

Voltairine De Cleyre and Colonialism

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Voltairine de Cleyre, like her fellow historical anarchists of Euro-American (or simply European descent), took contradictory stances on colonialism and Indigenous peoples throughout her life. Her case is just particularly extreme, and due to that, especially instructive.

As an otipêmissiw person who's been studying anarchist history for about three decades now, I've never been surprised to encounter anti-Native sentiment when put forward by Euro-American and European anarchists, but it's only recently that I've started writing about it. My work in this case also expands upon that of Klee Benally (*Unknowable: Against an Indigenous Anarchist Theory*) and Gia Vogerl (*Deconstructing Settler Socialism*) who first wrote about the anti-Native aspect of De Cleyre's writing in particular.

Of added personal interest to me over the years has been De Cleyre's comradeship with Honoré Jaxon, a settler socialist from Toronto and Prince Albert (in what's now Saskatchewan) who married into the otipêmissiwak community, served as secretary to Louis Riel, and then fled to Chicago after Canada crushed the Northwest Resistance of 1885. I've also long been an appreciator of De Cleyre's particular skill at writing and her attention to the Mexican Revolution.

Learning from Mistakes

When it came to North American history, on the one hand De Cleyre lamented the brutality of the colonizers and the dispossession of Native peoples, as she did in her commentary in the British anarchist journal *Freedom* and the American anarchist publication *Free Society*. She even celebrated the Indigenous resistance that was part of the Mexican Revolution and the Native's hatred for authority that it exemplified to her. On the other hand, she supported the explicitly genocidal rebellion of Nathaniel Bacon against a colonial government that wasn't doing enough, in Bacon's opinion, to kill every last Native person. In addition, De Cleyre displayed naivety and ignorance about America's Founding Fathers and the character and history of anti-Black racism and slavery in the country of her birth.

To her great credit, De Cleyre did, more than once, admit that she had taken incorrect stances in the past and wished to correct them. This is much more than can be said, for example, about current-day macho male anarchist pundits such as Peter Gelderloos and the editor of *CrimethInc*, who refuse to admit to any mistakes, or even any mistakes on the part of their close friends, seemingly due to their fragile male egos and their perceived need to project strength, no matter how fake.

It's a shame that De Cleyre was not able to come to the point of recognizing her mistakes when it came to colonialism and anti-Blackness, but her humility is something to aspire to and something all the more necessary today given the ego-maniacal white boys club that makes up much of American anarchist media.

Painful Misinformation

In the late 1880s, De Cleyre made a public speech on the Founding Father and author of *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine. That speech, a glowing tribute to Paine and his work, was later included in the 1914 book, *Selected Works of Voltairine de Cleyre*, edited by Alexander Berkman.

Nowhere in her speech, nor anywhere else in her writing, does De Cleyre so much as mention, let alone critique, the line in *Common Sense* where Paine states that, at the time of the American

Revolution, with regard to the British, there were “thousands, and tens of thousands, who would think it glorious to expel from the continent, that barbarous and hellish power, which hath stirred up the Indians and Negroes to destroy us, the cruelty hath a double guilt, it is dealing brutally by us, and treacherously by them.” Nor does she mention how Paine’s counter-revolutionary sentiment and conspiracy theory was then paraphrased in the Declaration of Independence by fellow Founder Thomas Jefferson.

De Cleyre had read Moncure Conway’s biography of Paine, and this gave her the mistaken impression that Paine had been an outspoken abolitionist, since a newspaper article, African Slavery in America, was falsely attributed to Paine by Conway. In reality, although he privately opposed slavery, Paine was reluctant to say so publicly, only doing so under his own name in one known case, his 1802 text, *To the French Inhabitants of Louisiana*, and under an assumed name in the case of the 1792 pamphlet, *Old Truths and Established Facts*, co-written with Joseph Priestly.

Although Paine opposed slavery, and didn’t hold slaves himself, unlike Jefferson, he also opposed, as we see from his comments in *Common Sense*, rebellion by the slaves, rebellion that actually led to freedom for some of the enslaved who rebelled, as they escaped from America to other British colonies. If De Cleyre was not blissfully ignorant about this, she nonetheless chose to remain silent on it and instead promote Paine as an all-out abolitionist that he never was.

In her 1908 text, *Anarchism and American Traditions*, De Cleyre returned to the theme of the Founders, heaping praise on both Jefferson and Paine. Nowhere does she mention that Jefferson was a slave master who had fretted over slave rebellions, or that he was an advocate, in his letters, of ethnic cleansing against Indigenous peoples. Nowhere does she mention the counter-revolutionary grievances of the Declaration of Independence, the complaints against Britain for restricting the theft of Native lands and for supposedly inciting Blacks and Natives to rebellion. She even states the opposite of the truth, that “the spirit of liberty was nurtured by colonial life” and that it is “American tradition that we keep out of the affairs of other nations.”

Un-American Notes

In the 1890s, De Cleyre wrote a semi-regular column for the anarchist-communist journal *Freedom in Britain*, keeping their audience up to date on American affairs.

In her September 1897 column on the Klondike gold rush, she criticized the “settling up” policy of the Hudson’s Bay Company, the expulsion of the Native hunter from his land, the partitioning of the land and the installation of capitalist property and government.

De Cleyre’s April 1898 column roasted America for its role in the Spanish-American War and its looming occupation of Cuba. She not only mocked the American state but also the American people who helped make war and occupation possible. “The American public,” she explained, “is considerably like a great bullyragging school boy with too much body for his brains, going constantly about saying, ‘I can lick you,’ but who when it comes to bracing up to combat puts his fist in his eye and bawls, ‘my mother won’t let me.’” With the current American war on Iran and bully behaviour in the Caribbean and South America, we see that not much has changed more than a century and a quarter later.

In her August 1898 column, De Cleyre criticized America’s newly discussed “colonial possibilities” and annexation of Hawaii, but also displayed an all too typical naivety when she claimed

that since the American Civil War, lynching of Black people was still occurring, unofficially, but only in cases of rape. She even sank as low as saying, “it’s the same sort of thing these savages might do in Anarchy provided they had it just now.” De Cleyre did not live long enough to see the high profile cases of the Scottsboro Boys and Emmett Till that illustrated just how prejudiced she was, but this is still no excuse.

In 1899, De Cleyre translated French anarchist Jean Grave’s book, *Moribund Society and Anarchy*, with its chapter on Colonization.

Since it’s known that she also held Wisconsin anarchist Charles Leigh James in high esteem, it’s possible that De Cleyre had read his 1886 tract, *Anarchy*, in which he stated in his footnotes that “our government, like others, sprang from war and oppression; [...] it was organized to drive out the Indians, to enslave the negroes, and to prevent others from sharing the spoil; [...] for a hundred years our flag enjoyed the honor of being the only one which fostered the growth and extension of slavery,” but if she did, she didn’t comment on it, or display much understanding of the point made.

Racism and Civilization

De Cleyre’s lecture, *Anarchism*, was published as an article in the Chicago journal *Free Society* in 1901. In it she made an important distinction between Europe and America. “There was no gradual change from the mode of life of the native people to our own; there was a wiping out and a complete transplantation of the latest form of European civilization,” she explained.

In the September 1906 issue of New York City’s *Mother Earth*, De Cleyre praised James F. Morton’s text, *The Curse of Race Prejudice*, only critiquing it as far as suggesting he could have “cited more facts” to support his points, qualifying this by adding that “it appears to me that not even the proofs given are necessary, the abomination of race prejudice being self-evident.” However, we have seen that the self-evident abominable character of racism does not automatically imbue the white person with a deep understanding of colonialism or anti-Blackness.

In the October 1907 issue of *Mother Earth*, De Cleyre commented on the “many offences” of deceased President William McKinley, pointing out that “upon his hand was the ‘damned spot’ of official murder, the blood of the Filipinos, whom he, in pursuance of the capitalist policy of Imperialism, had sentenced to death.”

She speculated, “perhaps he was able to reconcile his Christian belief, ‘Do good to them that hate you,’ with the slaughters he ordered; perhaps he murdered the Filipinos ‘to do them good’; the capitalist mind is capable of such contortions.”

In the July 1909 issue of *Mother Earth*, De Cleyre’s speech, *On Liberty*, was printed, including her starkly callous opening lines in which she suggested, “you know the brutal saying of some white man about Indians: ‘The only good Indian is a dead Indian,’ and then followed up by saying, “in my opinion, the only ‘good’ government is a dead government.”

De Cleyre’s 1910 article, *The Dominant Idea*, also published in *Mother Earth*, contained a chauvinist portion where she used a racist slur for Black South Africans, asking if we remembered “the helpless Kaffirs, victimized by the English for the contumacy of the Boers, having been forced to dig the trenches wherein for pleasant sport they were to be shot, were lined up on the edge, and seeing death facing them, began to chant barbaric strains of triumph, smiling as they fell?”

“Let us admit,” she suggested, “that such exultant defiance was owing to ignorance, to primitive beliefs in gods and hereafters; but let us admit also that it shows the power of an idea dominant.”

Primary Contradictions

In her 1912 pamphlet, *Direct Action*, published by *Mother Earth*, De Cleyre sank to her lowest point yet, as she upheld the explicitly genocidal rebellion led by Nathaniel Bacon in the 1670s, claiming that “all our historians certainly defend the action of the rebels in that matter, for they were right.”

She continued by claiming that “for the benefit of those who have forgotten the details, let me briefly remind them that the Virginia planters were in fear of a general attack by the Indians; with reason,” as if the settlers hadn’t provoked the situation in the first place, as if Bacon’s call to “extirpate all Indians in General” could ever be justified by anything (and bringing to mind the current Israeli genocides committed against the Palestinian, Lebanese and Iranian peoples).

De Cleyre’s deeply contradictory worldview was highlighted in the same time period that she wrote *Direct Action* with her text, *The Mexican Revolution*, published in *Mother Earth* in three parts, from December 1911 to February 1912. In the text she explains that of the Mexican population of 15 million, four million are Indigenous, that they are people “somewhat similar in character to the Pueblos of our own southwestern states, primitively agricultural for an immemorial period, communistic in many of their social customs, and like all Indians, invincible haters of authority.”

“The Indian population—especially the Yaquis and the Moquis—have always disputed the usurpations of the invaders’ government, from the days of the early conquest until now, and will undoubtedly continue to dispute them as long as there is an Indian left, or until their right to use the soil out of which they sprang without paying tribute in any shape is freely recognized,” De Cleyre further detailed.

“The communistic customs of these people are very interesting, and very instructive too,” De Cleyre explained, “they have gone on practising them all these hundreds of years, in spite of the foreign civilization that was being grafted upon Mexico (grafted in all senses of the word); and it was not until forty years ago (indeed the worst of it not till twenty-five years ago), that the increasing power of the government made it possible to destroy this ancient life of the people.”

To her great credit, De Cleyre not only wrote about the Mexican Revolution but also organized in support of it, alongside her Canadian comrade Honoré Jaxon, raising funds for the Mexican-American anarchist journal *Regeneración* and organizing lectures and lecture tours on the revolution.

On the other side of the border, De Cleyre celebrated Indigenous resistance, while on her own side, despite knowing and writing of the bleak history of American colonization, she praised genocidal settler violence against Indigenous peoples.

Unfortunately, these contradictions are still on display among American anarchists today, such as Peter Gelderloos, who falsely claims that historical Marxists were racist against Indigenous peoples but anarchists in contrast (and by omission) were not, and CrimethInc, who spread disinformation about historical anarchists like Louise Michel, Peter Kropotkin and Mikhail Bakunin, falsely claiming that they became anarchists due to their encounters with Indigenous

peoples. More recently, CrimethInc has also intentionally left out any mention of America's anti-Native and anti-Black origins in order to appeal to the liberal nationalists who attend No Kings demonstrations.

So what's the solution? All we can do is shine a light on the situation, better educate ourselves, swallow our pride and try to learn from our mistakes, as De Cleyre sometimes did, and as a principle that we should carry to its logical conclusion.

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