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Colonial Legacies Personal Essay

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Wrestling With Decolonization: Applying Decolonial Knowledge to My Experience of Colonialism

Drawing on knowledge from my early education, when we had the opportunity to learn about “Native Americans”, I would like to reflect on these teachings while addressing their colonial implications and how I have come to understand my place as a settler. In doing so, I would like to elevate the work of Indigenous scholars and minimize my opinions. Though, much of this essay will entail anecdotal information from my personal history and reflections on my engagements with colonial learning, my goal is to offer meaningful reflections on these instances as I attempt to decolonize my mind.

I am fortunate enough to have a history of my family told and retold to me throughout my life. Naturally, I will be drawing on my memory of my family’s history for the majority of this personal essay. I will start from the beginning, or rather, when my family’s ancestors left Europe for what was to become the United States.

My ancestors, the British ones, the original Barlows, were some of the first, but not the very first to settle the ‘new world’. Their arrival upon a boat that was not designated as the Mayflower has cast that vessel’s name into the void of history. But none-the-less they arrived. For some time, my ancestors are said to have spent in the original colonies of the United States. There they remained until the era of westward expansion. Again, it is said that these ancestors were some of the first, though not the very first of a group of settlers who desired to settle in the west. Six generations ago, my great to the sixth grandfather was born in what is now known as Albany County, Wyoming. My branch of the ancestral tree has resided in Wyoming since. This is, in brief, my family’s history. It is not special; many of my peers from the States have similar stories. Though, many of my peers have a different story too.

So, what has my family been doing for six generations? Well, they have been ranchers, wheel wrights, blacksmiths, oil prospectors, and architects. My grandfather was the oil prospector and geologist. He discovered an abundance of natural resources hidden beneath the soil throughout Wyoming. Our family still maintains leases on land that he prospected. James Cobb, the first of my family to be born in Wyoming was a wheel wright and a blacksmith. He provided his services to westward travelers who owned wagons, and other technologies that required specialized maintenance. I am of the opinion that there aren’t any more people in Wyoming now than there were in his day (the official state population of Wyoming is approximately 500,000 and it is 253,596 square km in size).

I would like to engage with the work of Chelsea Vowel to address my view of land and territory acknowledgements. Because of my family’s embedded history in my homeland for six generations, I have come to understand myself as tied to this land. Keeping in mind that the Indigenous nations of Wyoming, the Shoshone and Arapahoe have occupied and used the same land for much longer. Thus, my sentiments of disdain regarding the overwhelming onslaught of wealthy second home owners in my hometown are but trivial in comparison to what members of the Shoshone and Arapahoe Nations must feel. Vowel, in her essay “Beyond Territorial Acknowledgements” argues that “Merely mouthing the names of local Indigenous nations does not automatically confer understanding”. This is in response to Jennifer Matsunaga’s words where she “takes issue with the institutional standardization and expectation of these acknowledgments” because “it is important for people to do their own searching and learning” (Vowel). I understand her issue with land acknowledgments for failing to confer understanding behind their purpose. Earlier in the article, my own institution’s is highlighted for purporting an example of a “fairly short” land acknowledgement (Vowel). Bear in mind I am not attempting to absolve UBCO’s flat land acknowledgement, however, if it were not for this acknowledgement, I would not have been motivated to conduct my own searching in learning about Indigenous peoples. It was the mere presence of a land acknowledgement that led to my engagement with Indigenous knowledge holders such as UBCO’s own Sam Marlowe, Jeanette Armstrong, and Kerrie Charnley. Alas, this is a cyclical experience of learning, for now that I have engaged with these teachings, I now recognize that the same land acknowledgement that initiated my journey of searching and learning is part of an evolving process. Thus, I reiterate Vowel’s expressed frustration with the current style of land acknowledgements: “Merely mouthing the names of local Indigenous nations does not automatically confer understanding[!]” (Vowel). So, what does it take to make a land acknowledgment that confers understanding?

Generating a responsible land acknowledgment requires an evolutionary process carried out over time. Vowel best explains the process here, “best practices must evolve over time through deeper engagement with the purpose and impact of territorial acknowledgments (Vowel). These words resonate with my own experience of land acknowledgments. Upon reflecting on Vowel’s words and my experience of interacting with UBCO’s land acknowledgments, I had a decolonial epiphany: It is not simply acknowledging the land in a verbal or written statement that matters, what is most important is that because it is spoken or written, some person will interact with it and become inspired to learn more. Though current land acknowledgements fail to confer deep understanding of the meaning behind acknowledging the land, each one is a seed of knowledge and information that challenges colonial values. In the hands of the curious, this seed has the potential to contribute to dismantling colonialisms in society.

Vowel’s words on land acknowledgments further highlight a significant feature of the Indigenous worldview; land is important. It is important for many reasons. Though, colonial knowledge certainly has a different opinion of land. Armstrong provides an insightful take on the importance of “the land”:

…we grew up loving the land. We grew up loving each other on the land and loving each plant and each species the way we love our brothers and sisters and that’s the point I want to get across (Armstrong 67).

Just before this passage, Armstrong expressed her displeasure with ongoing disappearances of endangered species. Moreover, the land is a symbol for the bigger picture. What lives in the land and occupies it? In addition, to the land, the inhabitants of the land are important. Effectively, everything is important; the land, its inhabitants, and how it all interacts together. Armstrong’s words best convey this as she explains the love in her community:

It happens as a result of how we interact with each other in our families, in our family units, in our extended family units, and in our communities; the networks that we make outward to other people who surround us on the land. Those networks are extremely important insofar as what happens to the land and how we interact with the land (Armstrong 67).

If the all of the trees, all of the animals, and all of the people are beads, then the land is the string that connects them all together; the medium of reality in which all life interacts. Armstrong’s words provide an insightful look into holistic relationships. That is, relationships with everything. Armstrong suggests that *all* relationships matter. Further, the greater network of relationships implies that—to some degree—everything is interconnected. Because everything is interconnected, positive or negative actions at any part of the network will percolate throughout. This concept of holism clashes with colonial notions of land exploitation.

Unfortunately, I have witnessed and even benefitted from exploiting the land. Previously, when I elaborated on my family’s history, I noted that my grandfather was a geologist—and an oil prospector. He used his knowledge of rocks and soil to poke and prod the land for oil. Oil that, in his day had minimal known consequences. I recall learning about oil spills, the dark truths behind fracking, and the consequences of GHG emissions from oil powered vehicles. I have profited from the oil industry. I have witnessed the segregation and oppression of Shoshone and Arapahoe people. In elementary school we travelled to the Wind River Reservation to learn about the Shoshone nation. Though, it was a school field trip with the intention of teaching us about Shoshone culture, it had an overbearingly awkward feel to it. Instead of encouraging engagement with Shoshone children and elders, the experience felt more like that of going to the zoo, or a museum; look but do not touch. As a child of eleven years old, I did not comprehend the invisible glass that separated me from playing with the Shoshone kids. To this day, this is a difficult memory to recall. I always wonder what if I was bold enough to break the barrier?

Reflecting on these experiences now, equipped with knowledge and concepts of decolonization, I realize that the above experiences are examples of settler, internal, and external colonialism as described by Tuck and Yang in “Decolonization is not a Metaphor” (4-5). Just in the past six generations of my family, beginning with James Cobb, we have engaged with settler colonialism where “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” (Tuck and Yang 5). This is problematic because of settler colonialism’s concern with the exploitation of land (using the Indigenous notion of land here) is severely damaging: “the disruption of Indigenous relationships to land represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence” (Tuck and Yang 5).

My grandfather’s oil exploits are a manifestation of external colonialism as there was an economic benefit offered in exchange for a “fragment of an Indigenous world” that immediately is usurped to the top of the world hierarchy:

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 (Tuck and Yang 4).

This signals that settler colonialism by means of external colonialism runs deep in my family’s history. In fact, my very existence could be construed as a symptom of settler colonialism.

My experience of the ‘invisible barrier’ on the Wind River Reservation is an experience of internal colonialism. The barrier that I describe is a manifestation of the implied rules of engagement between white people and Indigenous people in Wyoming:

…the biopolitical and geopolitical management of people, land, flora and fauna within the “domestic” borders of the imperial nation [involving] the use of particularized modes of control-prisons, ghettos, minoritizing, schooling, policing-to ensure the ascendancy of a nation and its white-elite (Tuck and Yang 4-5).

Reflecting on this armed with Tuck and Yang’s decolonial information, yields that the Reservation and Reservations in general are a form of “geopolitical management of people”. The ‘invisible barrier’ was imposed by a powerful few to effectively oppress my Shoshone peers. Moving forward, it is important to recognize the inherently damaging nature of the settler colonialism paradigm, and highlight methods for repairing the damage that has been done over time. However, the decolonial project in the States and consequently Wyoming is complex for:

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 (Tuck and Yang 7).

Further, one must be bold enough to engage with acts of decolonization as Tuck and Yang remind us of Fanon’s words, “Decolonization never takes place unnoticed” and assert “[s]ettler colonialism and its decolonization implicates and unsettles everyone” (Tuck and Yang 7).

So, is that all? The world is not yet decolonized because no one has been bold enough to decolonize it? Though this essay is not meant to be argumentative, I would like to begin concluding by arguing that yes, it really is that simple. Naturally, this is easier said than done, for effective methods of decolonization are up for debate. Going back to Tuck and Yang’s work, they summarize that “decolonization specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (21). Further they assert that, the first step in decolonizing one’s mind encompasses, “…considering how the pursuit of critical consciousness, the pursuit of social justice through a critical enlightenment, can also be settler moves to innocence-diversions, distractions, which relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility, and conceal the need to give up land or power or privilege” (21). Given my sentiments on my experiences and involvement in settler colonialism, I recognize that it is important for me to move forward, seeking to first think critically about how my actions or moves can be acts of settler innocence-diversions to absolve my feelings of guilt. To engage with true decolonization, I ought to redirect income from the land that my grandfather prospected to the rightful proprietors of that land. Most importantly I should seek to award the Indigenous people in my life with whatever land, privilege and power that I can.

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