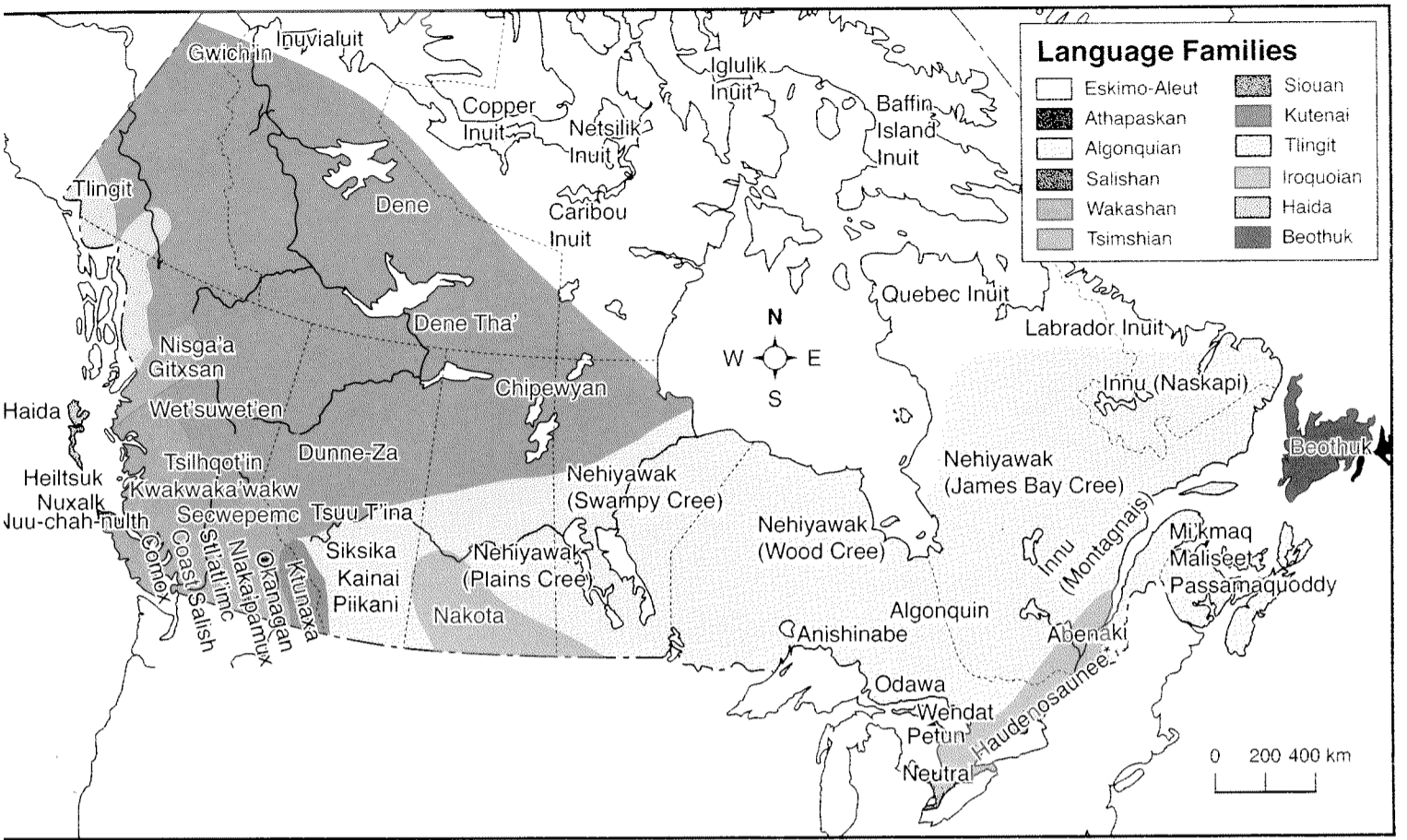


# Pre-Contact Locations of Indigenous Peoples and Language Groups



Map: Before contact with Europeans, fifty to seventy different languages were spoken in the region that is now Canada. Haudenosaunee' is used to mark the territory of the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora peoples.

# Racism, Colonialism, and Indigeneity in Canada

A READER

Edited by  
 Martin J. Cannon  
 & Lina Sunseri

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members of the community treated it as a community issue and dealt with it according to protocol. However, as Anderson suggests, colonization changed all of this: Western patriarchal ideals and models of gender and familial relations eventually displaced women's traditional power, status, and authority and enabled men to acquire whatever limited amount of power over women and children. Matrilineal and matrilineal societies were ultimately transformed into patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal ones, modelling European relations of the time. As Anderson concludes, 'colonization in and of itself is a violent process. It brought many untold forms of violence against the women, children and men of the Americas. Today, we are faced with epidemic, lateral violence in our communities.'

The residential school system is one method through which violent transformation occurred within Indigenous communities. Both Anderson and Ing examine the direct and intergenerational impacts of Canada's residential schools on individuals, families, and whole communities. Through the separation of children from their families and communities, the State had hoped that the traditional cultures of Indigenous peoples would be forgotten, and assimilation to mainstream society would take place. In 2008, the House of Commons reported that this policy was racist because it deemed Indigenous cultures to be inferior to that of Eurocanadians. It reported the many violent forms of abuse that happened inside the walls of the schools, as well as the long term impact on the bodies, minds, spirits, and hearts of the survivors and their families that is still being felt today.

Indigenous children were expected to suppress their sexuality, were punished for speaking their language and for maintaining bonds with their siblings, and suffered abuse from their teachers and schoolmates in residential schools. Children were left with feelings of shame about their Indigenous identity; they did not learn positive parenting skills, confusing love with violence and self-hate. When returning to their communities, they no longer possessed the love, confidence, self-esteem, cultural knowledge, and often times, the language, to form positive relationships with their families. Many turned to negative coping behaviours to escape the internal turmoil, sometimes involving alcoholism and other addictions, as well as violence. As Ing points out, residential schools affected entire communities. Many of them 'suffered a disintegration of political and social institutions of culture, language, religion and economic existence'. Ing rightly argues that we must make the links of the current social-economic conditions of Indigenous communities to residential schools and to re-educate society of the harm done by racist colonial policies that targeted Indigenous traditional ways of relating with each other.

Residential schools are not the only ways in which Indigenous peoples were forced to forgo their identities and to assimilate into mainstream society. By documenting her personal story, Shandra Spears shows how transracial adoptions, as frequently practiced in Canada over many generations, displaced children from their Indigenous families and, in so doing, disconnected them from entire communities. This process links with the major theme of 'disappearing' underscoring this anthology. As Spears writes: 'In Canada, young Native people disappear into the dominant society through love, lies, and ideology—transracial adopting—disconnects them from nations, families.' These 'disappearances' embody an act of genocide: just like residential schools, the State had hoped to make 'Indians' disappear through placing children into white families, impeding their ability to form strong Indigenous identities.

As Spears' narrative illustrates, the outcome was unjustly dramatic: many emerged angry, unable to formulate a positive sense of belonging in either white society or in the Indigenous community. The outcome of this history was a 'fractured' identity, one characterized by 'a collection of shutdowns and self-destructive behaviour'. Just like the experience of residential schools, children were robbed through transracial adoption of their inherent right to Indigeneity and have had to struggle to recover and reclaim their identification.

Despite the genocidal nature of both residential schooling and transracial adoption, all three authors speak of their own resilience and the courage of Indigenous people to survive the racist colonial attacks on Indigeneity. This is evident through efforts to recover both traditional gender and familial relations, and to pass on these traditions to the younger generations, both by educating oneself of the history of residential schools, as well as our family members who have experienced this history so that we can make sense of the lingering effects existing in our families and nations, and to find again our inner strength to heal and move forward. As Spears concludes, 'the colonizer can try to hurt us, but can only succeed if we change who we are.' In short, the work that we are doing today to both reclaim and resist past histories of racism and injustice suggest that Indigenous peoples are quite clearly 'not disappearing'.

## Chapter 13

### Marriage, Divorce, and Family Life

**Kim Anderson**

To discuss the concept of marriage as it existed in pre-Christian Native societies is difficult, as there were so many different traditions regarding this type of union. Women made autonomous decisions about these partnerships in some cases, but many societies practised arranged marriages. Polygamy was acceptable in many societies prior to Christian influence. Some societies expected that the union of two people was a lifetime arrangement but in others 'divorce' or separation was common and in others still 'marriage' was viewed as a primarily economic relationship that had nothing to do with sexual fidelity or loyalty. Native women's status and experiences with marriage were therefore not uniform. Like the people of western society today, partnerships were formed, but the expectations of those partnerships were very different from nation to nation. Regardless of these differences, Native women typically had power, respect, and recognition within their families. As part of a family unit, a Native woman was interdependent, yet in many

nations her autonomy as an individual in this unit was also respected. It may be that the principle of non-interference which was prevalent in many Indigenous nations was helpful to Native women in the arena of marriage. The principle of non-interference meant, among other things, that no one person had the right to tell another what to do. . . .

In the matrilineal societies of the Navajo, Seminole, Cherokee, and Iroquois, a woman's autonomy in marriage was even more pronounced. The central position of the woman in the family was sustained by living with her own kin. There was no way for men in these societies to assume the position of 'head' of the family; rather, they became part of the interdependent family unit that ensured the central role of the mothers. The man joined the woman's family to assist with the survival of that family; he would work for the well-being of the family that had descended from the mother's line. As Jeannette Armstrong points out, this meant that the woman's property was handed down through a line of women, and that women were assisted by the men. . . .

A number of societies (such as the Inuit, Lakota, and Siksika) practised polygamy. Some Native women argue that polygamy can not be considered according to western/Christian standards of marriage. In fact, it may have provided a better life for women. Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve writes, 'Polygamy—a practice that most whites found reprehensible—lessened an individual wife's duties. The more wives a man had, the more skins could be tanned for the comfort of the lodge; however, the more women in the lodge, the more they controlled the man' (Sneve, 1995: 11). She reports that Sioux women who married white men found themselves in monogamous marriages that increased their workload. . . .

Polygamy may not have been the most ideal situation for women, but it may have offered some advantages. If marriage is understood as a primarily economic relationship, it is possible that polygamous relationships served some particular needs for Native women. However, we need more research to better understand women's positions in

these marriages. For example, what were the sexual liberties of women? How did they relate to the other wives? Were these marriages simply thought of as work-teams or socioeconomic units, and how was this at odds with European notions of love?

There were many types of unions in traditional societies, and many of these relationships could be ended quite simply. Separation from one's partner was not complicated by the religious and legal ramifications of western society. In numerous Indigenous nations, 'divorce' was uncomplicated, commonplace, and could be initiated by either the man or the woman (Albers, 1983: 191; Buffalohead, 1983: 242; Guemple, 1995: 149; Sattler, 1995: 222; Sharp, 1995: 54). In Navajo culture, for example, either the woman or the man could decide to end the marriage. . . .

'Divorce' was easier in many Native societies largely because of the understandings of property. As with the understanding that one can't 'own' land, there was an understanding in most Indigenous cultures that one can't 'own' people.<sup>1</sup> This meant that a man could not own his wife, nor could parents own their children. The family was not the property of the man. In this way, a woman was more free to marry or divorce as she saw fit. With relation to the principle of non-interference, the wife had autonomy and respect. This enabled her to make decisions on her own behalf.

Whether single or in a partnership, motherhood accorded Native women tremendous status in the family, community, and nation. Motherhood was an affirmation of a woman's power and defined her central role in traditional Aboriginal societies. This stemmed from the reverence for women's innate power to bring forth life. Yet this power belonged to all women, regardless of whether or not they biologically produced children. Indigenous societies highly valued their children and both biological and non-biological mothers were honoured for their work. Pre-conquest women, Paula Gunn Allen writes, 'were mothers, and that word did not imply slaves, drudges, drones, who are required to love only for others rather than for themselves, as it so tragically does for many modern women' (Allen, 1986: 7).

With colonization, this powerful role of mother and the position of woman in the family came under attack. Social, economic, and political power was ripped away through the imposition of the western family structure. European 'family values' were a keystone in the conquest strategy. From the outset, missionaries were instructed to change Aboriginal family structure as part of their project to convert Native peoples. The Jesuits of New France, headed by Father Lejeune, introduced the patriarchal family structure, 'with male authority, female fidelity, and the elimination of the right to divorce' (Leacock, 1980: 28). Field

matrons were sent out to Native communities to 'civilize' and 'educate' Native women so they could meet the patriarchal ideals of wife and mother (Emmerich, 1991). In order to be civilized, Native women needed to learn how to obey. Residential schools taught Native women to be compliant to their husbands and prepared them for the domestic role that was expected of white women at the time (Fiske, 1996; Whitstock, 1980: 214). The intent was to break down extended family and clan systems, considered by the missionaries to be a degraded state, 'the outcome of looseness of morals and absence of social restraint' (Fiske, 1996: 171). . . .

With the diminishing family structure, the respect for women and children vanished, and men's responsibilities shifted dramatically. In her essay on the criminalization of single, destitute mothers, Lakota scholar Elizabeth Cook-Lynn relates family and social breakdown to the destruction of traditional values. Before contact, men had natural and ethical responsibilities towards children. Men who dishonoured women were not accorded political, spiritual, or social status and were often physically attacked by women. Today, this is no longer true: 'men who are known to degrade women and abandon children now hold positions of power, even sometimes sitting at the tribal council tables. They are directors of tribal council programs, and they often participate unmolested in sacred ceremonies.' Women were also traditionally held accountable for their actions in the case of irresponsibility towards children,

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but they were not singled out and placed 'at fault' alone, as they are in the increasingly popular 'single-mother' bashing of today's society (Cook-Lynn, 1996: 115–16). With the loss of their traditional responsibilities and the honour accorded to their position, Native women have, in many cases, become oppressed by a role that was once a great source of strength and power.

## Sex and Sexuality

Attitudes towards sex and sexuality were complex, and varied extensively among the nations. One thing they held in common, however, was the acceptance that sex was something natural for both women and men. . . .

According to many Native peoples, women's bodies, by virtue of their capacity to bring forth life, were powerful and celebrated through all their cycles. Respect for their bodies was related to the respect and responsibility they commanded in their families, villages and nations. Because of this respect, women were not seen as 'sex objects', and, as well, they had a great deal of individual control over their own sexuality. . . .

Attitudes towards marriage, sex, and love were so different that it is hard to imagine traditional Native marriage relations from a contemporary western viewpoint. However, if one considers that people married young into arranged marriages that were based on economic development for the families, it is not hard to imagine that there was acceptance of this type of sexual freedom in marriage. Jeannette Armstrong (Okanagan) says the existence of post-marital sexual freedom among her people is a practice that still exists in some families today.

The fear of unwanted pregnancy was also absent among Native women. Children were always welcome, and because women were esteemed for having children, pregnancy was a natural part of the sexual cycle. Nor did children born out of wedlock have the stigma that later came with European ideas about 'illegitimacy'. Women were not punished for having children out of marriage. Leslie Marmion Silko asserts: 'New life was so



precious that pregnancy was always appropriate, and pregnancy before marriage was celebrated as a good sign' (Silko, 1996: 67–8). There was no such thing as a 'single mother', because children were accepted into large kin-based or clan-based communities, with all the supports that accompanied this. . . .

The idea that all children are welcome, regardless of where they come from, is such a persistent value in Native societies that it still exists today, even in communities that have been heavily Christianized. Myra Laramée says that teenage pregnancy does not carry the same stigma in the Aboriginal community, 'because a child is a sacred being, and it doesn't matter how it gets here'.

Despite children always being welcomed as sacred beings, it appears that Native women did have access to birth control. Beverly Hungry Wolf has recorded Siksika elder Ah-dunn (Margaret Hind-Man) talking about the traditional knowledge and practice of birth control. . . .

The sexual freedom and fluidity of sexuality included homosexuality in many Native societies. Anthropologist Sue Ellen Jacobs has identified eighty-eight societies with documented references to gayness. Eleven other societies have denied the existence of homosexuality, and these societies were 'in areas of heaviest, lengthiest, and most severely puritanical white encroachment' (Allen, 1986: 197).

The fluidity of gender was inherent in Native cultural views of the world. Some Native cultures understood that there were four genders rather than two: man, woman, the two spirit womanly males; and the two spirit manly females. A wide variety of Native American languages have words to describe people that are a combination of the masculine and feminine (Lang, 1997: 103). Current literature suggests that two-spirited people were not traditionally understood as they are now; for instance, it was not as socially sanctioned to have sex between people of the same gender (i.e., man/man), but people could have sex with an individual of another gender, regardless of whether they were the same sex (i.e., man/two spirit womanly male). The prevalence of this

across Native societies and the acceptance within societies was such that people could marry members of the third and fourth gender (Laframboise and Heyle, 1990: 459). . . .

Although these practices may not necessarily imply homosexuality, they do indicate a lack of homophobia in the societies that would allow such gender fluidity.

Homosexuality was highly regarded in some cultures. Odawa Elder Liza Mosher states that homosexual men were traditionally considered special because they could do 'women's work' such as taking care of children or cooking for feasts when the women were on their moon time (cited in Kulchyski, McCaskill, and Newhouse, 1999: 149). . . .

With European contact, homosexuality, the open sexuality of women, and the acceptance of children out of wedlock immediately came under attack. In short, sexuality that did not fit into the patriarchal model was unacceptable. . . .

Homosexuality was viewed as the ultimate sin. Algonquin educator Helen Thundercloud explains: 'We honoured two-spirited people because they brought gifts to our communities that were very important. And all of a sudden the Christians came along and said, "Oh you can't do that. That is a sin against God." Over the years we took those beliefs, and that has destroyed our people.' Where God was not enough to regulate homosexuality, the state stepped in. The *Indian Act* institutionalized heterosexual marriage (and heterosexuality) as it was the only way by which an individual would be able to pass on Indian status and rights (Cannon, 1998: 118). Whether by way of the church or the state, Euro-Christian attitudes about homosexuality have borne their bitter fruit, as homophobia has now found a place in every Native community. . . .

I believe that the most tragic and devastating impact on both Native women and Native men's sexuality came during the residential school era, when sexuality and sexual expression were suppressed, distorted, and perverted. Schools were either all male or all female, as the churches believed that Native students were likely to be

more sexually active than non-Natives. Historian J.R. Miller speculates that this fear that led to the 'fanatical segregation' of the sexes 'might have been based on a misunderstanding of the greater autonomy and control of their own bodies that females in some Native communities enjoyed' (Miller, 1997: 234–35). It could be that the missionaries confused Native children's personal control of their bodies with open sexual license. Whatever the cause, Native children suffered the consequences by being chastised and even beaten for even attempting to communicate with members of the opposite sex, who were often their siblings and relations (Miller, 1997: 219). Shirley Williams recalls the policing of sexuality and the hysteria associated with it at St Joseph's Residential School. She remembers that girls were accused of improper behaviour when they tried to make contact with boys: 'We were called boy crazy.' These attempts at contact were usually not sexually driven, but the attempts of lonely little girls who wished to speak to their brothers or cousins. Their excitement at catching periodic glimpses of family members was often met with anger from the nuns, who accused them of sexual behaviour.

At residential school, girls were taught that the female body was a locus for shame. Miller describes the measures taken by the nuns at the Blue Quills Residential School in Alberta to conceal the female body: 'At Blue Quills, school girls had to wear 'this real tight binder' so that their growing breasts would be flattened, and at all ages they had to wear 'a bathing suit' that resembled 'a grey flannelite nightgown' when taking a bath. Other schools demanded that boys wear shorts in the shower, but females had a greater obligation than males to be modest in dress, chaste in behaviour, and free of pregnancy. Their heavier burden was part of the misfortune of being a woman' (Miller, 1997: 235).

Shirley Williams knows too well the sense of worthlessness and the denigration that came out of these policies. She remembers that girls in her school had to wear clothing that was loose, 'because you couldn't show your shape of your body'. . . . Residential school priests and nuns fan-

atically instilled the dogma that sex was the most punishable of offences, while at the same time sexually abusing the children in their care. The prevalence of rape, sexual assault, induced abortion, and sexual/psychological abuse is well documented (Christoph, Young, and Maraun, 1997; Assembly of First Nations, 1994), as are the outright and horrific pillaging of Native sexuality. . . . Residential school survivor Shirley Williams says that she left residential school 'starved for love'. Presumably, this was the case for many residential school survivors. When these feelings were coupled with abusive and degrading teachings about sexuality, they had the potential to wreck havoc on Native individuals, families, and communities.

## Family Violence

The traditional respect accorded to Native women made it unthinkable in Aboriginal cultures to practise violence against them. Although some writers contend that violence against women existed in early Native societies (Brodrick, 1984: 89; Malz and Archambault, 1995: 47–8), there is overwhelming evidence that such behaviour was offset by strong taboos and severe punishment. Sylvia Maracle writes, 'Our elders tell us that incidents of violence—be they sexual, mental, emotional or spiritual—were rare and swiftly dealt with in our communities prior to contact with the Europeans' (Maracle, 1993: 1). Patricia Monture-Angus asserts that 'violence and abuse (including political exclusions) against women were not tolerated in most Aboriginal societies'. . . .

When violence against women happened, there were systems to deal with it. Abusers could be met with violence in return, often at the hands of the women. Lee Maracle recalls her grandmother physically beating a cousin who had been violent with his sister. In the Plateau societies, the women meted out punishment to rapists. . . .

There were also ways of dealing with the sexual abuse of children, which was not unknown to Native societies. In a 1992 consultation, a number of different nations in British Columbia stated that

that there were traditional sanctions and laws against child sexual abuse, and that the clan system did much to eliminate or control these crimes (Fournier and Crey, 1997: 144). In my conversation with Maria Campbell, she told me that Métis and Cree culture had stories that warned about pedophiles, and precautions were taken to keep children away from unknown men. Men were expected to socialize in a house away from the children, and old women had the responsibility to watch over them. Among the Stolo, watchmen elders could send their spirits through the walls of an extended family's house to make sure the children were safe. They were called upon to work with visions about what was happening to a certain child. Guardians who were suspected of child abuse were publicly identified and punished with banishment, segregation from children, and even death (Fournier and Crey, 1997: 114). The protection provided by the extended family, clan, and community systems was lost with the introduction of nuclear family models. As the 'head of the family' male sexual predators were handed control over their wives and children, a role that shielded them from public scrutiny' (Fournier and Crey, 1997: 144).

Colonization in and of itself is a violent process. It brought many untold forms of violence against the women, children, and men of the Americas. Today, we are faced with epidemic, lateral violence in our communities. State and church policies started this vicious cycle by instilling violence in children who were placed in residential schools and abusive foster homes, and by degrading women sexually, politically, and socially (Maracle, 1993: 1, 4; MacDonald, 1993: 5).

Abused Native boys and girls have grown into adults who abuse or who accept abuse as part of a relationship. If the cycle of violence is not broken, adults can pass violence on to their children. Instead of being positive role models, they risk teaching children violent behaviours. . . .

Western patriarchal family structures enabled Aboriginal men to turn their violence inward: 'Aboriginal men who had been deprived of natural authority through impoverishment and the

theft of land were handed in exchange the weapon of absolute possession and control over their wives and children . . .' (Fournier and Crey, 1997: 145). Frustrated and powerless men have exerted their anger in the only arena of power they were given by the colonizer: the power to dominate Native women and children. The introduction of alcohol and drugs exacerbated the violence. Our people have used (and continue to use) alcohol and drugs to fill the ugly gap left by the theft of our ways. . . .

The violence that has become a 'way of life' for many Native women has crippled their well-being. It feeds into all the other mainstream messages about the worthlessness of Native women, and creates a vicious cycle of abuse that is passed onto the future generations. This culture of violence works in direct opposition to an understanding of woman as a sacred source. As Calvin Morrisseau suggests, 'striking out against a woman is like striking out against every thing we hold sacred. . . .' (Morrisseau, 1998: 40).

## Notes

1. Some nations (for example, the Stolo) had slavery.

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