



Decolonization begins with understanding

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The United States, among other nations, exists because of a system called settler colonialism. This system assumes the validity of land ownership and creates wealth through the possession of land, animals, plants, and enslaved human beings. For the system to work, Indigenous people, culture, history, and futurity (that is, having the ability to create their own future) must be erased. Settler colonialism enables excessive physical comfort while causing psychological discomfort among White people who unconsciously practice various “moves to innocence” to absolve their guilt for perpetuating centuries of oppression, violence, and imagined supremacy over other beings. Popular literature and movies, and even social justice movements and justice-oriented educational practices, demonstrate these various moves, all while avoiding the ultimate question: *what does a decolonized world actually look like?* Valid answers to this question create scenarios that can't be reconciled with settler plans for the world.

KEY DEFINITIONS

This article challenges two assumptions about the world that many people never question: first, that humans can and should own land, and second, that plant, animal, and mineral products should be cultivated and exchanged for human physical comfort.

I begin this brief with these two assumptions because they form the basis for many of the other, more complex ideas in Tuck and Yang's article. Their ideas explain supremacist thinking and policies; and, more uncomfortably, how even ideas and movements that seem justice-oriented can perpetuate injustice when viewed through the lens of settler colonialism.

External and internal colonialism are not mutually exclusive. Indeed both operate within the U. S., which like many other nations depends on food, housing material, and human physical and intellectual labor from within and beyond the nation.

External colonialism (AKA exploitation colonization)

Moving earthly beings and materials from one area to another. Creating a new frontier or war front. Labeling earthly beings and materials “natural resources.” Settlers take these actions for profit or physical comfort.

Internal colonialism

Managing earthly beings and materials within the lands designated as belonging to the imperial nation. Includes control of beings such as incarceration and schooling; to ensure that those in power stay in power.

Three literal or symbolic entities describe how human beings are categorized settler colonialism; these may be confused with other entities:

- 1) *Settler vs. immigrants*: Settlers come to a place and displace the Indigenous people, culture, and laws. Immigrants come to a place and assimilate into the people, culture, and laws that are already there.
- 2) *Slave vs. person*: Enslaved human beings are valued only for the labor they provide. The

¹ As a Euro-American woman striving away from Whiteness, I created this brief because I believe the ideas in it must be confronted by a broader group than may have access to Tuck and Yang's 2012 article. This brief represents my best attempt to summarize and interpret the ideas presented by Tuck and Yang. All errors or misunderstandings are my own.

person (with thoughts, feelings, will, and plans of their own) underneath the slave is excess and must be contained or eliminated.

3) *Indian vs. Native person.* In popular language and culture, an Indian is a settler-created symbol for, among other entities, an enemy, a remnant of the past, or a storied ancestor. In contrast, native and indigenous people exist in the U. S. (by 2010 Census estimates, about 5.2M persons); live in rural, reservation, and urban areas; existed before this continent was colonized; and will continue to exist in the future.

SETTLER MOVES TOWARD INNOCENCE

Settlers make six moves to position ourselves as innocent in originating and perpetuating the violence inherent in the system of settler colonialism:

The Indian Grandmother Complex. This move (formally, “settler nativism”) means claiming an Indigenous ancestor, usually on the grandmother’s side because the Indian princess is a more romantic and peaceful image than a warrior. By claiming a Native ancestor, settlers self-distance from the violence and treachery perpetuated on Native peoples to take land, livelihood, lives, and culture; while continuing to benefit from this violence.

Blood quantum laws enabled the U. S. government to dictate “who counts” as Native. Restricting tribal membership based on ancestry allowed the settler state to decrease—on paper—the numbers of Native individuals over time, which was helpful to the mission of taking their land and not having to offer services or payments. Blood quantum laws and popular culture also allowed settlers with Native ancestors to “stay white”; fewer Indians meant fewer claims to stolen lands.

Showcasing how rules and laws change to benefit settlers; the *one-drop rule*—applied to slaves, meant that one Black ancestor made one a slave. This was better for settlers if there were more slaves: more slaves = more free labor.

The adoption fantasy. This move is prevalent in popular literature and film, ranging from the widely-read James Fennimore Cooper of the mid-1800s, made

into *Last of the Mohicans* several times; to 1990’s *Dances with Wolves*, to 2012’s *The Descendants*, set in Hawaii. In these stories, a settler “becomes without becoming” Native. The settler suffers, which creates sympathy and helps to absolve their inherent guilt. The settler adopts enough of Native life and culture to be able to lay a legitimate claim to Native land (the settler project all along).

Important to note: Cooper’s fictional works were extremely popular and helped to create the notion of a single “America” in his White readership. He ignored the historical events of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, and subsequent Trail of Tears, using his fiction to erase Native peoples from the land before these events actually occurred. Similar to misinformation campaigns today, this entertaining subterfuge causes readers to forget reality, and invent a new (false) reality that is conveniently more aligned with preserving one’s positive self-image.

Calling everything colonialism. In this move, colonization is equated with other forms and experiences of oppression. Likewise, decolonization is also equated with other efforts to humanize and win justice for non-White, non-heteronormative people.

Another aspect of calling everything colonialism is that when it’s convenient or necessary to keep settlers in power (and on stolen land), people of color are moved between Native, slave, and settler categories: such as when immigrants are encouraged to use the education system to achieve the “American dream” of land ownership (slave->settler), or the instance of Alaskan Aleut tribal members being interned in camps during WWII so they couldn’t align themselves with the Japanese (Native->slave).

Innocence through awareness. The authors uplift Franz Fanon and criticize Paulo Freire to explain this move. Readers of Freire, who wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, are encouraged to *free their minds* through developing self-awareness of systemic oppression. In contrast, Fanon calls for new behaviors, laws, and structures that would *free land* from settlers and return it to Native

peoples. Innocence through awareness means stopping at Freire, to unconsciously (or consciously) avoid thinking about what it would truly mean to give up settler property.

At risk-ing / Asterisk-ing Indigenous peoples. Education and social science professionals are responsible for this move, which includes a series of practices common to normative, large-scale, policy, and population-based research:

At-risking means labeling Indigenous people and learners using deficit perspectives; while simultaneously perpetuating low-quality, culturally ignorant education and health policies.

Asterisking means that in educational and social science research, it is acceptable practice to conduct studies on small numbers of Indigenous peoples; which then justifies excluding them from analyses—and policy solutions—or lumping them with other groups; and to ignore the large numbers of Indigenous people (about two-thirds) who live in urban areas.

Re-occupation and urban homesteading. This final settler move is exemplified by the Occupy [Wall Street] movement and by those seeking to bring farming and nature back to cities. The Occupy movement sought to address the wealth disparity between “the 1%” (who own more than 50% of the monetary wealth in the U. S.) and “the 99%”.

In popular culture, the Occupy movement is about justice and fairness. However, the 99% are settlers, essentially proposing to redistribute land stolen from Native peoples from a few wealthy settlers to many, less wealthy settlers. In Oakland, CA, the Occupy movement (dubbed “Decolonize Oakland”) failed because actual decolonization would mean giving land back to the Ohlone people, who are indigenous to the Oakland, CA area.

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“Solidarity is an uneasy, reserved, and unsettled matter that neither reconciles present grievances nor forecloses future conflict.” (p. 3)

INCOMMENSURABILITY

Incommensurability is defined as “having no common basis, measure, or standard of comparison; utterly disproportionate.”

Decolonization, or returning Native lands to Native peoples, is at odds with settler life and goals, even some social justice goals. When we look through the decolonization lens, three movements typically considered benevolent only serve to further settler-Native-slave relations in the world:

- 1) *Third-world decolonization:* U. S. scholars and activists who work on justice issues related to colonialism elsewhere in the world ignore that their work is occurring on stolen lands.
- 2) *Abolition:* Ending slavery came with the promise of (stolen Native) land to former slave-owners. The ultimate, largely unrealizable achievement for those formerly oppressed was, and remains (stolen Native) land ownership.
- 3) *Critical pedagogies:* The education movements that seek to help youth and inhabitants understand place and examine the untold history of places, especially urban spaces, ignores Native sovereignty over the land being studied.

CONCLUSION

For someone on U. S. soil, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” does not mean giving property ownership to Indigenous peoples. Native peoples don’t believe that land can be owed. Instead, the title of this article means grappling with such questions as:

- If this land is returned to its Native peoples, where would I live?
- Where will my children/family live?
- What form will my wealth take?
- How will I eat/drink/survive?
- How will I relate to the natural world?

Decolonization means reordering the existing world order. It is unpleasant and *unsettling*.