Decolonizing Resistance, Challenging Colonial States

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Introduction

In a recent article in Social Justice, “Decolonizing Antiracism,” Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua (2005) argue that antiracist theory and practices have historically excluded the concerns of Aboriginal peoples. The result, they claim, is twofold: Aboriginal people “cannot see themselves in antiracist contexts and Aboriginal activism against settler domination takes place without people of color as allies.”¹ They further argue that antiracist praxis has actually contributed to the active colonization of Aboriginal peoples (pp. 122–123). Indeed, they contend that “antiracism is premised on an ongoing colonial project” (p. 123, emphasis added) and on “a colonizing social formation” (pp. 129–130).²

Examples of antiracist complicity, according to Lawrence and Dua, include postcolonial critiques of national liberation strategies and social constructivist critiques of nationhood or nationalisms. They maintain that such analyses further secure the colonization of indigenous people by contributing to “the ongoing delegitimization of Indigenous nationhood” (p. 128). Moreover, since indigenous “nationhood” is understood in ethnicized terms, Lawrence and Dua also claim that critiques, such as those of Stuart Hall, against ethnic absolutism are destructive of indigenous national identity and struggle (p. 131).³ Like other nationalist arguments that read the existence of contemporary nationalized polities back into time immemorial, Lawrence and Dua maintain that such critiques are attacks against both the pre-colonial identity of indigenous people and of their contemporary efforts at achieving sovereignty.

Since their critique is broadly focused on antiracism thought and practice as it affects indigenous people in Canada, Lawrence and Dua discuss what they see as the implication of nonwhites within the colonial project. One of their central arguments is that “people of color are settlers. Broad differences exist between those brought as slaves, currently working as migrant laborers, are refugees without legal documentation, or émigrés who have obtained citizenship. Yet people of color live on land that is appropriated and contested, where Aboriginal peoples are denied nationhood and access to their own lands” (p. 134).⁴

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In this article, we would like to respond to two of these arguments. First, we challenge the conflation between processes of migration and those of colonialism. We ask whether it is historically accurate or analytically precise to describe as settler colonialism the forced movements of enslaved Africans, the movement of unfree indentured Asians, or the subsequent Third World displacements and migrations of people from across the globe, many of them indigenous people themselves.⁵ Are there particular sets of relationships that make one a “settler colonist,” or are all migrants by necessity part of this group? What are the political consequences of seeing various forced, less-than-voluntary or even fully voluntary migrants and/or their descendents as settler colonists? What work do these ideas do in today’s political movements for justice for indigenous people and for migrants? What are the consequences of naturalizing an ethnicized, racialized, and nationalized relationship between people and with land?

Second, we interrogate the claim that decolonization may be secured through the nationalist project. Is it possible for indigenous nationalisms in Canada or elsewhere to succeed where no others have actually secured what can be called “decolonization” without seriously distorting the term? Do efforts at decolonization that rely on ideas of “nationhood,” this time centered on autochthonous discourses of “Native” rights, result in a transformation of colonial rule with its particular definitions of territory, polity, and governance, or do they simply reverse (or loosen) the binary of power while maintaining the dualism? Are critiques of naturalized nationhoods and nationalisms tantamount to support for colonialism? Are there other more transformative and more effective paths to liberation than through the national sovereignty project? What are these?

In challenging two key planks in Lawrence and Dua’s argument, we recognize that they are not the first to make these linked sets of arguments. The tainting of a particular group of people to particular places—and basing principles of justice and the allocation of resources (especially land) on notions of their natural connection to these—has become increasingly widespread since the late 1980s. Though each has its own specificities, there are, nevertheless, striking parallels in the mobilization of the sorts of sentiments expressed by Lawrence and Dua in South Africa, Equatorial Africa, Australia, New Zealand, parts of Asia, Europe, North America, Latin America, Oceania,⁶ and the Caribbean.

In each instance, a particular definition of who constitutes the “Native” is put forward. Some, like the one articulated by Lawrence and Dua in the Canadian context, are part of efforts at decolonization where many “Natives” are subordinated and defined (by both the dominated and the dominating) metaphysically as being of the land colonized by various European empires. Others, such as across Africa and in Asia, are advanced in postcolonial contexts where the polity is redefined over the distribution of power and land and where “Natives” are usually defined ethnically as those living in any particular area (at smaller and larger scales) at the point of colonization (Mamdani, 1998). Still others are formulated in an attempt
to make claims for the continuation of rank hierarchies for those “Natives” racialized as either European or white against former colonial subjects who have made a home in various metropoles (Balibar, 1991b).

Although each definition of the Native shares qualities with the other (metaphysical claims of “rootedness” are often racialized and ethnicized, for instance), in each case it is those constituted as “migrants”—the quintessential non-Natives—who come to be the problem for those constituted as “Natives.” Migrants are said to take resources properly belonging to Natives, to promote the disintegration of the “nation,” thwart decolonization, and so on. In this negative duality of the “Native” and the “migrant,” each is defined as existing within discrete, oppositional categories that are wholly unrelated and, more importantly, should remain so.

The pervasiveness of such autochthonous discourses leads us to question how they are related to political and social transformations shared across the spaces where they are, or are rapidly becoming, prevalent. Global flows, after all, are certainly not new. Many (most?) places across the world have long experienced the movement of people. As capitalist social relations have truly become a global phenomenon, however, it seems that the presence of “foreigners” has taken on even greater urgency and generated increasingly heated controversies. As we shall argue below, the expansion of the category of “settler colonizer” to include all “non-Natives” emerged within the context of the political consolidation of neoliberalism in the late 1980s and the related rise of neo-racist ideologies of incommensurable “differences” among “cultures” imagined as separate and distinct (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2005: 125; Balibar, 1991b; Mamdani, 1998; Geshiere and Nyamnjoh, 2000).

Though we will clearly depart from Lawrence and Dua on various key questions—including on who constitutes a settler colonizer, on migration, and on nationalism—we do share certain of their arguments. For example, it is important to attend to the specificities of the oppression of people constituted as indigenous in any struggle against racism; a civil rights approach clearly does not pose a fundamental challenge to colonialism; and a forceful critique of liberal discourses of “democracy” and multiculturalism is needed since they do not challenge colonial relationships. We therefore conclude with a consideration of ways to undo the divide between “indigenous” people and “migrants” by working toward practices of decolonization that are fundamentally anti-racist and toward an anti-racist politics fully cognizant of the necessity of anti-capitalist decolonization. From this standpoint we reject the de-linking of anti-racism and anti-colonialism that is fundamental to Lawrence and Dua’s argument, and seek rather to renew the historical linkage with colonialism made in the best of antiracist thought and practice. We are especially interested in liberatory strategies of critique and practice that do not reproduce the ruling strategies of colonial modernity, the colonial state, and nationalism, and that open up spaces for radical critique and resistance.

What Does the Discourse of “All Migrants Are Colonizers” Do Politically?

A number of political and intellectual projects are evident in Lawrence and Dua’s article. In this essay, however, we address what we perceive to be two of the most problematic aspects of the argument that nonwhites in Canada are settler colonists. The first is the conflation of migration and colonization; the second is the attempt to depoliticize nationalist politics by taking it out of the realm of contestation. In claiming that attempts to critique notions of “nationhood,” or of the ways in which nationalism organizes social relations, are tantamount to decolonizing practices, Lawrence and Dua neglect to consider how various nationalisms, including relatively recent ones centered on indigeneity, have relied upon and reproduced the colonial state and colonial social relationships. In this section, we try to unpack these two political projects by showing their link to neoliberal practices that have further globalized capitalist social relations and to the related neo-racist practices of “each to their own.” Both of these, we argue, rely on nationalisms and the existing, or hoped-for, national states they legitimate.

A discourse that posits that “all migrants are settler colonists,” or that “all those who leave their ‘Native’ lands are colonizers,” necessarily renders the entire process of human migration as a serious problem, while denying the migratory histories of “Natives.” Within this perspective, the only way not to be a “colonizer” is to remain on the land with which one is associated, which is something many people have been unable or unwilling to do in the past and that a growing number of people find impossible or undesirable to do today. Ironically, migration is often one response of people who have been colonized and dispossessed of their prior livelihoods. In some cases, migration is also a response to being “decolonized,” as postcolonial struggles rage over whose “nation” has just been “liberated.” For those defined as outside the new nationalized polity—or even as its “enemies”—migration is one of the few available “escape routes” for life.

Those observing the expansion of the category of “settler” or “colonizer” to include all “non-Natives,” regardless of their historical or social relation to colonialism, see it as emerging from the political maturation of neoliberalism as a global phenomenon in the late 1980s (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000: 125; see also Maman, 1998; Geshiere and Nyamnjoh, 2000; Veracini, 2007). Significantly, the character of racist discourses also changed in that period, casting migrants as the ultimate enemies of “nations,” however that entity is imagined. Problematizing the presence of those who do not “belong” and calling for people to stay fixed in “their” space gained legitimacy as capital, commodities, ideas, and people became increasingly mobile and as the material benefits of citizenship were reduced due to neoliberal policies of liberalization, privatization, and deregulation. In Latin America, for instance, the privatization of lands and the unraveling of the “national-popular” state project have led, in a number of cases, to urban-based and other movements for “cultural revitalization” among indigenous peoples (Mallon, 2005: 285).
Far from being a contradiction or a mere reaction, such moves toward autochthony are deeply embedded within the processes of capitalist globalization. Historically, as capitalist social relations have expanded, notions of “community” have often contracted. The process continues today: over the last few decades, the politics of neoliberalism has increasingly engendered virulent hatreds of anyone deemed to be “foreigners.” Such distinctions are not, in and of themselves, clear cut since many of those now considered to be “the same” were once unknown to each other, while those now considered “strangers” were once long-time neighbors, friends, and even family (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh, 2000: 423). Such distinctions are a response to, and a deep denial of, the intricate webs of interdependency that tie people to each other across the globe today (and, arguably, for a long time).

This ideological terrain of neoliberalism is very much racialized. In this form of racism, “differences” between cultures and traditions are seen as insurmountable. Differing from previous hegemonies of racist ideologies, it does not rely on a biological concept of “race” or even a racialized hierarchy per se. Instead, this form of racialized thought posits that “different” people should be in “their” own places (which, not coincidentally, often coincide with the boundaries of the existing or aspired-for nation states). This “new racism” has been called a “differentialist racism” (Tagueiff, 1990), or simply “neo-racism” (Balibar, 1991b). Robert Miles (1993) points out that these racisms may not be so novel, but it is certainly true that today’s racist practices are “largely based on the argument that it is futile, even dangerous, to allow cultures to mix or insist that they do so” (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 192).

The anti-miscegenist character of neo-racist thought stems from its base assumption that ethnic boundaries are “natural borders.” As feminist commentators in particular have noted, when “culture” and “tradition” are naturalized in this way, ethnicized borders are used by actual or aspiring elites to enforce their particular and particularistic interpretations of “culture” (Bannereji, 2000; LaRocque, 2007; Maracle, 1988; Menon, 2005; Moghadam, 1994). Such interpretations tend to construct forms of “community” that normalize patriarchal, elitist, and exploitative social relations. Ideologically detached from historical, social, or political processes, the fact that these standards are made through the unequal distribution of power is concealed.

Moreover, the centering of “culture” within neo-racist discourses ensures a continuance of the devotion to genealogy held by the “old” racisms. That devotion has material moorings: origin stories within the neo-racist imagination lay the basis for making historical claims to contested lands by ethnicizing group rights that are said to be held solely by those “Native” to the place. Such notions work to make indigenous identity a possessive identity since this identity is often the only avenue within existing systems to make group claims to resources (Lipsitz, 1998; Mamdani, 1998; Hall, 2005). In this regard, it is a possessive identity of the poor and dispossessed in particular, since the rich have other, more market and law-based means by which to gain land. Processes of neoliberalism have exacerbated this process as access to needed resources has diminished further due to the ongoing entrenchment of market relations.

Thus, the dualistic hierarchy established by neo-racist thought is one between “Natives” and “non-Natives.” Within this dynamic, two arguments are discernable: first that “Natives” have a natural connection to particular lands and that migrants, either by moving or staying, upset this “natural” order. With such a “naturalization of xenophobia,” as Jean and John Comaroff put it (2005: 140), it is entirely unsurprising that the demonization of contemporary and past migrations constitutes a central characteristic of the autochthonous character of neo-racist thought. Doing so helps to legitimate exclusive “Native” claims that are made on the grounds of “nationhood.” “Migrants” come to stand in for the subordinated “race” within this neo-racist sensibility (Balibar, 1991c: 52).

In one sense, then, autochthonous discourses can be said to be a form of flexible Othering. Creating an ever-expanding host of different Others narrows the group comprising the autochthones. Indeed, Geschiere and Nyamnjoh (2000: 424) argue that notions of autochthony “can be seen as marking a new form of ethnicity,” one that because of its ahistoricity is less specific and therefore subject to greater political manipulation. That such flexible Otherings are related to the neoliberal turn in state practices is evident in the ideological character of the criteria of belonging—and not-belonging. That is, the neo-racist fetishization of autochthony should by no means be confused with either the disavowal of racialized hierarchies or the actual spatial separation of “different people.” Though responsible for the increased precarity of many people’s global movements, border-talk, and the state policies and ideas of “community” mobilized through it, is largely aimed at creating categorical juridical distinctions between “different” people within the same social space (Sharma, 2000; 2006).

Thus, the distinction between “Native” and “non-Native” appears to be spatially organized (i.e., demands for fixed, ethnicized boundaries and for greater border control), while autochthonous discourses are primarily concerned with sorting out distinctions within shared spaces. This ensures the ethnicization of the polity, of politics writ large and of social movements. In an act of high irony, such ethnicizations are often formulated as a kind of antiracist response that “centralizes indigeneity” (as Lawrence and Duas call for) by demanding “a place” for “each people.” In this way, the historical articulation of racism and nationalism is mobilized through autochthonous discourses (Balibar, 1991c: 50). Neo-racist arguments of this kind, therefore, ought to be seen as linked to either new or old nation-building projects, as well as to neoliberal practices since both rely on forms of “differential inclusion” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Balibar, 1991b).

Importantly, neoliberal and neo-racist discourses rely on the state to legislate differences and on ideas of nationhood to legitimate such distinctions, demonstrating the ongoing dependence of global capital on national states and nationalism.
This is particularly so regarding the claims of states to the “right” to control the “character” of the “nation” through border controls and, not coincidentally, the shaping of competition within and between nationalized labor markets (Sharma, 2006). Thus, a key consequence of a focus on origins (by the Right and Left) is the depoliticization—and insularity—of the market and the nation-state through the organization of anti-migrant politics. Claiming that any anti-nationalist critiques of such politics are acts of colonialism, those advancing an autochthonous project further legitimate their own nationalisms. In this sense, then, autochthony can be said to be a neoliberal mode of belonging, one whose attempts to contain contestation are based on allegations that any demand for rights and/or resources by “non-Natives,” including a radical rethinking of how rights and resources are thought of and distributed, is tantamount to a disregard for, and even colonization of, the autochthones.

As Jean and John Comaroff (2005: 128) argue, by “elevating to a first-principle the ineffable interests and connections, at once material and moral, that flow from ‘native’ rootedness, and special rights, in a place of birth,” autochthonous discourses place those constituted as “Natives” at the top of a hierarchy of the exploited, oppressed, and colonized. By insisting that the moral claims of “Natives” are central, the claims of others are rendered as peripheral to the realization of either decolonization or justice. In keeping with the anti-miscegenist character of such politics, the numerous past and present alliances across “Native”/“non-Native” divides are wholly denied as are the classed, gendered, and sexualized divisions within such categories. In these neo-racist denials of active solidarities among the expropriated, the back-story to how so many “Natives” and “non-Natives” ended up with one another is also denied. That is, the fact that modern colonization largely depended on the global mobilization of the newly expropriated and soon-to-be exploited proletarians.

Another important aspect of this largely unacknowledged history is that the categories of “Native” and “non-Native” were part of the ruling practices of the colonial state in many places across the globe (Mamdani, 2001). As Anthony Hall observes in his comprehensive study of indigenous encounters with European empires and nation-states, complex and contradictory Aboriginal identities emerged from the crucible of the unfinished 18th-century revolutions and the ultimate exclusion of indigenous people by Creole and white nationalisms in the Americas. The failure of revolutionary movements to imagine and create full liberation for all (including negatively racialized “migrants” and “Natives”) allowed for an alliance between what became constructed in response (by elites and by Aboriginal people) as “aboriginality” and the related ideas of hereditary sovereignty that secured the power of European monarchies and aristocracies. As Hall (2005: 37–38) explains:

Recognition of the imperatives of aboriginality tend best to mirror the arguments and convictions of those who resisted the most sweeping applications of the Enlightenment’s revolutionary thrust, wherein the inherited titles of monarchs and aristocrats were denounced in the name of the natural rights of human beings to equality before the law. The transatlantic commonalities linking those holding similar conservative orientations towards land and governance were reflected in the tendency for proponents of the embattled monarchies of Great Britain, and later Spain, to move towards strategic alliances with Indigenous peoples in the Americas.

Hall (2005: 36–7) hastens to add, “the idea of First Nations as a kind of entrenched, entitled aristocracy is far from the present realities of most Indigenous peoples, whose day-to-day experiences are too often framed by the most serious forms of racial discrimination, poverty, incarceration, suicide, addictions, and violent death.” Nevertheless, as his analysis makes clear, it is crucial to contextualize all social identities, including “aboriginal” ones, to understand how they are the historical outcome of, and are located within, ongoing practices of ruling and may reflect ruling ideas more than they resist them.

As Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker (2000) indicate regarding the making of the “revolutionary Atlantic,” the destruction—through enormous violence—of the solidarities among the expropriated and exploited across space was central to the global expansion of capitalism. Moreover, the ideas of “race” and “nation” were integral to a bourgeois victory. One outcome, as Tiya Miles (2006) has made clear for the 18th-century U.S. context, was the differential positioning of “Indians” and enslaved Blacks within ruling colonizing strategies. Such ruling strategies must be placed alongside the long history of joint resistance against colonialism shared by indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans throughout the Americas (including, for example, that led by Tupac Amaru in Peru)—an alliance often forcibly destroyed through incredible violence (Rediker, 2007).

The theorizing and re-forming of these intimate, historical connections among the colonized ought to be central to our strategies for a decolonization worthy of its name. As Sylvia Wynter (1991: 5; see also Lowe, 2006) comments that all of us must recognize, as Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier indicates, that all the major and hitherto-separated races [sic] of the world have been brought together in the new world to work out a common destiny. This destiny would entail the transformation of our original dominant/subordinate social structure and its attendant perceptual and cognitive matrices into new ones founded on reciprocal relations.... [W]e must come to terms with the tragic paradox of 1492.... To resolve it, we must now replicate Columbus’ creation of a ‘new image of the earth’ by creating a new ‘image of the human,’ based on a trans-racial mode of inclusive altruism, beyond the limits of the national subject and the nation-state.
Along with challenges to hegemonic subjectivities, such an “inclusive altruism” needs a material base. That is made clear in the Abahlali baseMjondolo statement (May 2008) against the attacks on “migrants” in Johannesburg: “The solution,” they argue, “is not to educate the poor about xenophobia. The solution is to give the poor what they need to survive so that it becomes easier to be welcoming and generous.”

For a Decolonization Without Nationalism

Étienne Balibar (1991c: 43) observes that, “to judge it by its own ideals, decolonization has failed, the process being both incomplete and perverted.” Indeed, Vijay Prashad’s (2007) critical-historical account of the Third World political project, *The Darker Nations*, is an important anatomy of the tragic failures and defeats of national liberation projects and post-independence states. Such failures and disasters have been due, in part, to the goals of many of these projects. Namely, they were to establish themselves as supposedly sovereign members in the global system of national states—and often within the very territorial borders drawn up by the colonial powers. This claim to “sovereignty” for most colonized people, however, exists within the planetary expansion and dominance of capitalist social relations and is therefore profoundly circumscribed. Although people most often see each other through the lens of a nationalist imagination (never too far removed from a racist—or neo-racist—one), they nevertheless exist within a dense and hierarchical network of global relationships of the capitalist marketplace.

Decolonization can be construed as a liberation of “nations,” rather than as a liberation of people from social relations that are organized through their hierarchical placement within a ruthless, global competition for profits, whether private or public. When that happens, it loses its material moorings and becomes about gaining a particular group’s power (one that is usually racialized/ethnicized, and always homogenized). In this way, nationalism as an ideology makes domination appear to be a form of egalitarianism; this, indeed, is one source of its ongoing, deep allure. Thus, although the neo-racist evident within many indigenous nationalist movements emerges from colonial forms of rule, and can often be seen as a reaction to the racist practices of colonizers, we cannot ignore the commonality shared by the nationalists of the dominant with those of the dominated (Balibar, 1991c: 45). These commonalities include adherence to modernist identities of “nationhood,” with all of its imagined, limited, and communalist characteristics, and, therefore, the acceptance of a hierarchical notion of societal belonging organized through old or new racist discourses (Anderson, 1991). The ironic result, observes Hall (2005: 235), is that indigenous people are then “set up to relive on a reduced scale the historical evolution of their former imperial rulers.” They also share—or strive to share—their history of people’s mobility across and through spaces claimed by various “nations” (Balibar, 1991c: 48). Nationalism “from above” and “from below” must erase relations for the fiction of “ethnicity” or “nationhood” to constitute “common sense.”

For these reasons, some of the key aims of indigenous nationalist movements—“nationhood” and sovereignty—are unable to realize decolonization. In Equatorial Africa, for instance, the gaining of “Native” group title to land has not lessened autochthonous claims. Instead, it has exacerbated them by ethnicizing access to a key means of production, all of which takes place in the context of a neoliberal emphasis on export-driven trade, privatization, and deregulation. Attempts to become “indigenous” or to deny “indigenous” status to competing groups have thus proliferated. This has occurred in “settler colonial” contexts and in situations not normally conceptualized as such. Far from promoting a decolonizing of people’s relationship to one another and to the land, these attempts reinforce the inherently exclusionary aspects of colonial relations. As Mamdani (2001: 10) argues in reference to national states in Africa, “in privileging the indigenous over the non-indigenous, we turned the colonial world upside down, but we did not change it. As a result, the native sat on the top of the political world designed by the settler. Indigeneity remained the test for rights.”

The indigenous/non-indigenous divide in the Americas has had its own specificities and the divides there differ from the direction in Africa. Only in exceptional cases have the indigenous people in the Americas had the slightest chance of assuming state power. They have long contended with genocidal colonial states organized through various white and Creole nationalist projects and with the violent expropriation and exploitation of their land and labor. As Hall notes with respect to Canada, land claims and self-government processes have largely served to ensnare indigenous peoples in legal processes far removed from the survival needs of non-elite Aboriginals. This has tended to reinforce the power of states and corporations: “Corporate law has, in many instances, penetrated so deeply into the culture and lands of Indigenous peoples that there is a growing trend to frame what is often identified as Aboriginal self-government in the legal wrappings of corporate charters emanating from the sovereign authority of national, state, or provincial governments” (Hall, 2005: 23). In other cases, he notes (p. 24), outright destruction of the basis for life for Indigenous people (and other colonized and exploited people) characterizes many corporate and development projects in the Americas—just as it has elsewhere globally—and has inspired a politics of resistance against what David Harvey (2003) has famously called “accumulation by dispossession.” Despite the varying conditions in, very broadly, Africa and the Americas, there is a resurgence of claims to “indigeneity” organized through nationalist imaginaries and in the face of increasing failures of nation-states either to decolonize or provide for peoples’ needs. These claims deeply shape how social movements, spaces, and alliances are imagined or enclosed.

Historian Florencia Mallon (2005) has examined the trajectory of indigenous experiments in and against nation-states within Latin America. Independence
movements failed to bring about decolonization and indigenous peoples have become some of the fiercest critics of economic development, displacement, and the nation-state. Indigenous intellectual production has begun to form a bridge to the critique of colonialism and 20th-century decolonization as it was developed in Asia and Africa. As Mallon notes, various complex political experiments characterize indigenous projects in the Americas. However, such projects have largely countered the failures of post-World War II Latin American “national-popular” regimes with assertions of indigenous, nationalist “cultural and territorial autonomy,” all within the framework of existing nation-states. Due to the tensions and failures of this model, as well as the intense debates within and against the Latin American Left, some indigenous intellectuals have begun to rethink the “nation,” the state, and the trajectory of indigenous experiments. Likewise, they have more profoundly challenged the “racial,” national, ethnic, class, and gender divides that sustain ruling (Mallon, 2005: 286, 287; Hylton and Thomson, 2007; Warren, 1998).

Decolonizing relationships has proved to be much more difficult than decolonizing territories. Even using the term “decolonization” to describe the outcomes of national liberation movements is radically misplaced. It has produced what David Scott (2004) evocatively calls “conscripts of modernity,” who may continue to imagine that colonialism was/is mainly about “foreigners” who usurp(ed) the power that rightfully belongs to the “Native.” Though speaking in the language of group rights, nationalist movements have privatized and concentrated power in the hands of old or new elites within the claimants. Since the 1980s, the latter are elites who have increasingly been defined as necessarily “Native.” These “decolonizing” efforts do not fundamentally problematize ruling relations as such, only who rules.

Thus, the problem is that ruling goes beyond who rules to encompass ruling relations. In comparing neo-racist discourses in Europe and the Third World, Balibar (1991a: 13) notes that both “have the same stumbling block to overcome: the confusion of ethnic particularism or politico-religious universalism with ideologies that are liberatory in themselves.” A fundamental problem with nationalisms of all stripes is what is done to those imagined as the nation’s Others, an ever-widening circle in the contemporary period. Mallon (2005: 287) articulates the question as follows: “As the viability of such nations breaks down in many parts of the world, along with the promises of development, autonomy, and participation, is there anything that might take its place?” Are there other ways of thinking about our relationship to space and to each other? In North America, indigenous feminist scholars such as Andrea Smith (2007: 104) have called for understandings of political community beyond the nation-state “to free our political imagination to begin thinking of how we can build a world we would actually want to live in.” Though Smith wishes to retain a flexible concept of “nation” (as distinct from the coercive nation-state), we would challenge both nation-state projects and the concepts of “nation” on which they rely.

Decolonizing Resistance, Challenging Colonial States

Locating Alternatives

The global system of capitalism and nation-states are deeply intertwined since both arose from the bloody violence of expropriating the commons and exploiting the commoners. Defeat of the anti-enclosures movements in one place helped to consolidate attacks against the commons elsewhere (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000). Such defeats also helped to consolidate the emerging and expanding system of national states, with its classificatory system of differential inclusion. While discussing decolonization, territory, and the Fourth World, Hall (2005: 233) comments that the U.N. model of nation-states further served to close down political possibilities:

The international system sanctioned by the charter members of the United Nations came to resemble the legal motifs of land ownership that emerged primarily from the specific historical conditions of both Western Europe and Creole nationalisms of America. In this model, the government of each state recognized at the United Nations was afforded an internationally recognized status similar to that of the owner of a title deed to a specific plot of land. The motifs of Lockean possessive individualism came to permeate the qualifications for acquiring those sovereign proprietorships on which the U.N. system was based.

Thus, decolonization projects must challenge capitalist social relations and those organized through the national state, such as sovereignty. Crucially, their goal must be the gaining of a global commons. The commons is an organization of human activity that “vests all property in the community and organizes labor for the common benefit of all” (Linebaugh, 2007: 6). Thus, the commons is much more than a resource: it is a practice—a practice of commoning (Ibid.). Key to the realization of a commons is the nurturing of relationships of mutuality with fellow commoners. As Linebaugh (Ibid.: 45) puts it, “commoners think first not of title deeds, but of human deeds.” He lists four key principles historically evident in the practice of commoning and in the rights held by commoners. Such rights differ substantially from the modern regime of “human rights.”

First, common rights are “embedded in a particular ecology” that relies on local knowledge and thus are neither abstract nor essentialist. Second, “commoning is embedded in a labor process” and is “entered into by labor.” Third, “commoning is collective.” Fourth, commoning is “independent of the state” and the law. Within common rights there are no sovereigns. In sum, commoning is the realization of the political, social, and economic rights of the commoners, a practice that resolves the capitalist separation of falsely divided spheres. Common rights have historically included the principles of neighborhood, subsistence, travel, anti-enclosure, and reparations (Ibid.: 45). They are valuable principles for which to struggle today, as well as viable, everyday practices engaged in by people escaping ruling relations.
However, the definition of “community” and of what is “human” is central to our understanding of who the commoners are and who can common. Hinging on this understanding is whether we reproduce the practices of colonial states, with their categorical hierarchies of “race,” “nation,” and gender, or achieve decolonization. What do commoners have in common? Can commonalities be based on a shared “culture,” “heritage,” or “genealogy,” or do commoners share a practice and an experience? (See Chan and Sharma, 2007.) Equally important, what is the space and scale of the commons?

Answers to these questions require recognizing the profound changes since the advent of capitalist colonization, processes that have resulted in the enormous mobility of capital, goods, and people. The world differs greatly from what it was in 1492, due certainly to the violent processes of capitalist colonization, but also to the connections forged among people who encountered each other through this process. Not all of them were or are relationships of colonialism. Such encounters produced new social formations and it is within—not against—these social formations that struggles for decolonization need to (and do) take place (Wynner, 1991).

Within this context, we might also consider the standpoints of indigenous migrants as locations from which to interrogate and transform indigenous/migrant divides. For example, some 25% of those migrating to the United States from Mexico are “indigenous.” This migration forms the context for Ramirez’s (2007) study of transnationality and indigenous people in the United States, as well as her call for renewed decolonizing dialogues. For Ramirez, there is a need to move “beyond dominant categories, which have created confusion within and between indigenous communities” (Ibid.: 168). Some Native Americans view the claims of undocumented indigenous migrants seeking U.S. citizenship as conflicting with their rejection of civil rights appeals to the U.S. government in favor of rights and reparations-based appeals to the U.N. The transformation of indigenous/migrant divides, in turn, requires a fundamental rethinking of our relations to one another and to space.

John Holloway (1994) has argued that the concept of “society” now only makes sense if understood as global. Each village, region, or continent can only be fully comprehended in relation to others existing within a global space. All of us are integrally linked to each other—ecologically, culturally, politically, and economically. Historically, many of these links have been born of violence and have imposed and sustained hierarchies; other links, however, have been established under conditions of solidarity among the targets of this violence and the actions they have taken to end it (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000). That is, many people have been brought together through historical relations of expropriation and exploitation, but at times they have connected with one another through a common struggle against these processes, and against the identities of “race,” “nation,” and gender. These identities have been understood (and hopefully will be again) as a key part of ruling-class practices meant to destroy the “motley crew” of revolutionaries (Ibid.).

Contrary to a nationalist common sense, it is not possible to end the ongoing process of “accumulation by dispossession” if we deny or try to sever our links with one another through a neo-racist politics of autochthony, including its notion of “historical continuity of title.” By understanding colonialism as the theft of the commons, the agents of decolonization as the commoners, and decolonization as the gaining of a global commons, we will gain a clearer sense of when we were colonized, who colonized us, and how to decolonize ourselves and our relationships. By comprehending colonialism as occurring each time the commons is expropriated and the commoners are exploited, our understanding of colonialism and who has been colonized should expand. Finally, instead of pitting one racialized, ethnicized, nationalized, and gendered group of expropriated commoners against another in the struggle for decolonization, this would reinvigorate the contemporary struggle against all “possessioners” (some of whom are part of the group defined as “Native” the world over).

NOTES

1. For various takes by Aboriginal scholars, writers, and activists on the politics of alliances between indigenous people and people of color within Canada and the United States, see Amaday (2008), Marcure (1988), Silko (1996), and Smith (2006).
2. For scholars who have analyzed the colonization of people now constituted as “indigenous” as part of their understanding of processes of racism(s) in Canada, see Marcure (1988), Bolaria and Li (1988), Bourgeault (1989), Abele and Stasiulis (1989), LaRocque (1990), Ng (1993), Bannerji (1995), Backhouse (1999), Mackey (1999), and Perry (2001).
3. For an Aboriginal studies scholar who takes on board Stuart Hall to theorize indigenous identities, see Valaskakis (2005, especially Chapter 8.
4. Later on, Lawrence and Dua state: “Recently, people of color have been implicated as citizens in colonial actions. For example, those with citizenship rights participated in constitutional reform that denied efforts on the part of Aboriginal peoples to fundamentally reshape Canada’s approach to decolonization” (p. 135).
5. For important new work on indigenous migrations to the United States, see Fox and Rivera-Salgado (2004) and Ramirez (2007).
6. For examples from the Hawaiian archipelago, see Fujikane and Okamura (2000) and especially the articles by Haunani-Kay Tnek (2000a, 2000b).
7. From their outset, practices of colonization have been subject to challenge by those affected. Colonized people have, however, constituted themselves—or have been constituted by colonizers—through a variety of identification strategies. Since the end of World War II and the emergence of the United Nations (U.N.), the pan-identity of “indigenous” has increasingly been used as a unifying strategy among those colonized people who claim a pre-colonial link to colonized spaces and a “right” to use the U.N.-mandated identity of “peoplehood,” which is seen as necessary for any decolonization project to be considered by the “world community” of national states as legitimate (see Niezen, 2003). Identifications such as “aboriginal” and, especially, “First Nations” are specific to the Canadian context and may be unfamiliar to U.S. readers. “Aboriginal” may here be taken as synonymous with “indigenous” and, in Canada, includes those known as Métis, Inuit, and “First Nations.” First Nations, an identity exclusive of Métis and Inuit, usually refers to a band recognized by the Canadian state, with
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official status (or one that is claiming such status). For an indigenous feminist take on the political/historical context for the deployment of “First Nations” identities in terms of the emergence of Third World liberation movements, see Millon’s suggestive sketch (2000).

8. In North America and elsewhere, this is evident in attempts to deny that the ancestors of those constituted as “indigenous” also migrated from various points and through various land and sea routes. This approach is often a reaction to those who would deny the process and impact of colonization, as well as to thwart efforts at decolonization. However, by denying histories of migration, such reactions reinforce the institutions and ideologies of colonial formations. To deny prior histories of migration is to reinforce the notion that only those who can show either uninterrupted or original inhabitance on a particular territory have any claims to it. Second, such denials play into the hands of those (often sharing the analytics and belonging to the same political movements as those working against processes of decolonization) who demonize those constituted as “migrants” and claim that migrants neither have, nor should have, rights. For a discussion of Aboriginal migration in 19th-century British Colombia, see Raibouni (2005).

9. Indeed, the idea that there is a “land” to which one “naturally” belongs is in itself a feature of particular social processes and needs to be historicized. See Hansen and Stepputat (2005) and Sutcliffe (2001).

10. An infamous example is the massive transfer of people between the new national states of India and Pakistan following their “decolonization” in 1947. In a now burgeoning literature, see Butalia and Khan (2007). For a fascinating discussion of migration as an escape route from ruling relations, see Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos (2008).

11. For a very useful critique of “culture talk,” see Mamdani (2004).

12. See Mamdani (1998) for a discussion of how this idea is often used to explain and, at times, justify contemporary hostilities throughout the African continent.

13. For suggestive comments on this, see Menon’s (2005: 219) call for an “uncompromising critique of the nation-state” as a key component of anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal politics.

14. Linebaugh and Rediker (2000) develop the notion of the “mofley crew” to capture the dynamic, migratory, and multiethnic proletariat of the Atlantic world; it is a concept that may be usefully counterpoised to labor histories that center “on the white, male, skilled, waged, nationalist, propertyed, artisan/diizen, or industrial worker” and that do not account for the violence that destroyed the solidarities of the revolutionary Atlantic world.
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