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Uprooting Colonialism

The Limitations of Indigenous Peoples' Day

Indigenous Action

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October 4 2017

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Columbus and Other Cannibals by Jack D. Forbes

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The Wretched of the Earth by Franz Fanon

Red Skins, White Masks by Glen Coulthard

or word game constituting an agreement in word not deed, easily forgotten and ignored tomorrow. We're not trying to join in with the settler block party. Or even to take it over."

Balaam further adds, "To be Anticolonial means to act and attack. Its not just a bunch of solidarity photo-ops and masked up defensive actions with junior settlers driven by their colonial guilt during their weekend warrior adventure. For the Colonized, life is war, we are under occupation and siege from all sides at all times. Even the would be accomplice is and always has been, yet another contingent potential traitor. Just as much so, we the colonized all have the potential to collaborate in our own genocide. The difference is not a matter of what position we take. Genocide is always the situational condition of our struggle and we are forced to respond accordingly. We don't get a second chance at making mistakes, because fundamentally either we are an existential threat or they are. Its their cabins or our teepees ablaze but one way or another way something is burning."

Enshrined in genocide & slavery at the brutal hands of white supremacy, is its banks, its skyscrapers, its statues, its names over streets, schools, currency, and other institutions, all standing in monolithic celebration as a physical threat of the violence our violators are still very capable of. Because like many other nation-states the "U.S." on the whole stands a monument to the ongoing legacy of colonial violence of an entire civilizational order. Our work is to dismantle this order and shatter these monuments of colonial violence, like this one called "America."

Sources

The History of Indigenous Peoples' Day

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The first Columbus Day celebration reportedly took place in 1792 in occupied Lenape lands aka "New York" when colonizers marked 300 years since Columbus' brutal invasion of Taino lands in 1492. It wasn't until 100 years later in 1892 that "U.S." colonial forces officially celebrated the genocide of Indigenous Peoples. 1907, in occupied Ute lands, the state of Colorado created a law to make Columbus Day the first state holiday.

In 1937, Franklin D. Roosevelt established Columbus Day a national holiday, largely as a result of intense lobbying by the catholic group "Knights of Columbus." Originally observed every October 12, it was fixed to the second Monday in October in 1971.

In 1968, then "California" governor Ronald Reagan signed a resolution calling for a holiday called "American Indian Day," to be held the Fourth Friday in September. In 1998, the California Assembly passed AB 1953, which made "Native American Day" an official state holiday, observed annually on the fourth Friday in September. The law states, "An emphasis on freedom, justice, patriotism, and representative government have always been elements of Native American culture, and Native Americans have shown their willingness to fight and die for this nation in foreign lands." It further states, "Native Americans have given much to this country, and in recognition of this fact, it is fitting that this state returns the honor by recognizing Native Americans for all of their offerings to this beloved land through the establishment of a state holiday referred to as 'Native American Day.'"

In 1977, a delegation of Indigenous Peoples proposed replacing Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples' Day (IPD) at the United Nations "International Conference on Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations in the Americas" that was held in Switzerland.

In 1982, Spain and the Vatican proposed a 500-year commemoration of Columbus's voyage at the UN. The African delegation walked out of the meeting in protest.

In 1989, the Transform Columbus Day Alliance was formed by Colorado AIM and more than 80 organizations to directly resist cultural imperialism in the form of an annual Columbus Day parade. The alliance also called for the abolition of Columbus day in occupied Ute lands aka “Denver, Colorado.”

In 1989, the South Dakota legislature unanimously passed legislation proposed by republican governor George S. Mickelson to proclaim 1990 as the “Year of Reconciliation” between Indigenous Peoples and white settlers and to change Columbus Day to “Native American Day.” Since 1990, every second Monday in October is celebrated as “Native American Day.”

In July 1990, representatives from more than one hundred Indigenous Nations from throughout the Americas met in Ecuador in preparation for the then upcoming 500th anniversary of Native resistance to the European invasion of the Americas. A resolution was passed to transform Columbus Day, 1992, “into an occasion to strengthen our process of continental unity and struggle towards our liberation.”

In 1991, after the formation of a committee called Resistance 500 in occupied Ohlone lands aka “Berkeley, California,” the city council became the first in the “U.S.” to declare October 12th Indigenous Peoples’ Day.

In 1997, the state of Nevada declares the Fourth Friday of September as “Native American Day.”

In 2014, Indigenous organizers pushed the cities of “Seattle” and “Minneapolis” to pass resolutions declaring IPD. These declarations started a watershed movement, since then more than 60 cities, Indigenous Nations, states, and counties have passed IPD resolutions.

Amrah Salomon J., states, “Abolition and decolonization, along with collective self-determination, require concrete actions. Actions that may begin with taking down a statue or ending a holiday, but that certainly cannot end there as removing a monument does nothing to address mass incarceration or police brutality and ending a holiday does nothing to address the disposability of Indigenous life or the desecration of sacred sites. Yes, racist statues need to come down and racist holidays need to be abolished, but the cynical renaming of holidays and statues into some kind of feel good celebration of inclusion (arguments for diversity and inclusion are really about cultural assimilation to settler colonialism, not a deep reckoning with our politics of difference) is being allowed by the state because it can be reduced to a mechanism for settler society to allow the actions of colonialism and racial terrorism to continue while washing their hands of the responsibility to do anything about it. We reject this.”

We can and must simultaneously critically engage and attack the ideas and structures of white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism. After all, people in communities from occupied Ute lands in Denver and beyond have been fighting for years to transform Columbus Day and tear down glorifications of conquistadors & other brutal colonizers while simultaneously organizing efforts to heal suffering from historic and intergenerational trauma.

Anti-colonial struggle means attack

K’in Balaam states, “Anti-colonial assaults are decisive strikes that aim to achieve one of three things, 1) expropriate resources for our own survival, 2) materially alter the conditions of power relations and geographic control, or 3) actively sabotage and undermine the continuity of colonial power, resources, culture and control. In short, its something measurable, not simply a sentiment,

Anti-colonial posturing thrives off of lateral violence. Radical posturing and silencing of those disagreeable is how white supremacy navigates the perpetuation of itself. We are familiar with this as radical/anarchist/anti-capitalist/anti-authoritarian Indigenous Peoples as we've already been it's subject and we constantly suffer it's blows. Of course we continue to face how disposable we are every day. Radical communities and spaces are no exception unless they are our own or the long-term hard work to configure relationships in fight, to truly become accomplices not allies, has occurred. And still, how meaningful that relationship is will never be determined by white settlers. Never.

Uprooting Colonialism

Colonialism is not a static event but a structure built on ideas.

Assuming that colonial power structures will bend to moral arguments is a position that accepts the idea that colonial power can absolved, we believe that it cannot be. It must be destroyed and the conditions that precipitate it must also be rooted from these lands. As anti-colonial abolitionists, we seek the total dismantling and systematic erasure of colonial domination and exploitation from these lands.

We desire an unmapping of colonial geography, and see how the dismantling of historic documentation and iconography is an integral part, but we assert that such gains should be wholly in the hands of the people and not the state.

When unsanctioned and unmediated Indigenous and/or accomplice hands strike at or down these statues, monuments, and days of recognition, the process towards destabilizing the colonial death grip on our humanity is loosened.

These kinds of attacks against markers of colonial power can break away at its legitimacy.

Declarations, Disconnect, & Decolonial Recuperation

As momentum has accelerated for occupying forces to issue declarations of "Indigenous Peoples' Day (IPD)," we can't help but feel disconnected from the revelry.

Aside from psychic solace, if the state dismantles these statues and proclaims Indigenous Peoples' Days, what do we actually achieve if the structures and systems rooted in colonial violence remain intact? Is it merely political posturing or window dressing to diminish liberatory agitations? Our senses are heightened as most re-brandings of Columbus Day into IPD appear to whitewash ongoing colonial legacies.

The statistics are all too familiar: Indigenous Peoples in the "U.S." are the ethnic group that faces the highest police murder rate, the highest rates of incarceration, homelessness, and sexual violence.

So yes, we have very good reason to be skeptical of symbolic gestures.

We're all for removing colonial symbols and nationalistic myths, so long as structures such as colonialism and racism go along with them. Problem is they are not. These edicts are readily embraced by their advocates as "steps in the right direction" for Indigenous interests, yet—as we'll assert here—only serve to calcify colonial rule. What else are we to glean from superficial declarations handed down by occupying governing bodies?

Decolonial aspirations are stunted with liberal cosmetology if nothing concrete is done to address historical and ongoing anti-Indigenous brutality. This is an insidious conciliatory process of decolonial recuperation that is rooted in cultural and symbolic change primarily fixated on transforming social stature. It fails to meaningfully confront and transform social power.

To illustrate, nearly all recently passed IPD declarations use the same template with some minor variations:

Reaffirmation of “commitment to promote the well-being and growth of _____’s American Indian and Indigenous community.”

Recognizing “that the Indigenous Peoples of the lands that would later become known as the Americas have occupied these lands since time immemorial; and – _____ recognizes the fact that _____ is built upon the homelands and villages of the Indigenous Peoples of this region, without whom the building of the _____ would not have been possible; and” – Valuing “the many contributions made to our community through Indigenous Peoples’ knowledge, labor, technology, science, philosophy, arts and the deep cultural contribution that has substantially shaped the character of _____; and – _____ has a responsibility to oppose the systematic racism towards Indigenous people in the United States, which perpetuates high rates of poverty and income inequality, exacerbating disproportionate health, education, and social crises; and – _____ promotes the closing of the equity gap for Indigenous Peoples through policies and practices that reflect the experiences of Indigenous Peoples, ensure greater access and opportunity, and honor our nation’s indigenous roots, history, and contributions; and so forth...

IPD traces its roots back to 1977, when a delegation of Indigenous Peoples proposed replacing Columbus Day at the United Nations “International Conference on Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations in the Americas” in Switzerland. (see time-line above)

otic ritual more than anything that amounts to liberation.

Breaking from Anti-colonial Posture

We’d like to take a moment to address what we mean by “anti-colonial posture.”

This position seeks to justify and legitimize itself as loudly as possible, at times purposefully and at others by virtue, drowning out any critical Indigenous voices. Usually with the familiar din of delegitimizing and dismissive rhetoric through one on one in-person private meetings (with no greater accountability), white or academicsplaining (sometimes both) or online statements (which means we’re going to do what we want anyways, we have just “heard” you), or the most used disingenuous tactic of the “invitation to present your concerns.” You want us to present at your event to express how problematic it is yet do nothing to functionally change what it is that you are actually doing, really? There’s nothing anti-colonial about that.

This is the realm of the fascism of settler/white allyship, it is in actuality, anti-Indigenous. This form of radical posturing craves its validation so much so that it aggressively seeks those who are agreeable, and when it finds them it objectifies and capitalizes off their participation. This is no form of solidarity, it is viciously exploitative. This is where the false allyship of settler colonizers intersects with capitalism. To be clear, anti-colonial posturing upholds white supremacy and capitalism.

The most basic attempts at whitewashing anti-colonial colonialism result in a redfaced facade. As it is, there will always be some wolves ready to dance and where there is a chance to gain social position/power by proximity to whiteness, out come the dances with wolves.

not what's happening. It appears that liberal organizing is what's in the way of any real substance coming out of the victory. Rather than attacking 21st century colonization they choose to celebrate what the colonizers give them."

These infrastructure threats to Indigenous existence are generated by the very systemic forces that drove Columbus' genocide of the Taino. Defending the sacred is nothing new, it's as old as resistance to Columbus and other not-so-well-despised colonial invaders, so why celebrate the hollow gestures of politicians? What about supporting and celebrating the ongoing struggles for liberation of our Mother Earth?

Put this into perspective that folks rushed to support #nodapl resistance yet perpetuate erasure of sacred lands and water struggles right where they live. This isn't to say Lake Oahe (the sacred confluence of the Cannonball & Missouri River) didn't warrant critical support, but to contextualize the larger struggles to defend the sacred and protect water. Anti-colonial struggle necessitates an understanding that the front-line is everywhere. It measures and calculates how colonial power operates. If we don't build these understanding into our struggles, we risk the momentum ebbing right where Idle No More left it's water mark. Without meaningfully engaging in sacred sites defense at once as struggle against capitalism and colonialism (add racism and heteropatriarchy to boot), we risk a not so distant future where we'll have people driving hybrids through South Mountain (sacred site outside of "Phoenix, Arizona") on loop 202 to ski on shit-snow at Arizona Snowbowl on the sacred Peaks while wearing #nodapl or "Defend the Sacred" t-shirts they bought at an Indigenous Peoples' Day event weeks prior. This particular brand of superficial activism and anti-colonial posturing that has become more prevalent post-Standing Rock.

Indigenous Peoples' Day, as a process of collusion with occupying state forces, risks becoming a colonial patri-

The momentum picked up in July 1990, when representatives from more than one hundred Indigenous Nations gathered to organize for the "500th anniversary of Native resistance to the European invasion of the Americas." A resolution was passed to transform Columbus Day, 1992, "into an occasion to strengthen our process of continental unity and struggle towards our liberation."

One year later, after the formation of a committee called Resistance 500 in occupied Ohlone lands aka "Berkeley, California," the city council became the first in the "U.S." to declare October 12th Indigenous Peoples' Day. The resolution called for a day of "ceremonies, cultural events and speakers, participation from the schools and an informational procession.

In the "global south" our relatives elicited a C.I.A. threat advisory stating that, "The U.S. intelligence committee assess that there is an increased potential for terrorist violence in selected Latin American countries in conjunction with the October 12 observance of the 500th year of Columbus' arrival in the New World." Attacks included bombings of U.S. targets such as churches, banks, and the U.S. ambassador's house in Chile. The United Press International office in Peru was liberated for a radio broadcast denouncing Columbus' invasion.

Contemporarily in the "U.S.," IPD –at its worst– has absorbed decolonial tendencies and transformed them into annual state-sanctioned cultural marketplaces. With non-profit or self-appointed managers holding it down: it's all pow-wow and no rage, with zero mention of accountability or liberation. We're all too familiar with the machinery of these kinds of "celebrations" as "Native American Heritage Month" is already marked with dances, sales, and a range of other essentialized commodities. This is just an expression of the intimate structural partnership of capitalism and colonialism, it's IPD(tm) with all rights reserved. A holiday on stolen land.

To focus on abolishing one day that celebrates genocide of Indigenous Peoples is to ignore the 364 others that are also entrenched in the ongoing occupation and exploitation of Indigenous lives and land.

Amrah Salomon J., Mexican & O’odham, states, “The practices of naming and celebrating are important ways of normalizing genocide and colonialism. Naming places and days of celebration after horrific killers like Cristoforo Colombo, (Columbus), is a way of creating social acceptance for his crimes: rape, torture, invasion, genocide, and being the architect of mass incarceration and the chattel slave trade (that carried Native American slaves to Europe and African slaves to the Americas). Seeing these names celebrated around us elicits deep historical trauma for Black and Indigenous peoples and functions as a form of racial microaggression.”

Salomon continues, “So yes, it is important to remove these offensive names from our everyday geographies, end holidays, and remove monuments that celebrate slavery, colonialism, and genocide. But addressing public representations that glorify colonial and racial violence is not enough, we must also end ongoing acts of colonial and racial violence for these representational measures to have any kind of lasting social significance. If the statue of Columbus and the genocide celebration of Thanksgiving are gone, there is still a myriad of other acts of colonial violence happening every single day that need to be addressed. Rectification with colonialism can only be achieved through decolonization. Rectification with racism can only be achieved through the abolishment of white supremacy as a structuring institution and social system, not only as a practice of individual bigotry. Rectification with heteropatriarchy can also only be achieved through abolition.”

work was promising, ultimately the initial process was co-opted by liberals who allowed the accountability and community power-building components to fall by the wayside. In becoming a liberal project that served to improve the functioning of the occupying governing forces, it became a process perpetuating colonial violence.

When the City of Phoenix declared IPD, Alex Soto, Tohono O’odham, stated, “If the City of Phoenix really recognized Indigenous peoples, it would have also motioned and passed a resolution against the South Mountain Freeway.” Alex further adds, “The politics of settler recognition (IPD) in no way ensures our existence. If anything it re-enforces the notion that we are a conquered people. I rather put my energy into burning the table if insincere gestures of acknowledgment and respect are offered by settler colonial institutions. Basically, whatever effort we put into IPD should be at the least be put into actually campaigns that protect local Indigenous culture. If not, what’s the point?”

“The politics of settler recognition (IPD) in no way ensures our existence. If anything it re-enforces the notion that we are a conquered people. – Alex Soto

As Phoenix readies to celebrate its first IPD, the echoes of dynamite blasting through the sacred South Mountain will most likely be drowned out by the revelry.

Andrew Pedro, Akimel O’odham from Gila River, brings the points home, “Indigenous People’s Day in Phoenix continues to be a facade of Indigenous resistance. Just south of phoenix, Moadag (South Mountain) is being desecrated by a construction of the loop 202 extension. This is 21st century colonization by the state but we should still be grateful that the state changed the name of a holiday? I could support it more if the holiday itself wasn’t the end goal. The name change is a symbolic victory. Use the struggle as a platform to make demands on behalf of our sacred places but this is

their past transgressions. The sacred Black Hills in occupied South Dakota—which celebrates “Native American Day” not Columbus Day—, have been desecrated by resource extraction and the blasphemous monument to slave owning genocidal presidents, were fiercely fought for and reclaimed multiple times by the American Indian Movement in the 1970s. There are telescopes, ski resorts, pipelines, mines, skyscrapers, and other effigies of oppression that are either desecrating or threatening to violate countless other sacred places right now.

In 2015, riding the wave of IPD declarations, the City of Flagstaff in Arizona proposed to follow suit. Due to their role in maintaining a contract to sell millions of gallons of wastewater to Arizona Snowbowl ski resort for desecration of the holy San Francisco Peaks, a group of folks shut the process down. The group asked “how does this action stand to benefit Indigenous people more than appease white guilt?”

They issued an initial statement that expressed how, “We desire to see Columbus Day abolished in all of our lands and can see how others would jump at the opportunity to support this gesture, after all, trust and healing are needed and many other communities have struggled hard with their own campaigns to change the name. Perhaps a meaningful process can be brought forward that includes; addressing historical trauma from settler colonialism, that operates from an understanding that Flagstaff is not a ‘border town’ but occupied stolen Indigenous lands, that immediately ends the Snowbowl contract, that ends racial profiling, police violence, and criminalization of our relatives on the streets, that protects Mother Earth and nurtures healthy and just communities. A process that moves beyond re-branding how our oppression is recognized and restructures our power relationships towards abolishing white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and settler colonialism.”

Alternately the group proposed a comprehensive process to materially address the social and political conditions due to ongoing anti-Indigenous policies maintained by the City. While the frame-

Beyond Recognition

As Charlie Sepulveda, Tongva from occupied lands of “Los Angeles” states, “Changing Columbus Day for Indigenous Peoples Day, while appropriate, is nothing more than a politics of recognition. It isn’t justice. It doesn’t give land back. It doesn’t move the Tongva toward decolonization or strengthen our ability to be sovereign. It allows L.A. to recognize Indigenous people without having to do anything to radically affect the hegemonic order of settler colonialism. Sorry to rain on your parade.” Sepulveda further adds, “I am grateful to those who worked on abolishing Columbus Day. It is important. Yet, Tongva desperately need more than a symbolic name change. And it is Tongva land, not ‘Indian’ land. – I hope that was clear [with the declaration of IPD]? If not, then why not? We are still here.”

The politics of recognition are important to understand in terms of strategy & tactics. If the goal is for Indigenous autonomy, liberation of the land, people, and other beings, than why plead with our oppressors to merely acknowledge or recognize our existence?

Glen Coulthard, Yellowknives Dene, states in his essay Indigenous peoples and the politics of recognition that, “...colonial powers will only recognize the collective rights and identities of Indigenous peoples insofar as this recognition does not obstruct the imperatives of state and capital.” Coulthard further asserts in his book *Red Skins White Masks* that, “...in situations where colonial rule does not depend solely on the exercise of state violence, its reproduction instead rests on the ability to entice Indigenous peoples to identify, either implicitly or explicitly, with the profoundly asymmetrical and nonreciprocal forms of recognition either imposed on or granted to them by the settler state and society.”

This is not to state that attacks on Indigenous identity regarding racist mascots, stereotypical depictions in movies, in advertising, hipster appropriation, and so forth, are not at all damaging.

As Charles Taylor notes in the book *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, "...often by the misrecognitions of others... a person or a group can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning one in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being."

Understanding how the politics of recognition functions can elucidate pitfalls of cooptation and pathways of greater resistance. Even the practice of "recognizing the Indigenous Peoples whose lands we are on" disembodies Indigenous identities. It is extremely different to stand with and honor protocols and customs for being a visitor or guest on Indigenous lands, than to merely recognize their existence. Putting this into perspective: most all current movements to establish IPD have originated in urban settings without meaningful engagement of the original peoples on those lands. This re-colonization perpetuates the very erasure that IPD is scripted to address, this is a glaring example of lateral violence.

Coulthard emphasizes how "the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous peoples' demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend."

Dehumanization can be mitigated by actions that reclaim and re-assert Indigenous identity, but we're urging to go beyond recognition towards what Frantz Fanon offers in *The Wretched of the Earth*: "...it is precisely at the moment [the colonized] realizes [her] humanity that s/he begins to sharpen the weapons with which s/he will secure [her] victory."

Liberalism or Liberation?

While it has been argued that IPD "is a step in the right direction," we ask, "but what direction?" To claim Indigenous Peoples' Day as an act of decolonization is a failure of liberal assimilationists. Symbolically ending Columbus' legacy while continuing to perpetuate and benefit from the violence of the "doctrine of discovery" is just one more dead-end direction of Indigenous liberalism. If we understand that colonization has always been war, then why are we fighting a battle for recognition and affirmation through colonial power structures?

Bettina Castagno, mixed Kanien'kehá:ka, states, "Those in all good intention think they are helping but don't know that these 'holidays' are still a dominant culture deciding what is to be celebrated. Those days eventually become a consumer capitalist driven celebration, taking on the value system of the dominant greed cultures with christian euro-centric values and behaviors."

Castagno further states, "In this day and period of 'U.S.' history, no it is not enough to throw us a holiday. Revisit history: after throwing warm blankets, commodity foods, poison hidden in alcohol bottles, sterilization of Indigenous women, uranium poisoned land, substandard medical care and education, broken treaties, stolen land, a mere holiday is insulting. We are not free because we are told we are free, we are not free because it is printed on paper or stamped on coin, we are only truly free when there is not a dominant entity or other culture making the decisions for our people, our land, our medicines, livestock, food, water, education and health."

Consider that their constitution still does not guarantee Indigenous Peoples protection for religious freedom relating to sacred sites. Sacred places are our shrines or "monuments" of the relations we have maintained since time immemorial and integral for our continued existence. Yet they are constantly profaned and attacked by the very political forces that now decry select facets of