



# KNOWLEDGE, POWER, AND COLONIALISM



## CENTRAL QUESTION TO THINK ABOUT

How and why does the colonial knowledge contribute to the process of legitimizing colonial subjugation?

“The most common mistake people make when they talk about racism is to think it is a collection of prejudices and individual acts of discrimination. They do not see that it is a system, a web of interlocking, reinforcing institutions: economic, military, legal, educational, religious, and cultural. As a system, racism affects every aspect of life in a country.”

–Elizabeth Martinez (i)

## KEY TERMS TO UNDERSTAND

- Terra Nullius: The settlers’ inclination to view land as empty and unclaimed to invalidate Indigenous claims to the land.[ii]
- Colonialism: a system through which land, resources, and labour are taken from “one group of people for the benefit of another.”[iii]
- Settler: Applies to anyone who is not Indigenous that is/was living on land that was taken through colonialism.[iv]
- Settler Nativism: “settlers locate or invent a long-lost ancestor who is rumored to have had “Indian blood,” and they use this claim to mark themselves as blameless in the attempted eradications of Indigenous peoples.” [v]
- Orientalism: the stereotypical representations of the Middle East that embody Western colonial attitudes. [vi] This concept will be discussed for the purpose of comparison in Part 2.



## 1. KNOWLEDGE AS A COLONIAL TOOL:

- Racism is rooted in unequal power dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized. This is not a system where historical knowledge is exchanged freely among all parties but rather a system where knowledge is passed mostly from one party to another.
- This results in history being told in a manner that implicitly reinforces colonial subjugation and omits Indigenous dispossession.
- The pervasiveness of the racist and dehumanizing myths such as the “noble savage” and the “disappearing Indian” have propagated a colonial system that enabled the process of taking land and resources through terra nullius (vii). This is crucial to understand as it has resulted in Indigenous dispossession.
- This process is by no means “natural.” It is made to feel natural because of the knowledge that has been passed down to us over centuries.



## 2. ARE THERE PARALLELS OF THE ABOVE THAT CAN BE SEEN IN WESTERN PORTRAYALS OF THE MIDDLE EAST?

- Edward Said’s book on Orientalism argues that the representation of the Middle East of today is a result of centuries of “othering.” which is a process that emphasizes difference rather than common understanding.
- Orientalism questions why so many people have these strange preconceptions of the Middle East, even if they have never visited the Middle East or met anyone from the region.
- In popular media, Islam and Muslims are often shown as villainous.
- Even seemingly innocent cartoons like Aladdin show the Middle East as a “barbaric” place.
- The way we acquire knowledge is not “innocent or objective” but rather a highly “motivated” process. Most of the knowledge that we acquire in our daily lives ends up implicitly or explicitly reinforcing the colonial structure (viii).
- Therefore, there are parallels between this “othering” mentality and stereotyping and settler views on Indigenous People in North America.



## 3. HOW SHOULD WE ATTEMPT TO OVERCOME THESE PROBLEMATIC FRAMEWORKS OF KNOWLEDGE?

- There is no “blueprint” for decolonization, “decolonization means different things for different people.”[ix] We need to acknowledge that since this is a political struggle, this is a process that requires perseverance and understanding.[x]
- It is important for us to recognize that the world order we live in is “predicated on Indigenous disappearance.”[xi]
- Being an ally for Indigenous People needs “action, not just theoretical support.” This involves moving beyond the self-rejecting settler conundrum.[xii]
- Collective ethnic accountability, repatriation of the land, and respecting indigenous sovereignty are some solutions put forward.[xiii]
- According to Edward Said, the goal is to “transform from a unitary identity to an identity that includes the other without suppressing the difference.”[xiv]
- Edward Said and some Indigenous scholars advocate for the idea of “Peaceful co-existence.”[xv]



## Endnotes

- i. Laura Hurwitz & Shawn Bourque, "Settler Colonialism Primer," *Unsettling America: Decolonization in Theory and Practice* (June 2014): 1-11. <https://unsettlingamerica.wordpress.com/2014/06/06/settler-colonialism-primer>
- ii. Ibid.
- iii. Hurwitz & Bourque, "Settler Colonialism Primer"
- iv. Ibid.
- v. Hurwitz & Bourque, "Settler Colonialism Primer."
- vi. Sut, J. (Director). (1998). *Edward Said On Orientalism* (Interview). Toronto: Kinetic Video. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVC8EYd\\_Z\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVC8EYd_Z_g)
- vii. Audra Simpson, Chapter Four "Ethnographic Refusal: Anthropological Need," *Mohawk Interruptus* (USA: Duke University Press, 2014): 95-114\*  
<http://reader.dukeupress.edu.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/mohawkinterruptus/11>, 100
- viii. Edward Said on Orientalism (Interview).
- ix. Hurwitz & Bourque, "Settler Colonialism Primer."
- x. Ibid.
- xi. Audra Simpson, Chapter Four "Ethnographic Refusal," 112.
- xii. Laura Hurwitz & Shawn Bourque, "Settler Colonialism Primer."
- xiii. Ibid.
- xiv. Edward Said on Orientalism (Interview).
- xv. Georgia Sitara. Knowledge, Power, Race, and the Land. Week 2 PowerPoint. History 329A