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# So you want to decolonize higher education? Necessary conversations for non-Indigenous people



Sharon Stein · Dec 5, 2017 · 22 min read

*This is a follow-up to an earlier piece I wrote about the need to face up to the colonial present of U.S. higher education.*

The “decolonization of higher education” is by now a phrase that many of us have heard, at least in passing. The concept is both very old, and long overdue, being the latest iteration of a whole history of critiques and social movements that have intended to name and transform the enduring colonial white supremacy that characterizes U.S. colleges and universities. But these conversations have arrived quite late to higher education as a field. At ASHE this year, I believe for the first time ever, the (printed) conference program included a formal acknowledgement of (some of) the Indigenous peoples of Texas; ACPA has included a more extensive acknowledgement on their conference site, and now has a “Strategic Imperative for Racial Justice and Decolonization” (and accompanying syllabus). As interest in decolonization slowly grows, though still at the margins of the field, I suggest that non-Indigenous scholars and practitioners need to enter into these conversations with intellectual humility, a commitment to address how comprehensively colonization shapes our institutions and our collective “field-imaginary”, and a deep recognition that decolonization is not a single event or prescribed blueprint but a complex and contested process of unlearning

and undoing centuries of colonial ideas, desires, and infrastructures, and of (re)learning how to be together in the world differently. We must, in other words, commit to grappling with the unsettling and disorienting fact that to truly decolonize our institutions would require *the end of higher education as we know it*. [1]

I do not say this out of a desire to police the terms of this conversation, but to simply state it as the ultimate conclusion that emerges from the rich (500+ year old) tradition of anti-colonial critiques. If we do not come to this realization, then we likely have not yet understood the extent to which our world is ordered by colonial relations (including our educational institutions), and the extent to which non-Indigenous people are complicit in ongoing systems of dispossession. This dispossession has resulted not only in the physical displacement of Indigenous peoples from their homelands, in most cases, but also the cascading effects of displacement, resulting in “profound epistemic, ontological, and cosmological violence” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5).

I am generally supportive of the notion that if we want to transform the world, then we need to meet people where they are, without being overly invested in the precise terms of the conversation or the political purity of our arguments or even our interventions. (Although, it is necessary to attend to who the “we” is in these scenarios — more on this later.) But if we have not realized how colonization shapes almost everything about institutionalized higher education in the U.S., then we have not yet understood the extent to which decolonization would require that we collectively reimagine and remake our existence in ways that would be unimaginable to most of us from where we currently stand — figuratively, but also literally, on currently colonized lands.

## What is colonization?

If we are going to engage the question of decolonization, then perhaps we should start from the beginning — what exactly is colonization? Colonization occurs when an external power forcefully asserts their governing authority over a people — their lives, lands, and resources. The form of colonization that we should perhaps be most concerned about in the U.S. context is settler colonization. Although the particulars of settler colonialism differ from place to place (Kelley, 2017), according to Glen Coulthard (2014) “a settler colonial relationship is one characterized by domination; that is a relationship where power — in this case, interrelated, discursive and non-discursive facets of economic, gendered, racial, and state power — has been structured into a

relatively secure or sedimented set of hierarchical social relations that continue to facilitate the *dispossession* of Indigenous peoples of their lands and self determining authority” (pp. 6–7). It is through processes of settler colonialism that many of us are here today, and all U.S. colleges and universities were built on dispossessed Indigenous lands. (You can use the resource <http://native-land.ca> as a starting point for learning about the Indigenous peoples of a particular place in what is now called North America — including Canada, Mexico, and the United States).

Other formations of colonialism include metropole or exploitation colonialism, in which colonizing powers extract the labor and resources of a foreign population, but do not seek to permanently settle their lands in large numbers, as well as neocolonialism, which refers to indirect/informal colonial intervention in uncolonized or formally decolonized countries. These are not mutually exclusive. For instance, the U.S. is a settler colonial nation-state that colonizes hundreds of Indigenous nations “at home.” However, we also maintain colonial authority in the territories of Guam, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, Northern Mariana, and others. Today, we also have many colonial entanglements scattered across the globe, including in the Middle East, northern Africa, the Pacific, and Latin America, just as we have throughout the majority of our history. We might also view the ruthless policing of the U.S.-Mexico border — on land that, as Gloria Anzaldúa (2007) reminds us, “was Mexican once, was Indian always and is. And will be again” — as a form of what Harsha Walia (2013) calls “border imperialism.”

Finally, although colonization and racialization are distinct and should not be collapsed, they often intersect. In particular, within the U.S. and other parts of the Americas, the colonization and commodification of Indigenous lands was accompanied by the enslavement and commodification of Black lives in ways that together served to expand the wealth and power of white settlers (King, 2016; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). In this piece, I emphasize decolonization as it relates to settler colonization, but we must always consider how different colonial/racial logics relate through complex social formations, and ultimately, we cannot address these as distinct processes in piecemeal ways.

**Decolonization is not a metaphor — so what is it?**

Recently, I attended a panel about pursuing racial justice in education. It is worth noting that no one on this panel was Indigenous. At some point, an attendee raised a question to ask about the place of decolonization in this work. In response, one of the panelists declared, “we need to remember that ‘decolonization is not a metaphor.’” However, the speaker did not follow this up with further guidance or reflection about the implications of their statement and its significance to education. Their comment was, of course, a direct reference to an [article](#) by the same name, “Decolonization is not a Metaphor,” authored by Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang (2012). Indeed, this article is increasingly cited by non-Indigenous scholars, and held up as a guiding text for engagement with anti-colonial critique. Celebrations of the piece are not overstated; every higher education scholar should read it, and we should assign it in our classes. But I worry that the canonization of even radical texts might be standing in for doing exactly what Tuck and Yang encourage, which is the difficult, transformative work of then grappling with the unsettling implications of what decolonization demands. If we fail to do so, then our citational politics (Ahmed, 2013) merely become non-performative performances of radicalism (Ahmed, 2006), and, somewhat ironically, the phrase “decolonization is not a metaphor” risks becoming a metaphor itself, standing in for the complex, uncomfortable process of identifying, addressing, and undoing all of the ways that non-Indigenous individuals and institutions are implicated in the ongoing project of colonization.

In other words, if we agree that decolonization is not a metaphor, then this is only the beginning of the work that is required of us. We must ask, if it is not a metaphor, then what is it? Tuck and Yang (2012) suggest, “Decolonization brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (p. 1), which would require that we address “the real and symbolic violences of settler colonialism” (p. 2). But, I think if we are being honest with ourselves, then most non-Indigenous people have very little idea what this means, what it might look like, or what it would demand of us — that is, how the workings of everyday life in our colonial contexts are organized to forestall precisely these possible futures.

Making decolonization into a metaphor is not done simply out of “not knowing better,” but out of continued investments in the benefits that colonialism offers (Vimalassery, Pegues, & Goldstein, 2016). Tuck and Yang (2012) describe “settler moves to innocence” as “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” (p. 10). Particularly in the case of white people, once we start to understand more about our complicity in colonial violence, we often seek to quickly reclaim our presumed virtue because we are still attached to and invested in the promise of white settler futures. In other words, we want our “bad feelings” to go away, but do not want to lose our entitlements to the rights, property, and opportunities that are guaranteed at the expense of Indigenous, Black, and other racialized peoples. Thus, white people seek non-disruptive ways to incorporate elements of decolonial critiques onto our existing critical frameworks, and sometimes even gain academic capital for being “self-aware” (Tuck & Yang, 2012). That is, we seek to “transcend [colonialism] without giving anything up” (Jefferess, 2012, p. 19).

I do not intend to offer my own poorly paraphrased versions of all of the arguments already made with great effect by Tuck and Yang. Instead, I encourage people to read the piece for themselves. But I want to offer a brief illustration of all the intellectual, affective, and material labor that would be demanded of us were we to disinvest from our presumed innocence, face up to our own complicity, and take seriously the task of decolonization. Amongst many other important arguments, Tuck and Yang warn against the tendency to collapse the imperative of decolonization into existing social justice efforts. They emphasize how demands for decolonization exceed both rights-based advocacy and discourses of inclusion, as “the promise of integration and civil rights is predicated on securing a share of settler appropriated wealth (as well as expropriated ‘third world’ wealth)” (p. 7). This claim must be unpacked, because it really does stand in confrontation with many existing social justice frameworks, by suggesting that neither expanded equality nor equity alter the fundamental fact that ongoing life in the U.S. is premised on ongoing colonization. Expanding inclusion into an otherwise unchanged settler colonial state does not, in other words, make it less colonial.

Pointing to the incommensurability of different social justice demands is not intended to entirely dismiss all rights-based claims — it is rather meant to invite us to make sense of and come to terms with how we want to move forward toward a horizon of justice when even many of our critical claims are still made at the expense of Indigenous peoples. Indeed, it is the U.S. state that has largely set the terms of the debate for what justice is possible. This allows for a certain amount of contestation, up to the point where it challenges the basic terms of the debate, which is the presumed continuation of the settler colonial — as well as anti-Black, imperial, and patriarchal — nation-state, and

the capitalist political economy with which it is entangled. Thus, as Jodi Byrd (2011) puts it, our formal systems of state-sanctioned justice “have created internally contradictory quagmires where human rights, equal rights, and recognitions are predicated on the very systems that propagate and maintain the dispossession of indigenous peoples for the common good of the world” (p. xix). Black radical thinkers have offered parallel insights about how the subjugation of Black life operates as a condition of possibility for U.S political, economic, and social life (Hartman 1997; Hartman & Wilderson, 2003; Silva, 2014; Spillers, 1989; Wynter, 2003), and there need be no contest between these claims, as colonization and anti-Blackness operate simultaneously (King, 2016, 2017; Leroy, 2016).

What I have sought to indicate is that just one single claim about decolonization in just one dense article demands a great deal of us as readers, thinkers, and interlocutors. Just one sentence raises a series of questions about the ability for even our most critical justice frameworks to deliver on the demands of decolonization — and I would add, abolition. The mainstreaming of conversations about the distinctions between equality and equity has itself been quite recent; how might a thorough critique of colonialism shift and challenge even these terms of social justice? How can we continue to struggle toward alternative higher education futures without becoming lost, discouraged, or frustrated by the difficulty of addressing the incommensurability of different demands for justice?

Perhaps the most pressing question for critical scholars and practitioners of higher education is not the prescriptive one we are used to asking, “how do we move from too much wrong to less wrong to justice?” (Simpson, 2014, p. 44), but rather, how might our existing ideas of justice inadvertently reproduce the injustices we seek to resist? We might follow Leigh Patel’s (2014) suggestion about the need to “pause,” that is, interrupt the imperative to produce and resolve complex problems with uncomplicated solutions by instead sitting with and learning from the difficulty of decolonization, and reflexively considering our own role and investments in the systems we undertake to study and critique. Part of this pause might include slow, careful deliberations in which we, as a field, consider the implications of the unsettling insights that anti-colonial critiques offer, without seeking a quick or easy resolution. The idea is not to prove who is the most virtuous or to list off our complicities but to dive deep into the apparent “impossibilities” of decolonization.

Conversations alone will not solve everything, or perhaps anything, especially as we often become trapped by the limits of our own frames of reference. Conversations are also never neutral — even in conversations about injustice, we see that unequal power relations are reproduced and the same (white, male, wealthy) voices tend to dominate. Further, when white people like me engage in critical conversations about race and colonialism, we are often rewarded (Patel, 2015), while our racialized and Indigenous peers of color receive vitriol from colleagues, student evaluations, and online trolls — even when they have been hired to address these very issues ([Munoz, 2017](#)).

Conversations also cannot be an excuse not to meet the pressing needs of the most marginalized in our institutions and community collaborators in order to reduce immediate harm, even if our responses might be imperfect, even if the support we offer might ultimately be part of the larger problem rather than the solution. We need to relieve immediate symptoms, even as we look to identify and address systemic root causes. Thus, conversations are necessary but insufficient — they're just one small piece of the decolonizing process.

## Conversations about (de)colonization

Conversations about decolonizing higher education must emphasize the insights and interventions of Indigenous scholars and students, and Tuck and Yang's piece is just one text within an entire constellation of knowledges produced by Indigenous peoples (and non-Indigenous [accomplices](#)). We cannot read one piece and think we have understood the complexities of decolonization; we cannot collapse thousands of different heterogeneous Indigenous voices, genealogies of critique, and placed-based knowledge systems into one "Indigenous voice" (Hunt, 2016).

While our field has not historically been a welcoming place for Indigenous peoples, and the experiences of Indigenous students and faculty are underrepresented in higher education scholarship (Willmot, Sands, Raucci, & Waterman, 2015), there are many Indigenous higher education scholars who are and have been working to Indigenize our field, including many whom work together and are editors of and contributors to an upcoming text, edited by Robin Starr Minthorn and Heather Shotton, entitled *Reclaiming Indigenous Research in Higher Education*, which is due out February 2018. I have attended sessions hosted by several of the book's contributors, who powerfully assert that they intend to be "unapologetically Indigenous" in colonial spaces like ASHE

and AERA. As part of this commitment, they generously offered each guest at their session a bundle of plants that, I believe, came from their traditional territories and/or are central to their knowledge systems. Apart from Indigenous scholars of higher education, there are many brilliant Indigenous scholars, artists, and poets outside of our field whose insights would be crucial for helping us to critique and reimagine the work that we do. However, we should also recognize that the majority of Indigenous knowledges are not held within the academy at all.

While non-Indigenous people's engagement with Indigenous scholars and Indigenous knowledge production is vital, this engagement can also become selective, tokenistic, and instrumentalized (Ahenakew, 2016; Gaudry, 2016). When non-Indigenous scholars engage Indigenous thinkers, we need to ask ourselves: What are we expecting to hear when Indigenous people speak, and are we able to hear them when they deviate from that script? Are we romanticizing and/or homogenizing Indigenous communities and individuals, and if so why? Are we selectively interpreting and instrumentalizing Indigenous critiques and knowledges for our own political agendas? What should we do when, inevitably, different Indigenous peoples and communities offer contrasting, even conflicting, perspectives? In our efforts to emphasize/centre Indigenous voices, are we expecting Indigenous people to engage in pedagogical labor that should be our own responsibility? How can/should we construct truly horizontal relations amongst diverse collaborators, both Indigenous and not, given unequal institutional power?

We also need to recognize that, in addition to engaging Indigenous scholarship, we need to address, in our courses, scholarship, and institutions, how students, faculty, and administrators reproduce colonization. Why don't we study, in our student development research, how settlement becomes naturalized for white students, despite them rarely being asked to think of themselves as colonizers or occupiers of someone else's lands? Why don't we ask, in our history of higher education courses, how our institutions came to claim title to the lands on which they sit, and what responsibilities derive from this history? Why don't we address, in our research methods courses, how research has been and is still used as a weapon against Indigenous peoples (Patel, 2015; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012)? Why don't we ask more questions about the origins of the wealth from which our institutional endowments derive, and where that endowment is currently invested?



These are not merely rhetorical questions, but at the same time I do not expect us to have answers to them right away. We need, instead, to learn from the difficulty of asking, let alone answering these questions, and be mindful that there are many questions we have yet to ask. At the same time, we cannot always control where our questions lead, and thus we cannot be assured that we will not get lost or go down the wrong path in the process. Thus, we must act with great care, humility, and generosity, and with an agreement to hold each other/be held accountable when we make mistakes — at least, those who wish to take part in the process of decolonization (and I recognize that many in our field do not).

Those committed to the process will need to get our literal and metaphorical hands dirty, engaging where it is possible in our different institutional and interpersonal contexts. This will require that we work toward decolonial justice not out of desires for innocence, redemption, and virtue, but rather out of a commitment to the integrity of the process of working collectively toward transformation, and that we commit to engaging in important but imperfect interventions where possible, rather than waiting for the “perfect” moment to engage, or offering our precise political analysis to an audience that, because of their/our wilful ignorance, cannot hear or relate to it.

The line between whether one is leveraging one’s colonially secure structural advantage toward the long-term project of dismantling colonialism, thereby ceding the space that should never have been ours to begin with, or leveraging it toward personal advancement, is ambiguous to say the least, and I suspect these are hardly mutually exclusive. But part of grappling with complicity in colonization means that non-Indigenous people need to learn to decentre ourselves without using this decentring as a means to avoid being held accountable. We might need to start by being more honest about just how much of our everyday lives, aspirational desires, and imagined futures are implicitly premised on the continuation of colonization — in the context of higher education, and everywhere else.

Yet as many have pointed out, there is a way that white fragility fills the room when white people are confronted with our complicity in racism (DiAngelo, 2011). Similar processes operate when non-Indigenous people are confronted with their complicity in colonialism (Ahenakew, 2016). We need to remain vigilant about the space we take up in these moments, but also ask what these affective responses tell us. In order to

interrupt our defensive reactions we need to trace which investments and attachments lead us to respond in this way, so that we can ultimately dislodge them (Taylor, 2013). This would be just one small part of the multi-dimensional, life-long process of “retrac[ing] the history and itinerary of one’s prejudices and learned habits (from racism, sexism and classism to academic elitism and ethnocentrism), stop thinking of oneself as better or fitter, and unlearn dominant systems of knowledge and representation” (Kapoor, 2004, p. 641). While decolonization is not an individual act, if we do not do this self-work, it is unlikely that in our collective work we will imagine or produce something different.

Of course, these processes will look different depending on our different positionalities and communities. That is, while it remains important not to collapse racialization and colonization, (re)imagining relations between Indigenous people and Black people will necessarily look different than those between Indigenous people and non-Black racialized people who were colonized in their own lands (sometimes by the U.S. itself) and arrived to the U.S. as immigrants or refugees, and between Indigenous people and white settlers (Byrd, 2011; Dhamoon, 2015; King, 2016, 2017; Saranillio, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Walia, 2013).

### **Sitting and learning (and being undone) at the edge**

Indigenous peoples have put forward many different ideas and visions about what decolonial futures might look like, and we should read, engage, and be guided by this work, but it is not their job to do this work for non-Indigenous people; they have their own battles to fight and relations to maintain. Ultimately, we will need to learn to have conversations in which we both dispense with our desire for control and certainty, and explore new possibilities without being guided by singular authorities. Even as many individuals and articles offer invaluable insights, we cannot seek direction from some pure position of epistemological privilege that does not exist. There is no prescription for decolonization; it cannot be found in a book. Settler colonization is, centrally, about the objectification and commodification of land as a means to ensure settler access and control toward the ends of capital accumulation. However, if decolonization requires the return of lands and the resurgence of Indigenous sovereignty, kinship relations, cosmopolitical structures, and knowledge systems (Arvin, Tuck & Morrill, 2013; Hunt & Holmes, 2015; Simpson, 2011; Tuck & Yang, 2012), then it cannot be a standalone act.

Rather, it would likely require dismantling the colonial nation-state and capitalist system, and require that non-Indigenous people reimagine and reconstruct how we have been socialized to think about and engage knowledge, relationships, gender expression, labor, the environment, property rights, governance — in short, *nearly everything about our existence on these lands*.

I do not think it presumptuous to say that most of us do not yet know how to do this, as much as we might — in theory — want to, or believe it the right or just thing to do. Indeed, nearly all of the theories, frames and vocabularies that we have developed in the field of higher education for talking about justice fail or falter when confronted with colonialism as a condition of possibility for our field, our institutions, and our imaginations. Our “field-imaginary” is structured by assumptions about the imperatives of education as a means of economic mobility (within a colonial capitalist system), greater justice secured through legislation and court rulings (of a colonial state), and the general benevolence and universal value of our institutions (structured by colonial knowledge). Because of this, not only do we not know how to decolonize, we often do not even have the words to talk about why we don’t know how.

When we arrive at the edge of what is possible to articulate within our inherited frameworks, vocabularies, and horizons of justice, it is often the point at which people start to express their frustration. Once we begin to realize the full extent of colonialism, and our complicity in it, there are at least two common responses, or some combination of these: 1) dismissal of the demands of decolonization as unreasonable and/or unrealistic, and either exiting the conversation, or perhaps metaphorizing the demands, as Tuck and Yang (2012) predict; or 2) being overcome by an intense desire to find or formulate an immediate solution — some way out of this genocidal cycle and toward a decolonial future. Yet, as Patel (2015) suggests, we cannot create a detailed plan for decolonization from where we stand, because where we stand “is so deeply embedded and enlived by colonial logics” (p. 88). While it is impossible to know in advance what a decolonized higher education might look like, in order to possibly arrive there someday, after much struggle and many missteps, we might nonetheless work toward decolonial horizons.

The deep challenges to justice that characterize the contemporary political, economic, and ecological landscape might make such horizons appear more distant than ever.

However, we might also consider this moment as a dubious opportunity. Growing disillusionment with our current, colonial system might lead us to explore new possibilities, but it can also lead to feelings of betrayal or resentment that can in turn lead to violence (against oneself, and/or [often marginalized] others), or feelings of being unmoored and unable to act after one's foundations have been radically unsettled. If we want a fighting chance of creating radically *other* worlds than the one we have inherited, then we will need this proliferating disillusionment to ultimately lead to a disinvestment from old dreams and promises. Thus, I suggest that these are not just social and political struggles, but educational challenges as well.

We need to ask what kind of an education could prepare us and our students not to simply critique, but also learn from, the mistakes of a dying system so that we do not continue to repeat them; to remain vigilant about addressing the new mistakes that we will no doubt make in the process; to sit with the discomfort that often develops when we are faced with our complicity; to fully mourn false and harmful promises so that we are not tempted to resuscitate them; to address the intellectual poverty of an educational system that is built on a single type of knowledge; to unlearn the modes of relation that have led us to treat the earth and other-than-human beings as a set of resources to be possessed and extracted, and to treat other humans as exploitable and expendable rather than indispensable; and to (re)learn how to see and sense ourselves and others not as autonomous individuals but rather as entangled in a set of reciprocal relations and interdependencies, and from there, to figure out how to affirm our boundless responsibilities to one another.

If there is to be a place for non-Indigenous higher education scholars in decolonizing work, then it cannot be premised on our presumed epistemic authority, nor the futurity of our field nor of our institutions, nor even of the selves that we think we are, but rather on the notion that these are precisely the kinds of colonial structures and certainties that need to be questioned, dismantled, and hospiced, so that new possibilities can emerge. Let us start, then, with the notion that we will need to learn how to desire, imagine, understand, sense, relate, and exist very differently, without assuming that we already know how.

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You can find a follow-up to this blog [here](#).

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[1] This is a notion that I put forward in a piece forthcoming in the *Critical Ethnic Studies* journal, “Higher education and the im/possibility of transformative justice.” It is derived



from Denise Ferreira da Silva's (2014) notion of "the End of the World as we know it" in her article "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," and echoes Aime Césaire in *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*: "What can I do? One must begin somewhere. Begin what? The only thing in the world worth beginning: The End of the world of course."

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