

Stony Brook University
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Abstract

The Rising of the Ongwehonwe: Representation, Sovereignty and Identity

By

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This dissertation considers the legal, cultural and political conflicts between the Canadian government and the Six Nations of the Grand River Territory from the late nineteenth-through the twentieth-centuries. It is a narrative steeped in the long history of resistance of Six Nations people facing the neocolonial oppression of Canada continuing until today. Presently, Canada is one of only two members of a United Nations committee, along with Australia, to vote against the adoption of a Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2006. Indigenous groups such as Six Nations represent a threat to Canadian sovereignty, territory and wealth. Claims concerning land, resources and a quest for self-government place native peoples on a collision course with Canadian development.

The Six Nations fled to the Grand River territory under the leadership of Chief Joseph Brant following the American Revolution, rekindling the council fire of the Iroquois Confederacy. Seeking to secure their lands and independence, Six Nations leaders struggled to codify the rights they were promised under agreements and treaties. The legal cases that ensued, contested in Canadian and international forums, are elucidated in the dissertation.

The struggle for representation and justice has often set the “Ongwehonwe,” or real people, at odds with one another. Yet, factionalism is not endemic at Six Nations, for through examination of the record I describe the shared meaning, belief and pride in our community’s identity, simply too strong to break. Six Nations is now joining together to forge one common message with which to address the Canadian government. Six Nations leaders, families and clans have a shared purpose that will not be subsumed. Presently there is an ongoing national debate within the community evoked by a yearning for consensus in Six Nations affairs. It is my contention that consciousness of Ongwehonwe identity will be instrumental in aiding our people to forge a new relationship with Canada, giving us more freedom to shape the future in terms of Six Nations visions and aspirations, rather than Ottawa.

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