

Colonialism on the Ground

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At one time our ancestors would have had difficulty imagining living in a state of unfreedom. Now we have difficulty imagining living in a state of freedom. This is perhaps the most profound impact of colonialism in our lives. It reveals a limitation in thinking so severe that it prevents us from reclaiming our inherent rights as Indigenous Peoples of this land, even in our dreams.

Colonialism is the massive fog that has clouded our imaginations regarding who we could be, excised our memories of who we once were, and numbed our understanding of our current existence. Colonialism is the force that disallows us from recognizing its confines while at the same time limiting our vision of possibilities. Colonialism is the farce that compels us to feel gratitude for small concessions while our fundamental freedoms are denied. Colonialism has set the parameters of our imaginations to constrain our vision of what is possible.

To be sure, the brand of colonialism in the United States today differs from the brands of earlier times when imperial forces from Europe established colonies in the “New World” as a means of expanding the wealth and power of their nations while also battling with competing imperial nations over pieces of the global pie. Thus, in the United States American schools teach our children that the “colonial era” ended when the United States gained its freedom from Great Britain. However, this denial of itself is simply one of colonialism’s myths. This denial is so extreme that even today the United States government insists on the language of “possessions” rather than “colonies” to identify its holdings outside the contiguous land base it claims in North America, despite the fact that many of them fit classic definitions of colonies precisely because they have not been absorbed into the state. But, the interest in domination and control over territories was established even before the entity of the United States was born. As American colonies gained their independence from their Mother Country, they sought to further expand their wealth and influence through the continuing invasion and acquisition of other Peoples’ lands and resources and the subjugation of the Original Peoples. The shedding of the constraints of their Mother Country simply facilitated and hastened that project. The United States soundly expanded its empire and is now so deeply entrenched in its colonial acquisitions that to anyone but the most conscientious observer, those roots have been lost in obscurity.

The hope, perhaps, is that Indigenous Peoples will eventually be incorporated into the lowest rungs of society enough to forget our colonized status. When we have forgotten, the United States and its citizens are ameliorated of wrongdoing and there will be no need for restitution for the crime against humanity that is colonialism. Indigenous Peoples, therefore, must be conscientious observers because the colonizing society will exercise all means to compel our historical amnesia.

For Indigenous Peoples U.S. colonialism meant the invasion and subsequent large-scale theft of our lands and continuing domination over the meager lands we retained. It meant the systematic interference in Indigenous ways of being and assaults on all aspects of Indigenous life including our physical bodies, our means of sustenance, our spirituality, our languages, our gender relations, and our kinship, economic, and educational systems as well as both natural and human laws.

In America, the process of destroying indigeneity was dramatically accelerated by the monumental loss of life that occurred as a consequence of exposure to new diseases. While colonizer scholars and popular culture suggest that loss of life due to disease was either inevitable or unavoidable, this too is a colonial myth. The reality is that Europeans and later European Americans understood that their presence in the Americas triggered pandemics that were devastating Indigenous populations. Yet, they chose to keep coming because they held no regard for the lives of Indigenous Peoples and massive die-offs of the populations clearly served their colonial interests. Not only were they unrepentant about their participation in our microbial slaughter, they were often celebratory. Thus when our populations were already severely weakened, the process of colonization was implemented much more effectively.

To understand the process phase of colonialism, that is colonization, it might be useful to articulate the general chain of events in the American context. Many of the colonial tactics were borrowed from previous colonial powers, or have since been replicated by global colonial powers, precisely because they work so effectively. Explorers and traders were typically the forerunners of American empire, seeking opportunities for exploitation and gauging the extent of Indigenous resistance. Soldiers and military forts came next with the purpose of establishing American supremacy in a region, not just to subdue Indigenous populations but also to contest other colonial interests. This was important for initially securing economic preeminence, often manifested in the form of the fur trade. White invaders intent on “settling” Indigenous lands soon followed the forts and soldiery and they paved the way for missionaries to implement their own imperialist agenda. Under the guise of saving souls and “civilizing” Indigenous people, missionaries implemented what we would characterize today as policies of ethnocide. Settlers then clamored for title to Indigenous lands, pressuring an eager and supportive U.S. government to formalize and legalize their usurpation of Indigenous lands and the subjugation of Indigenous Peoples. Missionaries, Indian agents, traders, settlers, and the U.S. government then all worked together to launch systematic and profound attacks on Indigenous bodies and ways of being, dividing us and crushing us into submission. All segments of our populations were subject to colonial violence and brutality, including the children who bore the brunt of colonizer indoctrination and manipulation in the genocidal boarding schools.

Divide and conquer techniques are the hallmark of colonial manipulation. Those indigenous individuals considered the friendliest to colonizer interests (that is, who offered the least amount of resistance) were singled out for special favors and rewards until they were firmly co-opted to do the colonizer’s bidding. Those who resisted colonizer interests most vehemently were targeted for particularly oppressive punishments. The collaborators are often distinguished in written records as the “friendly” or “good” Indians, while those who continued to resist co-optation were quickly identified as the “savage” or “hostile” Indians. The leaders,

thinkers, peacemakers, warriors, spiritual leaders, healers and teachers who did not fall in line with the emerging order were isolated, dehumanized and diminished. Thus, colonizers ably and superbly fostered resentments between the two groups, pitting them against one another and always calling on the favorite “friendlies” to monitor their colonized cohort and enforce the colonial system. These divisions severely eroded the unity in Indigenous societies that were often simultaneously devastated from disease, warfare, forced removals, loss of homelands, mass killings, and policies of ethnic cleansing. The tremendous harm caused by generations of factionalism as a direct consequence of colonialism cannot be overstated as it has greatly affected the capacity of Indigenous Peoples to mobilize broadly for significant change.

Even today, those who attempt to restore Indigenous ways of being in the modern world are dismissed by colonizers and their colonized puppets as angry, unrealistic, naïve, less sophisticated, or even less intelligent than those mimicking the values and ideals of the dominant society. The “friendly” Indians invested in whatever small perks they gain from the colonial system are deeply devoted to maintaining the existing system and they defend its justness at every turn. Or, they have individually reaped substantial prestige and power from toting the colonizer’s party line and as a consequence turn their back on the suffering of their Indigenous communities while at the same time applauding the amazing resiliency of the People. They see no need to seriously challenge the existing system because having bought into the American dream they are well on their way to achieving it. They actively participate in the blind march toward “progress,” regardless of how that march continues to devastate the People, their homelands, or their relationship with the rest of the universe. Some of them talk about tweaking the existing system, maybe passing better legislation on this issue over here, or developing a more strategic economic plan over there, and they have abandoned the struggle for liberation. They, in fact, do not want liberation because it might affect their comfortable status. And, because these “friendlies” offer no threat to the existing power structure, they become the favored pets, routinely lauded by the colonizers for their superior intelligence, insight, and commitment to the well-being of their People. They are paraded in front of colonizer audiences as Indian models of success.

Still others live in daily fear. They, too, have abandoned the struggle for liberation because they see no way out of this overwhelming oppression. Having grown accustomed to living as subjugated people, they might reap only mild benefits from the colonial system while injustices occur all around them, yet they are afraid of what might happen if they were to engage in resistance. For them, liberation is simply not conceivable, and they believe that if the colonized can never win freedom, then we must simply try to negotiate the best scraps we can while we numb ourselves with chemicals, feed our addictions, and entertain ourselves with material goods and Hollywood entertainment. For if we challenge colonialism, even those small privileges might be taken away from us and we might face increased harassment and assaults, we might be the ones carted off to colonial prisons, and we might be the ones who have our children taken away. These fears are not unjustified. They can keep us immobilized from enacting transformative change. Rather than challenge the colonial system, we live according to its values. We become low-level enforcers of its rules, replicating colonial injustice in our own communities, afraid to even imagine a different reality.

Our current reality as colonized Peoples echoes the reality of colonized Peoples around the world. However, in the United States, with the advent of casino gaming and other forms of economic development among some Indigenous populations, it is easy to be seduced into believing that things really are better. For example, many contemporary historians and scholars of Indigenous Peoples highlight Indigenous agency and resiliency in their analysis of our reality. They describe the historical experiences of Indigenous Peoples as processes of cultural transformation or of evolutionary and dynamic change. They celebrate Indigenous projects and plans. All of this, on the surface, seems to make sense. But, the question is, “better” relative to what?

For example, if visitors came to my home community, they would be inundated with positive messages about all the good projects happening on our reservation. They would receive a tour of our casino, of the recent housing development and the plans for the new community center. They would be shown our water tower and the water treatment system as well as our tribal courthouse. These visitors might be invited to our annual wacipi (powwow) held in August of every year. And, they would be told about our strong youth program, the language and culture classes offered, our community garden, the tribal police patrolling our reservation lands, and the chemical dependency support system we have in place. Indeed, these projects and activities inspire a sense of accomplishment and progress in all of our community members.

Yet, these projects, however worthy of celebration, do not tell the full story. If a broader view of history is employed to examine our current status, a different picture emerges with a more painful significance and legacy. If we delve more deeply, we learn that the reason we need a casino is because in the nineteenth century the invaders stripped our People of our homeland and with it our entire means of subsistence. Settler society systematically destroyed the life of abundance and sustainability that we knew for thousands of years so that they could exploit and destroy the resources in our lands while denying most of us even the right of occupancy. Since we were dispossessed from our original land base and colonizer society killed many Indigenous animals and plants to near extinction and devastated our homeland environments, our People have experienced lives of exceptional poverty.

For example, at one time our People maintained a highly evolved and spiritually fulfilling relationship with the buffalo and we depended on them as a major source of our basic needs including food, clothing, and shelter. But today, even after obtaining a new means of economic subsistence (at least partial subsistence) that helps put food on the table, our casino remains a poor substitute for the buffalo while also fostering a new set of addictions and a compromising of Dakota values (anti-materialism, reciprocity, respectful kinship relations). It in no way can satisfactorily replace our former relationship with the buffalo or the kind of engagement we previously had with our homeland. In pre-colonized time we sustained ourselves in accordance with natural laws, each generation possessing extraordinary capacities for economic self-sufficiency and self-determination, while now we have a gaming operation that helps sustain the community, but at a heavy social and spiritual cost that does not induce the same sense of individual or collective self-sufficiency and self-determination. Furthermore, we also know that relying on gaming for our well-being places us in a precarious position because colonizing

society could strip it from us at any time. A larger scope of comparison from the self-determination that existed in pre-colonial days to the costly compromise with oppressive external authorities for limited economic gain that occurs today in the context of gaming, indicates that progress has not been achieved, at least if progress is intended to indicate some kind of improvement. Instead, we cannot help but look at this loss of complete economic self-determination as simply another manifestation of colonialism. Are our lives “better” as a consequence of gaming? The significant question is, better than what?

Similarly, our water tower is necessary today because it provides the community with clean water that is distributed to all the reservation households. That is extremely important. In light of the desecration to the river that runs through our reservation where our ancestors drew their water, however, it seems a small consolation. Our river is now so toxic that we cannot even swim in its waters because the poisons, stemming largely from corporate run-off and farm pesticides and fertilizers, will leach through our skin. The fish and other beings who inhabit the river are currently threatened and they too have become toxic. They, in turn, threaten all the wildlife in the region who rely on them for subsistence, including us as Indigenous People. While we, at least, have the capacity to severely limit our fish consumption, other beings who rely on fish cannot do the same and they too become poisoned as a consequence. Now our man-made water tower sits atop a bluff beside a river from which we can no longer drink or eat. Is this “better”?

As for some of the other institutions we have in place modeled on the U.S. (in)justice system, we are merely replicating internally colonizer ways that have harmed generations of our People. We have become invested in punishment as a response to crimes, rather than community healing. At the same time the support systems we had in place prior to colonization to sanction appropriate behavior are either severely damaged or non-existent.

The processes of invasion, conquest, land theft and colonization do not just contribute to harmful behaviors within our communities—they cause them. When settler society denies our people our lands and ways of life that sustained us and nourished us physically, emotionally and spiritually, the population suffers. When people are routinely dehumanized, we forget how to interact humanely.

The attacks on Indigeneity in the U.S. have not only been systematic, the government has also doggedly sustained them in various forms over centuries, many of them until the present day. Hence, it was not only one generation of Indigenous Peoples that suffered from boarding school abuses and the ethnocide perpetrated in those schools, it was multiple generations. It was not only one generation of Indigenous Peoples that was subjected to relentless religious imperialism, it was multiple generations. It was not only one generation that suffered from various crimes against humanity, it was multiple generations. For instance, Indigenous Peoples generally acknowledge the harms resulting from the federally-mandated and government and church run boarding schools (such as the practices of severe corporal punishment as well as physical and sexual abuse), but we have not learned how to effectively heal from those generational traumas that are now perpetuated in our families and communities, nor have we been able to stop the cycles of abuse and chemical dependency

from afflicting our populations. Even today, there is a palpable sense of desperation in most of our communities. We have accepted trauma as a way of life and we continue to harm ourselves and others. All of this occurs in the context of a brutal and ongoing colonization. Yet, settler society has never rectified most of the crimes against humanity they perpetrated against our ancestors and ourselves and most of the losses we have sustained acutely affect our populations today. Rather than addressing the monumental crimes against humanity inflicted on Indigenous Peoples throughout the country, the U.S. criminal (in)justice system chooses instead to incarcerate our people in response to relatively milder crimes, in punishment for the consequences of their colonization of our Peoples.

The U.S. (in)justice system is now the predominant channel through which we help to funnel the dejected from our communities and it is the system that relentlessly continues to wrest our people away. The vast majority of our Indigenous brothers and sisters who end up doing time in the criminal (in)justice system are also victims of horrendous abuses which are colonialism's legacy, including structural racism and a constant degradation of personhood. In addition, most never had adequate legal representation, they typically have harsher sentences than their non-Indigenous peers, and they are subject to brutal and inhumane prison conditions in which indigeneity is constantly attacked and dehumanization is routine.

Yet, there is little resistance to colonialism in many of our communities and we continue to exhibit harmful behaviors to others and ourselves. Many of those harmful behaviors begin early and colonizer society criminalizes them. Our severe social problems are a reflection of our state of colonization. What Indigenous family is not affected by chemical dependency? By some form of violence? What community is not plagued by high rates of addictions, depression, suicide, incarceration, and early mortality? Our communities have normalized pain and suffering to such an extent that many of our people do not know or can even envision a life different from the one we have experienced and seen modeled for us. Many of our people contemplate suicide as children and then slowly enact lifestyles that facilitate an early death, either through violence, accidents, or compromised health. How many of our people have been killed or injured in car accidents or ended up incarcerated because of violent crimes perpetrated under the influence of drugs or alcohol? The latest harmful drug to sweep through our community is crystal meth and it is devastating the lives of our young people. The reality is that well people do not use crystal meth. Well people do not feed their addictions. Well people do not commit suicide. Still, these behaviors are not the consequences of weak or inferior individuals. These behaviors are a direct outcome of a colonization process that sinks people into a state of despair and does not offer any recognizable alternatives.

Against this overwhelming backdrop, if we attempt to identify "progress" in the community, what could possibly qualify? Suddenly the chemical dependency or addiction treatment programs we now offer can offer only a small bit of hope in the face of a devastating social reality.

This is in severe conflict with Indigenous ways of being prior to colonization. From the time children were born, they were embraced by a whole, nurturing community deeply invested in producing individuals who would be healthy, contributing members of society.

Amidst constant love and compassion, our ancestors raised children with strict teachings about how to be a good relative, and what was acceptable behavior according to the communal ethic. Our communities praised the positive behaviors and publicly celebrated individuals during rites of passage as well as for actions that benefited the community. If, after years of this upbringing, individuals still perpetrated a terrible crime, their behavior would be considered so aberrant, they would likely face harsh consequences such as death or banishment as a way to restore balance and peace to the community. Today, we employ similarly harsh consequences, not as a way to restore balance and peace, but as a means of punishment, without providing the years of communal support, teaching, and nurturing. Consequently, after incarceration, many of our people return home only to repeat offenses. This does nothing to help heal our communities. Meanwhile, settler society locks away our relatives in white colonial institutions—individuals with tremendous gifts and strengths to potentially offer our communities—often for years at a time.

Similarly, the corresponding cultural programs in my community, while worthwhile and important, are also responses to tremendous devastation wrought from colonialism. We now have an annual wacipi (powwow) when dancing and singing at one time accompanied part of our daily existence. When our dances were outlawed and Indian agents jailed practitioners of “heathen” rituals, we eliminated our practice of them, practiced them in secrecy, or learned to adjust our traditions to colonial regulations. We learned how to cloak our traditions in monikers of settler society. We now have a grand entry in which we carry the American flag, the ultimate icon of our own subjugation, out of apparent respect for our veterans who fought to enforce American interests throughout the world, thereby expanding the American empire. And, because we could not have our traditional dances frequently under colonial rule, we learned to concentrate them into one weekend a year. Thus, even this “celebration of culture” is marred with colonial compromises.

One of the starkest examples of the misplaced argument for Indigenous resiliency occurs in the area of language. Our high school age youth are offered the opportunity to take our language in the local high school and there is an occasional class offered to other interested community members. These classes are absolutely essential today and they are worthy of celebration. However, before any of us can get carried away with a celebration based on some notion of progress, we have to remember that the urgency regarding intensive language programming today exists because most of our languages are hanging on the edge of extinction. If we do not take drastic and immediate steps to revive our languages, we will lose them. This, too, is not a coincidence, but is a direct consequence of the U.S. government’s policy of cultural genocide perpetrated against Indigenous children through brutal boarding schools and reservation day schools. Thus, to anyone committed to Indigenous languages, there is a mixture of excitement about the growing language movements in our communities coupled with a sense of sheer panic about the losses our cultures have sustained. At the end of 2007 we buried three fluent speaking Dakota elders in Minnesota and we can count on two hands all the fluent Dakota speakers remaining on our Minnesota reservations. What does this say about our “agency”? About our “resiliency”? For those Indigenous Peoples who already lost their languages, do they maintain a sense of “resiliency” and “agency”? Or, are they

mourning their tremendous loss and grieving as a people? If the latter is true, it suggests a rejection of the notion of mere cultural change (as opposed to cultural loss) and challenges the notion of vibrancy and agency. It suggests instead that the forces of colonialism were historically so brutal and effective that some of our people and traditions have not been able to survive them. Not because we are weak, not because we are inferior, but because the power of colonialism has been, in some instances, too devastating to overcome.

Thus, Indigenous projects and activities that have come to symbolize “progress” in some academic circles may only be seen as such by examining ourselves through an elitist and very narrow scope of history. If we take a broad view of history, the argument of any notion of progress, agency or resiliency becomes impossible because we ultimately have to account for the loss of Indigenous self-determination and the violent, unremitting assaults on our bodies, lands, and spirits. It is not acceptable for colonialism’s apologists, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to high-jack the framing of our experiences.

Ah, but some might argue that Indigenous Peoples in the United States are sovereign nations and are already self-determined. By what standards? Every system and institution that we bump up against on a daily basis is not of our making, but has been imposed under colonial rule. The economic system, land tenure system, educational system, social welfare system, governmental structure, religious institutions are all colonial institutions that continue to oppress Indigenous Peoples and deny Indigenous liberation. Even freedoms that theoretically apply to all American citizens, such as religious freedom, are routinely denied to Indigenous Peoples. We do not even have control over the protection of our ancestors’ remains. Certainly, the fundamental freedoms that are necessary for Indigenous ways of being, such as access to homeland, clean air and water, are not part of our reality. What, in our lives, do we have complete control over? While we, along with other anti-statist communities, occasionally experience what Hakim Bey identifies as Temporary Autonomous Zones (created as an alternative to the existing hegemonic order), we have yet to produce lasting Indigenous communities in the U.S. that operate fully outside of a colonial existence. Instead, we create spaces where our ways of being are practiced and nurtured, where we attempt to liberate ourselves from the oppression that surrounds our daily existence, where it is good to be Indigenous. We make them last as long as we can, but because they, as of yet, cannot be sustained, we are forced to return to the “real world” that smothers with an oppressive weight not all of us can bear to carry. Self-determination is an impossibility under colonial rule.

Meaningful change will require dramatic action on our part that can move us beyond colonial interference. If we as Indigenous Peoples in the United States ever want a liberated future for our future generations or ourselves, we have to work toward decolonization. Decolonization is “the intelligent, calculated, and active resistance to the forces of colonialism that perpetuate the subjugation and/or exploitation of our minds, bodies, and lands, and it is engaged for the ultimate purpose of overturning the colonial structure and realizing Indigenous liberation.”¹ A growing awareness of colonialism inexorably leads to a simultaneous dissatisfaction with the situation and a growing unrest. This, in turn, has the potential to lead to revolutionary praxis. Thus, recognition of this colonial reality is the first step toward our liberation. We cannot resist what we cannot identify and name. Then we need to begin to

imagine an alternative reality. Our colonizers have told us that we must accept the way things are because we cannot change them. That is, we must accept our own subjugation and their domination as a natural and inevitable state. Decolonization is a rejection of that logic. It therefore requires opening up the mind to new visions of what is possible. If we were not subject to the authority or presence of the United States government and its citizens what would we want our lives to look like? The struggle for decolonization requires us to identify clearly our objectives as Indigenous Peoples and to critically question whether those objectives are constrained by the parameters of thought set by colonialism, or whether they traverse those parameters and reflect our desires as free, Indigenous Peoples of the land. If this critical interrogation of our own vision does not occur, even upon overturning colonialism we would run the risk of replicating colonial institutions and systems among our own populations.

Lest critics insist that a recognition of colonialism means condemning Indigenous Peoples to a perpetual state of victimage, let me state now that this position does not deny Indigenous capacity for action and resistance, but only that our actions are often violently limited within a colonial structure. One of the criticisms frequently hurled at decolonization theorists is that decolonization research, analysis, and activism and its accompanying focus on colonization, means an acceptance and advocacy of victimage, that when we attribute our social problems to external colonial forces we are denying Indigenous agency. I think just the opposite is true. While employing colonialism as an intellectual framework acknowledges the horrendous injustices perpetrated against Indigenous Peoples and the limited choices our peoples faced as a consequence, this is not inappropriate, nor is it overstated. When the loss of Indigenous life in the Americas weighs in minimally at 95% and the ensuing land theft, loss of resources, means of subsistence and attempts at cultural eradication are considered, to focus solely on the agency of the less than 5% who survived and are facing severe social problems seems disingenuous at best. An analysis of colonialism allows us to make sense of our current condition, strategically develop more effective means of resistance, recover the pre-colonial traditions that strengthen us as Indigenous Peoples, and connect with the struggles of colonized peoples throughout the world to transform the world. When colonialism is removed from the analysis, we have little alternative other than to simply blame ourselves for the current social ills. This blaming the victim strategy only increases violence against our own people.

Predictably, those who most fiercely deny the effects of colonialism are often the ones who advocate the most strongly for working within the existing system. They reject dreams of liberation and defeatist rhetoric characterizes their position. It includes such sentiments as “The world is not going to change,” or “We have to accept the way things are and do what we can within the existing system.” Ironically, this position denies the profound nature and propensity of human agency and relegates the results of human activity to negligible proportions. This is what decolonization advocates cannot accept. Instead, we put our faith and actions toward making revolutionary change, looking to the highest potential of human agency.

There was a time when my ancestors did not need to have strategies to resist forces of colonialism. When they did, the processes of invasion, military conquest and subjugation were

unleashed so abruptly, impromptu strategies were courageously, but unsuccessfully attempted. None of them prevented the total onslaught of colonial violence that ensued. Through time and processes of complete and humiliating subjugation that affected every aspect of the lives of subsequent generations, resistance weakened into complacency. Of course, not all Indigenous people chose this path and instead stayed the course of spirited resistance, but today they represent the exceptions rather than the rule. The vast majority found it easier to attempt to negotiate petty benefits from the colonial system while maintaining low visibility and small dreams.

Today, however, we have reached an era in which the existing system is on the verge of collapse, with colonizer and colonized alike resting near a precipitous edge. We can either succumb to the ongoing discourse of complacency propagated by the colonizing government, or we can mobilize for revolutionary change.

¹ Waziyatawin Angela Wilson and Michael Yellow Bird, eds., *For Indigenous Eyes Only: A Decolonization Handbook* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2005), 2.