

Imperialism & Settler-Colonialism

An Introduction For 'Canadians'

“Imperialism frames the Indigenous experience. [...] Writing about our experiences under imperialism and its more specific expression of colonialism has become a significant project of the Indigenous world. In a literary sense this has been defined by writers like Salman Rushdie, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and many others whose literary origins are grounded in the landscapes, languages, cultures and imaginative worlds of peoples and nations whose own histories were interrupted and radically reformulated by European imperialism.”
— Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012 57)

Colonialism is the ongoing process by which imperialism creates outposts by resettling the lands it has stolen. This has often been done by abducting Indigenous populations and enslaving them in other colonized territories where they might displace those Indigenous populations (for example the abduction of Indigenous people from west Africa to do forced labour on Turtle Island). Other strategies used by colonizers include the appropriation of sovereignty by dismissing Indigenous societies’ systems of order and displacing them with European-controlled government and legal systems, as well as cartography (map making) and the ‘charting of territory’ thereby forcing Indigenous people to learn new names for their own lands

Imperialism is the taking (by force, coercion, or treaties made in bad faith) of land, people, and resources in the name of economic expansion. Slavery is just as much a system of imperialism as claiming others’ territories. European imperialism can be said to have formally begun in the 15th century, with the term ‘imperialism’ being used by historians to describe “a series of developments leading to the economic expansion of Europe.” (Smith 2012 p.60) This type of imperialism is linked to a chronology of supposed ‘discovery’ and ‘conquest’, followed by exploitation, distribution, and appropriation. The lands supposedly

‘discovered’ by colonizers were in fact already inhabited and tended to by Indigenous societies and the language of ‘discovery’ reinforces the false idea that the lands seized by imperialists were ‘unused’ or ‘wild’ prior to European intervention. It is also important to note that while imperialist narratives cast expanding powers as “conquerors”, the people who are indigenous to so-called-‘Canada’ remain unconquered despite the far-reaching occupation of their lands by the ‘Canadian’ settler state.

Settler-Colonialism is characterized by the resettling of lands seized under imperialism. The colonizers in this case not only enslave and exploit the Indigenous people and land for economic gain, they come to displace those people and occupy their land. Canada is an example of ongoing settler-colonialism, having been founded by imperialists with the goal of resettling and extracting wealth from the land without regard for the ways of life and systems of order of the Indigenous peoples. Despite a shift since 1969 in Canada from unconcealed systems of settler domination towards colonial governance through the medium of state recognition and accommodation, the forms of recognition afforded by the settler-state are profoundly asymmetrical and nonreciprocal.

In ‘Canada’, a settler is anyone who is not Indigenous living here as either a ‘Canadian citizen’ or by invitation/permission from the colonial government (eg. work or study visas, immigration). The Canadian government recognizes and offers apparent accommodations to some Indigenous groups it recognizes as ‘First Nations’ in the form of treaties, however these “accommodations” are generally worded in such a way as to allow the colonial government to later renege on their agreements when it is beneficial to them to do so.

“Imperialism still hurts, still destroys and is reforming itself constantly.”
— Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012 57)

Racialization, referring to the processes by which meaning is projected onto bodies, is one of the tools by which imperialist rule is maintained. By separating people into categories based on arbitrarily defined differences and incorrectly insisting or assuming that these correlate to biological difference, hierarchical systems of “race” form the ontological underpinnings of colonial power. In fact, socially recognized “race” categories have no genetic basis.

Attempts to legally define racial categories in opposition to ‘whiteness’ have usually been additive, meaning that an individual having just one non-white ancestor would exclude them from the invented category of whiteness and the legal and social privileges that would confer. In contrast, the category of “First Nations” or “Native American”, while racialized, has been legally defined as subtractive — meaning that the descendants of Indigenous people and settlers (or even other Indigenous people without official recognition from the settler-state) would eventually no longer be recognized as part of those categories by the colonial government. Not only does this make for official data collection that reinforces the **myth** that Indigenous people are disappearing, but by slowly taking away legal recognition, the occupying government is able to quietly go back on agreements made with Indigenous populations that it has decided no longer exist. Colonial powers hope that Indigenous nations will disappear by this legislation and thus be unable to challenge the settler-state.

In fact: Indigenous nations and communities continue to exist, create, theorize, grow, and resist under colonial occupation on Turtle Island in the lands known as ‘North America’.

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“DNA tests used by tribes are simply statements of *genetic* parentage that tribal governments have made regulatory decisions to privilege instead of or along with other forms of parent-child relationship documentation, such as birth or adoption certificates. Tribes increasingly combine DNA tests with longer-standing citizenship rules that focus largely on tracing ones genealogy to ancestors named on “base rolls” constructed in previous centuries.” — Kim TallBear (2013 4)

Indigeneity is not a mere matter of DNA. Despite some pop-science claims, there are no “DNA markers” that identify someone as definitively Native American or otherwise indigenous to Turtle Island. Membership in Indigenous communities is a matter of tribal citizenship, and while DNA tests may sometimes be used by those communities to verify parental ties of an individual to another tribal citizen when adjudicating claims of citizenship, they should not be treated as indicators of one’s ancestral origins. To do so is to make the error of assuming that there are distinct and “pure” racial groupings of the human species, which there are not, and such assumptions of purity allow for greater epistemological errors such as the assumption that a given population might one day disappear due to genetic admixture. Indigenous nations have their own protocols for adjudicating and conferring citizenship, much like any other sovereign nation.

“Notions of ancestral populations, the ordering and calculating of genetic markers and their associations, and the representation of living groups of individuals as reference populations all **require the assumption** that there was a moment, a human body, a marker, a population back there in space and time that was a biogeographical pinpoint of originality. This faith in originality would seem to be at odds with the doctrine of evolution, of change over time, of becoming.”
— Kim TallBear (2013 6)

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