

White Allies, Let's Be Honest About Decolonization

I want to experience the solidarity of allied actions that refuse fantastical narratives of commonality and hope.

By Kyle Powys Whyte
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Indigenous environmental movements in North America are among the oldest and most provocative—from the Dish With One Spoon Treaty between Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples to the Mni Wiconi (“Water Is Life”) movement of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe. As a Potawatomi environmental justice advocate, I often get asked by other environmentalists in the U.S. to share my views on what they can do to be good allies to Indigenous peoples. Those who ask usually identify themselves as being non-Indigenous, white, and privileged. They are U.S. settlers: people who have privileges that arise from the historic and ongoing oppression of Indigenous peoples.

Whether one participates in settler colonialism is not entirely a matter of when or how one’s ancestors came to the U.S. Having settler privilege means that some combination of one’s economic security, U.S. citizenship, sense of relationship to the land, mental and physical health, cultural integrity, family values, career aspirations, and spiritual lives are not possible—literally!—without the territorial dispossession of Indigenous peoples.

How then can settler allies move beyond being sympathetic beneficiaries of colonialism? What approach is legitimately decolonizing?

The resilience of settler privilege is a barrier. Gestures toward allyship can quickly recolonize Indigenous peoples. Some people have tried to create bonds of allyship by believing that Indigenous wisdom and spirituality are so profound that Indigenous people have always lived in ecological harmony. This is the romantic approach. Other allies have tried to create solidarity through claiming that Indigenous and non-Indigenous environmentalists should not distinguish their efforts. In this view, environmental issues threaten us all, and we should converge around common problems that affect all humanity, instead of wasting dwindling time on environmental racism. This is the same-boat approach.

The romantic approach assumes that lifting up Indigenous wisdom and spirituality constitutes action. But this approach does not necessarily confront ongoing territorial dispossession and risks to health, economic vitality, lives, psychological well-being, and cultural integrity that Indigenous people experience. This is

why scholars Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang say decolonization is not a metaphor. Yet, the empathetic responsibility to support others' self-determination and well-being is a major lesson in many Indigenous environmental traditions. Subscribers to the romantic view are unprepared to respond to criticisms of supposed Indigenous hypocrisies, like the alleged contradiction of tribally sanctioned coal industries. Responding to these critiques requires an understanding of colonialism, yet some romantics are unwilling to take the time to learn how the U.S. forcefully re-engineered tribal governments to facilitate extractive industries. This understanding is key if one's goal is to undermine the levers of power that undermine Indigenous self-determination and well-being today.

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The same-boat approach also misses the colonial context. The conservation movement has been as damaging to Indigenous peoples as extractive industries. National parks, ecological restoration projects, conservation zones, and even the uses of certain terms—especially “wilderness”—are associated with forced displacement of entire communities, erasure of Indigenous histories in education and public memory, economic marginalization, and violations of cultural and political rights. Though certain sectors of conservation have improved greatly, newer movements, such as the international UN-REDD+ Programme, still repeat harms of the past. Almost every environmental achievement in the U.S.—such as the Clean Air or Clean Water acts—has required Indigenous peoples to work hard to reform these laws to gain fair access to the protections.

A decolonizing approach to allyship must challenge the resilience of settler privilege, which involves directly facing the very different ecological realities we all dwell in. Sometimes I see settler environmental movements as seeking to avoid some dystopian environmental future or planetary apocalypse. These visions are replete with species extinctions, irreversible loss of ecosystems, and severe rationing. They can include abusive corporations and governments that engage in violent brainwashing, quarantining, and territorial dispossession of people who stand in their way.

Yet for many Indigenous peoples in North America, we are already living in what our ancestors would have understood as dystopian or post-apocalyptic times. In a cataclysmically short period, the capitalist-colonialist partnership has destroyed our relationships with thousands of species and ecosystems.

Zoe Todd and Heather Davis, authors of “On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene,” characterize the ecological footprint of colonialism as seismic. The ongoing U.S. colonial legacy includes forcing Indigenous peoples into grid-like reservations that empower corporations and private individuals to

degrade our territories; fostering patriarchy and conditions for sexual violence in Indigenous communities; brainwashing Indigenous children through boarding schools; and brainwashing everyone else through erasing Indigenous histories and experiences across U.S. culture, education, and memory.

So Indigenous people awaken each day to science fiction scenarios not unlike the setup in films such as *The Matrix*. Yet in Indigenous science fiction films, such as *Wakening* and *The 6th World*, the protagonists are diverse humans and nonhumans who present unique solutions to daunting environmental problems. They are not portrayed as romantic stereotypes or symbols of a common humanity. They do not presuppose naive notions of Indigenous spirituality. They see environmental protection as possible only if we resist the capitalist–colonialist “matrix” of oppression and build allyship across different human and nonhuman groups. These films differ greatly from, say, *Avatar*, where the protagonist is a white male who passes as Indigenous and uses romantic Indigenous wisdom to save everyone. Indigenous people learn to ignore this difference, embracing a common foe together.

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Decolonizing allyship requires allies to be critical about their environmental realities—and about the purpose of their environmentalism. To do this, allies must realize they are living in the environmental fantasies of their settler ancestors. Settler ancestors wanted today’s world. They would have relished the possibility that some of their descendants could freely commit extractive violence on Indigenous lands and then feel, with no doubts, that they are ethical people. Remember how proponents of the Dakota Access pipeline sanctimoniously touted the project’s safety and that it never crossed tribal lands? On the flip side, when more sympathetic (environmentalist) settler descendants lament the loss of Indigenous wisdom without acting for Indigenous territorial empowerment; buy into the dreams and hopes of settler heroism and redemption in movies like *Avatar*; or overburden Indigenous people with requests for knowledge and emotional labor yet offer no reciprocal empowerment or healing—then they are fulfilling the fantasies of their settler ancestors.

One can’t claim to be an ally if one’s agenda is to prevent his or her own future dystopias through actions that also preserve today’s Indigenous dystopias. Yet how many environmentalists do just this? I do not see much differentiating those who fight to protect the colonial fantasy of wilderness from those who claim the Dakota Access pipeline does not cross Indigenous lands. Indigenous environmental movements work to reject the ancestral dystopias and colonial fantasies of the present. This is why so many of our environmental movements are about stopping sexual and state violence against Indigenous people, reclaiming ethical self-

determination across diverse urban and rural ecosystems, empowering gender justice and gender fluidity, transforming lawmaking to be consensual, healing intergenerational traumas, and calling out all practices that erase Indigenous histories, cultures, and experiences.

Perhaps these goals and values are among the greatest gifts of Indigenous spirituality and wisdom. I want to experience the solidarity of allied actions that refuse fantastical narratives of commonality and hope. Determining what exactly needs to be done will involve the kind of creativity that Indigenous peoples have used to survive some of the most oppressive forms of capitalist, industrial, and colonial domination. But above all, it will require that allies take responsibility and confront the assumptions behind their actions and aspirations.