

# DECOLONIZATION Is Not A METAPHOR



# DECOLONIZATION IS NOT A METAPHOR

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Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding. Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content.

--Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1963, p. 36

Let us admit it, the settler knows perfectly well that no phraseology can be a substitute for reality.

--Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1963, p. 45

## INTRODUCTION

Our goal here is to remind readers what is unsettling about decolonization. **Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life; it is not a metaphor for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools.** The easy adoption of decolonizing discourse by educational advocacy and scholarship, evidenced by the increasing number of calls to “decolonize our schools,” or use “decolonizing methods,” or, “decolonize student thinking”, turns decolonization into a metaphor. As important as their goals may be, social justice, critical methodologies, or approaches that decenter settler perspectives have objectives that may be incommensurable with decolonization. Because settler colonialism is built upon an entangled triad structure of settler-native-slave, the decolonial desires of white, non-white, immigrant, postcolonial, and oppressed people, can similarly be entangled in resettlement, reoccupation, and reinhabitation that actually further settler colonialism. **The metaphorization of decolonization makes possible a set of evasions, or “settler moves to innocence”, that problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity.** In this article, we analyze multiple settler moves towards innocence in order to forward “an ethic of incommensurability” that

recognizes what is distinct and what is sovereign for project(s) of decolonization in relation to human and civil rights based social justice projects.

Of course, dressing up in the language of decolonization is not as offensive as “Navajo print” underwear sold at a clothing chain store and other appropriations of Indigenous cultures and materials that occur so frequently. Yet, this kind of inclusion is a form of enclosure, dangerous in how it domesticates decolonization. It is also a foreclosure, limiting in how it recapitulates dominant theories of social change... we want to be sure to clarify that decolonization is not a metaphor. When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future. **Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks.** The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation. When we write about decolonization, we are not offering it as a metaphor; it is not an approximation of other experiences of oppression. Decolonization is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. **Decolonization doesn't have a synonym.**

Solidarity is an uneasy, reserved, and unsettled matter that neither reconciles present grievances nor forecloses future conflict. In this essay, **we think about what decolonization wants.**

There is a long and bumbled history of non-Indigenous peoples making moves to alleviate the impacts of colonization. The too-easy adoption of decolonizing discourse (making decolonization a metaphor) is just one part of that history and it taps into pre-existing tropes that get in the way of more meaningful potential alliances. We think of the enactment of these tropes as a series of *moves to innocence*, which problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity. Here, to explain why decolonization is and requires more than a metaphor, we dis-

cuss some of these moves to innocence:

- i. Settler nativism
- ii. Fantasizing adoption
- iii. Colonial equivocation
- iv. Conscientization
- v. At risk-ing / Asterisk-ing Indigenous peoples
- vi. Re-occupation and urban homesteading

Such moves ultimately represent settler fantasies of easier paths to reconciliation. Actually, we argue, **attending to what is irreconcilable within settler colonial relations and what is incommensurable between decolonizing projects and other social justice projects will help to reduce the frustration of attempts at solidarity**; but the attention won't get anyone off the hook from the hard, unsettling work of decolonization. Thus, we also include a discussion of interruptions that unsettle innocence and recognize incommensurability.

## THE SET OF SETTLER COLONIAL RELATIONS

Generally speaking, postcolonial theories and theories of coloniality attend to two forms of colonialism. *External colonialism* (also called **exogenous or exploitation colonization**) denotes the expropriation of fragments of Indigenous worlds, animals, plants and human beings, extracting them in order to transport them to - and build the wealth, the privilege, or feed the appetites of - the colonizers, who get marked as the first world. This includes so-thought 'historic' examples such as opium, spices, tea, sugar, and tobacco, the extraction of which continues to fuel colonial efforts. This form of colonialism also includes the feeding of contemporary appetites for diamonds, fish, water, oil, humans turned workers, genetic material, cadmium and other essential minerals for high tech devices. External colonialism often requires a subset of activities properly called military colonialism - the creation of war fronts/frontiers against enemies to be conquered, and

the enlistment of foreign land, resources, and people into military operations. In external colonialism, all things Native become recast as 'natural resources' - bodies and earth for war, bodies and earth for chattel.

The other form of colonialism that is attended to by postcolonial theories and theories of colonality is *internal colonialism, the biopolitical and geopolitical management of people, land, flora and fauna within the "domestic" borders of the imperial nation.* This involves the use of particularized modes of control - prisons, ghettos, minoritizing, schooling, policing - to ensure the ascendancy of a nation and its white elite. These modes of control, imprisonment, and involuntary transport of the human beings across borders - ghettos, their policing, their economic divestiture, and their dislocatability - are at work to authorize the metropole and con-scribe her periphery. Strategies of internal colonialism, such as segregation, divestment, surveillance, and criminalization, are both structural and inter-personal.

Our intention in this descriptive exercise is not be exhaustive, or even inarguable; instead, we wish to emphasize that (a) decolonization will take a different shape in each of these context - though they can overlap - and that (b) neither external nor internal colonialism adequately describe the form of colonialism which operates in the United States or other nation-states in which the colonizer comes to stay. *Settler colonialism operates through internal/external colonial modes simultaneously because there is no spatial separation between metropole and colony.* For example, in the United States, many Indigenous peoples have been forcibly removed from their homelands onto reservations, indentured, and abducted into state custody, signaling the form of colonization as simultaneously internal (via boarding schools and other biopolitical modes of control) and external (via uranium mining on Indigenous land in the US Southwest and oil extraction on Indigenous land in Alaska) with a frontier (the US military still nicknames all enemy territory "Indian Country"). *The horizons of the settler colonial nation-state are total and require a mode of total appropriation of Indigenous life and land,* rather than the selective expropriation of

profit-producing fragments.

Settler colonialism is different from other forms of colonialism in that settlers come with the intention of making a new home on the land, a homemaking that insists on settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain. Thus, relying solely on postcolonial literatures or theories of coloniality that ignore settler colonialism will not help to envision the shape that decolonization must take in settler colonial contexts. **Within settler colonialism, the most important concern is land/water/air/subterranean earth** (land, for shorthand, in this article.) Land is what is most valuable, contested, required. This is both because the settlers make Indigenous land their new home and source of capital, and also because **the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence. This violence is not temporally contained in the arrival of the settler but is reasserted each day of occupation. This is why settler colonialism is a structure and not an event.** In the process of settler colonialism, land is remade into property and human relationships to land are restricted to the relationship of the owner to his property. Epistemological, ontological, and cosmological relationships to land are interred, indeed made pre-modern and backward. Made savage.

In order for the settlers to make a place their home, they must destroy and disappear the Indigenous peoples that live there. Indigenous peoples are those who have creation stories, not colonization stories, about how we/they came to be in a particular place - indeed how we/they came to *be a place*. **Our/their relationships to land comprise our/their epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies.** For the settlers, Indigenous peoples are in the way and, in the destruction of Indigenous peoples, Indigenous communities, and over time and through law and policy, Indigenous peoples' claims to land under settler regimes, land is recast as property and as a resource. Indigenous peoples must be erased, must be made into ghosts.

At the same time, settler colonialism involves the subjugation and forced labor of chattel slaves, whose bodies and lives become the property,

and who are kept landless. Slavery in settler colonial contexts is distinct from other forms of indenture whereby *excess labor* is extracted from persons. First, chattels are commodities of labor and therefore it is the slave's *person* that is the excess. Second, unlike workers who may aspire to own land, the slave's very presence on the land is already an excess that must be dis-located. Thus, **the slave is a desirable commodity but the person underneath is imprisonable, punishable, and murderable.** The violence of keeping/killing the chattel slave makes them deathlike monsters in the settler imagination; they are reconfigured/disfigured as the threat, the razor's edge of safety and terror.

The settler, if known by his actions and how he justifies them, sees himself as holding dominion over the earth and its flora and fauna, as the anthropocentric normal, and as more developed, more human, more deserving than other groups or species. The settler is making a new "home" and that home is rooted in a homesteading worldview where the wild land and wild people were made for his benefit. He can only make his identity as a settler by making the land produce, and produce excessively, because **"civilization" is defined as production in excess of the "natural" world** (i.e. in excess of the sustainable production already present in the Indigenous world). In order for excess production, he needs excess labor, which he cannot provide himself. The chattel slave serves as that excess labor, labor that can never be paid because payment would have to be in the form of property (land). The settler's wealth is land, or a fungible version of it, and so payment for labor is impossible. The settler positions himself as both superior and normal; the settler is natural, whereas the Indigenous inhabitant and the chattel slave are unnatural, even supernatural.

Settlers are not immigrants. Immigrants are beholden to the Indigenous laws and epistemologies of the lands they migrate to. Settlers become the law, supplanting Indigenous laws and epistemologies. Therefore, settler nations are not immigrant nations.

Not unique, the United States, as a settler colonial nation-state, also

operates as an empire- utilizing external forms and internal forms of colonization simultaneous to the settler colonial project. This means, and this is perplexing to some, that dispossessed people are brought onto seized Indigenous land through other colonial projects. Other colonial projects include enslavement, as discussed, but also military recruitment, low-wage and high-wage labor recruitment (such as agricultural workers and overseas-trained engineers), and displacement/migration (such as the coerced immigration from nations torn by U.S. wars or devastated by U.S. economic policy). In this set of settler colonial relations, colonial subjects who are displaced by external colonialism, as well as racialized and minoritized by internal colonialism, still occupy and settle stolen Indigenous land. Settlers are diverse, not just of white European descent, and include people of color, even from other colonial contexts. This tightly wound set of conditions and racialized, globalized relations exponentially complicates what is meant by decolonization, and by solidarity, against settler colonial forces.

Decolonization in exploitative colonial situations could involve the seizing of imperial wealth by the postcolonial subject. In settler colonial situations, seizing imperial wealth is inextricably tied to settlement and re-invasion. Likewise, the promise of integration and civil rights is predicated on securing a share of a settler-appropriated wealth (as well as expropriated 'third-world' wealth). Decolonization in a settler context is fraught because empire, settlement, and internal colony have no spatial separation. Each of these features of settler colonialism in the US context - empire, settlement, and internal colony - make it a site of contradictory decolonial desires.

Decolonization as metaphor allows people to equivocate these contradictory decolonial desires because it turns decolonization into an empty signifier to be filled by any track towards liberation. In reality, the tracks walk all over land/people in settler contexts. Though the details are not fixed or agreed upon, in our view, decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, all of the land, and not just symbolically.

This is precisely why decolonization is necessarily unsettling, especially across lines of solidarity. “Decolonization never takes place unnoticed” (Fanon). Settler colonialism and its decolonization implicates and unsettles everyone.

## SETTLER MOVES TO INNOCENCE

In the discussion that follows, we will do some work to identify and argue against a series of what we call ‘settler moves to innocence’. **Settler moves to innocence are those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all.** In fact, settler scholars may gain professional kudos or a boost in their reputations for being so sensitive or self-aware. Yet settler moves to innocence are hollow, they only serve the settler. This discussion will likely cause discomfort in our settler readers, may embarrass you/us or make us/you feel implicated. Because of the racialized flights and flows of settler colonial empire described above, settlers are diverse - there are white settlers and brown settlers, and peoples in both groups make moves to innocence that attempt to deny and deflect their own complicity in settler colonialism. When it makes sense to do so, we attend to moves to innocence enacted differently by white people and by brown and Black people.

In describing settler moves to innocence, our goal is to provide a framework of excuses, distractions, and diversions from decolonization. We discuss some of the moves to innocence at greater length than others, mostly because some require less explanation and because others are more central to our initial argument for the demetaphorization of decolonization. We provide this framework so that we can be more impatient with each other, less likely to accept gestures and half-steps, and more willing to press for acts which unsettle innocence, which we discuss in the final section of this article.

- i. Settler nativism
- ii. Fantasizing adoption
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### *Moves to innocence III: Colonial equivocation*

A more nuanced move to innocence is the homogenizing of various experiences of oppression as colonization. Calling different groups ‘colonized’ without describing their relationship to settler colonialism is an equivocation, “the fallacy of using a word in different senses at different stages of the reasoning”. In particular, describing all struggles against imperialism as ‘decolonizing’ creates a convenient ambiguity between decolonization and social justice work, especially among people of color, queer people, and other groups minoritized by the settler nation-state. ‘We are all colonized,’ may be a true statement but is deceptively embracive and vague, its inference: ‘None of us are settlers.’ Equivocation, or calling everything by the same name, is a move towards innocence that is especially vogue in coalition politics among people of color.

People of color who enter/are brought into the settler colonial nation-state also enter the triad of relations between settler-native-slave. We are referring here to the colonial pathways that are usually described as ‘immigration’ and how the refugee/immigrant/migrant is invited to be a settler in some scenarios, given the appropriate investments in whiteness, or is made an illegal, criminal presence in other scenarios. Ghetto colonialism, prisons, and under resourced compulsory schooling are specializations of settler colonialism in North America; they are produced by the collapsing of internal, external, and settler colonialisms, into new blended categories.

This triad of settler-native-slave and its selective collapsibility seems

to be unique to settler colonial nations. For example, all Aleut people on the Aleutian Islands were collected and placed in internment camps for four years after the bombing of Dutch Harbor; the stated rationale was the protection of the people but another likely reason was that the U.S. Government feared the Aleuts would become allies with the Japanese and/or be difficult to differentiate from potential Japanese spies. White people who lived on the Aleutian Islands at that same time were not interned. Internment in abandoned warehouses and canneries in Southeast Alaska was the cause of significant numbers of death of children and elders, physical injury, and illness among Aleut people. Aleut internment during WWII is largely ignored as part of U.S. history. The shuffling of Indigenous people between Native, enslavable Other, and Orientalized Other shows how settler colonialism constructs and collapses its triad of categories.

This colonizing trick explains why certain minorities can at times become model and quasi-assimilable (as exemplified by Asian settler colonialism, civil rights, model minority discourse, and the use of ‘hispanic’ as an ethnic category to mean both white and non-white) yet, in times of crisis, revert to the status of foreign contagions (as exemplified by Japanese Internment, Islamophobia, Chinese Exclusion, Red Scare, anti-Irish nativism, WWII anti-semitism, and anti-Mexican-immigration). **This is why ‘labor’ or ‘workers’ as an agential political class fails to activate the decolonizing project.** “[S]hifting lines of the international division of labor” bisect the very category of labor into caste-like bodies built for work on one hand and rewardable citizen-workers on the other. Some labor becomes settler, while excess labor becomes enslavable, criminal, murderable.

The impossibility of fully becoming a white settler - in this case, white referring to an exceptionalized position with assumed rights to invulnerability and legal supremacy - as articulated by minority literature preoccupied with “glass ceilings” and “forever foreign” status and “myth of the model minority”, offers a strong critique of the myth of the democratic nation-state. However, its logical endpoint, **the attainment of equal legal and cultural entitlements, is actually an investment in settler colonialism.**

Indeed, even the ability to be a minority citizen in the settler nation means an option to become a brown settler. **For many people of color, becoming a subordinate settler is an option even when becoming white is not.**

“Following stolen resources” is a phrase that Wayne has encountered, used to describe Filipino overseas labor (over 10% of the population of the Philippines is working abroad) and other migrations from colony to metropole. This phrase is an important anti-colonial framing of a colonial situation. However an anti-colonial critique is not the same as a decolonizing framework; **anti-colonial critique often celebrates empowered postcolonial subjects who seize denied privileges from the metropole.** This anti-to-post-colonial project doesn't strive to undo colonialism but rather to remake it and subvert it. Seeking stolen resources is entangled with settler colonialism because those resources were nature/Native first, then enlisted into the service of settlement and thus almost impossible to reclaim without re-occupying Native land. Furthermore, the postcolonial pursuit of resources is fundamentally an anthropocentric model, as land, water, air, animals, and plants are never able to become postcolonial; they remain objects to be exploited by the empowered postcolonial subject.

**Equivocation is the vague equating of colonialisms that erases the sweeping scope of land as the basis of wealth, power, law in settler nation-states.** Vocalizing a ‘multicultural’ approach to oppressions, or remaining silent on settler colonialism while talking about colonialisms, or tacking on a gesture towards Indigenous people without addressing Indigenous sovereignty or rights, or forwarding a thesis on decolonization without regard to unsettling/deoccupying land, are equivocations. That is, they ambiguously avoid engaging with settler colonialism; they are ambivalent about minority / people of color / colonized Others as settlers; they are cryptic about Indigenous land rights in spaces inhabited by people of color.

*Moves to innocence IV: Free your mind and the rest will follow*

Fanon told us in 1963 that decolonizing the mind is the first step, not the only step toward overthrowing colonial regimes. Yet we wonder whether another settler move to innocence is to focus on decolonizing the mind, or the cultivation of critical consciousness, as if it were the sole activity of decolonization; to allow *conscientization* to stand in for the more uncomfortable task of relinquishing stolen land. We agree that curricula, literature, and pedagogy can be crafted to aid people in learning to see settler colonialism, to articulate critiques of settler epistemology, and set aside settler histories and values in search of ethics that reject domination and exploitation; this is not unimportant work. However, the front-loading of critical consciousness building can waylay decolonization, even though the experience of teaching and learning to be critical of settler colonialism can be so powerful it can feel like it is indeed making change. **Until stolen land is relinquished, critical consciousness does not translate into action that disrupts settler colonialism.**

Paulo Freire, eminent education philosopher, popular educator, and liberation theologian, wrote his celebrated book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in no small part as a response to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. Its influence upon critical pedagogy and on the practices of educators committed to social justice cannot be overstated. Therefore, it is important to point out significant differences between Freire and Fanon, especially with regard to de/colonization. Freire situates the work of liberation in the minds of the oppressed, an abstract category of dehumanized worker vis-a-vis a similarly abstract category of oppressor. This is a sharp right turn away from Fanon's work, which always positioned the work of liberation in the particularities of colonization, in the specific structural and interpersonal categories of Native and settler. Under Freire's paradigm, it is unclear who the oppressed are, even more ambiguous who the oppressors are, and it is inferred throughout that an innocent third category of enlightened human exists: "those who suffer with [the oppressed] and fight at their side" (Freire). These words, taken from the opening dedication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, invoke the same settler fantasy of mutuality based on sympathy

and suffering.

Fanon positions decolonization as chaotic, an unclear break from a colonial condition that is already over determined by the violence of the colonizer and unresolved in its possible futures. By contrast, Freire positions liberation as redemption, a freeing of both oppressor and oppressed through their humanity. Humans become 'subjects' who then proceed to work on the 'objects' of the world (animals, earth, water), and indeed read the world (critical consciousness) in order to write the world (exploit nature). For Freire, there are no Natives, no Settlers, and indeed no history, and the future is simply a rupture from the timeless present. Settler colonialism is absent from his discussion, implying either that it is an unimportant analytic or that it is an already completed project of the past (a past oppression perhaps). Freire's theories of liberation resoundingly echo the allegory of Plato's Cave, a continental philosophy of mental emancipation, whereby the thinking man individualistically emerges from the dark cave of ignorance into the light of critical consciousness.

By contrast, black feminist thought roots freedom in the darkness of the cave, in that well of feeling and wisdom from which all knowledge is recreated.

"These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through darkness.

Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman's place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep." (Lorde)

Audre Lorde's words provide a sharp contrast to Plato's sight-centric image of liberation: "The white fathers told us, I think therefore I am; and the black mothers in each of us - the poet - whispers in our dreams, I feel therefore I can be free". For Lorde, writing is not action upon the world. Rather, poetry is giving a name to the nameless, "first made into language,

then into idea, then into more tangible action”. Importantly, freedom is a possibility that is not just mentally generated; it is particular and felt.

Freire’s philosophies have encouraged educators to use “colonization” as a metaphor for oppression. In such a paradigm, “internal colonization” reduces to “mental colonization”, logically leading to the solution of decolonizing one’s mind and the rest will follow. Such philosophy conveniently sidesteps the most unsettling of questions:

The essential thing is to see clearly, to think clearly - that is, dangerously and to answer clearly the innocent first question: what, fundamentally, is colonization? (Cesaire)

Because colonialism is comprised of global and historical relations, Cesaire’s question must be considered globally and historically. However, it cannot be reduced to a global answer, nor a historical answer. To do so is to use colonization metaphorically. “What is colonization?” must be answered specifically, with attention to the colonial apparatus that is assembled to order the relationships between particular peoples, lands, the ‘natural world’, and ‘civilization’. Colonialism is marked by its specializations. In North America and other settings, settler sovereignty imposes sexuality, legality, raciality, language, religion and property in specific ways. Decolonization likewise must be thought through in these particularities.

To agree on what [decolonization] is not: neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease, and tyranny... (Cesaire)

### *Moves to innocence VI: Re-occupation and urban homesteading*

The Occupy movement for many economically marginalized people has been a welcome expression of resistance to the massive disparities in

the distribution of wealth; for many Indigenous people, Occupy is another settler re-occupation on stolen land. **The rhetoric of the movement relies upon problematic assumptions about social justice and is a prime example of the incommensurability between “re/occupy” and “decolonize” as political agendas.** The pursuit of worker rights (and rights to work) and minoritized people’s rights in a settler colonial context can appear to be anti-capitalist, but this pursuit is nonetheless largely pro-colonial. That is, the ideal of “redistribution of wealth” camouflages how much of that wealth is land, Native land. **In Occupy, the “99%” is invoked as a deserving supermajority, in contrast to the unearned wealth of the “1%”. It renders Indigenous peoples (a 0.9% ‘super-minority’) completely invisible and absorbed, just an asterisk group to be subsumed into the legion of occupiers.**

As detailed by public intellectuals/bloggers such as *Tequila Sovereign* (Lenape scholar Joanne Barker), some Occupy sites, including Boston, Denver, Austin, and Albuquerque tried to engage in discussions about the problematic and colonial overtones of occupation. Barker blogs about a firsthand experience in bringing a proposal for a *Memorandum of Solidarity with Indigenous Peoples*, to the General Assembly in Occupy Oakland. The memorandum, signed by Corrina Gould, (Chochenyo Ohlone - the first peoples of Oakland/Ohlone), Barker, and numerous other Indigenous and non-Indigenous activist-scholars, called for the acknowledgement of Oakland as already occupied and on stolen land; of the ongoing defiance by Indigenous peoples in the U.S. and around the globe against imperialism, colonialism, and oppression; the need for genuine and respectful involvement of Indigenous peoples in the Occupy Oakland movement; and the aspiration to “Decolonize Oakland,” rather than re-occupy it. From Barker’s account of the responses from settler individuals to the memorandum,

Ultimately, what they [settler participants in Occupy Oakland] were asking is whether or not we were asking them, as non-indigenous people, the impossible? Would their solidarity with us require them to give up their lands, their resources, their ways of life, so that we – who numbered so few, after all – could have more? Could have it all?

These responses, resistances by settler participants to the aspiration of decolonization in Occupy Oakland, illustrate the reluctance of some settlers to engage the prospect of decolonization beyond the metaphorical or figurative level. Further, they reveal the limitations to “solidarity,” without the willingness to acknowledge stolen land and how stolen land benefits settlers. “Genuine solidarity with indigenous peoples,” Barker continues, “assumes a basic understanding of how histories of colonization and imperialism have produced and still produce the legal and economic possibility for Oakland”.

For social justice movements, like Occupy, to truly aspire to decolonization non- metaphorically, they would impoverish, not enrich, the 99%+ settler population of United States. Decolonization eliminates settler property rights and settler sovereignty. It requires the abolition of land as property and upholds the sovereignty of Native land and people.

There are important parallels between Occupy/Decolonize and the French/Haitian Revolutions of 1789-1799 and 1791-1804, respectively. Haiti has the dubious distinction of being “the poorest country in the Western hemisphere”; yet, it was the richest of France’s colonies until the Haitian Revolution, the only slave revolution to ever found a state. This paradox can be explained by what/who counts as whose property. Under French colonialism, Haiti was a worth a fortune in enslaved human beings. From the French slave owners’ perspectives, Haitian independence abolished not slavery, but their property and a source of common-wealth. Unfortunately, history provides us with the exact figures on what their property was worth; in 1825, “France recognized Haitian independence by a treaty requiring Haiti to pay an indemnity of 150 million francs payable in 5 years to compensate absentee slaveowners for their losses”. The magnitude of these reparations not *for* slavery, but *to* former slave owners, plunged Haiti into eternal debt. Occupy draws almost directly from the values of the French Revolution: the Commons, the General Assembly, the natural right to property, and the resistance to the decolonization of

Indigenous life/land. In 1789, the French *Communes* (Commons) declared themselves a National Assembly directly “of the People” (the 99%) against the representative assembly of “the Estates” (the 1%) set up by the ruling elite, and adopted the celebrated *Declaration of the Rights of the Man and the Citizen*. Not unlike the heated discussions at the December 4, 2011 General Assembly of Occupy Oakland that ultimately rejected the proposal to change the name to “Decolonize Oakland”, the 1789 National Assembly debated at great length over the language of emancipation in the *Declaration*. Ultimately, the *Declaration* abolished slavery but not property, and effectively stipulated that property trumped emancipation. While rhetorically declaring men as forever free and equal (and thus unenslavable), it assured the (revolutionary) colonial proprietors in the assembly that their chattel would be untouched, stating unequivocally: “The right to property being inviolable and sacred, no one ought to be deprived of it...”

Decolonizing the Americas means all land is repatriated and all settlers become landless. It is incommensurable with the redistribution of Native land/life as common-wealth.

Our critique of Occupation is not just a critique of rhetoric. The call to “occupy everything” has legitimized a set of practices with problematic relationships to land and to Indigenous sovereignty. Urban homesteading, for example, is the practice of re-settling urban land in the fashion of self-styled pioneers in a mythical frontier. Not surprisingly, urban homesteading can also become a form of playing Indian, invoking Indigeneity as ‘tradition’ and claiming Indian-like spirituality while evading Indigenous sovereignty and the modern presence of actual urban Native peoples. More significant examples are Occupiers’ claims to land and their imposition of Western forms of governance within their tent cities/colonies. Claiming land for the Commons and asserting consensus as the rule of the Commons, erases existing, prior, and future Native land rights, decolonial leadership, and forms of self-government.

Occupation is a move towards innocence that hides behind the nu-

merical superiority of the settler nation, the elision of democracy with justice, and the logic that what became property under the 1% rightfully belongs to the other 99%.

In contrast to the settler labor of occupying the commons, homesteading, and possession, some scholars have begun to consider the labor of de-occupation in the undercommons, permanent fugitivity, and dispossession as possibilities for a radical black praxis. Such “a labor that is dedicated to the reproduction of social dispossession as having an ethical dimension” (Moten & Harney), includes both the refusal of acquiring property and of being property.

## INCOMMENSURABILITY IS UNSETTLING

Having elaborated on settler moves to innocence, we give a synopsis of the imbrication of settler colonialism with transnationalist, abolitionist, and critical pedagogy movements - efforts that are often thought of as exempt from Indigenous decolonizing analyses - as a synthesis of how decolonization as material, not metaphor, unsettles the innocence of these movements. These are interruptions which destabilize, un-balance, and repatriate the very terms and assumptions of some of the most radical efforts to reimagine human power relations. We argue that the opportunities for solidarity lie in what is incommensurable rather than what is common across these efforts.

We offer these perspectives on unsettling innocence because they are examples of what we might call an ethic of incommensurability, which recognizes what is distinct, what is sovereign for project(s) of decolonization in relation to human and civil rights based social justice projects. There are portions of these projects that simply cannot speak to one another, cannot be aligned or allied. We make these notations to highlight opportunities for what can only ever be strategic and contingent collaborations, and to indicate the reasons that lasting solidarities may be elusive, even undesir-

able. Below we point to unsettling themes that challenge the coalescence of social justice endeavors broadly assembled into three areas: Transnational or Third World decolonizations, Abolition, and Critical Space-Place Pedagogies. For each of these areas, we offer entry points into the literature - beginning a sort of bibliography of incommensurability.

### *Third world decolonizations*

The anti-colonial turn towards the transnational can sometimes involve ignoring the settler colonial context where one resides and how that inhabitation is implicated in settler colonialism, in order to establish “global” solidarities that presumably suffer fewer complicities and complications. This deliberate not-seeing is morally convenient but avoids an important feature of the aforementioned selective collapsibility of settler colonial-nations states. Expressions such as “the Global South within the Global North” and “the Third World in the First World” neglect the Four Directions via a Flat Earth perspective and ambiguates First Nations with Third World migrants. **For people writing on Third World decolonizations, but who do so upon Native land, we invite you to consider the permanent settler war as the theater for all imperial wars:**

- \* the Orientalism of Indigenous Americans (Berger, 2004; Marez, 2007)
- \* discovery, invasion, occupation, and Commons as the claims of settler sovereignty (Ford, 2010)
- \* heteropatriarchy as the imposition of settler sexuality (Morgensen, 2011)
- \* citizenship as coercive and forced assimilation into the white settler normative (Bruyneel, 2004; Somerville, 2010)
- \* religion as covenant for settler nation-state (A.J. Barker, 2009; Maldonado-Torres, 2008)
- \* the frontier as the first and always the site of invasion and war (Byrd, 2011),

- \* U.S. imperialism as the expansion of settler colonialism (ibid)
- \* Asian settler colonialism (Fujikane, 2012; Fujikane, & Okamura, 2008, Saranillio, 2010a, 2010b)
- \* the frontier as the language of ‘progress’ and discovery (Maldonado-Torres, 2008)
- \* r\*pe as settler colonial structure (Deer, 2009; 2010)
- \* the discourse of terrorism as the terror of Native retribution (Tuck & Ree, forthcoming)
- \* Native Feminisms as incommensurable with other feminisms (Arvin, Tuck, Morrill, forthcoming; Goeman & Denetdale, 2009).

## *Abolition*

The abolition of slavery often presumes the expansion of settlers who own Native land and life via inclusion of emancipated slaves and prisoners into the settler nation-state. As we have noted, it is no accident that the U.S. government promised 40 acres of Indian land as reparations for plantation slavery. Likewise, indentured European laborers were often awarded tracts of ‘unsettled’ Indigenous land as payment at the end of their service.

Communal ownership of land has figured centrally in various movements for autonomous, self-determined communities. “The land belongs to those who work it,” disturbingly parrots Lockean justifications for seizing Native land as property, ‘earned’ through one’s labor in clearing and cultivating ‘virgin’ land. For writers on the prison industrial complex, illegality, and other forms of slavery, we urge you to consider **how enslavement is a twofold procedure: removal from land and the creation of property (land and bodies). Thus, abolition is likewise twofold, requiring the repatriation of land and the abolition of property (land and bodies). Abolition means self-possession but not object-possession, repatriation but not reparation:**

- \* “The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not

made for humans any more than black people were made for white, or women created for men” (Alice Walker, describing the work of Marjorie Spiegel, in the in the preface to Spigel’s 1988 book, *The Dreaded Comparison*).

- \* Enslavement/removal of Native Americans (Gallay, 2009)
- \* Slaves who become slave-owners, savagery as enslavability, chattel slavery as a sign of civilization (Gallay, 2009)
- \* Black fugitivity, undercommons, and radical dispossession (Moten, 2008; Moten & Harney, 2004; Moten & Harney, 2010)
- \* Incarceration as a settler colonialism strategy of land dispossession (Ross, 1998; Watson, 2007)
- \* Native land and Native people as co-constitutive (Meyer, 2008; Kawagley, 2010)

### *Critical pedagogies*

The many critical pedagogies that engage emancipatory education, place based education, environmental education, critical multiculturalism, and urban education often position land as public Commons or seek commonalities between struggles. Although we believe that “we must be fluent” in each other’s stories and struggles, we detect precisely this lack of fluency in land and Indigenous sovereignty. Yupiaq scholar, Oscar Kawagley’s assertion, “*We know that Mother Nature has a culture, and it is a Native culture*”, directs us to think through land as “*more than a site upon which humans make history or as a location that accumulates history*”.

- \* The urban as Indigenous (Bang, 2009; Belin, 1999; Friedel, 2011; Goeman, 2008; Intertribal Friendship House & Lobo, 2002)
- \* Indigenous storied land as disrupting settler maps (Goeman, 2008)
- \* Novels, poetry, and essays by Greg Sarris, Craig Womack, Joy Harjo, Gerald Vizenor
- \* *To Remain an Indian* (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006)

- \* Shadow Curriculum (Richardson, 2011)
- \* Red Pedagogy (Grande, 2004)
- \* Land Education (McCoy, Tuck, McKenzie, forthcoming)

## *MORE ON INCOMMENSURABILITY*

*Incommensurability is an acknowledgement that decolonization will require a change in the order of the world. This is not to say that Indigenous peoples or Black and brown peoples take positions of dominance over white settlers; the goal is not for everyone to merely swap spots on the settler-colonial triad, to take another turn on the merry-go-round. The goal is to break the relentless structuring of the triad - a break and not a compromise.*

*Breaking the settler colonial triad, in direct terms, means repatriating land to sovereign Native tribes and nations, abolition of slavery in its contemporary forms, and the dismantling of the imperial metropole. Decolonization “here” is intimately connected to anti-imperialism elsewhere. However, decolonial struggles here/there are not parallel, not shared equally, nor do they bring neat closure to the concerns of all involved - particularly not for settlers. Decolonization is not equivocal to other anti-colonial struggles. It is incommensurable.*

*Black Codes made vagrancy - i.e. landlessness - illegal in the Antebellum South, making the self-possessed yet dispossessed Black body a crime (similar logic allowed for the seizure, imprisonment and indenture of any Indian by any person in California until 1937, based on the ideology that Indians are simultaneously landless and land-like). Dennis Childs writes “the slave ship and the plantation” and not Bentham’s panopticon as presented by Foucault, “operated as spatial, racial, and economic templates for subsequent models of coerced labor and human warehousing - as America’s original prison industrial complex”. Geopolitics and biopolitics are completely knotted together in a settler colonial context.*

*There is so much that is incommensurable, so many overlaps that can't be figured, that cannot be resolved.*

## CONCLUSION

An ethic of incommensurability, which guides moves that unsettle innocence, stands in contrast to aims of reconciliation, which motivate settler moves to innocence. Reconciliation is about rescuing settler normalcy, about rescuing a settler future. Reconciliation is concerned with questions of *what will decolonization look like? What will happen after abolition? What will be the consequences of decolonization for the settler?* Incommensurability acknowledges that these questions need not, and perhaps cannot, be answered in order for decolonization to exist as a framework.

We want to say, first, that decolonization is not obliged to answer those questions - decolonization is not accountable to settlers, or settler futurity. Decolonization is accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity. Still, we acknowledge the questions of those wary participants in Occupy Oakland and other settlers who want to know what decolonization will require of them. The answers are not fully in view and can't be as long as decolonization remains punctuated by metaphor. **The answers will not emerge from friendly understanding, and indeed require a dangerous understanding of uncommonality that un-coalesces coalition politics - moves that may feel very unfriendly. But we will find out the answers as we get there, "in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give [decolonization] historical form and content" (Fanon).**

To fully enact an ethic of incommensurability means relinquishing settler futurity, abandoning the hope that settlers may one day be commensurable to Native peoples. It means removing the asterisks, periods, commas, apostrophes, the whereas's, buts, and conditional clauses that punctuate decolonization and underwrite settler innocence. The Native futures, the lives to be lived once the settler nation is gone - these are the unwritten

possibilities made possible by an ethic of incommensurability.

*when you take away the punctuation*

he says of

lines lifted from the documents about military-occupied land

its acreage and location

*you take away its finality*

*opening the possibility of other futures*

--Craig Santos Perez, Chamoru scholar and poet (as quoted by Voeltz)

Decolonization offers a different perspective to human and civil rights based approaches to justice, an unsettling one, rather than a complementary one.

Decolonization is not an “and”.

It is an elsewhere.



DECOLONIZATION IS ABOUT THE LAND  
DECOLONIZATION IS REMATRIATION  
DECOLONIZATION IS UNSETTLING  
DECOLONIZATION IS AUTONOMOUS  
DECOLONIZATION IS AN OUTSIDE  
DECOLONIZATION IS INCOMMENSURABLE  
DECOLONIZATION HAS NO SYNONYM  
DECOLONIZATION HAS NO “AND”  
DECOLONIZATION IS “AN ELSEWHERE”

