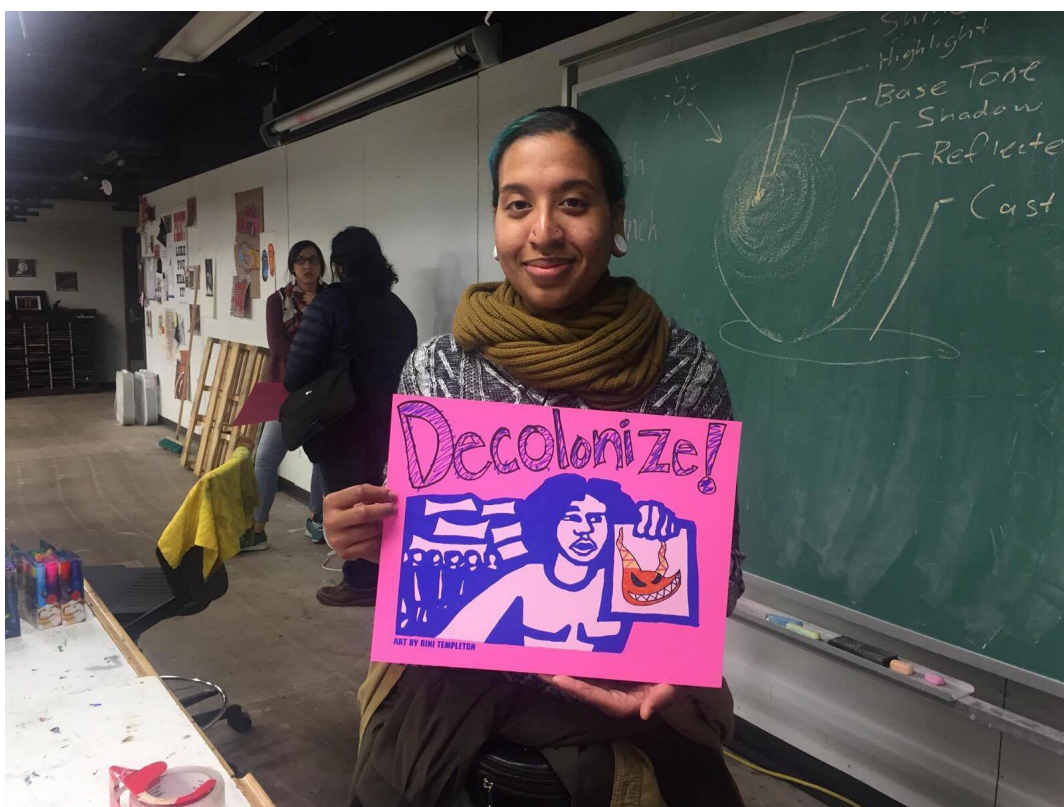


Stolen bodies, Stolen land: Contemplating Blackness and Indigeneity

STAFF NOVEMBER 22, 2017



by Briana L. Ureña-Ravelo

Today marks one year since I and a group of friends joined the frontline resistance in Standing Rock at the Oceti Sakowin camp, the ancestral lands of the Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota Sioux people.

I have spent this past year deconstructing, unpacking, learning, relearning, disconnecting, reconnecting, going through this whole process and listening

to Indigenous peoples' struggles, experiences, resistance, pain, joy, resilience, truths and all the complexities therein. It has been an impossibly deep and complex journey that I was already on in many ways before Standing Rock, and even before I was born, and will continue to be on for the rest of my life, even after I am gone.

The most significant thing that I was asked to wrestle with as a non-Native at Standing Rock was finding my place in Indigenous struggles and in my own process of decolonizing.

One thing was understood, at least superficially, by myself before entering the camp. As people not Native to these lands, we are guests here. We are on stolen land. We are on stolen land. The refrain was repeated to us over and over.

This is, of course, absolutely true. And as people not Indigenous to North American lands, it is important to build relationships and coalitions with the people who are of these lands, whose relationships with it run deep, and who are currently still surviving more genocidal projects at the hands of our mutual colonizers. It is necessary that we join their resistances and help protect their people from ongoing attempts at cultural death and destruction.

The more I heard the refrain, and its surrounding discourse, the more I realized how this framing posits that issues regarding colonialism and genocide in the United States were very especially land sovereignty-related, and that this was solely the realm of Indigenous North and South American people as it is their ancestral lands.

Meanwhile, the kidnapping of Black people, though understood as wrong, was kind of in its own realm, not mentioned, especially not in relation to the stealing of Indigenous North and South American land and white settler colonialism overall. The theft, exploitation and destruction of Indigenous African land for the building up of white settler infrastructure and wealth on stolen land in the colonies from 1492 until now was also left out of the conversation.

So I started to follow up “We are on stolen land” with various iterations of “built up on stolen labor and stolen resources globally.” Not only did European colonizers use the same framework used with Indigenous North Americans everywhere they went to colonize and exploit land, but there is no way that European settlers could have stolen and achieved the level of devastation that they did without the explicit exploitation of other Indigenous peoples globally, namely, the exploitation of Black bodies for labor.

In this process, Diasporic kidnapped and homeland Indigenous African lands were taken, exploited, stripped of their original names, usages, understandings, boundaries and relationships, and taken over by settlers. A hold they still have to this day. There was also the possession of the Indigenous body and exploitation of their labor, whether as slaves or during fur trades and beyond with the underpaying and intentional impoverishment of Indigenous peoples.

I came to see the binary separation of stolen land and sovereignty issues as relevant only to Indigenous North American and slavery as relevant only to Black people (with no deeper understanding of what that identity means or

is in relations to land or Indigeneity) as itself being colonial and false. There is clearly overlap and similar experiences across Indigenous and Black communities.

“But,” I will hear from Indigenous North and South Americans, “The difference is we weren’t meant to survive.” Neither were Black people.

Our colonization was the possessing of our bodies and the attempted destruction of our ties and roots to our homelands, so as to make us rootless. If a person has no name, no mother, no tongue, no tribe, no land, no people, she can be whatever you tell her to be—chattel, slave, 3/5ths, alligator bait, nothing. An Indigenous person with the distinct memory of her land, of where she was taken from, is a force to be reckoned with, and that was recognized by those who stole us.

And that is what sprung the creation of Blackness, the necessary death of the African to create an pastless, futureless dark malleable abyss in her place. A dark void from which can be wrought or sprung cotton, indigo, sugar, gold, pleasure, and labor from an enslaved workforce.

This [zombification of the Black body](#) is the past and continued self-interested colonizer usage and possession of Black parts—bodies, existence, land—with the explicit erasure and refusal to wholly engage the Black spirit and persons themselves.

Just like Indigenous women have made the connections between the exploitation, pillaging, rape and destruction of their ancestral lands to that of their bodies, the commodification of Black native lands, resources, bodies, labor, cultures, resistance, movements and ideology or the benefit of

those exploitations—even by other colonized peoples of color resisting their own attempted genocides—is the way we continue to be colonized and have our own sovereignty and Indigeneity erased.

I think that in order to truly grasp Black people's place in Indigeneity, we have to first posit and understand that “Indigenous” is not a monolithic race, but a naming/framing of a relationship between land and those originally on it. All people, including settlers, fall somewhere on that caste of Indigeneity, which becomes hierarchy in the colonizer's hands.

Whiteness is situated at the top of Indigeneity—its relationship to all land and all bodies being innate and all encompassing, limitless, a god-given Indigeneity, the “Citizen of the world” whose purview knows now end.

Activist [John Trudell](#) and others have spoken to the phenomena of how Indigeneity becomes constructed. When the settlers came, they called them “Indian,” “Native American,” and “savages,” but referred only to themselves as “people” because the white identity always predates colonial construction.

However, while Indigenous solidarity will acknowledge Indigenous people of different racial backgrounds and tribal affiliations in North and South America, Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii and other Pacific Islands, parts of Asian and even in Europe with the Sami, Indigenous solidarity and power is seldom extended to African peoples, or the people of the diaspora.

Indigeneity as it is constructed and seen by the colonizer is not a place of ease or privilege, and yet it is a necessary qualifier that Black people are intentionally exempt from. It was specifically constructed to exclude

African people, whether mainland, kidnapped, or from the migrant diaspora.

Our place as diasporic African people in this story is not the same as Indigenous North and South Americans, or Indigenous Africans immediately from the continent who can trace their roots. But we still have a role and to erase us is to continue that zombification of our people, to perpetuate the myth that we are nothing and from nowhere and can only serve as means to other people's ends.

It's more than the fact that [Black people are indigenous as well](#), though that is a necessary truth that we must repeat to ourselves over and over and educate ourselves on until we understand it. But the very colonial system that has infringed upon the indigeneity of North Americans relies on doing the same to Black and African people. It is rooted in that very violation via slavery, the banning of our culture, and destroying our ability to hold onto our Indigeneity in the lands we were kidnapped to.

The stealing, violating, and exploiting of colonized land, bodies, labor, and resource are different aspects of the same colonial process in the same white settler project. They are of the same orchestrated genocide, experienced by all colonized peoples of different backgrounds, albeit in different ways and to different degrees.

<http://outline.com/DXgGuD>

COPY

Outline is a free service for reading and annotating news articles. We remove the clutter so you can analyze and comment on the content. In today's climate of widespread misinformation, Outline empowers readers to verify the facts.

[HOME](#) · [TERMS](#) · [PRIVACY](#) · [DMCA](#) · [CONTACT](#)