# THE DYNAMICS OF A DENE STRUGGLE FOR SELF-DETERMINATION

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*Abstract:* This paper is about the social drama occurring when the Dene of a northern Canadian community sought to attain local self-determination, and Eurocanadians within the town and government officials beyond the settlement responded to their efforts. Each group found itself not merely in conflict with other groups, but enmeshed in internal symbolic paradoxes, which challenged basic images they held concerning their cultural identities. This article adds to the literature on interethnic relations in Canada, and reveals some of the subtle, even liminal, barriers to the creation of post-colonial society, encountered in the praxis of decolonialization.

*Résumé:* Cet article du drame social qui est survenue lorsque le Dene d'une communité du nord canadien a essayé d'acquéru l'autodétermination au niveau local, et comment les Eurocanadiens de la ville ainsi que les responsables gouvernementaux au delà de le communauté ont réagi à leurs efforts.

Chaque groupe s'est trouvé être, non en conflit direct avec les autres groupes mais plutôt, empêtre dans des paradoxes symboliques internes, qui remettaient en question la vision élémentaire de leurs identités culturelles réciproques.

Cet article contribute pleinement à ce qui a déja été écrit sur les relations interethniques, au Canada. De plus, l'auteur met à jour certaines des barrières tenues voire liminales affectant la création d'une société post-coloniale, et mises en évidence dans la praxis de décolonisation.

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> This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well.
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> — Paulo Freire

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## Introduction

In 1971-72 a group of young Dene (using the expression *sensu lato* to include Métis) in a settlement in the Great Slave Lake region of northern Canada initiated an effort to attain self-determination.[1] This was the first attempt by the Native people of the community to control their own local government since they began to abandon year-round "bush" living for town residence in the 1950s. Their initiative drew a response from Eurocanadians, who were townspeople employed by the federal or territorial government, and their superiors within the Government of the Northwest Territories beyond the settlement.

This paper is the story of a social drama (Turner 1957, 1974, 1985:291-301; Sharp 1986, 1988) in which each of the above groups found itself not merely in conflict with other groups, but also caught in a number of symbolic paradoxes associated with their most central images of who they were and what their roles in the community ought to be. Thus, the Dene, both the young people initiating the movement and most other Native people in the settlement, desired restoration of the kind of autonomy and power Native people had enjoyed before the advent of the "government-commercial era" in the north after World War II (Helm and Leacock 1971:357-359; J.G.E. Smith 1978:39). They also viewed this restoration as essential if they were adequately to cope with pressing community problems, and if they were to survive as a culturally unique people in the face of the rapid economic and political developments underway throughout the Canadian north (see Cardinal 1969; Watkins 1977; Driben and Trudeau 1983; Asch 1984; Salisbury 1986). Yet, achieving self-determination seemed to require adopting positions and taking actions that Native people had always seen to be incompatible with Dene culture, and potentially dangerous to their well-being (see Helm 1980).

Local White residents, on the other hand, most of whom believed they were in the community, in part at least, to assist Native people in becoming self-determining, found themselves hostile to what was quite a benign movement. On the surface their hostility appeared irrational and inconsistent with their beliefs. Analysis, however, suggests the movement seriously challenged many White peoples' most cherished images of themselves as humanitarian benefactors.

Finally, officials of the Local Government branch of the Government of the Northwest Territories were supportive of the self-determination effort, but found themselves uneasy about the direction the movement might take and displeased by Dene political processes. These bureaucrats wanted the movement to occur in ways that were consistent with their ethnocentric def-

initions of self-determination and with their plans for political and economic development in the Northwest Territories as a whole (see Bean 1977).

The dynamics of ethnic conflict discussed in this paper complement discussions of interethnic relations found elsewhere in the literature of the Canadian subarctic (see especially Savashinsky 1972, 1974). This account also is of interest in other ways: It documents the sort of local problems which, together with the impacts of broader issues like the development of natural gas and oil reserves and the implementation of a new federal Indian policy, led to the creation of the Dene Nation in 1976 (Watkins 1977) and to the agreement-in-principle between the Indian people of the Northwest Territories and the Government of Canada to establish Denendeh.[2] Secondly, it illustrates the ingenuity of the Dene as they shape a culturally incompatible Eurocanadian political form (such as the Settlement Council form of government) so that it can be used to accomplish their own ends. Thirdly, as the social drama presented below unfolds, some of the more subtle, even liminal, symbolic barriers to decolonialization are brought to light (Cardinal 1969; Lurie 1972; Puxley 1977; Bean 1977). Finally, for just post-colonial societies to be established, colonizers must learn as much or more from the praxis of local efforts to attain self-determination as do the colonized (Memmi 1963; Bennett 1985:23; Marcus 1986:166; Chilton 1988). Some Eurocanadians did learn a few such lessons as a result of this social drama. These lessons Paulo Freire (1984) aptly terms the "pedagogy of the oppressed."

Below, I recount the local conditions that Native people cited as leading to this self-determination initiative. I then present, as best I am able, a narrative of the major events in this social drama as I witnessed and, to a degree, participated in them.[3] In utilizing a narrative approach, I follow the recent example of Henry Sharp (1988) seeking to provide as rich (or "thick"; Geertz 1973:3-30) an account as possible so as to better reveal the elusive symbolic obstacles to decolonialization as these arose. The conclusion provides an interpretation of these obstacles.

## The Situation

In 1971, the population of this settlement consisted of about 210 Treaty Indians, 330 Métis without Treaty status, and approximately 60 Eurocanadians. Until 1969, government in the settlement had been under the control of an appointed Area Administrator of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. After 1969, as a result of governmental reorganization, a Eurocanadian Settlement Manager, appointed by the Department of Local Government, Government of the Northwest Territories, dominated lo-

cal political affairs. While there was also an elected Settlement Council, it had always been predominately Eurocanadian.

Most Eurocanadians were in the community due to employment with one or another government agency. There were school teachers, nurses, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, employees of the Ministry of Transport or the Department of Public Works, a game warden, the settlement manager and a welfare officer—when the latter role was not played by the Settlement Manager.

As a group, the Eurocanadians were highly transient. Most were school teachers, the most politically active segment of the White community. Yet, in the decade preceding 1971, some 70 percent of the school teachers remained in the community only one year or less; fewer than five percent had lived in the town as long as five years (Menez, personal communication). During the summer, when local government activities were at their height, teachers on the Settlement Council were often in the south on vacation, or furthering their professional educations.

In 1971, Eurocanadians held virtually all political, economic and educational authority. This was due both to their occupations and because Native people, for various reasons outlined below, did not seek to control their own political affairs. Moreover, in Settlement Council elections, Native people tended to vote for Eurocanadians—if they bothered to vote at all.

Native people stated that they did not seek to govern their own community for several reasons. In the first place, from early in the 20th century until after World War II, the Indians, and many of the Métis, had lived in small all-Native villages (Helm and Damas 1963) in the "bush" from which they dispersed for hunting, fishing and trapping. The last group to abandon their village for residence in the settlement had done so only in the middle 1960s. In the "bush," everyday political matters were handled informally through kinship channels, and through consensus seeking processes. In the settlement, an over-all sense of political community had not yet evolved. In a way, the Native component of the settlement comprised several communities, each having its own, rather discrete, area of residence in the town. While these different groups had, through the years, worked out successful modes of political accommodation and cooperation, to reside together and function as a single polity was new for them. "Things Indian," moreover, tended to be thought of as things associated with the "bush."

Secondly, many of the Indian and Métis people with whom I talked regarded Settlement Council procedures as foreign and inconsistent with Dene ways. Again, traditional Native political processes were those of consensus-seeking wherein all present who had something to say could contribute to deliberations. Furthermore, adversarial procedures, which deliberately provoke disharmony, were regarded in the traditional view as being

most improper. Because the Settlement Council in the past had allowed very little participation by visitors and adversarial procedures were employed when issues were discussed, Native people did not regard this institution as their own (see Bean 1977:130-141).

Thirdly, a few Native people mentioned that many of the most influential adults, both Métis and Indian, could neither speak, read nor write English. This made it very difficult for them to deal with governmental agencies beyond the community, particularly if utilizing the Settlement Council where the expectation had always been that business would be conducted in English. Hence, if Métis and Indians did vote in Settlement Council elections they voted for highly acculturated people or, even more commonly, for White people that they believed could be trusted. A teacher would have a very good chance of winning if she or he ran for office, since teachers were considered to be quite knowledgeable, and because the role, "teacher," is a respected one.

Fourthly, after many years of ever-increasing dependency, first upon the trader and missionary and then upon the government, with its various forms of social assistance, people had grown apathetic. Generally low or wildly fluctuating fur prices and chronic unemployment and underemployment at one time or another made welfare assistance a necessity for most Native people. There was a prevailing sense of despair often expressed to me by use of the English phrase: "What's the use?"

Finally, while there was apathy and despair, there was also genuine fear of publicly disagreeing with those Eurocanadians whose occupations gave them the power to hire and fire, or to administer social assistance. Native people regarded as "troublemakers" were not sought as employees and were sometimes also denied emergency welfare relief. Furthermore, if one was considered a troublemaker by one White authority, other White authorities often adopted the same opinion. As one Métis man said: " A guy would have to be crazy to run [for political office] against the welfare [officer]."

While Eurocanadian administrators and elected Councillors had accomplished some beneficial results for the community, many problems existed in 1971 which had, through the years, grown quite serious and which, to all appearances, were simply going to grow worse. There were only five full-time jobs available to Native people in the settlement. Most employment was seasonal or occasional. The single most significant potential for full-time employment was the local sawmill, which had been operated as a government-managed cooperative. However, due to equipment breakdowns and government mismanagement—something to which government officials have admitted (Fields and Sigurdson 1972)—the mill had been forced to close, many thousands of dollars "in the red." The mill was subsequently sold to a White entrepreneur, but it operated thereafter irregularly due to

breakdowns in its aged equipment and the lack of a competent millwright to administer preventive maintenance. There also seemed to be a chronic problem of finding markets for the lumber produced by the mill, even though the lumber was of an excellent quality. When a new elementary school was constructed in the community in 1970-71, all the lumber used was purchased from southern Canadian sources. Consequently, work and income that could have gone to local people were denied to them. Adding insult to injury, the lumber for school construction was stored in the local sawmill's yard.

Another problem not being addressed by the Council concerned the community's water supply. The water came from a bay of the large lake on which the settlement is located. By the early 1960s, the lake was seriously polluted because of the many people and their sled dogs who had come to reside permanently in town. Especially during spring thaw, human and animal feces washed directly into the bay. In 1963, the only year for which I have accurate figures, there were 223 cases of severe gastrointestinal illness in the community, directly attributed by the local nursing staff to the town's water supply. In 1971, as in 1963, water treatment consisted of dumping a certain quantity of liquid bleach into the tank truck that delivered water to the 45-gallon barrels at Native homes. The government had begun construction of a small water treatment facility but it had never been completed. The Settlement Council seemed unable to discover why the facility was not being completed. Since all government personnel received their water from a Ministry of Transport water truck rather than the water truck of the local private contractor who supplied Native homes, and since the former traveled to an (ostensibly) unpolluted area to obtain water, I surmise that Eurocanadian Settlement Managers, and Eurocanadian dominated Settlement Councils, did not regard the community's contaminated water supply as a pressing issue.

The educational situation in the community was also of considerable concern to Native people. All Native parents with whom I talked strongly valued basic formal, Eurocanadian style education for their children, but, at the same time, decried the process of cultural alienation that occurred when their children went to school. All teachers were Eurocanadians. Parents noted that the teachers never really mixed with Native people. The teachers with whom I talked had little knowledge of Native culture and virtually no understanding of community history – a must for understanding local social problems. Instruction in the Native language, or in any other aspect of Native culture, was absent in 1971. There was no local school board nor any other local body which had authority in hiring teachers or in establishing school policy and curriculum. In spite of educators' rhetoric to the contrary,

formal education in the community was largely a process fostering assimilation into White Canadian society.

Indeed, perhaps as much as any single event or circumstance, the dedication of the new elementary school in September of 1971 precipitated the self-determination movement. On the evening of the day of the dedication there was a celebration at the school attended by the principal, the teachers, the Settlement Manager and by "outside dignitaries" such as the Superintendent of Schools. No Indian nor Métis parent, nor any other member of the Native community (such as the Chief or a band Councillor), was invited. Although nothing was publicly said, privately Native people expressed their outrage at this display of disrespect.

Undergirding all else, the presence of ever-growing violence and other forms of cultural distortion in the community made Native people ready for fundamental change. For many, the virtual impossibility of continuing to live a contact-traditional style of life (Helm and Damas 1963) in the "bush," a lack of employment in the town and a consequent dependence on welfare, the prevailing sense that the Indian way of life was being destroyed by the press of the dominant Eurocanadian culture—these and other factors had resulted in a profound sense of despair. This contributed to heavy drinking, fighting, and, beginning in the late 1960s, suicides by teenaged children (compare Driben and Trudeau 1983). Every time I returned to the community for periods of fieldwork people would comment, in answer to my vague question, "How have things been?": "It's getting worse and worse, the drinking and fighting; nobody knows what to do." By the early 1970s, one section of town was nicknamed "Vietnam" because of the level of violence found there. The people wanted their lives to be peaceful and whole once again.

## Narrative of the Self-Determination Movement

### *The Settlement Council Election*

I arrived in the settlement in early September 1971 aboard the small Beechcraft which made a scheduled flight to the village twice a week. I had been in the community doing fieldwork twice before—in 1968 and 1969. The focus of my work had been contact history. I had also been successful in recording important aspects of traditional Dene culture since there were a number of very knowledgeable elders in the town. The National Museum of Canada, who funded my work, was especially interested in the latter information. Moreover, I was interested in contemporary cultural and ecological matters and I had arranged to spend early October, early December and early April (1972) in the "bush" with friends of mine. In this way I would experience life in the town and life in the "bush," at all seasons of the year.

On board the plane I sat next to a young Indian woman, Victoria, whom I recognized as being the granddaughter of a good friend and former landlord of mine.[4] She told me she had been away from the community for quite a long time, most recently attending school, but had decided to return home, having accepted the marriage proposal of a young man named Francois—whom I also knew. Then she said, with a soft laugh, that she was asked to leave the school she had been attending, for her teachers found her political views "frightening." It seems that Victoria had become sensitive to the oppressed status of American Indians in relation to White society, and had learned of the growing political activism of Indian people elsewhere in the north, in southern Canada and in the United States. She spoke eloquently of the need for the people in her own settlement to overcome their fear, dependence and despair. Her people, she felt, had to become politically active if they expected justice and cultural survival in the face of the rapid economic development underway in the north, and in light of the new ethnocidal policies of the government.

As it happened, I was fresh from teaching a year-long seminar concerning these matters; we had, for instance, read and discussed works by Indian authors, such as Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969) and Canadian Indian leader Harold Cardinal's book, *The Unjust Society* (1969). Victoria had also read these books and discussed the issues they raised with insight; we had a mutually interesting "in-flight" conversation. As the plane landed, Victoria suggested that we continue our conversation at some later date, and invited me to her wedding and, much more to my liking, wedding feast.

Near the end of September, not long after the marriage and an excellent wedding feast, the dedication of the new school occurred, with the subsequent "Whites Only" celebration at the school. On the evening of this party, I was at the home of Moise, an elderly friend. His home was a gathering place for young adults due to the popularity of his grandson. When I arrived, a couple of young Native women were discussing the party at the school. Within minutes of my arrival, Victoria and Francois came. Victoria was furious about the celebration going on, and her eyes flashed as she spoke of how insulting and inexcusable the exclusion of Native people from this event was. For his part, Francois told me in somewhat exasperated terms as we stepped outdoors for a moment, that he could not understand why she was so upset. Such expressions of disrespect from White people were hardly unusual, and were simply something Indians had to ignore. Besides, there were much more important "really Indian" matters to discuss—such as concluding arrangements for fall fishing so the people would have enough dog food for winter. In fact, discussing this matter was the ostensible reason they had come to visit. Francois wanted to discuss going to

an important fishery with Moise, who was Francois' paternal uncle. Although he was quite young (21 years old), Francois had been brought up in the "bush" and, so far as he was concerned, matters associated with the "bush" were the truly relevant issues of Native life. Certainly other matters were to be regarded as secondary.

Victoria, however, did not think so, and was in no frame of mind to discuss fishing trips. She spoke convincingly of the need for the people to run their own community affairs, including their own community school. Native people simply could no longer tolerate Eurocanadian domination—because, if they did, all that they held dear, that was associated with Native life, would soon be destroyed. At midnight, when I returned to my shack to sleep, a group of eight or ten young Indian and Métis adults were still at Moise's place discussing politics. Even Francois seemed to have become, albeit begrudgingly, interested and concerned. They were discussing the many problems in town and the need for Native people to become assertive if these problems were ever to be solved. In the space of three hours or so, Victoria had done quite a job of "consciousness raising," and I had the feeling that these young people were ready to do more than simply talk about the need for self-determination.

As it happened, mid-October was the time for the yearly Settlement Council election. Victoria, Francois, and a few other young people decided that this election provided them with an opportunity to, at least, begin the quest for self-determination. Consequently, they went from door to door attempting to convince respected Native people to stand for nomination to the Settlement Council, and seeking to get Native people to vote for Native candidates. As noted earlier, the Settlement Council was hardly regarded by Native people as an ideal form, or forum, for Native governance. Thus, it was not an easy task convincing Native people to take the Settlement Council election seriously. Also, since the people attempting to get out the vote were in their twenties, mostly without many "really Indian" skills or experience in the "bush," it was no mean task to get older Native people to take them seriously.

Probably all Native people would have preferred taking action through their band chief and councillor form of government, for while this institution was introduced by Eurocanadian government officials at the beginning of the century, after some 70 years the people had moulded it to conform with Dene values. These young people felt, however, that there were compelling reasons to try to utilize the Settlement Council in some way. Most importantly, at this time the band form of government really pertained, so far as both the federal and territorial governments were concerned, to Treaty Indians only. Consequently, the Métis, who comprised more than half the Native component of the settlement, were left unrepresented. Furthermore,

for reasons that are too complex to explore in this essay, in spite of Native sentiments, the chief and councillor form of government was all but dead in the community and government agencies tended to simply ignore it.[5] Also, the territorial government had recently received much greater power from the federal government, and it was the former that had to be "leveraged" in order to get many of the most basic community problems solved. The Settlement Council concept was considered central by the Department of Local Government to their efforts at northern development (discussed in somewhat more detail below). Finally, the Settlement Council election was regarded by the young Native activists as merely an initial step in the self-determination process; a culturally more harmonious institution such as the band chief and councillor system could be instituted in the future.

In addition to their efforts to get Native people to take the Settlement Council election seriously, Victoria, Francois and their friends sought the advice of the local Catholic priest. He was admired in the community because of his sophisticated knowledge of Dene language and customs, his respect for Native religious beliefs and because he was a long-standing advocate of Native rights. On several occasions, meetings with the priest at the mission were held well into the early morning hours. The priest volunteered to contact those Eurocanadians who would most likely stand for nomination to the Settlement Council, to see if they would agree not to do so, in order to "give the people a chance" at running their own government. These individuals seemed for the most part to acquiesce magnanimously.

However, I was able to talk to two of these Eurocanadians and came away with the impression that they certainly expected no changes in community government. The White Settlement Manager ran the community, had run the community in the past and would continue to run the community. The Settlement Council had played very little role in community governance. One school teacher jokingly told me that he would rather "drink beer and watch TV" (television was a consumer luxury only first available in 1970) than go to evening Council meetings anyway. They thought that being Councillors might be "good experience for the Indians" in that they might learn a lesson or two in "being responsible" but there certainly was to be no democratic leap forward. Native people, in their estimation, were not yet ready to be self-governing.

The efforts of Victoria, Francois and the rest proved to be successful—if only barely so. While only 20 percent of the eligible Native people voted, the newly elected Settlement Council consisted of five non-treaty Métis, two Indians and one Eurocanadian. For the first time in community history, the governing body of the town was a reasonable reflection of the settlement's ethnic composition.

Only two days after the election, I learned from the Settlement Manager that he was being transferred to another office within the territorial government bureaucracy. While he seemed pleased, particularly since his transfer involved a pay raise and because he would be located in Yellowknife, the administrative capital of the Northwest Territories, I thought it too coincidental that his transfer occurred as close to the Settlement Council elections as it had. To satisfy my curiosity, I later asked a visiting official of the Department of Local Government about the matter. He told me quite bluntly that, while this individual was regarded as very good with "paperwork," he was not the kind of person the Local Government branch wanted in the community if the election really reflected a significant change in community political temperament. In answer to a further question, he said it was well known to them that this individual single-handedly ran local government affairs. In fact, he went on to say, the Settlement Manager presided over the Settlement Council, and even prepared their agendas. Councils considered only his agendas and tended simply to "rubber stamp" decisions he had already made (or had been arrived at by his superiors in the Local Government branch).

At this time the territorial government was striving to win even greater power and autonomy from the federal government, with the ultimate goal of attaining Provincial status. To this end, it had to have local communities with governments which at least appeared viable and democratic. Consequently, the Local Government branch was prepared to support the nascent self-determination effort, and wanted to see the newly elected Settlement Council succeed – at least succeed within certain circumscribed limits. They did not want a Settlement Manager in the community whose procedures were undemocratic.

Another official of the Local Government branch said that the government had been very perplexed by the election results. He remarked that this settlement was considered "the most apathetic community in the region." This was the key reason why they permitted the appointed Settlement Manager to be so dominating. He also admitted that, since there were no complaints reaching Local Government branch officials from Native people via the community's Settlement Council, and since there were no Whites with major commercial interests in the community, the town was largely ignored. Thus, it lagged behind most other communities with respect to various government development programs (such as the development of an adequate water treatment facility).

Not knowing quite how to respond to the election results, the Local Government branch replaced the Settlement Manager with a young Development Officer, Jack, a recent political science graduate from a university in British Columbia. Jack had no northern experience, knew nothing about Na-

tive culture and little about the northern history. He told me that his instructions were simply: "Go there for a few months and get some administrative experience. Don't worry about making any positive contributions, for this is a hopelessly apathetic community." He was also told to observe events in the community carefully so that his superiors might better understand the political movement which seemed to be underway. He added that he also had the impression that his superiors had "over-hired" and were "stuck for a place to put him."

While naïve, Jack quickly established good relations in the Native community, largely because he interacted with Native people rather than remaining aloof from them. His youth, certainly, helped him relate to the young Native activists. But his acceptance among the Native people seeking self-determination was mainly because, at his first meeting with the new Settlement Council, he told the group that they, under their Council President, were to be responsible for governing the community. They were to tell him what his role ought to be, and that soon he ought not to be needed in the settlement at all. Jack later confessed to me that while he felt his position was the correct one he also did not know enough to do anything else. He certainly could not have single-handedly run the community, as had his predecessor. Also, almost immediately after coming north, he began to "hanker for the bright lights of Vancouver" and he was not greatly concerned if his superiors found his action in giving over power to the Council displeasing. That is, he did not care if he lost his job.

But in establishing good relations with Native people, particularly with the young activists, Jack immediately incurred the enmity of certain key, locally powerful, Eurocanadian residents. He was shunned by them, never being invited to the various all-White parties which occurred most every weekend.

While a bit shocked by Jack's statements since former government administrators had always played the dominant political role in the community, the members of the Settlement Council worked very well together. The fact that three of the Councillors were elders who could not speak, read nor write in English made no difference in the Council's performance. Soon various agencies of the territorial and federal governments were deluged with letters from the Council concerning the issues of the sawmill, water treatment, education, housing, the condition of the road into the settlement and many other matters which were also being neglected. Officials from the territorial government began appearing in the community with quizzical looks upon their faces. If puzzled, they also seemed to be supportive and measures were taken to begin to rectify long-standing problems. An important Yellowknife newspaper, *News of the North*—circulated throughout the Northwest Territories—somehow became aware of the rapid changes occur-

ring in the settlement, and sent a reporter to interview people. He subsequently wrote a complimentary article on the young Indian Council President under the headline: "A young man who knows what he wants."

The young man who knew what he wanted was none other than Francois who, a few weeks earlier, would have considered his being a Councillor and Council President, much less his knowing what he wanted in such a role, the subject of a first-rate joke. He was the only truly young adult on the Council; he was made President by the others largely because of his ability to speak, read and write English. Victoria, it might be noted, served as the volunteer secretary for the Council. Neither joined Moise and the others at the fishery that fall.

If Department of Local Government personnel were supportive, they were also concerned by the way in which the Settlement Council conducted its business. Francois, with the help of other Councillors and Jack, prepared an agenda for the meeting, but the agenda was not necessarily the subject of discussion. Discussions switched back and forth between the Dene language and English. Sometimes votes were taken, and sometimes they were not; when some action was required, everyone seemed to know what would be done and who would do it. Jack told me that his superiors felt he should seek to make Council meetings more orderly, operating in ways more compatible with established procedures of representative democracy so that community government would properly mesh with other units of Canadian government. It was inefficient, anarchical even, to have people from the audience as involved in discussions as they were at Council meetings. Furthermore, the Local Government people in Yellowknife sometimes could not understand from the meeting minutes sent to them what business had actually been transacted. Sometimes matters which local government officials wanted the Council to address were ignored. Jack's superiors also indicated that it was not "the Council's business" to consider issues of hunting, fishing and trapping land use, which were subjects of key importance to Native people, and hence, matters often brought up at Council meetings.

All in all, however, it seemed that a significant step in the effort to attain self-determination had been taken, and that government officials outside the community were becoming responsive to basic community problems.

## The Local Eurocanadian Response

Interethnic relations in the community appeared unchanged during the first two months of the new Settlement Councils' term. Those few Eurocanadians who had always seemed favourably disposed towards the Indians and Métis continued to be so disposed. The few Whites who always seemed ill-disposed towards Native people—there were at least two individuals with

overtly expressed white supremacist views—remained ill-disposed. Most Eurocanadians, whose interactions with Natives tended to consist of little more than what their occupations entailed, seemed to maintain their usual aloofness. That interethnic relations were changed by the Settlement Council election did not become clear until mid-December.

Then, at the end of a Council meeting, while the Councillors and a few people who had attended the meeting were relaxing together, drinking tea, one of the Councillors casually observed that the skating rink used by the children of the community had not been flooded. This was a task ordinarily carried out a month or so earlier in the season. In the ensuing discussion, it was noted that the Community Club, a predominantly Eurocanadian group that organized local social events (dances, bingo games, winter and summer carnivals in the community) usually took responsibility for completing this task. Francois asked if the Council wanted him to write a "pleasantly worded" letter of inquiry on their behalf to the Club. The Council agreed; the response to their letter was wholly unexpected.

The Community Club took the letter as a criticism of their activities. The Club replied, in a letter to the Settlement Council, that if the Native people were really concerned about the children, they would have made certain that the rink was flooded well before now. They also noted that they were led to believe that the Native people, under their Settlement Council, wanted to run their own affairs. Consequently, if the rink was to be flooded at all the Settlement Council would have to do it. The letter continued, stating that, if Native people really wanted to run their own affairs, then their Settlement Council had better demonstrate its ability to provide for community needs. Certainly, the Council could not expect to "come running" to them, the Community Club, every time it needed something done. Finally, the letter hinted that the Club might no longer sponsor such community events as the winter carnival, held in the month of March.

The hostility expressed in the Community Club response was very upsetting to the Native Councillors who had gone out of their way to avoid raising Eurocanadian pique. Months later, a Eurocanadian member of the Community Club, who had come to be helpful and supportive of Native rights, said that he really did not fully understand why the Club had responded in that way. He surmised that the members of the Club most responsible for the letter felt threatened by the Native exercise of power, and were also jealous of the attention that the Council was receiving from the Community Development Officer, the territorial and federal Governments and the press.

In any case, the Council decided to send a representative to the local water contractor, a key member of the Community Club, asking him to flood the rink for the usual fee. He refused. He also refused to state the reasons for his refusal. They then asked a key member of the local Ministry of

Transport unit, whose responsibilities primarily concerned maintenance of the small local airport, if the community might use their water truck to flood the rink. The Council was told that such unauthorized uses of equipment was against regulations. Councillors could have pointed out that Ministry of Transport personnel commonly "bent the rules" when it came to helping out their White friends by using government equipment. Councillors told me they felt they could not make this argument for they had to try to avoid any possible basis for Eurocanadian rancor.

Determined to make sure that the childrens' skating rink was flooded, the Council made what all later agreed was a terrible decision. They decided to use the community's small sewage truck which pumped the holding tanks of the few government buildings in town. A young man was instructed to flush out the truck's tank carefully several times, and then make the many trips with water needed to flood the rink. Unfortunately, he was not well acquainted with the operation of the truck, and when he tried to pump in water to flush the tank, he pumped out some of the residual sludge in the tank onto the snow-covered ice.

Horrified, and not knowing quite what to do, he immediately ran to inform Francois and Jack. Francois gathered a group of men, one of whom owned a pickup truck. The truck was loaded with hay which was then used to help absorb the sludge. Within a short period of time the hay, the sludge-soaked snow and the small bit of lake ice to which the sludge penetrated, were hauled away. While the procedure required several trips with the pickup truck, the spill proved to be very minor and, I believe, as one of the men who helped with the cleanup, that the spill caused no additional contamination of lake water (which was, of course, already contaminated).

Even so, within a short period of time, a Eurocanadian resident learned about the accident, and, in what I am convinced was a deliberate effort to embarrass the Council, phoned an account of what had happened to *News of the North* and to the Yellowknife radio station (CBC Mackenzie) whose programs are broadcast throughout the Mackenzie District of the Northwest Territories. The accident was made to sound extremely serious; yet, by the time the first newscast aired, the spill had already been cleaned up.

Many within the Eurocanadian community took this incident as clear, irrefutable proof that Native people were not ready to run their own affairs. For instance, a nurse, who was quite angry about the spill for what she assured me were medical reasons, also told me that, while Native people "have to be encouraged," they were not yet competent to be self-governing. For the Settlement Council, the incident was highly embarrassing; after all, news of the spill was spread to every community in the Northwest Territories. Some Native Councillors no doubt did question their competence to govern. In those years, Native people sometimes did indulge in self-deni-

gration, attributing to themselves the same shortcomings that Whites attributed to them (even sometimes including, I am afraid, racial inferiority). For a time, morale was low and one or two Native members seemed ready to resign.

From Christmas time, 1971, until March, 1972, the weather was bitterly cold and very little of note seemed to happen in the community. There were snubs by some Eurocanadians directed towards Native people, towards Jack, the priest, and towards me since I associated almost entirely with Native people. I was told that some Whites had come to suspect me of being an "outside agitator." After all, the "trouble" did not begin until I came to the community, and began associating with Native people.

Although little appeared to be happening, the cold and dark weeks of winter provided a setting in which the negative feelings of Eurocanadians could become even stronger, simply because people were confined indoors with few leisure-time diversions. I was told by one of the White people, who later became a supporter of the Council, that increasingly exaggerated gossip concerning the alleged ineptness of the Settlement Council was a dominant theme at Eurocanadian weekend parties. The consensus-seeking process which occurred at Council meetings was considered a chaotic waste of time, inevitably resulting in disasters such as the sewage truck episode. Had more been happening in the community, and hence more to talk about, White antipathy towards the Council might not have increased. In actuality, apart from the sewage truck fiasco, the Council's work had been very impressive.

On one occasion, at a community Valentine's Day dance which the Settlement Council had appointed several young people to organize, a male school teacher, who was very drunk, told Francois that "you bush niggers better stop what you are doing or you are going to be sorry." Francois, however, did not regard the threat as serious for the teacher was drunk. It was customary to ignore what anyone said, Native or White, when drunk. At the same event, a slightly tipsy nurse told Jack that he was the worst administrator in the north – an opinion which Jack said might well be correct.

In mid-March, the Settlement Council, having apparently taken the Community Club at its word, sponsored the winter carnival. Prize money for the dog sled race, snowshoe race, tea boiling contest and other events was raised at dances (such as the Valentine's Day dance) and at bingo games that the Council had sponsored in previous weeks. Native Council members demonstrated considerable initiative in ensuring that these things were done, an initiative never before apparent in the community.

The winter carnival, however, came off according to "Indian time." That is, while a schedule of events was carefully prepared beforehand by young Native people, no event really occurred at its appointed time and sometimes

not even at its appointed place. Native people more or less "magically" appeared and the event, sooner or later, occurred. Yet, all seemed to enjoy themselves. All, that is, but the few Eurocanadians attending, who appeared to have little fun. There were many loud complaints made by them concerning how ruinously disorganized the carnival was. Some of the comments that I overheard Eurocanadians make about the carnival's organizers seemed bizarrely vituperative.

Not long after the carnival, two Métis Settlement Councillors resigned. The initial experiment in self-determination was clearly threatened, for other Native people on the Council were stunned by their resignations. The men who resigned were two of the five Native people in town to have full-time jobs and I was told that they were afraid of losing them if they continued serving on the Council. One of these in particular was said to be receiving "an earful all the time" from his employer. The latter had even made a thinly veiled threat to fire him if he continued serving on the Council.

The remaining original Councillors were also discouraged by remarks they were receiving from certain respected Native people in the community. The latter were saying that Settlement Council efforts were "bad for the Indians." Some of these people were expressing their fear of what the powerful Eurocanadians might do if the Indians and Métis continued to assert their political rights. One Métis friend simply told me, "It's no telling what these [White] people might do if you get them mad enough." It seemed that most Native people who had much to do with the White community in daily life were subject to hearing derogatory comments about the Settlement Council. Yet, more subtly, for the more traditional Dene in town, the simple fact that the Council was incurring the anger of some White people was upsetting. For deliberately to create disharmony is, in the traditional Dene world view, to invite disaster (see D. Smith 1985). Since many shared Francois' original view of community politics—that it had little to do with "really Indian" matters—incurring the wrath of White people seemed all the more foolish. What struck me as being paradoxical was that these same people also found the conditions within the community unacceptable.

All the same, Council morale rose when two respected older men, one Métis and one Indian, replaced the two Councillors that had resigned. The Council now consisted of three Indians, four Métis and one Eurocanadian.

In late April, the tensions in the settlement quickly came to a head. The occasion was a teacher's meeting held in the community to discuss an innovative mode of classroom instruction being introduced in various northern elementary schools. Teachers from different communities and the Superintendent of Schools gathered in this community since the settlement's new

school had been designed with this new method of instruction in mind. However, once again, no one bothered to invite any Native people.

Two Settlement Councillors, one of them Francois, after discussing the matter with other Councillors and probably a Native elder, decided to attend the meeting uninvited which, from the Native standpoint (and from my standpoint) required considerable courage. It was also deliberately provocative, something they had tried to avoid. Yet, they felt that such expressions of disrespect could no longer remain unchallenged.

Francois had made up his mind to confront the Superintendent and to risk whatever the consequences of this confrontation might be for himself and for the Native community. While it was not appropriate for me to attend the meeting, I have a good idea of what Francois said, for he used me to play the role of the shocked Superintendent as he practised his statement.

He informed the Superintendent that, when a meeting was called in the settlement concerning the education of Native children, the people wanted, at the very least, to have representatives on hand as observers. He went on to say that he considered it insulting that the White educators had not seen fit to invite any Indian or Métis people to their meeting. The dumbfounded Superintendent said he understood, that he was sorry and, some little while later, after regaining his composure, conveyed his strong annoyance with this oversight to the school principal who had been responsible for making the local arrangements for the meeting.

While no doubt embarrassed, the principal seemed to take the matter in stride, even though his concept of professionalism did not make acceptable the presence of "laymen" of whatever ethnic stripe at such a meeting. However, the principal's wife, herself a school teacher and a vocal member of the Eurocanadian community, was extremely upset with this event and became abusive in her comments to the Superintendent and to the Native Councillors. She had been generally disturbed by what she felt was happening in the settlement as a result of the Settlement Council's activism and told the Councillors that she had "had it with their [the Council's] f——ing cheekiness."

Meanwhile, ever aware of the vigour of Settlement Council activity, but, as a result of Jack's regular reports, equally conscious of the antagonistic response of a considerable number of the Eurocanadian residents, the Local Government branch sent three important officials to the community. They were to hold a special two-day conference for all government personnel; again, nearly all Eurocanadians in the settlement were government employees. The purpose of the conference was to clarify the government's "developmental approach." While I found their presentations vague, I was told that the "plain English" message was supposed to be: "By all means become involved in community life. But remember that you are transients

while Native people must live here all of their lives. Besides, the time has come for the local residents of northern communities to run their own affairs. Above all, don't pick at them as they try.''

While officials' presentations were none too clear, they were not incoherent and they did not seem antagonistic. Yet, their presentations engendered responses that seemed irrational or at least non-rational. The response of the few Eurocanadian government personnel who had always seemed positive in their attitude and behaviour towards Native people and the Settlement Council was to feel genuinely hurt; they felt that they had been criticized when they did not deserve to be. The response of the majority of the Eurocanadians, who by now seemed antagonistic to the Settlement Council, was one of undisguised anger. They were particularly livid at being called transients even though virtually all government personnel *were* highly transient.

The principal's wife called the CBC radio station in Yellowknife and her recorded statement was aired verbatim. The substance of her statement was: The government people in the Settlement had been told to stay out of local community affairs. She said they were termed transients when some of them had been there three years. Warming to her task, she went on to report that the community had received, largely through local White efforts, a new school, a new nursing station and low-cost rental housing units. Since 90 percent of the local Native people were on welfare, paid for by Eurocanadian taxes, she concluded in very strident terms, ''What *more* could they possibly want from us?''

As a result of this report, which virtually everyone in town heard on the radio, a great deal of additional tension developed. One could see it in both Eurocanadian and Dene faces. Apparently my senses did not deceive me for, two days after the school teacher's radio comments, the Community Club President invited Francois and Jack to the Club's evening meeting for what he termed, trying hard to display a sense of humour, a ''showdown.'' As a result of his invitation, a number of Eurocanadian members of the Club, including the principal and his wife, resigned in disgust.

I was told that at the ''showdown'' influential Eurocanadian Club members and the Settlement Council began a truly amiable dialogue. Francois, having discussed matters with Victoria and members of the Settlement Council, carefully outlined what he felt were the motives and goals of the Council, and of Native people more generally. He indicated that it had never been their intention to ''freeze out'' the local Eurocanadian population and that they were always grateful for their help when appropriately given.

It needs to be stressed that the single Eurocanadian on the Settlement Council, who described himself as a conservative, was in agreement with most actions of the Council. His contributions made him well respected by other Councillors and, in spite of very conservative political views, he was

neither isolated nor embittered if he disagreed with the majority. Indeed, he demonstrated considerable strength of character, for a number of Eurocanadians, whom he had thought to be his friends, were highly critical of his service on the Council.

Actually, as suggested earlier, the Council had abandoned the formal procedures that were supposed to be followed at Council meetings, and deliberately chose to adopt the subtle processes of consensus seeking for which American Indians are so justly famous. More will be said about Council political processes in the conclusion of this essay.

At the "showdown," Jack indicated that, since they lived there (for however short a time), it was just and fair that Eurocanadians have a say in local politics. But he then outlined the history of Indian and Métis experience with Eurocanadian personnel and institutions. This subject was the focus of my study of contact history and I had shared what I had learned with Jack. He concentrated on the ever-growing economic and political dependency which had occurred during the 20th century, and its negative consequences for Native culture and society. Community Club members had no knowledge of this historic process, I was told they listened with patience and interest, asking frequent questions.

Their dialogue lasted into the early morning hours. Discussion centred on the plans and hopes of Council members, and other Native leaders, for the future of the settlement. The remaining Eurocanadian Community Club members explored ways in which they thought they might be able to assist in realizing the goals of self-determination, as Native residents defined these goals.

An appropriate conclusion to the events I have described occurred three days after the "showdown." The "ace reporter" of the Yellowknife CBC radio station visited the community unannounced. He spent the entire day there and talked with many people—Indian, Métis and White. The result was, to my mind, a balanced and fair investigative report of the political situation which prevailed in the community. Many Native people asked me if I had heard it. One elderly Métis woman said: 'You know, that's the first time I ever heard anything good about us [Native people] on the radio."

## Interpretation and Conclusion

Information is lacking for a satisfactory discussion of the denouement of this social drama. In subsequent years, as the Dene self-determination movement gathered momentum throughout the north, the Dene Nation was able to re-establish the pre-eminence of the Chief and Band Council as an effective form of government in this settlement. At the same time the Métis people of the Northwest Territories organized (the Métis Association of the

Northwest Territories) and, for a while, a Métis local represented the interests of the Native people who were not on the Treaty band roll.

By the 1980s, the community was governed by a community council representing the interests of all people in the community with a Native community manager as an executive officer and a Chief who, by virtue of his personal abilities, was successfully mediating between the council and community manager. Local government reportedly works fairly well in serving the interests of Native people, although many people are concerned about what will happen if (and when) the present very able Chief resigns (Driedger, personal communication). But it was the events described above which brought Native people their first experience with local community governance, and it is these events which I now give interpretation.

What I find so intriguing about this drama are the symbolic paradoxes which ensnare all three groups. Native people certainly felt the need for change because of the many, sometimes tragic, problems of daily existence, and because of ominous changes underway or portended by such events as the implementation of a new federal Indian policy, and the proposed construction of gas and oil pipelines. Most seemed to understand that Dene cultural survival was seriously threatened. Yet, many people initially felt they had little choice but to remain passive. They had never acted before as a polity; Eurocanadians had always dominated political matters associated with the settlement. White people controlled the jobs and the dispensation of welfare. Indeed, "town," since it had always been dominated by Eurocanadian personnel and institutions, symbolized things White, just as life in the "bush" symbolized things "really Indian." And for the Dene to take action seemed to require adopting political forms and processes contrary to those which were Indian.

Thus, for the Dene, politics was inseparable from the context of a band-level existence in the forest and tundra, and inseparable from Dene sacred beliefs (Ridington 1968, 1988, 1990; Sharp 1988). Traditional Native political processes stress personal autonomy and centre on consensus seeking, which were essential to survival in the difficult northern environment (see, for example, Savashinsky 1974). In the traditional context "power is a relation between a person and his environment including, but not limited to, other people" (Black 1977:147). As regards relationships with human persons (as opposed to other-than-human persons, see Hallowell 1942, 1960) "power needs to be thought of as the ability to accomplish one's own choices, but without any implication that to do so necessitates control over the actions of others" (Sharp 1988:xv). The attempt to control others can, indeed, create disastrous results in a world where what we regard as secular politics is inextricably a part of a broader, sacred context. The quest for harmony is essential because of this sacred context (D. Smith 1985).

For most Eurocanadians, power is usually thought of in connection with the exercise of control over others, with authority being the legitimate exercise of such control, usually given to a representative few. For the Dene, these notions of control have been repugnant and consensus seeking becomes the necessary, generative, empowering process (cf. Swartz, Turner and Tuden 1966:14-22; Swartz 1968:31-32) in which all who may be affected by any decision have an opportunity to participate in its formulation, if they choose to do so. The goal of consensus seeking is, of course, unanimity; but if that fails, it is at least necessary that all those who are affected by a decision be treated with respect and given their say (that is, be given control, or be empowered).

Eurocanadian political procedures, which allow only limited participation and which foster confrontation, have the potential to generate bad feelings between people and therefore "bad luck"—illness, poor hunting, poor fishing or any number of other problems. For instance, these procedures could give rise to medicine fights, which are attempts by sorcerers to make opponents powerless in a physical and spiritual sense (Ridington 1968; Sharp 1986; D. Smith 1990). The need to try to take control and to be confrontational, in order to have decolonialization, was thus not merely contrary to Indian ways; it was fraught with great potential danger. That the White people, resident in town, were upset was a serious matter as was the deliberate confrontation with the superintendent of schools—however necessary, paradoxically, confrontation and striving for control may have been. Because of the nature of power in traditional Indian belief, some respected Native people felt the self-determination effort was "bad for the Indians."

In the end, the paradox of having to exercise power in ways which are inconsistent with traditional Dene ways, may remain a difficult contradiction for a long time to come. For the Dene as a whole have had little choice but to organize as a polity to cope with the machinations of big government and big business and this struggle shows no sign of ending any time soon. As Helm remarks (1980:236) the need for large-scale organizing raises the issue of whether or not Dene "ancient social values and principles based in the small scale intimate society can be sustained, or at least satisfactorily transmuted, rather than obliterated."

Both the local White residents and the Local Government bureaucrats located beyond the community regarded the process of consensus seeking utilized at Council meetings as inefficient and chaotic. They considered it to be evidence of Native peoples' ineptness or inexperience at self-governance. They also felt that Indian political processes inevitably led to problems such as the sewage truck fiasco. Native people needed "encouragement," but sooner or later the Indians had to assimilate Eurocanadian political

processes. It is doubtful if, at that time, any Eurocanadian even considered the possibility of Eurocanadians adopting Dene ways.

Another paradox suggested in the narrative had to do with the fact that the self-determination movement was initiated by young Native people, at least half of whom were young women, and not older males. In traditional Dene society it was the elders, especially male elders, who by virtue of their greater experience and hence knowledge of life in the "bush," were the most influential people. Victoria, as a "new Indian" (Steiner 1968), felt the time had come for her people to take the many risks entailed in Native political activism. Indeed, she felt they had little choice. Victoria, more than any other Native person in town at that time, was influenced by the self-determination efforts underway elsewhere in Canada and the United States. She also seemed to realize that the time was ripe for pressuring the Department of Local Government. Victoria was certainly a charismatic figure for the young Dene, nearly all of whom could speak, read and write English, as they were strongly influenced by other aspects of Eurocanadian culture (for instance, Eurocanadian youth counterculture). Victoria was also admired by older people because she was well spoken and had a Whiteman's education, but because she was a young woman, obviously quite influenced by White culture, and had essentially no knowledge of traditional Dene life in the "bush," she really had little prestige. In the end, perhaps, it was the priest's influence, more than any other factor, which made it possible for the young people's efforts to "get out the vote" to be as successful—albeit limitedly so—as it was.

As far as local Eurocanadian residents were concerned, despite the presence of a few who believed Native people to be innately inferior and thereby unfit for self-determination, most certainly believed in the Eurocanadian values of freedom and democracy and that these values entailed local Dene rights to be self-determining. Some, I know, were even embarrassed by the fact that they lived in homes clearly superior to the best of government-owned Native rental units. Yet, they did not really expect the Settlement Council election to change the balance of power in the community. When it appeared to be doing so, and when government personnel who were their superiors demonstrated support for the Settlement Council, most found themselves quite disturbed for reasons they could not fully understand nor rationally articulate.

The process of decolonialization that was underway, of course, threatened White objective statuses of privilege; their very occupations were based upon Eurocanadian control. Yet, while this was true and could in part account for their antipathy to the new Council, I felt there had to be something more deeply involved, accounting for their apparently irrational antagonism towards the Council. Moreover, if it was simply a matter of their dominant

occupational statuses being threatened, why did Eurocanadians choose to be so transient?

After reflection I have come to realize that at least part of what was involved at this deeper level relates to what Freire (1984:532-533) calls "false generosity," "generosity," that is, that promotes injustice. It was false generosity which allowed Eurocanadians to accept their positions of control and still have good "self-images." Due to the "generosity" of Eurocanadians, the Dene were being prepared by White people to one day take their place as equals in Canadian society. Local Eurocanadians, as evinced in the school teacher's radio comments, felt they were the ones chiefly responsible for ensuring that new housing came, a school was built, and welfare dispensed. But of course for Eurocanadians to express their "generosity," injustice had to be perpetuated, not ended; the Dene needed to be "encouraged," but they were not ready for running their own affairs, and presumably would not be ready for some time to come. Only when they had properly assimilated White culture—for instance, when they could run a winter carnival in accordance with precise schedules of times and places for events or run a Council meeting according to parliamentary rules of procedure—would they truly be ready to take their place as equals in the "Canadian Mosaic."

It was false generosity which led the school teacher to ask, in plaintive terms: "What *more* could they possibly want from us?" Had not the local Eurocanadians always been humanitarians, having the best interests of Native peoples in mind and at heart? And yet, not only were the Native people dissatisfied and ungracious after all they had done, the superiors of the Eurocanadians in the government bureaucracy supported the Native people and called the local White people transients. For them to do so seemed to denigrate all that the local Eurocanadians had accomplished on behalf of Native people. In symbolic terms, the Department of Local Government had struck at perhaps the only factor which, at a deep level, local Eurocanadians could use to justify to themselves their positions of economic privilege and political domination, that is, their role as humanitarian benefactors.

The point that the school teacher and other local Whites missed is that humanitarianism which furthers colonial domination is dehumanizing; it is thus false generosity. Moreover, local Eurocanadians seemed able to overlook all kinds of problems extant in the community, in part perhaps because they were mesmerized by the belief that they were being humane and generous. Furthermore, their ignorance of northern history, combined with the brief periods of time most were in the community, caused their failure to understand that they were, to use a now quaint expression, more a part of the problem than a part of the solution.

What I am talking about under the rubric of "false generosity" is, of course, an aspect of what was known to colonialists during the heyday of colonialism as "The Whiteman's Burden." False generosity also made it possible for American slaveholders to justify slavery to themselves and to each other even where it was contradictory to some of their most cherished values. And just as the culture in which slavery flourished was an historical creation of both the slaver and the slave—as Genovese (1971; 1976) so brilliantly demonstrates—so also, as we have seen, the barriers to decolonialization in northern Canada are, paradoxically, the historic products of both Eurocanadian and Dene cultures.

Officials of the Local Government branch in Yellowknife supported the nascent self-determination movement partly because they believed in self-determination—in ethnocentric terms, of course—and because of their ambitions to attain provincial status for the Northwest Territories. None ever considered, so far as I am aware, that self-determination might have to occur in terms quite different from the Eurocanadian; they simply assumed that Native political processes must harmonize with Eurocanadian political forms. While they were impressed with Native activism, they were distressed by Council procedures and found them acceptable only for an interim period as the Dene familiarized themselves with "proper" procedures. Hence, their support of the decolonialization movement in this northern town was motivated by a false generosity which imagined that Native people could be free and equal under an imposed, foreign form of government. It was also one which could be rigidly controlled by themselves, a matter Wilf Bean, a former member of the Local Government branch, explores in his article "Colonialism in the Communities" (1977). Bean also has written (1977:137):

> Despite the individual beliefs of various local government officers, the territorial administration as a whole has had no serious intent of allowing either communities or Native peoples any significant degree of autonomy or any real chance to run their own affairs.

In my view many Local Government people were sincere in their desire to see self-determination occur in this settlement; but Bean throws open to question whether or not the territorial government as a whole then truly sought such ends.

In writing this essay I have become ever more convinced that fieldwork is, as Marcus (1986:166) remarks, central to bottom-up building and reconstructing of classic theories regarding political and economic change. For I think the present study of the praxis of a local level self-determination movement has revealed subtle symbolic barriers to political and economic change which might otherwise remain unrevealed, since they involve mat-

ters which are liminal (for instance, the sacred dimensions of Dene political processes; the underlying reason for Eurocanadian antipathy toward the movement).

Achieving a post-colonial society requires changing ways of giving meaning to experience which are strongly embedded in the cultures of the colonized and the colonizer, and which are also products of their historical interaction. It therefore becomes evident, as Freire (1984:532) suggests, that "the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed [is] to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well."

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## Notes

1. While stylistically awkward, I eschew mentioning this settlement by name to avoid any unpleasant repercussions for the key actors in this drama. Since those familiar with my work will know the identity of the town, and since others can discover this identity with little difficulty, I must trust readers to be discreet.
2. Denendeh is to be a province-like jurisdiction within the geographic area of traditional Indian occupancy, incorporating features meant to ensure meaningful Dene cultural survival (for details on the nature of Denendeh, see Asch 1984).
3. At a couple of points I am unable to provide as rich an account as I would like since I was in the "bush" with hunters and trappers and had to learn about events second-hand on my return. Also, I feel obliged not to elaborate on certain matters for ethical reasons.
4. All personal names used in this account are of course pseudonyms.
5. The ethnic diversity of this community, combined in complex ways with major historical acculturative pressures and demoralization in consequence of the deaths of many respected elders due to disease, made the chief and councillor system ineffective by the 1940s.

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