

ReImagine17 SDG Literature Review and Report

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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Background	3
Criticisms of the SDGs	4
Sustainable Business and Innovation	4
Tourism and Development	6
Geography	8
Indigenous and Decolonial	9
Feminist Political Economy	11
The Politics of “(Un/Under) Developed” Nations	12
Colonialism vs Settler Colonialism	17
What is Decolonization, Indigenous Sovereignty, and the Role of Human Rights?	20
Key Terms and Definitions	24
Contingent Collaboration	24
Intersectional Feminism	25
Native Feminism	26
Settler Colonialism	27
Reflection Prompts for Settlers	28
Recommended Readings and Resources	29
Cited Sources	30
In-Text Hyperlinks (in order of how they appear)	33

Introduction

The objective of this summary report is to investigate the use of the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals \(UN SDGs\)](#) using theories of anti-oppression and decolonization. This report will outline key readings, theories, and terms associated with decolonization borrowed from prominent academics such as Patrick Wolfe, Eve Tuck, K. Wayne Yang, and more. I use an active first-person voice as well as footnotes and hyperlinks throughout this report to guide you through these concepts in an accessible and (hopefully) engaging way. Even if you are familiar with the terms that have a footnote next to it, I encourage you to read them, as they guide you through my thinking, offer more direction, and additional resources.

You will find reflection prompts at the end of this report to investigate how these terms and theories are or are not practiced in your life, thinking, work, research, and advocacy. You will also find recommended readings at the end of this report that I strongly encourage you to read, as the full embodiment of praxis¹ cannot be done without positioning yourself in critical reflection and the continuous integration of knowledge. Beyond this report, I hope that you come away with a better understanding, appreciation, and curiosity for how systems of oppression overlap - specifically by interrogating settler colonialism and capitalism.

¹ **Praxis** bridges the gap between theory and the “real world.” It is not limited only to academic settings - settings - praxis can also be understood as the practical application of any sort of learning and knowledge. (Ex: if you learn the theory of “sharing is caring”, your praxis would be to show you care for someone by sharing your snacks, earbuds, or giving up your seat on a bus.) In the context of social research and theory, praxis is the work of social transformation. It asks you to see where theory can be applied to analyze your surroundings and create social change through practicing values of justice in your own life: it is the understanding that systems of oppression are held up by cultures of oppression. (Ex: [the prison industrial complex](#) is held by systems of carceral and racial capitalism, and anti-Black racism. The practice of theories such as “defunding the police”, “abolition” or “transformative justice” is the act of removing policing, cancel culture, and punishment in our interpersonal relationships and instead moving towards accountability and compassion.)

I hope that the importance of praxis in its ability to create real and material conditions that lay the foundation for collective liberation is made clear. The theories and terms shared here should and do exist beyond text – they are alive in how we think and move in our relationships with each other, ourselves, and our environments. This report alone cannot do it all. I encourage you to continue digging deeper into critical analysis, research methodologies, and unpacking big terms. If you have questions about readings, terms, theories, and what the embodiment of praxis can look like, please email at sarah.law@reimagine17.ca.

This report was used internally to inform ReImagine17's direction and work relating to the SDGs. This report is adapted externally to encourage knowledge sharing to inform work with the SDGs and social change.

Background

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) were adopted in 2015 and are globally recognized as being a leading framework to pursue sustainability and better futures. It offers a framework to tackle global problems such as: climate change, poverty, inequality, gender discrimination, and peace and justice. The intention of the SDG framework is to approach “global problems” from an interdisciplinary and systemic lens. It considers how health, education, inequality, and the climate crisis overlap. The UN intends to achieve the SDGs by 2030, which include but are not limited to ending global poverty and hunger, investing in a green transition, and decarbonizing all aspects of the economy.

Criticisms of the SDGs

Common critiques of the SDGs are due to its use and content of “sustainable development” within an imperialist, capitalist, and colonial framework. This critique is consistent across sectors of tourism, social policy, political economy, urban studies, international development, human geography, critical ethnic studies, social movement studies, and women’s studies. There are slight variations and specificities within these critiques of the SDGs due to the limited scope of each discipline. In this analysis, I will weave the literatures focused on feminist and gender, tourism, political economy and development, and decolonization together to provide a broader scope of each of these pieces

Sustainable Business and Innovation

Let’s focus on the broader picture and existing literature of sustainable development. Kirchherr (2022) writes on the use of “sustainable development” as a buzzword used across academic, activist, and corporate spaces. Kirchherr is an assistant professor in the department of Sustainable Business and Innovation at Utrecht University with an interest in the field of circular economy. They describe this increased focus in “sustainability” and “transitions” and an increase of “scholarly bullshit.” Their critique outlines 5 categories of “scholarly bullshit” that consist of: (1) boring questions (2) redundant literature reviews (3) recycling research (4) underdeveloped master’s thesis’ and (5) activist rants. They argue that the increased popularity in the concept of “sustainable development” has oversaturated research

with “50% of the work being pointless and unnecessary” (Kirchherr, 2022). This generalization is their opinion, rather than being founded on evidence. Kirchherr further argues that the growing popularity of sustainable development research is focused on empirical² anecdotes, rather than contributions to valuable critical work.

This article argues that empirical work is not a valuable kind of research, which reinforces colonial ideas of “validity”³, whose logic has [rationalized the criminalization](#) of Indigenous knowledge practices sharing (storytelling, potlatch, etc.). Given the [values of RE17](#), we should be weary of critiques that do not provide theoretical contributions grounded in anti oppression, decolonization, or critical feminist and race theory. Regardless, I believe that this article is beneficial despite the ideological and methodological divide, as it affirms that the work of “sustainability” is important, relevant, and has a broad reach. This article was included to outline how there are many pieces of work that exist that critique the sustainable development framework (UN related or not).

Within the sphere of tourism, geography, and political economy and development; critiques consist of interrogating the fetishization of development in “underdeveloped” Nations from the lens of the Global North. from the lens of the Global North.

2 **Empirical** work is based on observation and lived experience that drives a research question. Empirical work has been critiqued by *positivists* and *institutionalists* who believe that the validity of research is defined by numbers, “logical” or “un-biased” data. In the transition to post-modernism, the argument against positivist ideologies of research is over 40 years old. In a contemporary setting that values justice and anti-oppression, it is crucial to acknowledge how the formation and validity of research and data mimics the logic of oppressive systems that largely dismisses the lived experiences, perspectives, and voices of made-marginalized peoples. This is not to say that empirical work is not rigorous – empirical work is often supported by theoretical contributions that have pushed the boundaries for knowledge creation and sharing.

3 **Colonial idea of validity** mimics the logic and characteristics of white supremacy. Read more about the logic of white supremacy by Tema Okun [here](#).

Critiques outline how the (white) saviour complex⁴ is exasperated using “sustainable development” language when it comes to pursuing economic and environmental justice. This argument is supported by perspectives in political economy (Bianchi et al., 2021) and in tourism (Boluk et al., 2019). The [lens of political economy](#) questions ideas of “sustained” and “inclusive” growth that are intrinsic to the SDG goals (SDG 8: decent work and growth) to develop the 2030 sustainable tourism agenda. Bianchi et al.’s (2021) argument is that the SDG-led agenda contradicts the logics of growth, competition, and profit to justify continued expansion and exploitation of developments disguised as “tourism.” It argues that tourism as a means of sustaining economic growth justifies the exploitation and fetishization of “underdeveloped” Nations to the West and enables the reproduction of exploitative labour practices and reproducing market-based understandings of justice, rather than addressing structural injustices (Bianchi et al., 2021).

Tourism and Development

Within the tourism literature, Boluk et al.’s (2019) critiques are focused on impacts of imperialism and the white saviour gaze when referring to tourism benefiting “underdeveloped” Nations. It advocates for critical consciousness and understandings of the structural conditions of poverty and under-development, which point to imperialism, sanctions, and state interventions. This article offers seven themes to critically assess how the SDGs need to be shaped within the tourism industry.

4 The (White) Saviour Complex is a term that describes when white/Western perspectives are enforced onto made racialized people and communities to “help” them out of their poverty, oppression, and/or marginalization. To learn more about how this is harmful, you can read the work of *Mathew Snow’s “Against Charity”* and that takes a deep dive into the true impacts of philanthropy, the hypocrisy of altruism, and gift giving.

These themes consist of (1) both reformist and radical pathways to sustainable transitions (2) critical research (3) how gender influences sustainable development (4) engaging with place-based Indigenous perspectives (5) degrowth and circular economy (6) governance and planning and (7) ethical consumption.

This article outlines how the SDGs do not currently reflect these seven themes and advocates for better integration of equality, Indigeneity⁵, gender, and responsible consumption. Please note that this article reduces “gender” to a perspective only of “women” and does not include non-binary, trans, or two-spirit peoples, and it also does not outline which “Indigenous” perspectives would be included. It is crucial that we acknowledge that “Indigenous” is not a homogenous term that covers all Indigenous peoples – there are specific Nations and peoples that have differing perspectives, practices, and systems and cannot be reduced to a “pan Indigenous” identity⁶.

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⁵ **Indigeneity** is a complex term. For more, please read Sarah Hunt’s “Ontologies of Indigeneity: The Politics of Embodying a Concept” (2014).

⁶ **Pan-Indigenous** identity and representation is critiqued by many Indigenous scholars – you can find Dr. Zoe Todd’s (Métis) critique of *Robin Kimmermer’s book “Braiding Sweetgrass”* [here](#) in her series of tweets. For a more in-depth reading of the importance of being specific about Indigenous knowledges, you can read *Dr. Vanessa Watts’s* (Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee) work on Indigenous ontology, epistemology (2013) and violence.

Geography

Sultana (2018) critiques sustainable development within the discipline of geography and emphasizes the importance of maintaining the central issues of social justice and ethical engagement. This article alludes to Audre Lorde's (2007) infamous "master's tools, master's house" essay⁷ that outlines how the tools offered by oppressive systems that appear as "progressive" will not bring about true emancipation or liberation⁸. Lorde (2007) originally speaks about the master's house in relation to patriarchy⁹ and women's liberation, however, the argument has been adapted to many disciplines to emphasize the need for removing oppressive structures, rather than advocating for integration and/or assimilation. She calls on researchers to use subfields of political ecology, feminist geography, and development geography to better understand the politics of "sustainable development." It urges for more theoretical and methodological contributions to develop new "tools" to dismantle the "master's house" (Lorde, 2007).

⁷ **"Master's Tools, Master's House"** is derived from *Audre Lorde's* work. "It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change." You can read her full essay and speech [here](#).

⁸ **Emancipation vs Liberation:** emancipation is in reference to the emancipation movement that advocated for the end of slavery, as well as the end of the slave trade. The act of emancipation is to be removed from enslavement and the forceful capturing of Black bodies to be exploited for labour. Emancipation is in reference to being set free from legal, social, and political restrictions. Liberation is similar; however, it is less structured in the sense of it being directly connected to the civil rights movement. It is being freed from imprisonment, slavery, and oppression that can more abstract. *Franz Fanon's "Wretched of the Earth"* makes the argument that emancipation from slavery is not enough – that bodies and the mind have been colonized; thus, true freedom also requires mental liberation that is beyond legal emancipation. Malcolm X makes a similar argument in his speech *"White Liberals."*

⁹ **Patriarchy** is an institutionalized system that is supported by political, social, legal, economic, and interpersonal systems that enable the domination of man and the masculine over the feminine and the gender diverse. In "Canadian" contexts, it is a system that was brought by colonization and the Western institutionalization of Christianity. To learn more about how matriarchy and patriarchy were different before colonization, you can read the works of *Turpel Lafond, Audra Simpson, and Theresa Spence*.

Sultana's article advocates for new tools beyond the SDGs to advance social justice and ethical change, as justice cannot be achieved without challenging systemic oppression, existing power relations, and exploitation.

Indigenous and Decolonial

Decolonial and feminist critiques of the SDGs consist of emphasizing Indigenous sovereignty and the conflation of (gender, racial, and/or Indigenous) inclusion as being liberatory or anti-oppressive. Carrasco-Miró (2017, 2020) writes on decolonizing "sustainable development" and "feminist economies" by interrogating how women's empowerment and Indigenous inclusion are weaponized by inherently imperialist and colonial states/institutions. These critiques by Carrasco-Miró (2017, 2020) are developed through the lens of a scholar who studies feminist and gender studies in Central America with no known institutional affiliation.

In her 2017 piece focused on decolonizing sustainable development, she outlines how current literature on development does not acknowledge how the existing systems are oppressive. She argues that the SDG framework enables green capitalism¹⁰ and the pursuit of justice being limited to viewing equality or mere inclusion as liberatory. Instead of working within oppressive structures, Carrasco-Miró (2017) argues for a new framework of "*EcoSImies of care*" that draws on Indigenous, decolonial, feminist, and critical environmentalist knowledges.

¹⁰ **Green Capitalism** is the ideology and framework that views environmentalism and climate solutions through the lens of capitalism: voting with your dollar, the citizen-consumer hybrid ideology, and an emphasis of "shopping for change." (Scholars Wendy Brown and Josée Johnson have done incredible research on this topic.) This is largely rationalized by neoliberalism, a political ideology branching from capitalism that views the market as a site of "justice" and social regulation to emphasize the values of individual responsibility, competition, and consumption. Examples of green capitalism are carbon taxes, market-based green design, hybrid cars, cap-and trade schemes, and dematerializing the economy - all of which have failed (Klein, 2020).

This framework centres the natural inter-dependency of humans and ecosystems to ground her argument in a way that rejects hope as a political strategy and advocates for restructuring economic systems to adequately address environmental justice. It urges us to view ourselves and our relations in an ecosystem of *similarities* to develop interdependence and care.

Carrasco-Miró (2017) draws on Naomi Klein's work to argue that climate change and "sustainable development" is not about carbon, it is about global economic power systems that are inclusive of colonialism, industrialization, and globalization. She critiques how "development" is emphasized onto "underdeveloped" Nations through a Western and colonial framework that does not acknowledge how colonialism, globalization, and imperialism have manufactured their conditions. By negating how imperialism has created the conditions for their "underdevelopment" such as extreme poverty, lack of education and access to clean water, etc.

This justifies further intervention from the Nations responsible for their destabilization, which further indebts these Nations to the Global North. The logic of imperialism and its justification will be further outlined in this report through the theory of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2005) in the next section. Carrasco-Miró argues that sustainable development through the SDG framework further enables the economic exploitation and appropriation of humans and nature through inherently unsustainable and extractive economic systems (2017). She urges for a reframing of understanding what nature's value is beyond a form of exchangeable and profitable capital. This will set the foundation for just climate pursuits.

Feminist Political Economy

She further visits the concept of development through a feminist political economy lens in the criticism of empowering women's economic development as a means of liberation or justice (Carrasco-Miró, 2020). Her article on decolonizing feminist economies interrogates the use of "empowerment" as synonymous with women's economic liberation and justice. This article is of a similar framework that argues that "empowerment" and "development" within inherently oppressive structures (patriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism) are not to be conflated with justice. This argument is further supported by Kabeer (2020) who emphasizes that women's empowerment within patriarchal and capitalist systems also creates a monolithic understanding of what "women's experience" is in relation to economic development. These critiques emphasize how women's empowerment is merely a call for women to participate in exploitative economic structures through the illusion of equity.

We can think of this with the rising phenomenon of the "girl boss" identity/lifestyle and "grind culture" that views becoming rich, a boss, or a corporate elite as economic liberation. These perspectives are largely created by neoliberal rationalization (Harvey, 2007) that conflate personal and individual economic riches with "freedom" rather than collective emancipation from capitalism, which pursues economic justice outside of capitalism, accumulation, and exploitative extraction. It must also be noted that within this literature, women's liberation and "gender" equality largely emphasizes on the experiences of cis-women and excludes trans, non binary, and two spirit individuals.

The literature states that the SDG framework is not an adequate framework for sustainable development due to its formation in the perspectives of exploitative and oppressive states and institutions. Calls to sustainably develop the Global North and South require not only the acknowledgement of how globalization, colonization, and imperialism have created the conditions for “underdeveloped” Nations, but it requires removing the extractive economic systems of capitalism, divestment from “green” market-based solutions, and moving from individual focused action to collective emancipatory visions of economic justice.

The Politics of “(Un/Under) Developed” Nations

When speaking about “underdeveloped” Nations, we must consider the moral and political use of language. A helpful way to consider how to develop a critical mind about topics on “sustainable development” is to focus on how and why we are talking about these problems, Nations, and peoples. What interests does it serve to refer to Nations as “underdeveloped”? What is the imagery that is evoked by talking about Nations and its people as “underdeveloped”?

Consider: are these Nations underdeveloped? Or are they overexploited?

Using the language of “sustainable development” without historical, legal, ethical, socio political, and cultural contexts frame the SDGs as a racially neutral and progressive framework. This is significant, as it requires us to look into rectifying historical injustices and understanding how they shape our current realities before we begin to “move forward.” Critical studies of decolonization outline how the ongoing structure of settler colonialism that is the fabric of “Canada” is not equitable or progressive. In this report,

I will briefly outline some literature that critiques accumulation through globalization, colonialism, and capitalism. I will contextualize these arguments through critical race, ethnic, and feminist studies to outline how “development” is never a neutral or progressive statement.

The idea that “development” is synonymous with social progress is rooted in the idea that our current state is neutral or is impartial (Mills, 2014). It is a liberal idea that frames the settler colonial state of “Canada” as being a default – as if its existence is natural and was “always meant to be.” This idea seeks to remove the history of colonialism and the current structure of settler colonialism (Wolfe, 2006) whose logic appears in residential school denialism, anti-Indigenous policy formation, stigmatization, and racist stereotypes about Indigenous peoples. The current settler-colonial state of “Canada” is not racially neutral; its existence is a replacement of Indigenous Nations that have existed long before colonization. Reflecting on the realities of a settler-colonial state, the accumulation of wealth or aspects of social mobility, seeking security on stolen lands as settlers are at the expense of continuously dispossessing Indigenous Nations from their lands and undermining Indigenous sovereignty (Issar, 2021). This is the reality of the illusion of “social developments” that seeks permanence, stability, and security on unceded territories: it is the pursuit of guaranteeing settler futurities and non-Indigenous settlement.

Within the settler-colonial state of Canada, we can apply the politics of “underdeveloped” Nations to Indigenous Nations and communities to question why it is that Indigenous Nations are impoverished. We can turn to Karl Marx’s theory of primitive accumulation that has most recently been adapted by David Harvey’s theory of accumulation by dispossession (2005). The logic of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2005) outlines how settler-colonial states gain capital through four main functions: (1) privatization (2) financialization (of everything) (3) management of crises and (4) state redistributions.

These four functions create a loop of dependency on neoliberalism that makes it incredibly difficult to imagine new ways of creating solutions and futures that do not depend on green capitalism or extractive economies.

I will use examples throughout to outline how we can come to think of the theory of accumulation by dispossession theory materializing in the real world. The stage of (1) privatization looks like the power of the state using excessive force to gain property rights over land to privatize the “resources” of that land. This is largely done using militarization, police violence, and manipulating the court. We have seen this many times in the past and are currently seeing this occur on Wet’suwet’en territories and [their fight against the Coastal Gaslink Pipeline](#). The state uses violence (police and military) to occur lands that do not belong to them to continue the process of privatization and therefore the commodification of nature. This is where stage (2) financialization (of everything) occurs. This is when the value of anything is reduced only to its value within the economy – this logic infects all spheres and practices of the social and natural world. It dissolves the value of the interpersonal, social, political, and spiritual.

An example of how this occurs in just the way we speak, is when we walk about the value of a tree. Language is a social practice that emulates systems of power – so when we say that a tree has no value, we really mean that it does not have economic value until it is made into lumber. This also appears in the way that we think about ourselves in the context of work and productivity. Wage labour assigns value to our time and our value – where we believe that we are less valuable when we do not work, or feel guilty for resting, or being unproductive. The third stage (3) management of crises is when the state manufactures crises, whether they be financial, environmental, or social to manage them – which legitimizes its power and control. This is done through imperialist and colonial expansions that create conditions that require over exploited nations to have a dependency on “state interventions” and foreign aid.

This can look like the deliberate creation of unemployment, a labour shortage, and poverty to produce a surplus reliance on low-wage labour.

The illusion of the state “management” economic crises often lies on relief, welfare, or social programs that are notoriously unpopular in electoral politics. This has been a pattern throughout history that has been traced by scholars *Piven and Cloward's “Regulating the Poor and Epsing Andersen's “The Three World of Welfare Capitalism”* which illustrates how welfare and social benefits are not a “socialist” program but are rather managed by the state and capital to ensure civil order, reinforce work norms, (Piven and Cloward, 1971) and legitimize the state (Epsing Andersen, 1990). Managing economic crises through relief and welfare policies are cyclical (either lenient or restrictive) that are dependent on what problems the state aims to regulate in larger society (Piven and Cloward, 1971). Even what we are currently experiencing - a labour “shortage” and inflation - are all functions of capitalism. They are not a “natural” or “inevitable” consequence, they are manufactured by a social constructed system. This is a point that many scholars point to in demonstrating how the “free market” and the illusion of “choice” out of poverty is often not a choice but are managed by the state in the interest of control and capital.

The (3) management of crises goes hand in hand with (4) state redistributions. This is where policies are framed in liberal and progressive ways that appear socially beneficial but require dispossession to redistribute wealth (Epsing-Andersen, 1990). This can look like taxes that seek redistribution on investments, rather than taxes on income/wages. It also looks like providing subsidies and tax breaks to corporations rather than providing free education, housing, or healthcare. What we see in “Canada” and many provinces who are in a housing crisis, these policies look at offers to convert rentals to ownership at low costs. They promise and allow for these homeowners to accumulate wealth and secure housing, only for them to later be forced out through gentrification and/or renovictions (Harvey, 2007).

This creates a cycle of dependency, where problems are manufactured by the state only to be “solved” by the state – it does not question how (1) privatization or (2) financialization occurs or question its legitimacy.

This is a very brief and broad overview of what the theory of accumulation by dispossession looks like and how it creates dependency. If you are curious to know more, I encourage you to read Calvin Helin’s “Dances with Dependency: Out of Poverty Through Self Reliance” which focuses specifically on Indigenous-settler relations and the state. In our “Canadian” contexts, the theory of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2007) intersects with settler colonial political imperatives. We see this when the state (1) privatizes and (2) financializes Indigenous territories to a.) secure settler futures and b.) act as if securing settler futures can exist separately from ongoing Indigenous dispossession. This is a very brief summary of this theory. If you are curious, you can listen to Dr. David Harvey describe his theory of accumulation by dispossession at this link [here](#).

Beyond the settler-colonial state of Canada, the idea of “underdeveloped” Nations is tied to globalization, imperialism, and militarization that function in a similar manner as “Canada” – just on a global scale. For more, you can listen to Dr. Harsha Walia’s [TEDxUniversityofWinnipeg talk](#), as well as read her books *Border and Rule* and *Undoing Border Imperialism*. She is a leading scholar and activist who looks at the fabrication of borders, imperialism, globalization, and militarization. I don’t want to overwhelm this section with a world history literature review, but I am going to encourage you to read her work to contextualize how the theory of accumulation by dispossession appears on a global scale. When you dive deeper into her work, think about reframing the moral weight of power in the term “refugee crisis” and consider: *Is it a refugee crisis? Or is it a crisis of imperialism and state intervention? What is the real crisis?*

Colonialism vs Settler Colonialism

Colonialism in “Canada” never ended – it adapted into the current ongoing structure of settler colonialism (Wolfe, 2006). The fact that “Canada” exists is evidence that colonialism never ended; the state is an occupation of Indigenous lands. Both colonialism and settler colonialism are violent processes that require the dispossession of Indigenous peoples, however, the distinction between is the permanence of settlement. Patrick Wolfe (2006) writes in his piece *Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native* about the logic of elimination being the foundation of the settler colonial state. He argues that colonialism does not occur as singular events (residential schools, 60’s scoop, Indian Act¹¹, etc.) but they are rather a part of an ongoing structure of genocide: settler colonialism. This theory lays the foundation for understanding how the impacts of colonization and policies that enabled assimilation are not “one off” incidents whose impacts have been removed because of new legal protections or acts of “reconciliation.” All that has occurred since colonization is *still* colonization, only now it has been restructured into settler colonialism, which seeks *permanence* and not just invasion.

The key functions of settler colonialism are (1) settlement (2) permanence (3) replacement and (4) guaranteed possession (Wolfe, 2006). Settlement and permanence occur with the exploitation of land resources and people by a foreign presence. The (2) permanence of this (1) settlement is defined by the fact that there is no time limit – we can see how settler colonialism is alive just by the fact that “Vancouver”, “Edmonton”,

¹¹ **The Indian Act (1876)** was developed to categorize Indigenous identities to shape contemporary Native life. It is a function of paternalistic, invasive, and colonial governance that sought for control over who qualified as “Indian” for status, rights to their land, and rights to practice their culture. The Indian Act is still alive today. Please read more about the impacts of the Indian Act [here](#).

and “Toronto” still exist. All regimes of colonialism are physically violent; however, settler colonialism is extremely violent because it doesn’t just seek to have a presence, it looks to (3) replace and eliminate: in its nature, it is genocidal. It says, ‘we have arrived, made treaties and promises, but we are taking everything over and are looking to replace the population by eliminating the Natives.

This is how settler colonial regimes exist (the US, Canada, and Australia are prime examples) and a large reason why #LANDBACK¹² is not just a local movement – it is a call to return land to their rightful stewardesses on a global scale. The (4) guaranteed possession in settler colonialism is homeownership, non-Natives holding title to the territories they occupy, and having political possession of those territories. It is extracting control over a territory without a connection to colonization but is an exploitation of resources nonetheless (taking [landlords and urbanization](#) as an example) whose mere existence functions as Indigenous dispossession. What is interesting about colonization and its different forms of racialization is how the different contours of racialization is not one of natural default but is melded to the power and control of the state’s intentions. In the US, racialization occurred against Black people to justify why they were “naturally” inferior (Issar, 2021) to rationalize their inclusion in labour exploitation.

On the reverse, Canada used racial fractioning and blood quantum logic to exclude Indigenous peoples based on their fabricated “racial” difference. I draw upon these disturbing differences to illustrate how racialization is in fact a social construct that has no evidence that can justify exploitation but is rather yet another function of exerting power. Wolfe’s (2006) argument is that settler colonialism is a political structure that continues and is distinct from genocide, as it is not reduced to only “one

12 **#LANDBACK** is an Indigenous-led global social movement that has existed for generations. Its goal is to return all land back to its rightful stewardesses – the Indigenous Nations that have dispossessed from their territories. It is a political framework that moves towards solidarity and collective liberation. You can read more about it [here](#).

event” – it is a structure that forms all spheres of the social, political, and economic world. He proposes the logic of elimination, where settler colonialism’s practices are based upon in order to guarantee settler futures at the expense of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination.

Patrick Wolfe (2006) writes: “No such problem bedevil analysis of the logic of elimination, which, in its specificity to settler colonialism, is premised on securing, obtaining, and the maintenance of territory. The logic certainly requires the elimination of the owners of that territory, but not in any particular way. To this extent, it is a larger category than genocide” (402). The context of this argument is that settler colonialism is not about genocide, it’s about removing people from the territory in different tactics that can look like forceful removal with law enforcement, discriminatory policies, impoverishing certain communities, residential schools, and genocide as being one of those tactics. Indigenous-state relations, policies, laws are always about land and rights to land – anything that claims to be about Indigeneity, reconciliation, and/or decolonization must come back to land.

“

Colonialism in “Canada” never ended – it adapted into the current ongoing structure of settler colonialism (Wolfe, 2006). The fact that “Canada” exists is evidence that colonialism never ended; the state is an occupation of Indigenous lands.

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What is Decolonization, Indigenous Sovereignty, and the Role of Human Rights?

This is a tough section to write as an uninvited settler. I do not claim that my work is “decolonial” or that I have expertise in this topic. What I can offer, however, are my learnings from various Indigenous, Black, and made-racialized scholars who I have been lucky to study. These learnings that I offer below are brief – and I strongly encourage you to read the pieces that I am citing and linking to develop your own understanding and critical reflections of what decolonization means and looks like. You can also find resources to explore Indigenous-settler relations, Indigenous-led movements, and various forms of media on the [Relmagine17 Instagram page](#) that was posted on “Canada” day (2022). When we think about #LANDBACK and Indigenous sovereignty, it is place-based. It is impossible for me to tell you what #LANDBACK would look like on the lands that you occupy, nor is it my place to lead work on decolonization. Using my privilege in this work is most often using the access that I have to a critical education to educate other settlers so that we can best support, be in solidarity, and be in collaboration with efforts led by Indigenous peoples on their lands. You can find out whose land you are on at [Native Land](#) (although, please be aware that it is not always accurate). The best ways to truly know whose land you are on is to speak with Indigenous elders, listen to stories, attend local Indigenous-led action, or listen to oral histories that are available online.

Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang have spearheaded the scholarly world in the understanding that decolonization is not a metaphor (2012) and cannot be co-opted. This means that decolonization is not synonymous with any action that claims to be “radical”, “anti-capitalist”, “revolutionary”, “reconciliatory”, “restorative”, “representative”, or “spiritual.” Decolonization calls for the removal of oppressive structures, it is the unsettling of what currently exists (Fanon, 2021). The integration of made-marginalized voices, perspectives, and/or bodies in any given institution or decision-making process is not synonymous with the process of decolonization. Decolonization does not exist as an addition *to* systems, nor is it a token of recognition (Coulthard, 2014). Decolonization can only be understood as the disruptive process of removing our current fabrication of the settler-colonial and capitalist state and returning land to Indigenous nations. We as settlers cannot call anything that is not the returning of power, ownership, control over land to Indigenous Nations as decolonial – decolonization is not a metaphorical concept that is for our own benefit, personal healing, or self-improvement. It is about returning land.

When we think about Indigenous sovereignty in a human rights framework, decolonization does not fit – especially when we take the ongoing genocidal structure of settler colonialism into consideration. I will outline a few arguments from some articles and books that show how decolonization and Indigenous sovereignty are incompatible with human rights. Indigenous Nations are **Nations** with sovereignty, their own laws, and political and governance systems. Colonization and liberalism have “racialized” Indigeneity through policies like the Indian Act and the White Paper to individualize, medicalize, and moralize the symptoms of colonial oppression (Million, 2013), residential schools, and intergenerational trauma.

What we saw on the global scale post World War II was a shift towards globalization, which led to many Indigenous peoples seeing that their living conditions mimicked those living in “the third world” (Million, 2013). This was a massive shift in global governance and the rise of the “human rights era” that wanted to establish a universal set of laws.

What has been made clear from critical Indigenous scholarship (Palmer, 2011; Million, 2013; Maul, 2014; Hakimeh, 2018; García-Del Moral, 2022; Moses, et al., 2022) is that the human rights framework does not advance Indigenous sovereignty. Human rights act as a function of the structure of settler colonialism that naturalized Indigenous peoples as “citizens” of the settler-colonial state that occupies their land. The framework of human rights often mimics liberal “colour blind” logic (Mills, 2014) that erases all historical evidence of pre-existing lives before colonization. It erases the racial structure and formation of settler colonial states in the name of “equality” without considering the historical impacts and legacy of colonization. As argued similarly through a Native feminist framework, many western “progressive” imperatives of equality do not align with Indigenous ways of being (Turpel-Lafond, 1997). Turpel-Lafond argued that western feminism movements that sought for “equality of the sexes” negated the understandings of matriarchal Indigenous governance. She infamously said, “I do not want to be to the same as a man”, stating that equality is not the most important political or social concept – that in their ways of being, women were more than equals.

What we’re seeing being critiqued by Indigenous scholars (Million, 2013; Maul, 2014; Hakimeh, 2018; Moses, et al., 2022) is that human rights do not offer a framework of decolonization or reconciliation for Indigenous sovereignty. It is not offering a way of reclaiming their rights to their land. It rather functions to have Indigenous peoples assimilate to “the rest of Canada” and become a “Canadian.”

In this way, human rights act in harmony with the Indian Act and the ethos of the White Paper¹³ that continue the structure of settler colonialism that wants to eliminate the Native (Million, 2013; Maul, 2014; Hakimeh, 2018). We can understand the logic of elimination (Wolfe, 2006) in not just the physical removal – but the removal of Native identity (abolishing the Indian Act, removing Indigenous titles, and making Native people “citizens” of Canada) as a function of settler colonialism. By removing Native title, the state removes Native rights to land claims, which weakens Indigenous governance structures and titles to land. This allows the state to gain access more easily to their land in order to privatize and financialize their land and its resources to accumulate capital and guarantee settlers' futures.

The revised literature states how human rights and decolonization are not only incompatible but are a function of settler colonial violence (Palmer, 2011; Million, 2013; Maul, 2014; Hakimeh, 2018; García-Del Moral, 2022; Moses, et al., 2022). The role of a non-profit organization made of settlers on unceded lands is not clearly outlined by the literature, nor are there concrete solutions for best steps forward. What is important for us to remember is that there is no perfect way of moving in this world. What we choose to do with the information listed does matter, however, we cannot hold ourselves to unreasonable standards of revolutionary action without the proper resources. There are ways for us to move forward with this information that can feel right, and it is up to us to reimagine what that would look like – it is an opportunity for better, not perfection.

13 The White Paper (1969) was developed by Pierre Trudeau and Jean Chrétien that wanted to dismantle the Indian Act and assimilate all “Indians” into Canadian society. This would render all previous acts of resistance against assimilation moot. Pierre Trudeau fought for this act to pass under the guide of “equality” and a “just society” – which framed the “special rights” that Indigenous peoples had under the Indian Act as being the reason why Canada could not develop a truly “just” society. The White Paper was ultimately not passed; however, its ethos continues to shape the policy agendas of Canada and the Office of Indian Affairs. You can read more about it [here](#).

Key Terms and Definitions

Contingent Collaboration

(Tuck and Yang, 2012): “Allyship” or collaborations that don’t ask to work together forever, but rather ask to work together for as long as it’s useful to be in collaboration and conversation with one another. It is the understanding and practice of solidarity with efforts led by Indigenous peoples, communities, and Nations towards regaining political sovereignty and stewardship of their lands.

Example: If someone asks you to help them cross the road, you can go ahead and do that. It is useful for that person in that time. However, this does not mean that you must now help them across every road that they walk for the rest of the day – or their life. You do not have to now give up your plans and follow them around to ensure that they get across the street safely. You are a vessel for them to get what they need. More directly related, mutual aid funds, showing up to rallies, and redistributing your funds to Indigenous-led efforts and peoples are examples of solidarity with Indigenous-led action.

Reflection Prompt: What does LANDBACK mean to you? What do you personally have to lose from land being returned? What is there for the collective to gain? How does that make you feel? Who do you want to be in this movement?

Want more on allyship, collaboration, and solidarity?

Dive into the works of: adrienne maree brown, Angela Y Davis, Dean Spade, Eve Tuck, Mariame Kaba, Patricia Hill Collins, Tema Okun, and browse [Hua Foundation’s guide on “anti-racism + solidarities resource collection”](#)

Intersectional Feminism

Kimberlé Crenshaw is a Black feminist scholar who developed “Critical Race Theory” and the term Intersectional Feminism (1989) in her work *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. Dr. Crenshaw’s work describes how race, class, gender, and individual identities intersect under systems to create different experiences of discrimination and privileges. These identities include but are not limited to sexuality, education, ability, age, gender, language, ethnicity, class, and sex. You can listen to Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw talk about intersectional feminism at this [link](#).

Example: Women can experience sexism in their lives, however, women who have been racialized will experience both sexism *and* racism in ways that White women do not. Intersectional feminism is not about “oppression Olympics” and “who has it worse.” It is a method to understand how every person has specific identities that fall under various overlapping systems of oppression that can help us build better understanding, compassion, and solidarity.

Reflection Prompt: How have your identities shaped what social issues you are interested in? How you think about the world? In what ways have your identities been beneficial or harmful in your understanding of people around you?

Want more on intersectional feminism?

Dive into the works of: Angela Y Davis, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Judith Butler, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Roxane Gay, and Sara Ahmed

Native Feminism

(Turpel-Lafond 1997; Tuck 2012; Simpson 2016)

Disrupts the invasion of settler colonialism on *how* we are in relationship with one another and with the environment. For Turpel Lafond and Simpson, gender is the foundation of settler colonialism. Gender designs policies that have goals behind them – which have been repeated in the Indian Act, which discriminated against gender through interracial marriages. Colonialism looked to dislodge matriarchal lines and governance to disrupt Indigenous ways of being in favour of European family structures. Native feminism looks at how at how the ways we are governed by systems that mirror settler colonialism that are deeply gendered, colonial, and motivated by the dispossession of the Native. It argues how violence is enacted in settler colonial societies in gendered ways that disproportionately impact Native women.

Example: It is not my place to give an example of Native feminism. Instead, I offer this wonderfully written and short article that speaks on Indigenous feminism for you to look at instead. It focuses on Navajo traditions and outlines how patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism are linked. Please read that article by clicking [here](#).

Reflection Prompt: What do you know about MMIWG ([Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls](#))? Read about the history and browse through the [Final Report and Calls for Justice](#). In what ways have you been shielded from this reality? In what ways have you seen Native women represented in media? How would an intersectional or Native feminist lens look at news articles about MMIWG?

Want more on Native feminism?

Dive into the works of: Audra Simpson, Dian Million, Eve Tuck, Leanne Simpson, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Theresa Spence, and Turpel Lafond

Settler Colonialism

(Wolfe, 2006) as a structure not an event. Colonialization in Canada never ended – it only adapted into the structure of settler colonialism that continuously dispossesses Indigenous peoples from their territories. This grounds us in the understanding what can appear as “progress” are not *neutral* developments. These developments occur at the expense of Indigenous sovereignty – they are replacements. Wolfe (2006) walks us the logic of elimination as a key function of settler colonialism where the Native repressed continues to structure the functions of settler-colonial society.

Example: There are countless examples of genocidal tactics enacted by the state against Indigenous Nations. This is not limited to committing genocide and murder (Manifest Destiny, Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890, Wounded Knee siege of 1970, Sand Creek Massacre, the Oka Crisis, RCMP invasions of Wet’suwet’en territories, etc.) You can read more about the function of violence in settler colonialism in this [article](#): *The Slow Violence of Settler Colonialism: Genocide, Attrition, and the Long Emergency of Invasion* by Pauline Wakeham. (If you need free PDF access, send me an [email](#).)

Reflection Prompt: How much do you know about the land that you occupy? In what ways has that land provided for you? In what ways do you provide back? How do you plan your future? How much of that plan is reliant on permanence? How does that feel?

Want more on settler colonialism?

Dive into the works of: Audra Simpson, Dian Million, Eve Tuck, Franz Fanon, Glen Sean Coulthard, Kyle Willmott, Leanne Simpson, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Patrick Wolfe, Rima Wilkes, Robert Nichols, Siddhant Issar, Theresa Spence, Turpel Lafond and Wayne Yang

Reflection Prompts for Settlers

1. Where did you first learn about Indigenous-settler relations? How do you think that environment/person influenced how you currently understand decolonization?
2. Where have you seen calls for “decolonization” in the media, institutions and/or policies? How often do they mention returning land? What do they emphasize, and why?
3. Is there discomfort at the thought of returning land and sovereignty to Indigenous Nations? Is that discomfort rooted in the unknowing or lack of control? How much of that discomfort is rooted in the characteristics of the culture of white supremacy?
4. How has your position (class, gender, sexuality, race) influenced your understanding of decolonization and Indigenous-settler relations? How do you understand your experiences with systems of oppression? What are the root causes/systems?
5. How do you imagine sustainable development? In what way do the ways you think of sustainability and development mirror settler colonialism? Decolonization? Imperialism? How do you feel about the ways you can and cannot think about better futures?

Recommended Readings and Resources

1. Article: "*Decolonization is Not a Metaphor.*" Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang (2012)
2. Article: "*Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native.*" Patrick Wolfe (2006)
3. Article: "*Theorising 'Racial/Colonial Primitive Accumulation': Settler Colonialism, Slavery and Racial Capitalism.*" Siddhant Issar (2022)
4. Book: "*Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights.*" Dian Million (2013)
5. Book: "*Dances with Dependency: Out of Poverty Through Self-Reliance.*" Calvin Helin (2006)
6. Book Chapter: "*Red Skin, White Masks – The Politics of Recognition in Colonial Contexts.*" Glenn Sean Coulthard (2014)
7. Book Chapter: "*The Wretched of the Earth – Concerning Violence.*" Franz Fanon (2021)
8. Guide: Tema Okun's "[White Supremacy Culture Characteristics](#)" (2021)
9. Guide: Hua Foundation's "[anti-racism + solidarities resource collection](#)" (2022)
10. Guide: Climate Chaplin's "[Whiteness and White Supremacy Reading List](#)" (2022)

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In-Text Hyperlinks

(in order of how they appear)

1. **UN 17SDG Framework:** <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>
2. **Prison Industrial Complex:** <https://criticalresistance.org/mission-vision/not-so-common-language/>
3. **Criminalization of Indigenous knowledge sharing:** <https://www.ictinc.ca/the-potlatch-ban-abolishment-of-first-nations-ceremonies>
4. **Logic of White Supremacy:** <https://www.yorku.ca/edu/unleading/systems-of-oppression/white-supremacy/>
5. **What is “political economy?”:** <https://www.sociologygroup.com/political-economy/>
6. **Dr. Zoe Todd (Métis)’s critique of “Braiding Sweetgrass” by Robin Kimmerer and pan Indigenous identity and knowledge:**
<https://twitter.com/zoestodd/status/1356659306372820993>
7. **Audre Lorde’s Essay/Speech “The Master’s House”:**
https://collectiveliberation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Lorde_The_Masters_Tools.pdf
8. **Wet’suwet’en and Coastal Gaslink Pipeline (media release):**
http://www.wetsuweten.com/files/Media_Release_Feb._6,_2020_-_CGL.pdf
9. **Dr. David Harvey talking about Accumulation by Dispossession:**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRTUhoNORB4>
10. **Dr. Harsha Walia talking about borders and imperialism:**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOYgLixCOKE>
11. **The Indian Act:** https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_indian_act/

12. **Landlords and Urbanization as Indigenous Dispossession:**
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-2427.12666>
13. **#LANDBACK:** <https://landback.org/>
14. **ReImagine17 Instagram Page - “Canada” Day 2022:**
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CfeOTP4OTjW/>
15. **Native Land:** <https://native-land.ca/> (please be aware that it is not always accurate)
16. **The White Paper:**
https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/the_white_paper_1969/
17. **Hua Foundation’s Anti-Racism + Solidarities Resource Collection:**
<https://solidarities.huafoundation.org/home/>
18. **Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality:**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BnAW4NyOak>
19. **Article “Indigenous Feminism is Our Culture”:**
https://ssir.org/articles/entry/indigenous_feminism_is_our_culture
20. **MMIWG (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls):**
<https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/>
21. **MMIWG Final Report and Calls for Justice:** <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/>
22. **Article “The Slow Violence of Settler Colonialism” by Pauline Wakeham:**
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14623528.2021.1885571?journalCode=cjgr20>
23. **Tema Okun’s White Supremacy Culture Guide and Characteristics:**
<https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/characteristics.html>
24. **Hua Foundation’s Anti-Racism + Solidarities Resource Collection:**
<https://solidarities.huafoundation.org/home/>
25. **Climate Chaplin’s Resource on Whiteness and White Supremacy:**
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/12KCdiT1F6Do0Aq7F8XUUvqtQZsZ-v4GBYqj92MGGzM/edit>