

Read Black and White: Decolonizing African studies in North America

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Abstract

This article addresses my personal experience at a conference dedicated to the goal of decolonizing the academy of African Studies. Though this conference hoped to create a forum for discussion that would deconstruct colonialism, conflicts that arose between conference attendants served instead to entrench colonial myths and white supremacy. This article addresses the impact of settler colonialism on African Studies and stresses the importance of expanding our knowledge of colonialism in the world. This paper argues that in order to fully contest colonialism in any discipline, academics must acknowledge the role of settler colonialism in constructing global perceptions of colonization.

Keywords: African studies, decolonization, academia, North America, anti-racism

hey now how we come this far/why don't we know who we are?/love changed hands from red to white/stories gone now in the night/I asked my old grey auntie/"Tell me tell me history"/she just laughed and turned her head/"Hush now child" is all she said/"Gone and dead" is what she said (Kinnie Starr 2006)

Reducing the Scope of Colonialism: African Studies as Black and White

As a North American, métis¹ academic, I have asked myself how my experiences of settler colonialism relate to my responsibilities and privileges in my own work and academic participation. As a Ph.D. applicant, I consciously chose to pursue my studies on witchcraft-related violence in the field of political science, as I continued to have serious, though not necessarily well-founded, misgivings regarding African Studies as a discipline. Having completed my studies in Comparative Politics and Political Theory, I am now confronted with an additional sense of intrusion as a political scientist who borders on African Studies. Though I am very critical of political science, and Comparative Politics in particular, for the lack of regard for African epistemologies, the participation of many political scientists in the pessimistic construction of Africa as a place of disorder, corruption and ethnic violence, and I personally reject the term Africanist, it was not until I attended a conference dedicated to decolonizing African Studies (discussed in the later section) that I began to actively investigate the role of race in the history of this discipline in North America.

African Studies as a discipline is concerned with the “experience of (rather than observations about) people in African spaces” (Adams 2014: 469). As many know, the discipline began to evolve, for “the Anglophone world ... in the late 1920s in Oxford”, expanding towards North America alongside “the onset of the Cold War” (Bryceson 2012: 186). Building on the politics of the 1960s, some American schools began to directly contest “[r]acial hierarchies within African studies” (Bryceson 2012: 187). These critical movements sought to re-discover “Africa's hidden history” through a significant focus on “black oppression” and theories “pertinent to the African-American

1 Métis is a Canadian legal term used to refer to people of mixed Aboriginal and European descent (small 'm') and those who are members of the Métis Nation (capital 'M') and descendants of the Red River Métis people (Gaudry 2013). The use of these terms and debates regarding membership in these categories will be discussed in greater detail in a later section.

experience” (Bryceson 2012: 190). According to Bryceson, this emphasis on “U.S. race relations” has maintained a central role in American approaches to African studies (2012: 194).

The binary construction of this racial dichotomy, where white/Northern academics study black/African individuals within the African-American diaspora or in Africa, has been the subject of criticism and led the discipline to important periods of reflections (see Nugent 2009). However, race relations in North America are not black and white; they are much more diverse, and this diversity becomes incredibly relevant when questions of colonialism are at play. The racial map of North America overlays a landscape of genocide against red people, the first peoples of North America, who are still colonized and fighting to resist this colonization. North American academics in African Studies, in their approaches to life in post-colonial societies and states, fail to acknowledge that there is a potential relationship between the post-colonial experiences they study and the active colonial situation they live as academics is not only concerning, it is also an important feature of settler colonialism. The masking of ongoing settler colonialism and genocide is a key feature of colonization in North America, and this willful masking is replicated at every level of engagement, within and without academia.

In my own life, I have frequently encountered this willful ignorance in academia. The most common expression of this masking is the application of stereotyped representations of Indianness and the erasure of indigenous identities that do not conform to this representation. Outside of academia, my experiences of racialization are mixed. For example, I have been accused of hypocrisy for wearing brown make-up while professing to be against cosmetics and I have been asked persistently where I am from by recent immigrants who will not accept that I am from Canada. In contexts where indigenous and settler conflicts are layered with open hostility, as in Northern and Central Canada, I have been verbally and physically assaulted for being indigenous.

However, in academic settings, I am consistently racialized as being white. This masking of indigeneity in academia is represents a feature of settler colonialism that is particular to the context of the colony. Because I do not readily conform to static and simplistic representations of the native in Canada, erasure through unconscious assimilation is a common response. However, in academic contexts, this erasure performs numerous colonial strategies: indigeneity is erased, colonialism is masked, and the role of educational institutions in perpetuating these erasures is overlooked. As well, these erasures reflect an assumption that indigenous people do not populate certain spaces, such as academia.

When I have traveled and lived internationally, the construction of certain fields and expertise as being white has been a prominent experience. When I am unbound by association to the power and privilege of academia or research, I am not interpreted as being white. For example, while on holiday in Vietnam a waiter in Hanoi asked me if I was Venezuelan because, in his words, they are frequently of Indigenous descent. When I was living in Ghana, I was often asked whether I was Hindu, which I found to be a particularly entertaining association. However, in my work with HelpAge Ghana, as an NGO worker, or in bearing the mantle of researcher, Ghanaians and Cameroonians I worked with or interviewed immediately perceived me as being white, and in these roles, this was a label I did not contest. Conscious of the fraught colonial history of these countries as well as continuing racism, oppression, and neo-colonial relations with the West, I did not contest the views of respondents who aptly criticized the white privileges of the foreign researcher.

However, the complicity of academia in constructing, or failing to deconstruct, the racial binaries embedded in these privileges requires further investigation. In my fieldwork, as well as the conference on decolonization of African Studies, it was implicitly and explicitly assumed that only white people study black people, and, from a critical perspective, that these studies take from black people in order to benefit and entrench the privilege of white people. During my fieldwork, this criticism was often expressed as anger towards Western appropriations of witchcraft as a spiritual power for the benefit of Europeans and to the detriment of Africans, the extraction of knowledge and

information from Africans for Western enlightenment, and the social power of Westerners who were seen as being untouchable².

As a researcher, I have struggled with my privilege. For example, during interviews I was sometimes directly criticized for having colonized African power and knowledge, because all people with white skin are colonizers. Given my personal experiences of colonial efforts to assimilate my family³ these accusations caused me significant turmoil. Because my research assistants were aware of my distress in these situations, I chose to share some of my personal history and knowledge of Aboriginal culture with them. Neither of my research assistants, like my colleagues at HelpAge Ghana, knew that there were Indigenous populations inhabiting North America before the arrival of Europeans. Though I was saddened by this, as an Aboriginal person I am all too familiar with the erasure of these experiences in my own society, in academia, and in global knowledge of North America. However, my experiences at the decolonization conference forced me to confront the complicity of my fellow academics in this erasure.

The masking of settler colonialism in North America, and the replication of this colonial strategy in disciplines concerned with colonialism, such as African Studies, perpetuates the myth of colonialism as being black and white and constrains our knowledge of colonialism. As a result of this, our ability to contest colonialism and decolonize the academy is narrowed, if not, completely co-opted by discourses that advance the normalization of settler colonialism. I argue that North American academics must acknowledge their complicity in settler colonialization in their own locality before they can effectively decolonize their disciplines. Overall, this paper argues for the inclusion of colonized voices in processes of decolonization and cautions against construction of new forms of domination as diverse voices gain access to these essential debates.

North American History, Aboriginal Reality

In Canada, there are “over 1.4 million” Aboriginal people, many of whom live in crisis (Anaya 2014). Poverty, inadequate housing, unsafe water and poor education, along with a lack of self-govern opportunities are cited by Anaya (2014) as some of the characteristics of this crisis. While these conditions are common among colonized people, they are greatly also compounded in long-term settler colonies by the phenomenon of generational grief (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski 2004). Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski (2004), define generational grief as “the residue of unresolved, historic, traumatic experiences” that is “passed from generation to generation [and] continuously acted out recreated in contemporary Aboriginal culture” (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski 2004: 3). In Canada, histories of trauma combined with cultural genocide⁴, have prevented generations of Aboriginal peoples from expressing their trauma or seeking resolution for this trauma in culturally relevant ways

2 It is important to note that these views were not necessarily correlated to skin colour; in many cases, people within the African diaspora may also be considered as having benefited unfairly from spiritual powers that enabled them to leave Africa and live *as* white people. As well, some noted my racialization as white as positive as my identity as a Westerner was seen by many as a protection against the dangers of witchcraft and that I was willing to address this problem as a legitimate concern genuinely amazed some.

3 Due to the fragmentation of my family history, the experience of only three generations are known to me and have been confirmed as involving experiences of specific colonial policies of assimilation including residential schools, the Sixties scoop, and child welfare interventions. The experiences of my more distant ancestors are still unclear.

4 Cultural genocide is defined in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada final report: “Physical genocide is the mass killing of the members of a targeted group, and biological genocide is the destruction of the group’s reproductive capacity. Cultural genocide is the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group. States that engage in cultural genocide set out to destroy the political and social institutions of the targeted group. Land is seized, and populations are forcibly transferred and their movement is restricted. Languages are banned. Spiritual leaders are persecuted, spiritual practices are forbidden, and objects of spiritual value are confiscated and destroyed. And, most significantly to the issue at hand, families are disrupted to prevent the transmission of cultural values and identity from one generation to the next. In its dealing with Aboriginal people, Canada did all these things.” (2015: 1)

(Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski 2004). The consequences of this are evident in high rates of mental illness, addictions and suicide among Aboriginal peoples⁵.

Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski (2004) trace these experiences of trauma back to the early colonial era when the “high mortality rates of Indigenous people” were seen “as a gift from the Christian” (12). As noted by these authors, “within one hundred years of contact” an estimated “90 to 95 per cent of the Indigenous population was wiped out by epidemic disease, warfare, slavery, starvation and complete and utter despair” (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski 2004: 19). The death of Aboriginal peoples as individuals and nations ensured that the lands of North America would be easily claimed by European settlers, while the loss of Aboriginal peoples as slaves would later be supplemented through the Trans-Atlantic slave trade (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski 2004). Though many histories of racism envision the slave trade as the beginning of racial oppression in North America, “the genocide and colonization of Indigenous peoples in the Americas” preceded (Lawrence & Dua 2005: 130), and continued throughout and beyond, this period of horror. Despite the exclusion of Aboriginal peoples by “anti-slavery activists, women's suffragists, labor leaders and ex-slaves” (Lawrence & Dua 2005: 132), the enslavement of women and children in particular as “domestic servants and sex slaves” (Glenn 2015: 59), continued violence that echoes these practices, for example, the high rate of murder of indigenous women in Canada today, demonstrates the importance of understanding the complex trajectories of colonialism and racism in North America⁶.

Throughout early colonization, missionaries sought to eradicate Aboriginal spiritual and social beliefs with a particular emphasis on the decentralized authority and gynocracies that dominated many Indigenous social systems (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski 2004). The introduction of Christian and European patriarchal and authoritarian systems greatly impacted Aboriginal families as well, upsetting notions of descent and membership by defining lineage through patrilineal relations (Green 2013). The fragmentation of ancestry supported efforts to assimilate and eliminate Aboriginal peoples through intermarriage and the dilution of Indigenous blood lines, and many French colonists “took Indian mistresses and wives with whom they formed Metis (mixed) communities” (Glenn 2015: 57), that were kept outside of colonial definitions of Indian (Green 2013). In addition to representing a form of ethnobiological “dilution”, Métis were also viewed as being “less authentic” Aboriginals by the Canadian constitution (Green 2013: 95).

In addition to biological assimilation, “Indian schooling” policies were designed to ensure the “social death” of Aboriginal peoples (Glenn 2015: 59). The governments of Canada and the United States implemented the forcible removal of children from their families and their placement “in residential schools where many faced horrific abuse” (Lavalley & Poole 2010: 273; Wesley-Esquimaux Smolewski 2004). Though the last residential school⁷ in Canada closed in 1996, assimilation policies

5 As noted by Lavalley & Poole (2010) “statistics on suicide for American Indian (AI) and Alaskan Native (AN) youth in the United States is 2 to 2.5 times higher and non-AI and non-AN (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2001), 2 to 3 times higher in Aboriginal people in Australia (Elliott-Farrelly 2004) and up to seven times higher in Aboriginal people in Canada (Health Canada 2006). While a direct link between colonization and suicide is difficult to demonstrate empirically, “the potential transgenerational links between these [colonial] social practices and suicide can be traced” (Kirmayer et al. 2007, p.10). These colonial social practices, such as residential school, child welfare, the 60’s and millennium scoop (Sinclair 2007), past and current land reclamations that are occurring globally, environmental dispossession (Richmond and Ross 2009), the lack of history from an Indigenous perspective in our educational institutions and the overt and covert racism experiences by Indigenous people contribute to “denigration of identity” (Kirmayer et al. 2007, p.79), cultural genocide, grief, anger, hopelessness and helplessness.” (273-274)

6 As noted by Glenn (2015): “The elimination of Native Americans and the enslavement of blacks form two nodes that have anchored U.S. racial formation. Redness has been made to disappear, such that contemporary Native Americans have become largely invisible in white consciousness. In contrast, blackness has been made hypervisible, and blacks are constantly present as an imagined threat to whites and the settler colonial social order. ... Indianness is thought to be diluted and then to disappear through miscegenation, while blackness is thought to be continually reproduced even through generations of miscegenation.” (69-70).

7 According to Trocme and Blackstock (2005) the residential schools system began in the 1800s in Canada. These

continue in many forms alongside the repercussions of earlier policies (Lavalley & Poole 2010). The impact of these colonial policies on the collective and individual identity of Aboriginal peoples cannot be overstated (Lavalley & Poole 2010).

White colonial representations of Aboriginal identity dominate and overlay a state of cultural uncertainty that is lived by many Aboriginal people. As noted by Lavalley and Poole (2010) “Aboriginal people who self-identify but do not look like a stereotypical Indian” face many challenges by both “non-Aboriginal people and Aboriginal people” (277). The following excerpt demonstrates this tension:

Marten: Stepping through the doors [attending the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto] I was scared...I didn't know if I would be accepted because I didn't look that Native but I see that I am accepted here.

White Spider: I know what you mean.

Turtle: You [referring to Marten] look very Native. I don't look Native.

White Spider: What's an Indian supposed to look like anyway? (Lavalley & Poole 2010: 277-278)

Both the stereotyping and invisibility of Aboriginal identities in Canada contributes significantly to ongoing assimilation efforts. The common and inaccurate assumption that Aboriginal families are unfit for care for their children⁸, without acknowledgment of the role of residential schools in ensuring that adults were traumatized, raised in institutions, and fractured from their own families (Sinclair 2007; Blackstock 2011), continues to inform state intervention against Aboriginal families and is used to justify silence and indifference among settlers regarding this issue. The Sixties Scoop, a period of “notable increases in Aboriginal child apprehensions” that saw the removal of a third of Aboriginal children from their homes (Sinclair 2007: 66) is only now being addressed in Canadian courts (CBC News 2015). Shockingly, Trocme and Blackstock estimate that there are now “as many as three times more Aboriginal children in the care” of the state than there were at the height of the residential schools program (2005: 13). Today, Aboriginal children represent “approximately 40%” children in child welfare care (Trocme and Blackstock 2005: 12), though they represent “less than 5% of the child population” (Blackstock 2011: 187).

The fracturing of Aboriginal families and communities and the high rate of miscegenation that results from these practices presents a dire risk to a population whose legal status is defined and recognized through “blood quantum requirements” as current “demographers predict that there will be no status Indians in 200 years” (Blackstock 2011: 188). However, there is also little political will to recognize this ongoing genocide or to protect Aboriginal rights in North America as demonstrated by Canada and the United States governments official opposition to the UN Declaration of Rights of

authors note that “[t]he primary objective of these schools was to eliminate any vestige of Aboriginality, replacing it with Euro-Western culture, knowledge and spirituality” (Trocme & Blackstock 2005: 14). Adding to these practices of cultural genocide, “the death rate at the schools from preventable disease was a shocking 24% per annum, increasing to 46% if the children were tracked over a three year period” (Trocme & Blackstock 2005: 15).

8 As noted by Blackstock: “the first study to include child welfare data specific to the experiences of Métis, First Nations and Inuit children in order to better understand the factors contributing to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in child welfare care. ... revealed that the reasons why Aboriginal children come to the attention of child welfare authorities are significantly different than for non-Aboriginal children. ... Aboriginal children were less likely than non-Aboriginal children to be reported to child welfare authorities for physical, sexual and emotional abuse, and exposure to domestic violence, but were twice as likely to be reported for neglect. When researchers unpacked neglect, the only factors that accounted for the overrepresentation were caregiver poverty, poor housing and substance misuse ... Taken together, [these] findings suggest that First Nations children were not being removed because their families are putting them at greater risk, but rather because their families are at greater risk due to social exclusion, poverty and poor housing” (Blackstock 2007: 75-76).

Indigenous Peoples; the only two states to oppose this Declaration (Blackstock 2011).

Who is M/métis?

It was only seven days before I attended the decolonization conference in 2016 that Métis and non-status Aboriginals had been ruled, by the Supreme Court of Canada, as the responsibility of the federal government (Vowel 2016). That this ruling only emerged some five hundred years after contact exemplifies the “ambiguous position” of métis people “in the Canadian imagination” (Gaudry 2013: 64). *Métissage* has been, according to Gaudry (2013), employed to downplay histories of resistance and “involuntary incorporation” and “envision a more just Canada” (66-67). In Gaudry's analysis of Canadian representations of Aboriginal miscegenation, *métissage* as “the mythical origin” of Canada is used to demonstrate that Canada is “a postcolonial nation”, thereby suggesting that there is no need for “deeper engagement with Métis communities who, by-and-large, live in poverty and have been politically, socially, and economically marginalized” (72-77).

Despite colonial efforts to appropriate Métis and métis identities, considerable debate exists as to how these communities should be defined and delimited. For some, the view that Métis simply represents racial mixedness is both dangerous and facile as it reduces complexity and assumes “a common experience for all mixed-identity Indigenous peoples” (Gaudry 2013: 78). At the same time, Andersen & Hokowhitu (2007) caution against “monolithic” notions of authenticity and or tradition in defining Aboriginal peoples and communities as these “are just as oppressive as their colonial derivatives” (43-44). As a self-identified member of the Métis Nation, Andersen defines himself as belonging to and claiming “allegiance to a set of Métis memories, territories and leaders who challenged and continue to challenge colonial authorities’ unitary claims to land and society” (2013: 101). For Andersen, Métis is “a nation with membership codes that deserve to be respected” and “not a soup kitchen for those disenfranchised by past and present Canadian Indian policy” (2013: 101).

However, the history of Métis peoples is somewhat more complex than colonial contestation and the events of the Red River and North-West Rebellions. By defining Métis through this particular experience of resistance, other forms of anti-colonial activism and non-nation and non-state goals of decolonization are significantly devalued. Most problematically, in order to be identified as Métis according to Andersen’s definition, one must not have any history of complicity with colonization at any point in their family history. This high standard of anti-colonial action is not only unreasonable, it is also an inaccurate representation of the plurality of views among Métis people historically and today.

As noted by Green, “[s]ome communities became Métis by default”, as “external racism and exclusion” forced them into the category of “boundary people, who were not permitted to be status Indian and were rejected as white” (2013: 95). Miscegenation between Aboriginal and white settlers has been “understood in racist and eugenic terms” as a “step toward assimilation” (Green 2013: 95). In many ways, the Métis Nation as represented by Riel and the Rebellion was evidence of this assimilation; as the Métis Nation sought to distance themselves from First Nations and Aboriginal identities by establishing a unique and distinct nation-state, they also confirmed and replicated aspects of colonial assimilation in the social and political expression of their struggle for emancipation.

Métis people, have therefore found themselves in highly precarious and contentious positions throughout history, as they are consistently unable to define and assert their identity outside the proscriptions of colonial categories. As a person who is métis, I do not identify with the traditions and culture, mainly those of land and hunting, that are canonized in the Canadian Constitutional definitions of Indianness. Yet, at the same time, key physical features that are recognizable as being the product of mixed ancestry and having been subjected to generations of assimilationist policies confirms that I am not, nor ironically through the action of these policies will I ever be, considered white, though I have white skin. In terms of defining myself as métis, while many of my family members were recognized elders of the Métis Nation, they were also soldiers in the Canadian army, patriotic citizens and, too often, supporters of the assimilationist policies of which they were themselves victim. Therefore, by

Andersen's definition, I can also never claim to be Métis.

Though, as Green notes, “we know in our psyches ... that we do not – cannot – choose “either/or” identities” (2013: 96), it remains that métis people in Canada face numerous challenges and great uncertainty in the recognition of their own identity. This continuing conflict was the active subtext of my personal experiences at the decolonizing conference. Just weeks earlier, some of my white family members learned that I had had an Aboriginal status card for some time without notifying them. In response, I was asked if I still wanted to be a part of my family, repeatedly told that I don't look Aboriginal, and reminded of the ways in which the colonial state has worked to save my Aboriginal family from its own dysfunctional culture. Even more disheartening, a métis family member cautioned that by being counted and visible to the state and society, I was only ensuring that we would be exterminated faster. Yet, allowing our ancestry and unique experience of racialization to be erased is to also accept colonial rule, assimilation, and participation in cultural genocide. Therefore, I, like many métis, am compelled to enact my membership and, once having done so, must also constantly justify my identity for settlers whose stereotyped knowledge of Aboriginal peoples reduces indigeneity to the confines and strictures of colonial discourse, policy, and power.

Native Eyes Under A Colonial Gaze: Decolonizing, Education and Academia

For many settlers, knowledge of Aboriginal people is largely produced and perpetuated through colonial and racist discourses that they encounter in their home and in public as children. Because of the significant, though decreasing, segregation of Aboriginal peoples in North America, much of this knowledge is gained through state education. Therefore, in addition to the historical role of schools as sites of colonization and assimilation that seek to destroy Aboriginal culture, language, families, and communities, these institutions also represent a significantly Othering experience for Aboriginal people. As noted by van Ingen and Halas, “[s]chool are the archetype of contact zones” (2006: 380): “social spaces where disparate cultures, meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (Pratt in van Ingen & Halas 2006: 380).

In my own experience, success in school and higher educational attainment has been associated with being white and assimilated, betraying one's identity or people, or as means to distance oneself from their family and history. As an Aboriginal student in the colonized space of university education, I have frequently experienced unfiltered racism in class discussions and lectures. Though these experiences were not as extreme as the context of the decolonizing conference, they were nonetheless representative of an implied certainty that Aboriginal people do not occupy educated spaces, and were they to do so, they would have to participate at the expense of their identity. As a young Aboriginal woman, participating in these spaces forced me to constantly navigate a variety of strategic responses, such a silence, resistance, engagement, and protest.

However, these strategies cannot be considered apart from their social context and the perceived risk for Aboriginal women, who “are among the most vulnerable” in their society (Ambler 2014: 9). In Canada, Aboriginal women are “three times more likely to be the target of violent victimization than non-Aboriginal women” and “36% live in poverty” (Ambler 2014: 10-18). While the overarching colonial context conspires to limit direct access to education, the “intersection of class and race”, and I would add gender, “makes academic success particularly challenging” for Aboriginal students (van Ingen & Halas 2006: 382). During my PhD studies, I was subject of discriminatory statements by a few classmates who told me that I was too poor to study at my university. This experience happened early on in my studies and greatly informed my decision to remain silent about my Aboriginal identity unless in closed groups or facilitated discussion with trusted Professors. The African Studies decolonization conference I attended was the first time I actively asserted my Aboriginal identity in an unknown academic space. I had hoped that the conference would be a receptive and open forum for discussing the complexities of colonial experiences. Unfortunately, I found that the scope of colonialism being considered was incredibly narrow, and that a number of vocal attendees were incredibly hostile towards

narratives of indigenous experiences of settler colonialism.

Settler Colonialism Dominates a Decolonization Conference

In the spring of 2016 I attended an international conference that aimed to “provide an interdisciplinary space for interrogating the power and politics of knowledge creation in African studies” and to “examine various issues as they relate to inequality and legacies of (neo)colonialism in our world” (Anonymous Conference 2016). Having completed my dissertation in 2014 on the subject of witchcraft-related violence in Ghana and Cameroon, I was intrigued by the opportunity to explore and discuss some of the more theoretical themes of my work. In particular, my work is motivated by an interest in the processes by which modernity gains dominance in the global imagination. In the context of witchcraft, I view the erasure of the invisible and unseen world through Westernization, critically inclusive of academic interventions, and productions of knowledge of witchcraft in Africa, as central to the unification of reality in one hegemonic order.

Most specifically, I am interested in the parallel processes by which witchcraft as an epistemology continues to resist Westernizing and modernizing forces. As an Aboriginal person, I have a personal investment in understanding how non-Western epistemologies are sustained and perpetuated in spite of histories of colonialism and the assumed triumph of modernity. It was my hope that this conference would present the possibility of debating these issues with like-minded academics brought together to expose and contest colonialism in African studies. Unfortunately, on the first day of the conference a racial conflict side-tracked the focus of the conference and I came to stand at the center of this conflict like a lightning rod. During the question period for the second panel, I identified myself as an Aboriginal person. However, having white skin and being perceived as white by a number of Americans who were unfamiliar with indigenous identities and politics in Canada, I unwittingly became the focal point of black activism against white domination in the field of African studies.

Instead of contributing to broader discussions regarding colonialism in African studies, my participation distracted from efforts to decolonize the academy and the conference became dominated by voices that sought to deny and silence me. As a participant, my perspective on active colonialism in North America was erased along with mine and another Aboriginal students experiences of domination within in the discipline. The long standing racial divide of black and white in African studies was maintained throughout the conference, eliminating the experiences outside of the familiar white/black binary and omitting fundamental questions about decolonization in African studies, academia and North America. Instead of achieving the goal of working towards decolonizing African studies, the conference provided a platform for continued colonialism and the silencing of experiences of erasure.

Red, White and Silenced

The first morning of the conference began with the familiar binary of African Studies; that of white and black academics whose emphasis on colour becomes the foundation for exploring issues of essentialism, racism, and white domination. However, the second panel opened the floor to issues of active colonialism and indigeneity when two presenters introduced Indigenous Research Methods as a decolonized methodology, and discussed shared models of memory and commemoration between Indigenous communities in Canada and Kenya. Though Indigenous politics are rarely discussed in African studies, despite indigeneity being an important part of migration and colonial history, the inclusion of this issue and the parallels drawn between Canada, a settler colony, and Kenya, were incredibly refreshing. It was my hope that these and other challenging themes would be present throughout the conference.

Unfortunately, this was not the case. During the first question period in the afternoon, settler discourses of colonialism became entrenched for the remainder of the conference. The flash point began when a young female academic shared her experiences of being métis in academia and spoke about the challenge of being from a marginalized racial group and economic class that is excluded from

discussions of inclusion within the discipline. I was not only surprised to discover that I was not the only métis woman at the conference, and possibly in African studies, I was also relieved that issues of class were being included in an academic context and it is commonly assumed that graduate students and academics are from specific economic strata.

However, a young, black American panelist responded the métis woman by asking her to sit down, dismissing her as being white and chiding for discussing class in the context of a presentation that was about colour, I felt compelled to speak up in her defense. There had been a number of comments in the first half of the day that I had found disturbing at they sought to reduce the scope of colonialism. In particular, two academics had argued that Portugal, Germany, and the Netherlands had no colonial history in Africa, and that Portugal, rather than being a colonist, was itself colonized and was a non-European entity actively occupied by Brussels. As an academic who specializes in African politics and as a person who lives in an active colonial context, I was deeply concerned by these comments. When, adding to this, I was witnessing the dismissal of an Aboriginal woman's voice as well as the erasure of her identity in a forum on decolonization, I felt compelled to speak up. When I addressed the forum, I began by stressing this concern; that our discussions of colonialism were becoming myopic, and that out of defensiveness and ignorance we were reducing the complexity and perpetuating myths of colonialism through a hierarchy of suffering⁹.

Having grown up in Canada, in the shadow of the United States, I am aware that many people are poorly informed about the Canadian context and strongly associate Canadians with the international stereotypes of environmentalism, peace-keeping, and politeness, and completely over-look or deny settler colonialism. Therefore, in my comments to the forum, I sought to provide greater context regarding the history and experiences of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, the issues we face, and the challenges of living in the context of genocide. I spoke briefly about histories of assimilation, over-representation in prisons and child welfare, and the endemic violence Aboriginal women and communities experience on a daily basis, and I cautioned against the erasure of histories of genocide and the importance of maintaining the knowledge of peoples who have been lost in the legacy of colonialism, such as the Herero (Madsley 2004) and the Yahi (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski 2004), whose experiences of settler colonialism have greater similarities than differences¹⁰.

In response to my comments, the same panelist told me to sit down and stated that though she did not know about Aboriginal people in Canada, that 'we' (the other métis woman and I) were white and acting as oppressors in this context. Though I was disappointed by this response, I was neither surprised nor offended as I am familiar with Canadians and Americans institutionalized ignorance about Aboriginal people in their own colonies. In Canada, Aboriginal people are unproblematic citizens who are unable to grow into their civic roles because they are childishly plagued by the ghosts of a colonial history long past. In America, Aboriginal people are extinct, their once scattered and insignificant numbers lost in the annals of manifest destiny and glorified in Hollywood's gritty westerns and remote casinos. The other métis woman and I fell outside of these categories. We were not brown skinned and did not perform stereotyped notions of indigenous culture that might widely recognized and accepted as both quaint and authentic.

9 Some academics have employed the term "Oppression Olympics" to describe the discourses that marginalized groups used to claim that their suffering is greater than that of another. I prefer the term "hierarchy of suffering" as what is being challenged most directly are problematic power relations and these should be actively named as a replication of hierarchical system of oppression that causes and perpetuates experiences of trauma.

10 Madley (2004) stresses the similarities of frontier genocide experienced by the peoples of Tasmania, the Herero in Namibia and the Yuki in North America, which are defined by the three stages of settler invasion, Indigenous resistance and efforts to reclaim land and resources, and military incarceration and extermination of the Indigenous population. In their exploration of settler colonialism in North America, Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski (2004) coincidentally demonstrate the consistency of this pattern in their description of the Yahi genocide.

[See Images 1 and 2 following the bibliography]

Instead, we were two educated white women speaking about experiences of colonization and marginalization that white people do not experience. For a small number of vocal black, female American attendees at the conference, the idea that two young, white Canadians were attempting to remove themselves from the responsibility of white oppression was unacceptable. For the remainder of the conference, they employed every opportunity to stress that my comments were inappropriate, that I was white and, as was stated to me directly on three separate occasions, that there was a consensus at the conference that I did not belong there. Throughout the remainder of the first day and into the morning of the second day, I was repeatedly harassed by this small group. I was called out during question periods and told that the conference was an African studies conference, and I was instructed to go to my own Indigenous conferences to discuss *my* issues. Sadly, this was the only time I was recognized as Aboriginal. My own attempts to reconcile and discuss my experiences and identity with these women individually were met with hostility and dismissal. Despite being participants at a decolonization conference, their willingness to not only resist knowledge regarding colonization and genocide in the West, but also to actively deny the identity of the person standing before them, was disheartening.

As critical scholars seeking to challenge and deconstruct hierarchies of power, the resistance I met in expressing one aspect of my own identity was incredibly demoralizing. As a critical political scientist, I am alert to and aware of complex power relations. This is not only a product of my dedicated studies in political science, but also my own lived experience across marginal and liminal spaces. Throughout the conference, individual exchanges became imprinted in my mind, spread out along the varying positionalities being engaged such as class, gender, sexual orientation, colony, towards the erasure of my identity. The following exchange was had in numerous forms:

- : Whatever, whatever that word is you're saying.
- : Métis.
- : Whatever, I don't know who your people are and I don't care. You're white.

During these exchanges, I was also confronted with numerous mechanisms of erasure and appropriation of Aboriginal identities, exemplified in the following:

- : My friend spoke with some of your people online. I know some of your people and even they agreed, what you did was wrong, even they thought it was wrong.
- : Can you tell me who my people are? What do you mean by my people?
- : Whatever, I don't care who your people are!

In the end, I chose to leave the conference early. Despite the significant economic cost of my participation, I determined that the emotional cost of my continued participation would be too great. As I left the conference, I crossed paths with the young American students who were returning together from a lunch break. I offered them a weak smile of defeat as I retreated, though all of them maintained an averted gaze, ending the conference with a final and definitive message of invisibility and exclusion. My identity had been effectively erased from the conference.

Decolonization and Anti-Racism: Divide and conquer? Or where the lines meet?

In comparative politics, primordialism and constructivism are opposing interpretations of identity, the former positing that identity is wholly “ascendant” and that “ethnobiological” transmission of ethnicity determine group status (Gil-White 1999: 790). An assumption made in the primordial model is that miscegenation does not occur, and further still, that where miscegenation may occur membership is determined by social rules that are based purely on the dominant biological characteristics of the individual and is therefore apolitical. A further feature of the primordial approach, noted by Gil-White, is the idea that though ethnobiology may not be the only determinant of a person’s identity, ethnic actors who believe in ethnobiology enact these rules very strictly.

In North America, long histories of colonialism, slavery, segregation, and oppression have had a significant impact on identity politics. A feature of this is the extreme racialization of blacks in the United States of America, exemplified in policies such as the one-drop rule. Underlying this racialization is an imperative to isolate and exclude blackness from the American population thereby ensuring that blacks are clearly defined as the Other, who is dehumanized and exploitable, while indigeneity is simply erased (Glenn 2015). Aboriginal ethnicity as primitive, child-like and malleable, is more readily assimilated through miscegenation. In this respect, Aboriginal peoples are imagined as being akin to the distant ancestors of Europeans, whose simple lives harken back to a time of idealized simplicity and innocence.

In these dominant discourses, Indigenous ethnicity is not a threat to white supremacy, as Aboriginal people are subsumed through assimilation practices and the construction of their person as historical artifacts, while blacks are emphasized as dichotomous and dangerous Others. Most problematically, these discourses have also been adopted by many people of colour in North America: where Aboriginal identity is considered as a relic of the past rather than real, vibrant, and living. The replication on these racist discourses in black activism not only underestimates Aboriginal identity, it also fails to capitalize on the power of Aboriginal identity in opposing white supremacy in society, nationalism, and the state. By advancing the racist notions of indigeneity as weak, where a mix of Aboriginal and white ancestry makes one white, not Aboriginal, though a mix of white and black ancestry makes one black, anti-racist movements are contributing to the colonial project by entrenching white hierarchies of race and enacting settler privilege.

This is not to criticize North American activists of colour, or to apply, writ-large, an assumption that anti-racist activists are unwilling or incapable of reflecting on the reality that they are demanding greater rights from an active colony that has engaged in and currently engages in genocide “so that settler nations can seamlessly take [the] place” of the Indigenous population (Lawrence & Dua 2005: 123). Rather, what I hope to demonstrate and address are the features of racial discourse in North America that facilitate the erasure of Aboriginal identity.

In the context of ethnobiology, primordialist discourses of identity are easily replicated through white supremacist discourses of colour that dominate society and establish a hierarchy of “sticky attributes” (Chandra 2006: 18). For Chandra, sticky attributes such as skin colour, represent “one extreme on the scale of stickiness” with attributes such as the birth place of one's ancestors at the other, where these least sticky attributes are more mutable and where “new histories can be more easily invented” (2006: 17). The perceived ability to alter Indigenous identities in North America has been integral to colonial efforts to completely erase Aboriginal peoples from the continent (Lawrence & Dua 2005). At the same time, the stickiness of blackness in white constructions of identity have created the ideal conditions for sustained exclusion and exploitation. Because “descent-based attributes” are “more visible” than acquired attributes such as class, they are most essential to the division of society according to the needs of white supremacy and continued colonization. The replication of these hierarchies in anti-racist and anti-colonial activism demonstrates just how effective colonial, white supremacy is in maintaining control of relations among, and between, those who are oppressed by these racial systems.

In this context, it is not enough to have lived experience of marginalization, oppression, and discrimination, as this does not necessarily lead to “to a particular consciousness, or to an unmasking of power relations”; it is also necessary to “reflect critically on one's own circumstances” (Bozalek 2011: 472). Even as oppressed people, or as academics or North Americans, we may still “take for granted that [we] are the centre of [our] world” (Bozalek 2011, 473). In doing so, we marginalize the experiences of those whose oppression allows us to “pursue [our] own ends in the world” (Bozalek 2011: 474). Whether we are seeking to dominate a conference forum in order to advance a white/black binary politic by erasing Aboriginal experiences, or whether we are seeking to identify and contest the exclusion of Aboriginal voices in African Studies, we are enacting some form of power, and should be conscious in that act.

This critical reflection must also be open to broader discussions of intersectionality where sincere discussions of decolonization are concerned, as issues of “race, gender and class are not distinct and isolated realms of experience” (Brah & Phoenix 2004: 80). At the conference I attended, and in many anti-racism discussions I have encountered, class is too often an unforgivable inclusion. The increasing exclusion of class, as a product of capitalist, statist and increasingly, racist discourses, has been entrenched in “political, popular and academic discourse”, despite class being the most significant determinant of educational attainment (Brah & Phoenix 2004: 81; see also Haveman & Smeeding 2006; Mueller 2007). The point that the first métis woman to speak at the conference made underlined the reality that academia remains fully colonized for North American students, whether Aboriginal or settler, and this colonial domination of academic institutions limits the access and mobility of Aboriginal students seeking to participate in African studies. Without a radical effort to decolonize educational spaces, Aboriginal people will not only continue to experience oppression, they will also continue to resist participating in these spaces (van Ingen & Halas 2006). However, without the participation of colonized people, postcolonial studies and efforts to decolonize academia will be incomplete.

Dhamoon (2015) addresses additional layers of concern in responding to colonialism that are applied to feminism, but which also apply to de-colonization efforts. In particular, Dhamoon stresses three main tensions; where the nation is viewed as “a site of liberation or conversely as a site of oppression”; “how to navigate differentials of power within various interconnected forms of heteropatriarchal and neoliberal racisms and colonialisms”; and “the simultaneity of being a member of an oppressed group and being structurally implicated in Othering.” (2015: 20). When Indigenous voices and experiences are excluded from discussion regarding decolonization, the problem of active colonialism and “settler domination” become “Indigenous issues” rather than global issues of power “concerning people of colour (as well as whites)” thereby “effectively advanc[ing] colonial agendas” (Dhamoon 2015: 21).

Building on the work of Lawrence and Dua (2005) Dhamoon identifies a number of ways in which Indigenous experiences differ from “other non-whites”, including “ongoing forms of direct military-state intervention; policies specifically formulated to destroy Indigenous peoples, their culture and identity, ... and assimilation” (2015: 21). Dhamoon, like Lawrence and Dua, stresses the importance of acknowledging that people of colour in North America, regardless of their varying histories, are settlers who contribute to the re-populating of occupied territories and states that deny Indigenous sovereignty (Lawrence & Dua 2005; Dhamoon 2015). Therefore, demands for equality and decolonization at any level, including within academia, must acknowledge that these struggles overlay a landscape of active colonization, genocide and, importantly, resistance.

Again, it is important to stress that this point is not an effort to participate in the construction of a hierarchy of suffering; I am convinced that as individuals, we, as non-white activists and academics, are capable of consciously navigating these complex positionalities, which I see as being laid out in a web of privileges and powerlessness. As well, it is not a finger pointing or guilting process that I seek to engage by using the term settler. I argue that claiming the term of settler is an integral aspect of

contesting colonialism that can be positively adopted by all. Through the willingness to identify as a settler, non-Indigenous peoples commit two powerful acts of defiance against colonialism and white supremacy; they expose and contest the myth that colonialism is a historical event, and; they combat genocidal discourses of white supremacy in North America.

Despite the power of these actions, Dhamoon notes that some anti-racism academics claim that identifying people of colour as settlers contributes to “an Oppression Olympics framework” and seeks to establish neo-racist binaries (2015: 22). Dhamoon challenges this idea, noting that the need for “[i]ndigenous peoples to disappear” so that “migrants of colour [may] be assigned their due attention in liberation struggles” is an “inherently imperialist logic” (2015: 22-23). Embedded in this imperialist logic are the obvious and persistent colonial interest in normalizing “the erasure of Indigenous dispossession” in North America towards the hegemony of “white-supremacist capitalism” and the privileging of “non-Indigenous peoples, including people of colour, at the expense of Indigenous peoples” (Dhamoon 2015: 23).

In the United States of America, as in Canada, the myth of white settler indigeneity is replicated in anti-racist discourses that seek “upward class mobility on terms set by dominant European-based norms” (Dhamoon 2015: 24) as these norms are valued for demonstrating achievement of respected membership within the nation and state, and as expressions of full citizenship as a form of civil and political equality. The idea that non-white people are able to claim their rights as Americans and Canadians, without acknowledging disenfranchised Indigenous peoples as the first peoples of the land they live on, furthers the construction of these nations and states as white entities whose Aboriginal origins are no longer relevant. In Canada, “myths of multiculturalism” and discourses of ethnic diversity “in the service of European Canadian self-congratulation” effect Indigenous erasure (Dhamoon 2015: 25). In the United States, the myths of Manifest Destiny and the American Dream perpetuate the construction of Indigenous peoples as extinct.

The biases developed from these discourses are evident in academic environments and are particularly exacerbated in African studies. Though addressing settler colonialism is essential to achieving decolonization, scholarly debates regarding race have remained limited to “interracial group relations and inequality between and among groups marked as white and black” (Glenn 2015: 55). Because of this Aboriginal academics and activists “cannot see themselves in antiracism contexts” (Lawrence & Dua, 2005: 120). Adding to the complexity of this exclusion is the “racial ambiguity” experienced by any people of mixed-descent, and in the case of Aboriginals in Canada, “generations of policies specifically formulated with the goal of destroying our communities and fragmenting our identities” (Lawrence & Dua 2005: 121).

This exclusion of Aboriginal experiences of colonialism in anti-racism conferences demonstrates, for Lawrence and Dua (2005), the need to “decolonize antiracism theory” (123). Antiracism theory may, therefore, be “implicitly constructed on a colonizing framework” (Lawrence & Dua 2005: 127), a concern that is greatly compounded when these theories are applied to African Studies. As academics contributing to the construction of Africa through the production of knowledge about African spaces, people and histories, we not only responsible for understanding antiracism in the study of decolonized places, as North American academics, we must also reflect on the spaces we ourselves occupy “that have not been decolonized” (Lawrence & Dua 2005: 128).

In African studies, though the white wealth of Europe is often critically viewed as being achieved by the extractive gains made through colonialism, comparatively, the wealth of Canada and the United States are not widely recognized as the products of Aboriginal genocide and black slavery. In his work, Fanon (1967) stressed the need to remain constantly vigilant in the fight to decolonize, to challenge colonialism through an ongoing and evolving process that would lay bare the intricacies of oppressive power. Decolonization, for Fanon (1968), requires the complete upending and thorough questioning of colonialism as anything less would fail to de-racinate colonialism in our personal lives and societies. Therefore, it is not enough to decolonize a space, institution or society for one group, we

must propagate anti-colonialism, and in order to do this, we must first decolonize our knowledge of colonialism.

Without efforts to decolonize African Studies as a discipline, we may be enacting deeply rooted modes of colonialism and oppression that have yet to be unearthed and investigated. Therefore, the question of decolonization is not limited to the conundrum of how white, North American scholars can responsibly engage in the study and knowledge production of Africa. This task also includes the question how active settlers can responsibly engage in these activities.

Stumbling Towards Decolonization

Always present, Native eyes watched each wave of newcomers—white, black, or Asian—establish themselves on their homelands. Histories of racist exclusion facing peoples of color must detail the removal of Native peoples. (Lawrence & Dua 2005: 134)

For if, in fact, my life is worth as much as the settler's, his glance no longer shrivels me up nor freezes me, and his voice no longer turns me into stone. (Fanon 1968: 44)

The second morning of the conference I spoke briefly with the conference organizer about the comments that were being made to me in private as well as the open hostility during panels and questions periods. The woman, who is a white, American, asked me why I don't just study my own people. In response, out of frustration and fatigue, I replied that living and working in the context of ongoing colonization and genocide was enough for me; I simply didn't feel a need to also study my people's destruction in an academic context, particularly when it was unclear what such research could ultimately achieve.

I was disappointed that in an academic setting devoted to the process of decolonization, that I was being asked again to “re-negotiate” my identity and experience of colonialism (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski 2004: 82). It also became clear to me that “the realities of contemporary colonization and resistance” were deemed by the organizer to have no place among the “truths” of “postcolonial or critical race theory” (Lawrence & Dua 2005: 137). For the discipline of African studies, much like any academic discipline seeking to engage critical questions of power, the exclusion of Aboriginal experiences prevents the emergence of essential conversations about power, decolonization, solidarity and diversity.

Histories of colonial violence and oppression against Indigenous populations around the world, including North America and Africa, cannot be understood in complete isolation. The inclination to isolate histories and experiences of colonialism should be questioned as a possible externalization of colonialism and a reflexive dismissal of complicity. The reduction of colonialism and decolonization to a distant locality that absolves academics of responsibility towards their own colonized localities serves to situate the problem of colonization within the discipline while depriving academics of agency. In order to begin the difficult work of decolonization, academics must be willing to personalize colonialism. It is not in the interest of the state or the academy to decolonize, therefore this effort must be personal motivated and individually and collectively driven.

In African studies, the African experience of colonialism is treated as wholly unique, thereby reducing our view of both the history and reality of colonialism, including the role of postcolonial diaspora in active colonial space and frequently overlooked histories of genocide (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski 2004). As academics we need to situate ourselves within these histories and realities in order to understand the greater complexity of colonialism, as an act of learning as well as an act of resistance. It is only by exposing consistent patterns violence across the world, among groups where these are too often unrecognized, and through greater depth of knowledge regarding spaces that remain colonized, that we may truly begin the work of decolonization.

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Image 1:



Image one: A common depiction of North American Indigenous peoples. This one was found on the Royal Mile of Edinburgh, Scotland. This representation informs perceptions and helps explain comments by fellow academics who have suggested that I would be more readily identified as Aboriginal if I had feathers in my hair.

Image 2:



Image two: Dreamcatchers in a store window in Edinburgh, Scotland present an example of the global appropriation of Indigenous culture amid the international erasure of Indigenous genocide in North America.