

For Indigenous Eyes Only

Beginning Decolonization

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A. Introduction

Congratulations! In opening this book you have engaged in an act of decolonization. We hope this will be one of many steps on your journey toward liberation. As Indigenous Peoples we have an inherent right to be free in our own lands. We have an inherent right to self-determination. Though these statements represent truths and they speak of rights we once possessed, these rights have been systematically stripped from us. When others invaded our lands and stole them from underneath our bodies, when they destroyed our ways of life and injured our peoples, they prevented us from living the way we were intended to live. Reclaiming our inherent rights will require tremendous struggle. It will require learning to meaningfully resist the forces of colonialism that have so detrimentally impacted our lives. It will require the decolonization of North America.

Since the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is so deeply entrenched in the United States and Canada, most of us have never learned how to actively challenge the status quo. The current institutions and systems are designed to maintain the privilege of the colonizer and the subjugation of the colonized, and to produce generations of people who will never question their position within this relationship. Thus, no handbook exists to teach our people how to begin to challenge this oppressive relationship in our daily lives. Until now. This workbook is intended as a primer to help you to think more concisely about the meanings of colonization and decolonization, to give you a language to talk about them, and to

assist you in developing strategies for decolonizing your life and your world. But first we must define some basic terms.

B. What Is Colonization?

Colonization refers to both the formal and informal methods (behaviors, ideologies, institutions, policies, and economies) that maintain the subjugation or exploitation of Indigenous Peoples, lands, and resources. Colonizers engage in this process because it allows them to maintain and/or expand their social, political, and economic power. Colonization is detrimental to us because the colonizers' power comes at the expense of Indigenous lands, resources, lives, and self-determination. Not only has colonization resulted in the loss of major rights such as land and self-determination, but most of our contemporary daily struggles (poverty, family violence, chemical dependency, suicide, and the deterioration of health) are also direct consequences of colonization. Colonization is an all-encompassing presence in our lives. The consequences of colonization are similar for peoples all over the world including, for example, the Maoris of New Zealand, the Aboriginal Peoples of Australia, First Nations Peoples of Canada, and Indigenous Peoples of Africa and Latin America.

C. What Is Decolonization?

First and foremost, decolonization must occur in our own minds. The Tunisian decolonization activist, Albert Memmi, wrote, "In order for the colonizer to be the complete master, it is not enough for him to be so in actual fact, he must also believe in its legitimacy. In order for that legitimacy to be complete, it is not enough for the colonized to be a slave, he must also accept his role." The first step toward decolonization, then, is to question the legitimacy of colonization. Once we recognize the truth of this injustice we can think about ways to resist and challenge colonial institutions and ideologies. Thus, decolonization is not passive; rather, it requires something called *praxis*. Brazilian liberatory educator Paulo Freire defined praxis as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it." This is the means by which we turn from being subjugated human beings to being liberated human beings. In accepting the premise of colonization and working towards decolonization, we are not relegating ourselves to a status as victims. On the contrary, we are actively working toward our own freedom to transform our lives and the world around us. The project that begins with our minds, therefore, has revolutionary potential.

ACTIVITY:

As your first community activity, create a term for both *colonization* and *decolonization* in your Indigenous language. This exercise will provide an opportunity for you and your community to think consciously and critically about the meaning of both these terms from your own cultural framework.

Colonization: _____

Decolonization: _____

What are the literal and figurative meanings of your translations and what does this indicate about your culture's view of these processes?

Colonization and *decolonization* are words that should become a standard part of the vocabulary of all Indigenous Peoples, including the young people. Giving a name to our experience will add to our own empowerment. When you can use this language to speak for yourself, you are engaging in a form of resistance to colonialism. Furthermore, conceptualizing these ideas within our own Indigenous lens is a more advanced decolonization activity. In drawing on your Indigenous language you are not only recovering Indigenous knowledge that is in jeopardy of being lost as a consequence of colonialism, you are also making that language relevant to contemporary times. Because the colonizers attempted to methodically eradicate our Indigenous languages, our efforts to recover the language are also a powerful form of resistance.

D.A Gathering of Decolonization Activists

The topic of a decolonization workbook was initially proposed by Devon Mihesuah and Waziyatawin Angela Wilson, who believe strongly that scholars should engage in projects useful to Indigenous Peoples. Though, quite regretfully, Devon was unable to participate in the project, we hope that her inspiration and commitment are evident. To carry out the proposed topic, in February 2004 a group of nine Indigenous intellectuals gathered at the School of American Research in Santa Fe to address the topic of "Creating a Decolonization Workbook" in a short seminar. This handbook is the result of that meeting. The intellectuals who attended this meeting are all individuals rooted in tribal communities who are dedicated to helping Indigenous Peoples move toward freedom from the oppressive forces of colonialism. We are all what might

be called practitioner-activists. That is, we frequently take political positions to challenge colonialism, practicing this in our daily life, at our jobs, in our children's schools, in our communities, and in the broader society. In addition, we are all writers who have engaged in the intellectual debate surrounding decolonization and we subscribe to the notion that decolonization is necessary to the well-being and liberation of our peoples.

In this handbook we do not intend to provide universal solutions for the problems stemming from centuries of colonialism. Rather, we hope to facilitate and encourage critical-thinking skills while offering recommendations for fostering community discussions and plans for purposeful community action. Therefore, we are not making recommendations for what Indigenous individuals and communities *should* do, but instead we are establishing starting points for discussions about employing decolonization strategies in daily life. We have constructed this in a workbook format to immediately encourage your active participation in the hard work of decolonization. We believe that as Indigenous Peoples we have the power, strength, and intelligence to develop culturally specific decolonization strategies relevant to our own communities. We all have the capacity to actively pursue our own emancipation from oppression.

We must also emphasize that this handbook is intended to prompt *beginning* discussions on decolonization. It is intended to rally a critical, and critical-thinking, group of Indigenous People dedicated to decolonization who will eventually help to mobilize a massive decolonization movement in North America. As Indigenous intellectuals concerned about the

survival of our peoples, we have included exercises and activities here that we felt we could responsibly advocate as beginning decolonization strategies. We are not advocating the immediate taking up of arms or the organization of an Indigenous militia. Instead, we are advocating peaceful, intelligent, and courageous challenges to the existing institutions of colonialism as well as questioning our own complicity in those institutions. But make no mistake: Decolonization ultimately requires the overturning of the colonial structure. It is not about tweaking the existing colonial system to make it more Indigenous-friendly or a little less oppressive. The existing system is fundamentally and irreparably flawed. We hope the decolonization strategies we offer will help Indigenous communities become increasingly more sophisticated and fundamentally challenging to the current power structure as we strengthen and prepare ourselves for our long struggle toward complete liberation.

E. The Topics We Cover

The topics covered in this volume include the decolonization of Indigenous thinking: ideas about citizenship, governance and organizational structures, education, oral tradition, language, repatriation, images and stereotypes, and diet, as well as the role of truth-telling as an act of decolonization. While there are many other areas of our lives in need of decolonization, we believe this offers a solid basis for beginning the discussion. We hope that from these discussions, plans for action will be developed.

The first chapter discusses how to establish Tribal Critical Thinking Centers. All acts of decolonization require engaging the mind critically; thus, relearning this skill as individuals and as communities is central to the decolonization project. Michael Yellow Bird provides a step-by-step approach for transforming the world through the use of what he calls “criticality.” Real-world change is what we are after, and he helps us to understand the connection between thought and meaningful action. In addition, he details what is required of critical thinkers as well as how to recognize and overcome the barriers to critical thinking. Yellow

Bird then outlines how you can set up a Critical Thinking Center in your community so that you can begin to share this process with others and contribute your skills and developing knowledge to a growing tribal critical consciousness.

Suzan Shown Harjo demonstrates the importance of thinking critically about how Indigenous Peoples are represented so that we can take appropriate action against colonialist representations to prevent further harm to our peoples. In her chapter, “Just Good Sports: The Impact of Native References in Sports on Native Youth and What Some Decolonizers Have Done About It,” she breaks down for us how the identity of the colonized is negatively affected through colonization. This, she argues, is most apparent in popular American culture’s use of Native mascots in sports. She explains the various points of contention in the controversy as well as why these mascots are unacceptable. Harjo then provides several specific examples of how Indigenous individuals and their families have confronted this aspect of colonialism in their own lives. This allows us to not only see the importance of Indigenous People engaging in the struggle for human dignity, but it also provides us successful strategies for participating in that struggle.

The pursuit of dignity for ourselves and our ancestors is the topic of James Riding In’s chapter, “Decolonizing NAGPRA.” Riding In characterizes the fight for the return and protection of the bodies of our Indigenous ancestors as well as sacred objects as a fight against colonialism. He states, “The perpetrators disregarded our views, beliefs, and rights because colonialism instills the colonizer with a notion of absolute entitlement—a notion that denies the colonized the respect and rights afforded other humans.” While strides have been made in protecting some gravesites and in repatriating some remains and sacred objects, Riding In argues that this struggle is ongoing, particularly in regards to those remains labeled by the colonizers as culturally unidentified. He guides us through the various controversies surrounding the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act and helps us to approach the issue from a strong,

culturally grounded position. Thus, he lays the foundation for our organized and thoughtful responses to these attacks on our humanity.

The next chapter addresses the importance of decolonizing Indigenous diets. Waziyatawin begins this discussion by recounting health conditions of Indigenous Peoples both before and after colonization and by explaining precisely how colonization has detrimentally impacted Indigenous health. Once we understand how Indigenous health has been compromised and how we have often unknowingly participated in the decline of our own health, we can begin to decolonize our diet. This is achieved not just by eating healthier foods and exercising more; rather, it requires returning to Indigenous foods and lifestyles that will help promote not just nutritional but also spiritual, cultural, and mental health. Decolonizing our diets works to support the decolonizing of other important aspects of our lives.

The decolonization of our tribal governments is another project central to the broader decolonization project. In his chapter, Robert Odawi Porter explains how Indigenous forms of governance were affected by colonialism to the detriment of Indigenous Peoples. “The Europeans,” he argues, “knew that destroying Indian governments was the key to controlling Indigenous Peoples.” He is concerned with repairing the damage caused by colonial domination by creating community-built and -supported governments that operate according to Indigenous values. In his analysis, Odawi also explains the complexities of attempting to return entirely to precolonization forms of Indigenous governance because of the extreme diversity of values and agendas among individuals present in our communities today. Because of his honest assess-

ment of the current reality of reservation populations, Odawi is able to offer a useful and important process for decolonizing Indigenous governance. He further discusses the need to decolonize the United States Indian control laws that continue to impact our lives and make true self-determination impossible.

Overcoming these barriers to the redevelopment of our sovereignty is crucial to our eventual decolonization as Indigenous Peoples.

From a cultural perspective, Indigenous language recovery is another essential component to the decolonization project. Because the vast majority of Indigenous languages are in a state of crisis, unless drastic and immediate steps are taken to recover those languages, many of them will be lost. Since languages

Decolonization is the intelligent, calculated, and active resistance to the forces of colonialism that perpetuate the subjugation and/or exploitation of our minds, bodies, and lands, and it is engaged for the ultimate purpose of overturning the colonial structure and realizing Indigenous liberation.

are the key to worldview and the embodiment of Indigenous cultures, their loss would threaten all that makes Indigenous societies culturally distinct. In her chapter, “Defying Colonization Through Language Survival,” Waziyatawin explains how Indigenous languages were systematically and intentionally brought to the edge of extinction by government policies and institutions. She then

articulates strategies for Indigenous individuals and communities to actively work on recovering their languages by first establishing a critical mass of support for language revitalization efforts and then creating a sustainable tribal language movement. Saving Indigenous languages will require extraordinary amounts of hard work, but the results will contribute invaluablely to Indigenous decolonization.

ChiXapKaid picks up this discussion on cultural decolonization in his chapter, “Decolonizing Through Storytelling.” An accomplished storyteller, ChiXapKaid explains how Indigenous societies can decolonize

themselves through education, particularly through the medium of Indigenous storytelling. Recognizing that shared knowledge of cultural concepts is a tool of Indigenous survival, ChiXapKaid explains how Indigenous Peoples developed a belief in story symbology to create sophisticated educational systems. In recovering those systems we are countering the damaging effects of mainstream colonizing educational institutions to which our people have been subjected. ChiXapKaid offers strategies for Indigenous Peoples to remember ancestral teachings and begin to recover the art of storytelling.

Cornel Pewewardy then addresses in detail how a colonial Indigenous education was created by whites to help foster the ideology of white supremacy and ensure European domination. In “Ideology, Power, and the Miseducation of Indigenous Peoples in the United States,” Pewewardy explains how Indigenous educational systems prior to colonization functioned successfully and appropriately to meet the needs of Indigenous societies, and how those systems were suppressed and denied by the white architects of Indian education. In this chapter Pewewardy helps us trace how we have been subjugated by white educational systems and whose interests have been served by our uncritical participation in them. He then offers suggestions on how to decolonize Indigenous education by building our communities so that we can offer stronger opposition to domination and injustice while organizing ourselves for small- and large-scale action.

T’hohahoken is also concerned with community development and organization in his chapter, “Organizing Indigenous Governance to Invent the Future.” He encourages Indigenous movement toward self-determination through the recognition and use of the unique intellectual estate offered by our ancestors. In using our inherited knowledge, we can problem-solve today. Using Kaniienkehaka (Mohawk) traditions as an example, T’hohahoken demonstrates the relevance of this knowledge in the twenty-first century for renewing or inventing missions that can guide our Indigenous clubs, associations, organizations, or agencies, wherever they are located. In particular, he offers

suggestions and helps us identify how we can balance power within our organizations for effective problem solving, how we can create interdependency and unity, and, ultimately, how we can work toward the idea of democracy as consensus building.

One of the most contested issues among Indigenous Peoples today remains the issue of tribal enrollment. When Indigenous nations were prevented from freely governing themselves and were instead made subject to the institutions and forces of colonialism, methods for determining who was an American Indian were dramatically altered. As a consequence, most Indigenous nations today rely to some degree on blood quantum to determine who is and is not a part of their nation. Michael Yellow Bird addresses this hot topic in his essay, “Decolonizing Tribal Enrollment,” and encourages Indigenous nations to question their current enrollment practices and to develop culturally appropriate and intelligent criteria that will better serve Indigenous communities today. By calling into question the use of blood quantum as a determining factor in deciding who is Indigenous, Yellow Bird advocates instead for the creation of citizenship criteria that will build national loyalty, maintain fairness, ensure the survival of our cultures, and “foster a more honest, capable, and committed tribal citizenry.” Following his discussion of tribal enrollment and citizenship, he provides a list of questions that may be used as a basis for implementing a thoughtful community discussion about how to decolonize tribal enrollment and implement a system that effectively addresses what it means to be a citizen of an Indigenous nation.

The last chapter in the collection addresses the issue of how historical trauma has impacted Indigenous communities. In “Relieving Our Suffering: Indigenous Decolonization and a United States Truth Commission,” Waziyatawin argues that as Indigenous Peoples we can empower ourselves and initiate our own healing processes from historical or contemporary injustices by speaking the truth about those injustices. Based on her experience with the Dakota Commemorative March in Minnesota that retraced the route her ancestors were force-marched in 1862, Waziyatawin learned that the

process of publicly telling long-suppressed stories about human injustices fostered individual and collective healing, in part because those stories directly challenged the colonial status quo and served as an empowering catalyst. Taking lessons from other truth commission efforts around the world, she offers a step-by-step process for communities and tribal nations to engage in truth commission work by carefully gathering testimony and other documentary evidence. This developing body of work by Indigenous nations throughout the country may be instrumental in the ongoing struggle for the restoration of Indigenous lands that is heavily reliant on a genuine sense of contrition and a desire for justice by mainstream Americans. Since the truth about injustices perpetrated against Indigenous Peoples has been largely denied in the United States, truth-telling becomes an important strategy for decolonization.

One commonality among all the chapters of this volume is that they illuminate the importance of understanding how colonization has taken root in our lives. Only by understanding how colonization works at subjugating our people can we begin to aggressively counteract its effects. When we can recognize it, we can work to actively disrupt the colonial system and

take active steps toward our own decolonization. The book as a whole is designed to help us think about how we as individuals and collective entities can initiate discussions within our communities, employ whatever useful decolonization strategies are offered here, and create new ones based on our specific needs and objectives.

Above all, this handbook was created out of a sense of compassion. We were all motivated to create a workbook like this because we love our people. While we recognize the incredible strength and resiliency among our populations, we also recognize that there is incredible suffering. We watch as our people kill themselves slowly through chemical dependency, or more quickly through violence and suicide. We watch as diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer eat away at our people. And we watch as our populations continue to hurt one another, practicing the violence upon each other that we have learned from the colonizers. We believe there is another way for our people to exist, one that draws on the best of our traditions and through courageous acts of resistance, paves the way to our liberation. That way is through decolonization.

You have consciously joined the struggle. We're glad you're on this journey!

Excerpt from

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