

# *Recovering the Spirit, Bone by Bone: Colonization and the Classroom*

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## Abstract

This paper considers the loss of Spirit, as linked to a sentient view of Earth, alongside the issue of colonization as a cultural mode, a worldview, and a chimeric, yet often invisible player in our classrooms. Following the work of Four Arrows and the kinship value structure inherent in the cosmologies and practice of Earth-oriented Indigenous and Traditional communities across time and geographies, I offer a series of observations and adjustments to how we might collectively proceed with the work of holistic education with a Spirit-Earth focus and an eye on the constant presence of colonized consciousness.

**Keywords:** *indigenous communities, colonization, mixed heritage, fifth world, ancestral memory*

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As we approach what is variously called the Fifth World, the Sixth Sun, the Great Turning, and so on, we are being called to recalibrate our relationship with Earth and Spirit. And yes — I am citing prophecy. Without Spirit, the very essence of which has been exorcised from both culture and classroom, no real decolonization is possible. Without Spirit, we are but hollow bones on a spinning rock: fragile, brittle, and easily broken.

I write this as a woman of mixed heritage and mixed influence: neither this, nor that. I was born already colonized, as are many of us, and have had to dream a track back to the relationships that are both birthright and lived responsibility. I have come to know intuition as separate from the voices in my mind. I have come to listen more closely to Earth speaking her guidance. And through the practice of transmission, attempted to awaken in others the realization that we can never be disconnected from those forces that sustain us. As a teacher in the classroom, however, I have also come to realize that there is always an invisible presence sitting with us as we learn, and her name is Trauma. She carries a secret we have collectively learned

to silence, suppress, and deny — that regardless of historical context, and separate from ethnicity, we are all, at multiple levels, colonized.

To suggest that we have all been colonized out of our relationship with Earth and Spirit, is, in these times, a radical statement. And yet — there it is, with an emphasis on the word 'all.'<sup>1</sup> We are accustomed to considering this word *colonization* to be linked only with the struggles of Indigenous communities against the forces of empire over the last five hundred years. In this moment of our time, however, these same mechanisms continue to operate through modernization, globalization, capitalist expansion,

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<sup>1</sup> I am by no means the first to point in this direction. See the following authors: John Mohawk, ed. *Basic Call to Consciousness* (New York: Akwesasne Notes/Book Publishing Company, 1978; reprint, 2005); Moana Jackson, "Globalisation and the Colonising State of Mind," in *Resistance: An Indigenous Response to Neoliberalism*, ed. Maria Bargh (Wellington: Huia, 2007); Dwayne Donald, "On What Terms Can We Speak? Aboriginal-Canadian Relations as a Curricular and Pedagogical Imperative," in *Big Thinking Lecture Series for the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences* (University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada 2010); Patrick Curry, "Some Remarks on Val Plumwood," *Green Letters* 12, no. 1 (2010); Glenn Aparicio Parry, *Original Thinking: A Radical Revisioning of Time, Humanity, and Nature* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2015).

and ideological deceit. The poverty trap forces accelerated colonization for some, the illusion of progress forces others, and for many, extended isolation from necessary sustainable and local resources, and a grounded culture, has given humans no option but to comply. The juggernaut of the colonizing worldview pushes ever onward as an assimilative, destructive, absorptive engine that is now so prolific its continuance seems permanent. And yet common sense would tell us that it was not always this way.

As John Mohawk and the Haudenosaunee argued, in 1978:

The traditional Native peoples hold the key to the reversal of the processes in Western Civilization which hold the promise of unimaginable future suffering and destruction. Spiritualism is the highest form of political consciousness. And we, the native peoples of the Western Hemisphere, are among the world's surviving proprietors of that kind of consciousness. We are here to impart that message. (Mohawk 2005, 90-91)

But as it is now 2023, it would appear this 45-year-old message is yet to 'settle upon' the rest of Earth's people. Without the acknowledgment of Spirit, without accepting this invitation, we remain largely unable to fulfill our responsibilities as humans to Earth.

If we draw upon Four Arrows' work on the criticality of worldview for our educational work, we can align this state of colonization with the dominant worldview and trace its influence back through time. We can expand upon it progressively, for in every classroom, family, village, town, city, and country, and on every limb of Earth, everywhere and for everyone, the colonizing or dominant worldview is in some way *active* and impacting our relationships. For those who identify as settler, modern, or of pan-European descent, this can appear as an unremembered and unacknowledged influence, especially if the forcible removal of ancestors from place in the ancient establishment of city states is inaccessible to memory. And yet there *was* a process by which the colonized became the colonizer, and thus became absorbed into the cultural complex of mobile and acquisitional forces, acting under Kingship or Chiefdoms, in pursuit of resource theft by elimination and occupation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> To frame the colonizers as formerly colonized is not to adopt an apologist stance regarding the continuance of colonialism across the world (into contemporary times), as perpetuated by successive governments, institutions, and communities in ways which show absolutely no respect for Indigenous peoples, nor aid recovery from colonial violences. Rather, I am emphasizing that the behaviors of those who initiated, and continue, the colonial project, have a history that goes beyond contemporary settler-colonial academic discourses.

Logically, the ancestors of all humans maintained close relationships with places, but not all have maintained their Indigeneity. Understanding how this happened and what it has created can unlock grief from the inherited identities of our forebears in a manner that dissolves some of the polarities and divisions carried forward into the present day.

There is a set of definitions that can guide us. First, the central difference between colonization and colonialism is that, whilst Indigenous peoples possess a *living* ancestral memory of the collective losses wrought by colonialism and can make concrete connections between colonial violences and cultural and physical losses, those who were colonized by processes prior to living ancestral memory *do not*. We can locate colonialism in a continuum with colonization, but the latter stretches back much further into deep time. The difference is temporal.

Colonizing processes can be identified primarily as possessing a logic of replacement, assimilation, and ultimately, absorption of local places and peoples into a conglomerate, nation, or city-state, for the purposes of either human resources (labor) or natural resources (land, minerals, etc.). The mechanisms of control included, as a fundamental feature, the systematic and deliberate replacement of worldview at the level of religion and ritual practice, and the severing of relational, familial, geographical, and community bonds, as generally accompanied by the threat of violence or death. Early colonization processes were continued, generation after generation, to eventually manifest as the colonialism we *do* all remember, perpetuated by those who were colonized before memory.

Trauma, and the extreme fragmentation of our understanding of Earth and Spirit, has been the result. In the words of Jon Young, the historic trauma that caused Western societies to develop this amnesia has created the most disconnected active social system on the planet (Young 2015). The remedy, I believe, is to begin to teach with *compassion* toward those humans who are in a state of being whereby the original trauma has been forgotten.

I like to think of this state as similar to having charcoal on our hands, a metaphor I believe I am borrowing from a half-recollected talk by Robin Wall Kimmerer.<sup>3</sup> We know about charcoal, we can visualize this well, we can

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<sup>3</sup> If I may direct you to her book instead, Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

understand how it can get on everything. Now imagine the charcoal is invisible, creating black marks we cannot see.<sup>4</sup> This is how it is when we remain in a state of denial, or fail to bring these ideas into the classroom. Cultural design for education needs to include some awareness of what is active in the psyche of students regarding fear, belief, and control – an inherited set of conditioning parameters on the expression of their being that is generally unconscious. As written in a recent memoir by Stephanie Foo, and this resonates so powerfully with what I witness in the classroom: “Every cell in my body is filled with the code of generations of trauma, of death, of birth, of migration, of history that I cannot understand... I want to have words for what my bones know” (Foo 2022, 202).

So it is, with care, that we might decide to name this invisible presence and see how it blocks connection, awareness, and understanding. To follow along the lines argued by religious scholar Suhayb Yunus, there needs to be a kind of *ketosis*, or emptying out, of the colonized precepts that are living silently within us (Yunus "Debriefing on Decoloniality - a Public Conversation, Part 1").

If we wish to secure a future in which the traditional values of Indigenous peoples become the guidelines for human experience, we must attend to those invisible masters, irrespective of the timeline within which ancestral colonization occurred. In my own teaching practice, I draw upon history, geography, anthropology, neuroscience, physiology, and studies of religion and race to expose the long-term exorcism wrought by these colonizing processes, not to indoctrinate students into any particular view of Spirit, but to demonstrate the manner in which Spirit has been reshaped, suppressed, or recharacterized to comply with very human agendas.<sup>5</sup>

I present Earth as sentient and possessing of a consciousness to which we are all internal. We learn about custodial practices toward other species and the wider ecologies within which we are enmeshed. I profile a steady flow of wisdom drawn from Indigenous lifeways and living value systems (consistent across all Earth-oriented communities,

across time, and across the body of Earth), and walk with students as we explore different ideas about Earth, consciousness and ecologies. I explain the symbolic architecture of different communities in a non-appropriative way, in order to demonstrate that there are many paths that can spiral out from very similar value systems, and that the value system itself is not culturally dependent. In short, we *accept the invitation* to become students of Earth, directly; to become apprenticed to Indigenous value systems as consistent models of correct socioecological conduct; and, to agree to do the work of decolonizing ourselves – as a human group – in a heart-centered and grounded way that sees and attends to the presence of trauma with a focus on healing those aspects of ourselves that have been denied.

Surely, we have no more time for debate. Davi Kopenawa, of the Yanomamö, reminds us that when humans forget our proper function and cease to serve life, the world falls apart (Kopenawa and Albert 2013). This is where we are, in an exorcised world on the verge of the next one. Unprepared. Yet surrounded by advisors, those Elders who speak out, those ancestors whose words have been recorded or remembered, and those voices that emanate from the world of information, existing just out of sight, behind the veil.

Across time, and beyond our own small identities, if we can only reach far enough into the deep memories of Earth, we *know* what we are. When we place our bare feet on the body of Earth and we feel the web beneath us, holding us in her consciousness and drawing us into her. We know we have roots there. We know what we are and that we belong to a story that is much older than we may consciously realize. And so it is with care, that we might be conduits to reclaim and release the life songs and knowing from the once hollow bones of our brothers, sisters, others, and beloved kin, into the air, once again.

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<sup>4</sup> As echoed in these words by Brian Kim, “every step that I take towards decoloniality is tempered by the very coloniality of my existence.” Brian Kim, "Debriefing on Decoloniality - a Public Conversation, Part 2," <https://jcr.org/religioustheory/2021/06/22/debriefing-on-decoloniality-a-public-conversation-part-2/>.

<sup>5</sup> Key here is the definition of two cultural strands, Earth-oriented and War-oriented, that can be shown to manifest in the form of the circle, and the pyramid, thus depersonalizing some of the most difficult aspects of worldview transformation by de-coupling the two cultural forces from specific groups of people in order to examine them objectively.

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### Author Bio

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