

LandBack

The Indigenous Liberation Movement

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Since the very dawn of colonialism, across the globe, for centuries, indigenous peoples have been fighting back against their oppression. In a way, to be indigenous is to be in constant warfare, as they resist threats to their sovereignty, economic well-being, cultures, languages, ways of knowing, and access to the resources on which their societies depend. I think that the ideas, concepts, and praxis of indigenous peoples are severely underdiscussed, underappreciated, and underrepresented by, well, everyone. There's so much we can learn from the diverse cultures, philosophies, and worldviews that are under the umbrella of indigeneity. I want to do what I can to highlight these ideas in the coming year. Starting with one of the most vital, yet one of the most misunderstood, of the MANY currents of decolonization and indigenous praxis.

LandBack

Before we begin, I want everyone to understand that this video is introductory. LandBack is complex and can't be easily summarized into a 10–15 minute video. Just keep that in mind.

To understand LandBack, and WaterBack, we need to understand Settlerism-Colonialism, or more simply, Settler Colonialism. Settler Colonialism is an ongoing project by settler states, like the US, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Israel, etc. It involves external colonialism, also called settlerism, which is when a colonizing power exports settlers, resources, knowledge, plants, metals, weapons, and/or animals to increase its wealth and land, like when the European empires shipped millions of armed colonists to settle North America, many as indentured servants. And it involves internal colonialism, which is marked by the violent management of a colonized people and lands within the borders of the imperial nation through ghettos, reservations, police, schools, prisons, that sort of thing. A good example of internal colonialism would be the residential schools in the US and Canada up to the 20th century that stole Indigenous children from their families and stripped them of their cultures. Settler colonialism can be best summarized as the empire and the colony existing in the same geographical space. Settler colonialism is a process of destroying to replace.

Indigenous versions of governance, land management, cultural practices, etc. are destroyed through colonization and replaced with the settler versions of those things, which are often radically different. The land stolen from indigenous peoples was then worked by peoples stolen from their own lands. Interestingly, it took the subversive collaboration of indigenous peoples, marooning slaves, and runaway Europeans for settlers to invent and propagate the racial hierarchy in order to create divisions among the exploited. In Colonial Virginia, the lives of English, Indigenous, and African indentured servants and slaves were quite similar at first. They were owned by their masters and they worked shoulder to shoulder in the tobacco fields. Still, they sought relief from their grueling labour and difficult work conditions, so they'd run away. Sometimes together. Yet when they were caught, their punishments were much different. In July 1640, three servants were captured in Maryland. Two were white, and were sentenced to be whipped and four years were added to their indentures. The third was Black, and he was made a slave for life. That was the first legal distinction between Europeans and Africans made by Virginia courts.

See, it's all connected. Settler colonialism isn't some simple historical moment. It's an ongoing structure that maintains and impacts everything in a settler state. Settler states like the US are built on settler-colonization and slavery. That's not something that can be reformed away. And the initial acts of settler colonialism are what laid the foundation for its current acts. It took,

for example, the eviction of Oregon's indigenous peoples to give precedence to evictions as a whole in Oregon. Something even nonindigenous peoples are dealing with today. Fighting settler colonialism involves a whole, complex process of decolonization, which is deserving of its own video. LandBack is just one part of that process. Hm. LandBack. Land Back. A contraction of Land and Back. Let's start there.

What is Land?

Well, it isn't just a plot of dirt. Humans grew out of the earth, and our history remains rooted in our use of land and territory. From ecosystem management to resource extraction to expansionism. And with that expansionism comes the erasure of indigenous peoples and dispossession of their land. The various powers of Europe are quite famous for this. In 1800, Western powers held roughly 35% of the Earth's surface. By 1878, they held 67%, and by 1914, European powers held a grand total of 85% of the Earth as colonies, protectorates, dependencies, dominions, and commonwealths. Don't get it twisted though. Asian powers like Japan and China don't have their hands clean either.

Yet despite those claims, indigenous peoples never completely lost the connection to the lands and waters. Colonizing powers used violent occupation, repeated displacement and forced assimilation, all in an effort to eliminate the political alternative that indigenous peoples represent. But they couldn't and can't hide the land, so they have to resort to breaking the collective consciousness. Worse yet, they get to brush off this violence as "unfortunate history", if they acknowledge it at all, while ignoring the very present violence. Take for example the Wet'suwet'en Nation, who are facing eviction from their lands and poisoning of their water by the Coastal GasLink pipeline company.

"People get confused about what we want as Native people. It's like, 'what do you want?'. It's just like LANDBACK. Don't need any reconciliation, I don't want money. I don't want like, programs or funding or whatever... Just Land Back. It's funny, though. When I said that to my dad, you know, to Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en people, if you tell them about Land Back, they're like, 'We never lost the land anyway.' Which is true." —

When such discussions about LandBack are had, it's simplified to, "Oh they want to own the land." Except, land is more than just land. More than just property or a means of accumulating capital. There's a stark contrast between settler-colonial and indigenous peoples conception of land. In settler-colonial societies, the relationship to land is based on ownership and exploitation. Private property is accumulated and dominated by individuals, the bourgeoisie, to be exploited. But indigenous peoples see land as a whole social relationship to which all living and non-living beings belong rather than own.

Settler policy seeks to replace those relationships and the full sovereignty of indigenous peoples with domination via municipal puppets, corporate development, and patriarchal politics. Indigenous connection to the land goes deep, as though "the land owns", instead of just "the land is owned". That connection can't be taken, stolen, or given back. And it's a connection that settlers, people who engage in settlerism, do not have. LandBack, more significantly, is about how we relate to the land, how we relate to each other through it, and how it defines us. Land isn't just a place.

So, what about the Back part of Land Back?

Well, it isn't simply signing some documents and giving indigenous peoples legal rights over the land as private property. Those concepts didn't exist prior to colonization. The "Back" part can't mean returning to pre-colonial conditions either. As Frantz Fanon discusses in *The Wretched of the Earth*, there is no way to return to a pristine, pre-colonial time. Decolonization isn't about going back to the pre-colonial. And it isn't just focused on indigenous peoples either, the colonized. Decolonization must also involve the colonizer deconstructing the cultures and ideologies that maintain that domination and colonization. It's not that colonizers have to be deported. It's that they can't continue to engage in the whole settler-colonial system.

The "Back" part means a reassertion of sovereignty and consent. No more pipelines. No more police. No more fraud treaties. No more colonial institutions. That's what it'll take to eliminate the settler state. The complete and total dissolution of the colonization that props it up. LandBack is about ending the violence inflicted not only on Indigenous peoples, but also on Mother Earth. Only 5% of the world's population is composed of indigenous peoples living on their ancestral lands. But these peoples protect 80% of the planet's biodiversity, the heart and health of the Earth itself. These people, and the nonhuman life they exist with, are under threat. By state and capital. LandBack seeks to challenge that, reasserting lands from the colonizing entities.

LandBack is a method of direct action. Even now, such battles are being fought across the world, from Chiapas to Rojava to Tibet to Palestine to all over the so-called United States and Canada. The various movements associated with LandBack each deserve the respect of a video of their own. But to summarize, quoting the LandBack Manifesto:

"It is the reclamation of everything stolen from the original Peoples. It is a relationship with Mother Earth that is symbiotic and just, where we have reclaimed stewardship. It is bringing our People with us as we move towards liberation and embodied sovereignty through an organizing, political and narrative framework. It is a long legacy of warriors and leaders who sacrificed freedom and life. It is a catalyst for current generation organizers and centers the voices of those who represent our future. It is recognizing that our struggle is interconnected with the struggles of all oppressed Peoples. It is a future where Black reparations and Indigenous LandBack co-exist. Where BIPOC collective liberation is at the core. It is acknowledging that only when Mother Earth is well, can we, her children, be well. It is our belonging to the land."

LandBack is about Land, yes, but it's also about Freedom. Land and Freedom. *Tierra y libertad*, the rallying cry in the indigenous fight against settler colonialism during the Mexican revolution. Land and Freedom. They're interdependent concepts, each transforming the meaning of the other. Land linked to freedom means a habitat that we freely interrelate with, to shape and be shaped by, unburdened by imposition or ideology. Freedom linked to land means the self-organization of all the activity that is vital to our humanity, which we direct to achieve sustenance on our own terms, not as isolated units but as living beings within a web of wider relationships. So...how do we get there? How do we partake in LandBack? What does that look like in practice?

How To LandBack?

LandBack really starts in the mind. It starts with decolonizing your own psyche. You were colonized, are colonized, and are thus responding to life circumstances in ways that are limited, destructive, and externally controlled. It starts with questioning the dominant narratives

and power structures you were indoctrinated into accepting. And then, creating, restoring, and birthing. Creating various strategies to liberate yourself. Restoring your cultural practices that were taken or abandoned but you now need for survival. Birthing new ideas, thinking, technologies, and lifestyles that contribute to the advancement and empowerment of colonized peoples. It's deeply personal, so it'll look differently for different people. But I see the ongoing process in many fellow colonized people these days, and that gives me hope. With every tradition remembered and language relearned, colonized people begin to heal. And with that healing and learning comes the next step in the LandBack process.

Direct. Action. Tactics will need to be varied, of course. Dragging colonizers and gentrifiers on social media is part of it, as is going after hated and unpopular banks, slumlords, and governments. It builds the larger narrative and grows our support. Raising funds to buy the land and pressuring the legal owners to cede the land can also help. There's also protests, blockades, disruptions, and other Minecraft stuff I can't divulge here. (Check out the Seeds of Resistance blog for more details.)

Most vital to LandBack praxis is, of course, seizing and effectively defending the lands and peoples from further violence. Yet none of these methods can stand alone. They mostly leave the structures of capitalism intact. Even the most radical method, seizing the land, still allows the legal owner to maintain their claim, and eventually muster state support for a violent crackdown.

Do seize the lands held ransom by the settler state. And when we have it, we can build relationship with it, undermining the long history of dispossession, enslavement, and exploitation. That seizing...that expropriation...it's not just material. It's also spiritual. It's transformative. It takes land out of the realm of property and into a world of community, where capitalist value has no meaning. Refusing to recognize the commodification of land and totally rejecting the social contract of capitalism changes a person. As land is seized, strong networks are built, resources and experiences are shared, and perspectives are broadened, we're fundamentally transformed for the better.

But that doesn't mean that seizing and occupying land, water, and buildings is gonna be easy. Autonomous zones, with the aim of restoring indigenous consent on land, are not a simple matter. Spaces have been seized before. Some successfully, like the aforementioned Chiapas, and others not so much. The term autonomous zone probably sprung Capitol Hill in your mind. Many point to it as a failure of autonomous zones or something, but despite the excited claims of Twitter radicals, CHOP, first known as CHAZ, was not set up to last. Demands aside, it was meant to be a space for learning, and for temporary reprieve from the onslaught of police during an incredibly violent period in US Civil Rights history. Yet, CHOP perpetuated colonialism, only paying lipservice to the Duwamish nation, the first peoples of what is now Seattle. They were co-opted by liberals and deradicalized. Not to mention the two Black teens that were killed in the area. At least Camp Maroon and Camp Teddy in Philadelphia, after a few months, were able to secure a community land trust for the homeless people of Philadelphia. What did CHOP accomplish?

I digress. We have to think long term. Occupying a space with no plan going forward is futile. A Sisyphean struggle with no end in sight other than total destruction. While our failures do provide opportunities for learning and transformation, and we will fail often, we can't subsist on failure. Which gives rise to two questions: How to strike a balance between caution and confrontation so we don't become pacified or lose opportunities to progress? And when we fail, how do we fail in a way that inspires? That spreads and strengthens the legitimacy of our project?

This video is just an introduction. Settler structures need to be dismantled completely, and that starts somewhere, and everywhere. LandBack is one arduous step by one gruelling step forward to free Land, and eventually the whole world, from the grips of domination.

The tactics of our rulers change as the centuries plod on, but the overall colonizer's strategy remains the same. A consistent war on our minds and our bodies, to wear us down in the long run and remove the challenge to their legitimacy that our resistance, and especially Indigenous peoples' resistance, represents. Think of how it must feel to be constantly told that there will be no restitution for centuries of oppression and genocide. That's an emotional assault that we need to fight back against. All of us need to support indigenous peoples in this fight for LandBack, in any capacity they need. Truth is, you're either for liberation, and all the various forms it'll take, or you're against it. Are we in this together or not? LandBack is less a future to achieve and more an action to take on today. Solidarity forever.

Peace.

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