Unmapping Canadian National Railway's Colonial History

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Final Paper

This paper is the product of a Community University Research Exchange (CURE) project. CURE links community groups to undergraduate students who are able to conduct research for credit. My CURE project was conducted for the Tyendinaga Support Commitee, a Montreal-based indigenous solidarity organization that supports Mohawk struggles for land and self-determination in Tyendinaga. The research proposal did not come directly from the community of Tyendinaga, but was created by the Support Committee which works in solidarity with community activists there. Because of a lawsuit brought forward by Canadian National Railway against Mohawk activists in Tyendinaga, there was a request from activists and from their lawyer for supporters to engage in a campaign against CN until they drop their lawsuit. This research is intended to be used for this campaign, and presents both a critical history of CN and a history of resistance to colonial railway development in Canada.

While this document presents my research in the form of an academic paper, my research will also be used to create a zine and an online wiki. This will ensure that the information is accessible outside of the university and that it can be shared for activist purposes and with people in Tyendinaga. The zine is a draft that will be edited and changed if necessary by members of the Tyendinaga Support Committee.

I argue below that railroad building in colonial contexts, despite seeming like a , is always a violent and destructive practice. Because the purpose of railroad building is to enable settlement or economic expansion, railroads necessarily enable the violence that accompanies settler-native conflicts over land and resources. The land used for the construction of the railways themselves was bought, appropriated, and “gifted” from governments to builders without the consent of indigenous people. Colonial settlement and resource extraction affected indigenous

nations and societies on Turtle Island profoundly, and the legacies of violence, containment, economic restructuring, and “civilizing” policies continue to be felt today.

Railway Colonialism

"Three hundred years ago, when the map makers began to ink in details of the North American continent, there seemed no more unlikely place on the face of the earth to establish a new nation than the unwieldy land mass which is now Canada. Its size was appalling - more than 3,000 miles from ocean to ocean, containing more than 3,000,000 square miles of emptiness"(Stevens, 1973, p. 1).

In her book *Race, Space,and the Law* (2002), Sherene Razack writes that in the "national mythologies of [white settler societies], it is believed that white people came first and that it is they who principally developed the land; Aboriginal people are presumed to be mostly dead or assimilated" (pp. 1-2). In this paper I do not presume Aboriginal people to be dead or assimilated: one of the motivations for presenting a timeline of resistance is to contest this assumption. I have read white settler histories with a critical lens to challenge their claim to the development of 'terra nullius', the 3,000,000 square miles of emptiness. In many of the texts I have read to learn about the history of CN, indigenous people are erased from existence. Railways are built in empty expanses of land and maps are drawn on blank paper. Although history books evacuate colonialism, race, and power from these acts, I do not accept settler railway construction and mapping as innocent practices.

Around the world, railway building has been the major catalyst to growth and settlement in colonial situations. Railways increase the speed at which resources and goods can be transported, increasing settler profits. Having easy access to goods from the colonizing country

and from elsewhere in the colony makes settlement a more comfortable and attractive prospect. Politically, railways link geographically isolated settlements to major colonial centers and ensure tighter military and political control. In Canada and elsewhere, railroads were the arteries of new settler nations: the completion of national railroads were as much about consolidating economic and political power as they were about creating a national settler identity.

Colonialism can be defined as the "conquest and control of other people's lands and goods" (Loomba, 2005, 8). While this definition includes practices of domination and exploitation that have featured in human history for thousands of years, European colonialism is different in its alteration of the entire globe. The difference between earlier forms of colonialism and European colonialism is that while earlier colonialisms were pre-capitalist, "modern colonialism was established alongside capitalism in Western Europe" (Loomba, 9) and restructured the economies of colonized places. Without colonial expansion, "capitalism could not have taken place in Europe" (Loomba, 2005, 10). The colonizing powers' establishment of trade infrastructure, including railroads, was a necessary step in securing Canada for economic exploitation and European capitalist expansion.

A timeline of railway development in Canada

A timeline of railway development and resistance to railways in Canada must begin from the first moment of contact between indigenous people on Turtle Island and European colonists and explorers. Gibbon (1935) writes that from 1492 onwards, colonial explorers came upon Turtle Island in their attempts to discover a route to India and China and upon their “discovery” of the Americas, attempts were made to traverse them to find a route to the Orient (p. 3). In Canada, European explorers' search for the fabled North West passage from Europe to Asia drove further westward expansion (pp. 40, 43). While I will not go into detail about many specific

encounters, colonial settlement, and development, I will note that contact between European colonial explorers and indigenous people ranged from brutally violent extermination and economic exploitation to seemingly innocuous trade encounters (Dickason, 2002).

It was in the colonial context of desire for westward expansion that the first railways in North America were built. The original railway in Canada was completed in 1836 (Beswarick, 1977, 3). In the late 1840s and 50s, continental, national, and local lines began to be built: Continental lines integrated Canada's transportation and trade system with the United States, national lines united provinces in Canada, and local lines were small branches off of main national or continental lines (Beswarick, 1977, 10). There were two broad tendencies in these developments: one was to connect Central Canada to the Maritime Provinces and the other was to connect the East to the West. Both tendencies involved the construction of "intercolonial" railways that would connect colonial settlements (Beswarick, 1977, 13-14).

A major railway building boom was marked by the Montreal-Toronto connection, built by Grand Trunk in 1852 and followed by four years of intense railway construction, 1852 to 1856 (Beswarick, 1977, 20). This period of high productivity was followed by an economic slowdown between 1860 and 1867, when only two hundred miles of new track was built (Beswarick, 1977, 30). Two major flashpoints that restarted a railway construction boom were Confederation in 1867 and the Red River Rebellion in 1869. Confederation created a unified English Canadian state, and the national railways were needed to physically link the new Canada together. Soon after, the political conditions following a large scale Métis uprising in 1869-70 encouraged the construction of national railways because they would allow the military to be quickly transported to areas that the federal government wished to control.

Confederation and settler nationalism

Korneski (2008) argues that it was not profit alone that drove railway expansion in Newfoundland at the turn of the 20th century. He argues that until the mid 19th century, the colonial project had been to "dominate native populations both to extract profits and to "civilize" them" (p. 86). However, after a series of rebellions in Jamaica, India, and New Zealand coupled with an economic depression, British imperial officials promoted the "settlement of British peoples in colonial spaces" (p. 86).

In Canada, after the same economic depression, there was a return to prosperity around the time of Confederation, and conditions for railway construction shifted (Beswarick, 1977, 32). In addition to better economic conditions and cheaper methods of railway building, Beswarick (1977) argues that there was a political desire and "committement to bind together with ties of steel, the "new nationality" created in 1867" (p. 38), the colonial nationalism that Korneski (2008) describes. Confederation brought together many of the current provinces into the Dominion of Canada and created a unified (English) nationality. The railroad was an important way to link the new provinces of the Dominion, especially the later arrivals such as Manitoba in 1870 and British Columbia in 1871.

When British Columbia entered Confederation, a transcontinental railway was promised in order to connect the province with Eastern Canada. The railway was originally built between eastern Canada and British Columbia from 1881 to 1885 (connecting with Ottawa Valley and Georgian Bay area lines built earlier), and was Canada's first transcontinental railway.

Stanley (1973) writes that a consolidation of a Canadian nationalism can be attributed to the First World War several decades later. His history of Canadian National Railways reinforces the role of railways in building a wartime settler identity when he devotes an entire chapter to "[commemorate]...their splendid services". He recounts that "one cannot but marvel at the part

the Canadian railwaymen have played in the war programme and the deep-seated spirit of loyalty that actuates them" (p. 265). The national achievement that the transcontinental railways represented created a settler nationalism and confirmed the superiority of European technology and civilization, which was able to bring order and progress through the wild “terra nullius”. The many books that detail the histories of Canadian railroads sing the praises of their heroic construction workers and the magnificent achievement of dominating the wild expanse of empty land. To further highlight the narrative of masculine European dominance over nature and “uncivilized” people and space, it is worth noting that I have yet to read a history of CN that even acknowledges the presence of indigenous people in Canada. The railroad is not only a physical manifestation of colonialism, it is a symbol that represents European civilization, dominance, and “progress”. These are the values celebrated by the dominant Canadian settler culture and nationalism.

Repressing resistance

In addition to creating a national settler identity and increased corporate control of outposts engaged in resource exploitation and trade, railroads meant that the colonial centres in the East would have tighter political and military control in western colonial settlements. The histories of the Red River Resistance and Northwest Rebellion, two Metis-led uprisings, demonstrate how railway building and economic, political, and military interests converged to repress native resistance. First, a brief context to the Red River Rebellion is in order. The Red River Settlement was located at the area where the Red and Assiniboine Rivers meet within Rupert’s Land, a territory which stretched from Ontario to the Rocky Mountains that was being administered by the British controlled Hudson's Bay Company (Jonasson, 1934, 272).

Many factors shaped the climate from which the 1869-70 uprising emerged. In the years prior

to the conflict, grasshopper plagues, drought, declining numbers of buffalo and thus a declining buffalo hunt, and diminishing fisheries stressed the food production of the area (Dickason, 2006, 165). Migration and settlement of the area by white Canadians was increasing, partially because of westward migrations from Canada to Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota. Jonasson (1934) argues that the migration of Canadians to America was viewed as a national loss that might be prevented by opening up the territory in the West for easy settlement (p. 273). Trade with St. Paul and other southward cities was increasing, and some Americans spoke openly about the annexation of Red River. The Canadian government was concerned with the possibility of American settlement and annexation of the Northwest, especially considering the anti-British elements in the United States (Knaplund, 1934, 76). Red River was geographically isolated from Eastern Canada and although this was the era of railroad building, none was immediately foreseen for the Northwest (Dickason, 2001, 245). An application in 1851 to charter the Lake Superior and Pacific Railway was rejected by Canada's Standing Committee on Railways as both indigenous and Hudson's Bay Company land titles stood in the way, and it was not until 1860 that an irregular East-West postal service was established by steamship, canoe, and dogsled. Once the American transcontintental railroad reached the Mississippi in 1850s, it was actually easier to communicate with Red River via the United States.(Dickason, 2001, 245). These and other factors led to a deal between the Hudson's Bay Company and the federal government in which HBC sold Rupert's Land to the government of Canada in a poorly compensated transfer.

The people living at Red River were never consulted about the transfer of power from HBC to the Dominion of Canada (Stanley, 1985, 36-44). Upon the decision to transfer land, surveyors from the federal government began to survey the land in a British meridian line system, rather than in the Métis river frontage lot system, decreasing the value of farms owned by French,

Métis, and Aboriginal people (Rambaut, 1887, 145).

Bowsfield (1971) writes that this was particularly alarming to Métis people because many of them did not have legal title to their land and feared that it would be taken from them (p. 30). Dickason (2006) argues that Métis and Aboriginal people were treated as second class citizens, with Métis people claiming that the government was paying them lower wages than whites (p. 165) and that racism only increased after the HBC transfer. Red River became a site of unrest as the Métis began to be pushed out of upper echelons of fur trade (p. 245). In the pressure for Red River to become a colony of Canada there was a push for white settlement in the area because HBC control was eroding.

When the nonviolent uprising occurred, Canada reacted by sending settlers and the military, as quickly as possible. Prime Minister William McDougall encouraged settlement, declaring that "preparation should undoubtedly be made for a large emigration in the early spring of those settlers as were offered last fall by Colonel Barivis, of the township of Halifax, and by another gentleman in the county of Bruce. Settlers of this class will be a valuable, almost necessary, addition to the population of the Territory, and any expense which their transportation hither may involve ought to be readily furnished" (Morice, 1935, 324)

One hundred boats had been constructed to transport the troops over rivers and lakes by way of the old North West traders' route (Morice, 1935, 325). Troops were sent to Red River to regain order and obedience to Canadian authorities and to protect "immigrants flowing into that country" (Morice, 1935, 326). The expedition was carried out by General Wolseley, and it took 96 days for him and his troops to reach Red River (Morice, 1935, 339).

The Northwest Rebellion in 1885, the second largescale Métis-led uprising on the prairies, coincided with the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway, which brought "settlers

in greater numbers than ever" (Dickason, p. 285). In addition to bringing greater numbers of settlers, the railway meant that troops could be transported much more quickly. Recall that during the Red River uprising in 1869, Colonel Wolseley's troops took months to arrive at Red River. In 1885, troops arrived at Qu'Appelle one week after Riel set up a provisional government (Dickason, 2001, 285).

Historians debate whether the "government provoked the (Red River) uprising in order to solve its problems in constructing the transcontinental railway" (Dickason, 2001, 292). Doug Sprague argues that the uprising "'was not the result of some tragic misunderstanding, but of the government's manipulation of the Manitoba Métis since 1869' for reasons of political expediency" (Dickason, 2001, 292).

After the second uprising, there were significant problems with creating reserves and resolving settlements for Métis because the prospect of a "Canadian Pacific Railway route through the region had enhanced the value of the land so that white settlers were clamouring to have it opened for general settlement" (Dickason, 2001, 348-9). An additional point about the construction of this specific railroad is that it relied upon the racist exploitation of Chinese migrant laborers, many of whom died in the process of building it, because they were directed to the most dangerous jobs.

Westward settlement and trade

The railways of the 1870s were backed mostly by new Canadian capitalists, while earlier railways had been backed mostly by British colonial authorities (Beswarick, 1977, 34), demonstrating how newer expansion was especially profit-driven. In 1971, treaties began to be signed between First Nations and the Crown. Treaty Seven, which covers southern Alberta was signed in 1877 at Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) crossings. This treaty was important for railway

development because it opened up the land for the construction of a transcontinental railway (Dickason, 2002, p. 252). With the signing of Treaty Seven, the Canadian government "gained its immediate object of securing its western settlement frontier" (Dickason, 2002, pp. 261-2).

To serve the Prairie Provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, a railway network of more than 19, 000 miles was built during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Bohi, 1977, p. 6). It became clear in the late nineteenth century that the primary industry of the prairies would be the export of grain. Cheap transportation was necessary for this economy to be viable (Bohi, 1977, p. 9).

Roy (1993) points out that settlement created sometimes violent conflict over valuable land. For some indigenous people, this translated into the theft of cultural objects, such as totem poles or sacred items used in ceremonies (35-36). As quoted in Roy (1993), Cole argues that in the early 20th century there was an increased danger of "collection" and removal of totem poles and cultural objects along the CN railway that runs through Gitskan territory in the Skeena Valley, because the railway facilitated easy access to native people (p. 68).

Economic control was at the heart of this westward transportation expansion. For the Hudson's Bay Company, the control of trade outposts was essential as there had been problems due to distance from Montreal headquarters and a lack of supervision (Gibbons, p. 57).

While facilitating colonial economic expansion, the railroads simultaneously devastated native economies. As an example, Dickason (2002) writes that the explosion of the buffalo robe trade on the northern Plains was made possible by the transportation of goods via railroads (p. 175). White settlers facilitated the extermination of the buffalo, which provided native people with food, clothing, shelter, and a means to trade with settlers, by "buying as many of the robes

as they could possibly get, out of season as well as in season." The trade exploded to the point where native people were hunting buffalo for their pelts alone (Paget, 2004, p. 22).

The construction of the railroad meant that settlers no longer had to rely on Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) people on the Plains to process bison hides for them to trade. Instead, settlers could shoot vast numbers of bison, skin them, and send their raw hides to the East where they would be processed in factories. This contributed hugely to the extermination of the bison, especially because female bison were most often killed for their larger pelts, causing the reproductive bison population to shrink rapidly without being able to repopulate.

The formation of CNR

The early twentieth century marked the birth of Canadian National Railways and the consolidation of the Railway Act. In May, 1915 the Canadian Government Railways began to run the National Transcontinental Railway. For over 40 years, CGR had already been running the Intercolonial and Prince Edward Island Railways (Murray, 2004, 11). In 1917, CGR began to manage Canadian Northern Railway.

Canadian National Railways was created when the federal government stepped in to take control of three major rail systems: the Canadian Northern, the Grand Trunk, and the Grand Trunk Pacific. This was in addition to its control of Canadian Government Railways, which was composed of the National Transcontinental and the Intercolonial Railway. The three companies that were absorbed into Canadian Government Railways were each also made up of many subsidiary companies. Altogether, over 400 separate companies were amalgamated into one system of management in 1923 (CNR, 1965, p. 139).

In December, 1918 the name Canadian National Railways was approved to describe the

national system of railways under government control and management. In June 1919, the organization was incorporated as Canadian National Railway Company, a holding company for its operating companies known as Canadian National Railways.

In January 1923, the railway acquired Grand Trunk Railway, which marked the end of its formative period.

Labor & recent disputes

Canadian Pacific Railway, as mentioned above, has a dark history of racism and exploitation, as demonstrated by its exploitation of Chinese migrant labor. Canadian National Railway may not be known for similarly blatant racism and exploitation in its construction phases, but it too has a history of exploiting its workers that continues to this day. As with all histories of exploitation, the existence of counter-narratives of resistance are sometimes possible to discover.

On the weekend of October 25th, 1964, two-thousand eight-hundred running trades workers withdrew their labor and disrupted normal train operations (Canadian National Railways, 1965, p. 1). The short-lived strike was motivated by CN's decision, which was opposed by the unions, to convert some stations to "run-throughs", which would eliminate jobs. CN claimed that it needed to implement run-throughs because of competition from other modes of transportation (CNR, 1965, p. 22). Although it was a Crown corporation at the time of this dispute, it maintained that it was nationalized out of necessity and "did not and does not in any way represent a deliberate experiment in socialism" (p. 139), distancing itself from any political or moral obligation to provide job security to its workers. Tensions between union brotherhoods and CNR had been running since the 60s, during which time there had been several threats of carrying out wildcat strikes. Railway strikes date back as far as 1910, when international rail

unions demanded the same rate of pay as their United States counterparts (Stevens, 1973, p. 283).

CN continues to face accusations of neglect and mismanagement that have resulted in the tragic deaths of several rail workers. The two examples below demonstrate accusations of neglect in recent times. In August 2007, two trains collided leaving the Prince George South Yard in Prince George, B.C. causing a derailment and fire. There were no injuries, and although approximately 172 600 litres of fuel was spilled, the majority of it was consumed by the fire. A Transportation Safety Board of Canada investigation found that CN had conducted an inadequate risk assessment, that the employees operating the remote control switches were inadequately trained, and that the weight of the rail cars being transported exceeded the capacity of the trains' brakes (Transportation Safety Board of Canada, 2009). In December 2007, thirty CN cars derailed east of Edmonton in Strathcona County. CN said that no cars contained hazardous materials, and no one was injured (CBC, 2007b). These are two recent examples that do not involve injury to workers, but controversies from the 90s and early 2000s provide examples of work-related death and injury on CN lines as well as toxic spills.

Environmental impacts

While railway development is clearly inextricable from the colonial history of the Canadian settler state, its damage is not merely historical. Railway companies continue to profit from infrastructure built on stolen land, and the presence of railways continues to physically disrupt native land and economies.

The CN rail line along the Fraser and Thompson Rivers provides a pertinent example of the impact of rail lines on fishing. An Environmental Assessment Panel was formed to evaluate

the impacts of a CN Rail twin-tracking proposal in British Columbia and the Panel's report, published in 1985, found that native people had been living on the banks of the Fraser and Thompson Rivers for thousands of years because they provided food and access to transportation. As settlers moved into BC, the land occupied by native people diminished to 70 small reservations. The panel found that the construction of the original CN line and subsequent maintenance activities had damaged and destroyed the fishing and land base in the area. Native people also expressed to the panel that they were concerned about losing even more reserve land to the twin tracking program. Even if minimal land was needed to construct another track, the Panel agreed that construction could contribute to "erosion,...[interfere] with natural drainage of an area causing formerly dry arable land to become marshy, and poor weed control on the right-of-way allowing the spread of noxious weeds to adjacent lands." (Canada, 1985, pp. 26-7). Despite these conclusions, the Panel nevertheless gave the recommendation that "CN Rail take special care during the design and construction of twin tracking projects to preserve and protect and, where necessary, to replace Indian fishing sites and access trails".

Several other studies about the impacts of stream-crossing highways and railways on fish have been conducted in British Columbia in order to increase the number of fish stocks by opening freshwater habitat to salmon spawning and rearing (Wilson & Rabnett, 2007). Although not every railway crossing has a devastating environmental impact, their study clearly demonstrates that improperly constructed or maintained culverts can negatively impact fish crossings which in turn negatively impacts native fisheries or fishing activities. A report by Wilson & Rabnett (2007) identified nine “high priority restoration sites” out of 98 fish bearing stream crossings in the Bulkley Watershed (p. 3).

The above demonstrates some of the continuing environmental and social impacts of railways on Aboriginal communities. There are also other colonial legacies to contend with such as the theft of cultural objects facilitated by easy train access (Roy, 1993). As noted in the previous section on CN's history, beyond the everyday impacts of train traffic on wildlife, there are major environmental and human impacts that result from train derailments and accidents. It may be that such accidents are an inevitable fact of railway use, but unions and labor advocacy organizations accuse CN of mismanagement, claiming that many derailments and spills could have been prevented.

Timeline of Resistance

It was more difficult to discover , there are certainly many more histories of resistance that have not been told. Most of the events listed below are examples of economic disruption: blockades of railways or threats to blockade. First Nations have also used the federal land claims process to challenge railroad economic exploitation. In the *Status Report on Specific Claims in Canada* published by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (2009), CN was named in twenty-six claims.

The earliest example of resistance to railroad construction that I was able to find has been challenged by some scholars as being a myth. I have chosen to include it in order to challenge Eurocentric dismissal of oral history, and even if the event never occurred, it can stand in for the many accounts of resistance to colonialism that have not been recorded or remembered. In 1883 Piapot, a Cree chief, led other Cree people in resistance against the CPR by pulling up railway stakes and equipment, and erecting teepees in the path of construction workers.

Around 1909, the Sulpicians gave permission to the Canadian Northern Railway to construct a

railway that would run over 250 metres of Kanesatake, Québec without Mohawk consent. Forty armed Mohawks on horseback, including Chief Kennatosse, rode to the site where construction crews were working, threatening action if the railway was completed. Chief Kennatosse had been in hiding for seven years prior to the action for “stealing” trees from a section of disputed land. Today, the incomplete railway tracks stop abruptly at the edge of the highway at Pointe Calumet (York & Pandera, 1991, 100-101).

In 1992, the Gitksan in northern British Columbia blockaded the Canadian National Railway (Library and Archives Canada, 2005). Canadian filmmaker Nettie Wild was in the midst of filming Blockade (1993) when the CN barricade went up. CN unsuccessfully tried to seize footage from Blockade to use as evidence in their court case against the Gitskan. Wild and her film crew refused to turn over the footage, and because of public support were legally allowed to keep the information from CN (CanadaWild).

In 1999, the Dakota Tipi First Nation, supported by their chief, threatened to block rail lines in response to RCMP raids of their reservation (CBC, 1999).

In 2004, the Seton Lake First Nation in BC blocked a rail line to protest an accord that they viewed to be undermining their land rights. The blockade successfully stopped one freight train before they lifted the blockade (CBC, 2004).

In 2006 and in 2007, Mohawk activists in Tyendinaga, Ontario blocked the CN rail line running through their traditional territory.

In 2006 and in 2007, Chief Terry Nelson of Roseau River First Nation threatened to block CN rail lines running through the reservation on June 29th, the Aboriginal Day of Action. On both

days, people gathered at events held near the tracks, but blockades did not go up (CBC, 2007a; Kuxhaus, 2006).

In the fall of 2008, there were blockades and protests across Canada to disrupt the Spirit Train, a moving cultural event held on the CPR line to celebrate the Olympics in 2010. At each stop, demonstrations voiced opposition to holding Olympics on stolen native land. In Toronto a rail blockade and lock down disrupted the Spirit Train's schedule. Indigenous and settler activists were acting in resistance to "Olympic theft of Indigenous land, ecological destruction, and attacks on the poor" (Upping the Anti, 2008).

Conclusion

Canadian National Railway is no different than any other railroad company that built in a colonial context: it provided the infrastructure for dominance and exploitation. Its' construction depended on being granted large tracts of land without the consent of indigenous people who were using and living on the land. Its' building processes were disruptive to the environment around it, and in some cases the railway tracks and train traffic on them continue to be disruptive. While not desiring to oversimplify the complex histories of colonization in Canada or to attach blame to any one corporation, it is still undeniable that CN Railway helped to shape the current economic marginalization of indigenous people in Canada.

Not only is CN's lawsuit against Tyendinaga community members a racist campaign of economic intimidation, it is only the latest example of exploitation of Mohawk people by the company.

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