
(Mis)appropriations of Decolonization and the Right not to be Dispossessed**Shahram Sarwar¹**¹ PhD Scholar, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i2.2453>****Abstract**

This article examines the (mis)appropriation of decolonization within academic discourse and beyond it. It argues that decolonization loses its political force when it is reduced to a fashionable critique, separated from practice, or detached from land and Indigenous communities. The article first considers how academic debates can turn decolonization into a symbolic language of struggle while leaving the material conditions of colonialism untouched. It then examines the appropriation of Indigenous knowledge through patents, and development practices that extract knowledge from the relations and communities through which it is sustained. The discussion extends to environmental justice through the case of Kiribati, where the possible loss of inhabitable land exposes the limits of distribution as well as recognition. The article argues that environmental justice cannot be separated from land justice and that the right not to be dispossessed must remain central to decolonial practice. It concludes by proposing decolonization as an evolutionary process that develops through public institutional change and land return while remaining attentive to communities facing immediate dispossession.

Keywords: Decolonization; Environmental Justice; Environmental Ethics; Climate Change; Indigenous Philosophy

Introduction

In recent years, decolonization has taken off and received much needed attention in academic circles. Consequently, it has also become susceptible to misappropriation. The misuse of decolonization in academic and social circles has serious consequences for its practice. Practicing decolonization without appropriation is demanding and requires commitment. In this paper, I address two important questions that I believe have become central to decolonial struggles in recent years. What are the consequences of (mis)appropriating decolonization, and how does this appropriation take place? What should decolonization in practice look like, and is it possible to practice an ethics of incommensurability in our everyday decolonial struggles? Any decolonial struggle will eventually have to address these questions before it can clearly define its politics and practice.

In answering the first question, I present various forms of academic and nonacademic appropriation of decolonization. I also explore the relationship between decolonization and Indigenization and examine how appropriating one affects the other. I then turn to the relationship between environmental justice and land justice through the case of Kiribati. In addressing the second question, I explore the possibility of approaching decolonization as an evolutionary strategy. Decolonization requires a commitment to reject easy appropriations. It requires a radical overhaul of everything that has been produced and packaged through the colonial violence of the past five centuries. Seeing decolonization as an evolutionary strategy is different from demanding that everything be radically fixed at once. It might offer a practical way forward by understanding the needs of the present without compromising the spirit of decolonial struggles.

(Mis)appropriating Decolonization

Some ideas acquire a larger appeal within academia. The humanities, in particular, is a place where trends can develop a certain appeal and an x factor of their own. Postcolonial theory, social epistemology, and Anthropocene literature are among the discourses that have dominated the humanities during the past few decades. When a discourse becomes popular among academics, it can attract a larger audience. However, it can also become vulnerable to being reduced to a fashionable academic critique. Radical leftist discourses of the past offer an example of this tendency. Theorizing can become a world in itself, so appealing that academics may forget to connect it with the world outside it. And most of the time, the appeal of a discourse can generate diverse and productive debates. Decolonization is one such discourse. It has the ability to generate diverse debates, as has been witnessed in recent years. But it also remains vulnerable to becoming another academic critique of the system without challenging the system itself.

In theory, decolonization is praxis and demands an active decolonial living of the ideas generated through that living. Consequently, there is no decolonial theory without practice or practice without theory. Theory here should not be understood only in its dominant Western academic sense but as something that emerges from the land and returns to the practices of people sustaining their relations with the land. This is difficult to comprehend and explain because we, in contemporary times, do not usually live this way. But decolonization, by its very essence, is an active and practical way of perceiving the realities around us and resisting their exploitative nature.

The (mis)appropriation of decolonization works in two ways within academia. First, decolonization is appropriated as a discourse that generates debate among scholars. This reduces decolonization to a symbol of struggle against colonialism and removes it from the struggle itself. When Tuck and Yang (2012) call decolonization more than a metaphor, they point toward the concrete realities of land injustice, genocide, and settler colonial violence that resulted in the displacement and death of Indigenous peoples across the Americas. Decolonization, seen this way, is a struggle against the concrete and material violence of colonialism. This struggle cannot be reduced to protests centered on the language of human rights alone. It should also not be appropriated by academics merely as material for a conference paper. This is why, as Tuck and Yang emphasize, decolonization cannot become a metaphor. A metaphor is usually used as a figure of speech and may remain symbolic without representing the material reality to which it refers. Decolonization is an uncompromising demand for land reclamation. The decolonial claim for the recovery of land by its erstwhile owners cannot become a negotiable transaction managed through the give and take of politics.

Second, King (2019) argues that the North American academy promotes Settler Colonial Studies as a unified field which has resulted in the displacement of Native and Indigenous Studies. I see this as Orientalism revitalized in another form and its consequences are broad and destructive. King argues that Wolfe's theorization of colonialism as a structure instead of an event consolidated colonialism as a generalized phenomenon and shifted attention away from its specific violent manifestations in genocide, slavery, and dispossession (King, 2019, p. 65). Softer terms like settler colonialism replaced the harsher ones. Harsher terms are required to describe the violence of the past several centuries. Settler Colonial Studies has been culprit of placing greater emphasis on settlement than it has on colonialism. This has resulted in viewing the exploitation of land as being separated from the exploitation of people.

However, it were the communities, the peoples, especially the Indigenous and the Black, who were among the primary targets of the North American settler colonial violence. Land became a means through which people were exploited and new settlements established after resistance had been violently suppressed. Settler Colonial Studies can serve the interests of white settlers when it presents the exploitation of land as the primary concern of study and moves the exploitation of people into the background. In this sense, the academy can contain the radical discourses emerging from Black and Indigenous writers by replacing genocide and dispossession with categories that appear less violent.

(Mis)appropriating Indigenous Knowledge

There is yet another form of appropriation that extends beyond the academy. This appropriation results from the extraction of Indigenous knowledge for the needs of global capitalism. Before discussing this form of (mis)appropriation, I want to shed some light on the relationship between decolonization and indigenization and explain why appropriating indigenization is harmful to the decolonial project. Decolonization is impossible without indigenization as much as the latter is impossible without the former.

Indigenization is usually seen as a call to return to the roots and revitalize dormant structures of knowledge that survive on a ventilator but are not yet dead. These structures can be rejuvenated by challenging the centrality of modern scientific discourse and its hegemonic grip on epistemology. Indigenization, in this sense, is an outcome of decolonization. To bring local roots back to the center, the colonial grip on knowledge must first be displaced. Decolonization confronts colonialism with a will to defeat it uncompromisingly and without falling into appropriation. Indigenization becomes the next constructive step through which local knowledge can be rebuilt and reintroduced into public and academic discourse.

Decolonization and indigenization are interdependent. Without decolonization, indigenization remains compromised. Without indigenization as an alternative to colonialism, decolonization loses its direction. In practice, decolonization precedes indigenization as the first essential step. Yet decolonization will lead to little if indigenization is itself compromised or appropriated. Even if colonialism stands defeated, it can recover itself when no indigenized alternative is available to take its place. The (mis)appropriation of Indigenous forms of knowledge therefore poses a serious threat to decolonial struggles.

This appropriation takes place in various ways. I will discuss two of them. One of the most rampant practices in recent years has been the creation of databases that promise to bring “just” development through the collection of Indigenous traditions (Agrawal, 2002). Indigenous knowledge was discarded through centuries of epistemic colonization. It is now recorded in databases and made available to a global audience. This process involves collecting and analyzing Indigenous knowledge on a wide range of subjects. Its stated purpose is to preserve and circulate such knowledge systems. Multinational institutions maintain databases that cover subjects including “fisheries, botanical knowledge among native Americans, and veterinary medicinal plants in Africa” (Agrawal, 2002, p. 288).

These databases often work primarily for the purposes of global development. Knowledge considered useful is extracted while the rest is discarded. Useful knowledge is usually that which can be generalized and incorporated into development practices. This instrumentalization globalizes, compromises, and at times adulterates Indigenous knowledge by converting it into a cog in the larger machinery of capitalist development.

The other practice is what Vandana Shiva calls piracy through patents. Shiva describes it as biopiracy and calls it “the Columbian discovery 500 years after Columbus” (2016, p. 2). This modern Columbian exchange takes place through the incorporation of non-Western systems of knowledge into the reductionism of commercialized Western science and technology. Patents can legally restrict access to organic seeds, sacrificing the needs of poor farmers for the benefit of multinational corporations. Intellectual property rights interfere with the organic cycle of life itself. Creativity becomes a monopoly of those who control the processes of production.

Shiva (2016) calls for the decolonization of regeneration because regeneration is an indigenized and traditional mode of life that creates and recreates itself through the land. Technology, engineering, and capitalism disrupt this organic organization. Farmers and peasants who regenerate life through seeds become alienated from the process as seeds are patented and placed under the control of a few. This is among the most dangerous forms of appropriation because traditional knowledge is instrumentalized and separated from the local and poor communities through which it has been sustained.

The creation of databases and biopiracy through patents threaten Indigenous knowledge systems and decolonial endeavors alike. This makes one think that decolonization, apart from land justice claims, will have

to confront forms of colonization operating at several levels. Returning land to the commons will remain incomplete if the relationships between land and Indigenous people continue to be disrupted through intellectual property rights and similar mechanisms. Practicing decolonization is therefore an inclusive process that embraces everything from the seeds of the land to the people living upon it, including their cosmologies, epistemologies, histories, physics, and metaphysics.

Land Justice and the Limits of Environmental Justice

The discussion above raises a larger problem for environmental justice. If Indigenous knowledge cannot be separated from land, can environmental justice be conceptualized without land justice? One of the most important contributions of the American environmental justice movement is its emphasis on the inseparability of environmental justice from social justice. This emphasis brought American environmentalism closer to environmental movements in the Global South, where questions of ecology have often remained connected with the material needs of communities.

The environmental injustices faced by minority communities in the United States demonstrate how race and class are built into the organization of environmental harm. The experiences of communities across the southern United States, the Warren County struggle, the Black community of Alsen, and the placement of hazardous sites within the urban space of Los Angeles are evident cases of racial and class discrimination (Bullard, 2000; Cole & Foster, 2001; Pulido, 2000; Taylor, 2014). The inclusion of race and class within environmental debates is therefore a significant contribution of environmental justice scholarship.

Environmental justice scholars have also shown that environmental harm extends beyond spectacular disasters such as tsunamis, floods, droughts, migration, warmer ocean temperatures, and heatwaves. The deterioration of a community's air, water, and soil through toxic waste, pesticides, industrial contamination, and hazardous land use also belongs to environmental justice. The location of affected communities and the role of white privilege in producing environmental racism make these harms inseparable from the wider organization of society (Carson, 1962; Bullard, 2000; Taylor, 2014; Pulido, 2016). This work also challenged wilderness preservation schemes that displaced local populations and ignored their needs. Environmentalism has historically functioned for protecting nature at the cost of local livelihoods (Guha, 1989; Guha, 1997). Environmentalism becomes empty when it separates ecological protection from social justice.

Another major question within environmental justice debates concerns distribution and recognition. Fraser (1995) argues that economic distribution and cultural recognition have to be understood together because economic disadvantage and cultural disrespect are often interconnected. Schlosberg (2007) expands the meaning of environmental justice further through distribution, recognition, participation, and capabilities. These frameworks are important because they show that justice cannot be reduced to the distribution of material goods alone. Justice also concerns whether communities are recognized and possess the ability to sustain meaningful lives.

However, the limitations of these frameworks, and the American environmental justice movement, become evident when they travel beyond the historical setting in which they were developed. The documentary *Anote's Ark* presents such a situation. The film portrays the dangers faced by the people of the Republic of Kiribati as climate change threatens the habitability of their islands (Rytz, 2018). President Anote Tong reflects that the people of Kiribati once believed their isolation would protect them from the tribulations of the world. The documentary shows how little this isolation protected them from a crisis produced largely elsewhere.

While watching *Anote's Ark*, I found it difficult to imagine what environmental justice could mean for the people of Kiribati. In such a situation, hope becomes a bargain. The help that Kiribati may receive through relocation, material compensation, or international assistance remains an expensive bargain. These measures may protect lives and make displacement less brutal. They cannot reproduce the land, relations, histories, and forms of belonging that would be lost if communities were forced to leave.

Despite being aware of the land injustice his people may face, President Anote asks the global community to help him protect the people of his nation. His call for assistance carries the helplessness and stark injustice built into the structures of the world we inhabit. The global community can help only so far. It may provide resources, relocation, or political recognition. It cannot restore what would be lost if the conditions of continued life on the islands were destroyed. Anote is therefore forced to ask for whatever assistance might make a possible displacement less unbearable. This is among the most difficult conditions faced by people living on the brink of climate dispossession.

A major concern for environmental justice scholarship is what kind of justice can respond to such a situation. Fraser's synthesis of distribution and recognition offers an important framework within the American setting. The Kiribati case makes its limits visible. Gilio-Whitaker's (2019) call to indigenize environmental justice helps us understand why distributive justice cannot settle every claim. Land justice comes before the question of material distribution when the injustice involves the possible loss of a people's land. Can Kiribati receive justice if its land becomes uninhabitable? Land justice is what the people of Kiribati need. It is precisely what compensation alone cannot provide.

Dispossessing people from their land has a long colonial history. From an Indigenous framework, colonialism precedes many of the injustices that followed because it first displaced people from their lands and disrupted their relations with them (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019). Environmental justice understood through relocation and material compensation misses the essential point within Indigenous justice claims, which is *the right not to be dispossessed*. Compensation may respond to some of the material consequences of displacement. It cannot make the loss of land commensurable.

The Kiribati case does not make race, class, distribution, or recognition irrelevant but shows that these categories do not appear in the same form everywhere. The vulnerability of Kiribati is connected with a global order shaped by colonial histories, unequal consumption, and uneven political power. The communities that contributed least to climate change are placed in the position of asking the larger powers for help. A framework becomes appropriative when it carries its own categories into every part of the world without allowing the experiences it encounters to transform those categories.

Environmental justice cannot and should not be conceptualized outside the framework of land justice. Land justice, anticolonialism, and anti-imperialism remain integral to environmental justice if we are to address the injustices faced by communities across the planet. Recognition, distribution, participation, and compensation remain important. But these cannot entirely exhaust the meaning of justice when the land itself is under threat. Kiribati also complicates my understanding of decolonization as an evolutionary process. If evolutionary decolonization means gradual change, where does that leave communities whose lands may become uninhabitable before public consciousness, institutions, and policies are transformed? Evolutionary decolonization cannot mean waiting. Its gradual development must exist alongside urgent material action that prevents further dispossession. Otherwise, evolutionary progress can become another language through which justice is delayed until the land and relations it is supposed to protect have already been lost.

Decolonization in Practice

Since decolonization demands an inclusive and uncompromising rejection of colonial legacies, how can it be practiced in a world that remains colonial to its core? In practice, one can be critical of capitalism, neoliberalism, patriarchy, and racism. One can be critical of all the elements of one of these systems, some elements of one system, or some elements across several systems. Decolonization is an all-encompassing critique of colonialism and all aspects of it without reducing it to one single problem. It treats these problems as outcomes of colonial histories.

Practicing decolonization therefore requires opposition to the structures imposed upon the world through the colonization of Indigenous peoples during the past five hundred years. Decolonization is difficult to practice because it takes us out of the comfort zones through which we choose one injustice while overlooking another.

In short, it places land injustice at the center of the violence that must be rejected through decolonial practice (Gilio-Whitaker, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Many other forms of exploitation became possible through the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands. Capitalist extraction, for example, depended upon converting land into private property. By consciously questioning the land injustices experienced by Indigenous communities, decolonial practice should develop a struggle to return land to the people from whom it was taken and restore forms of common ownership destroyed through colonialism.

Precisely because of this, decolonization is difficult to practice and requires a conscious rejection of easy appropriations. In Tuck and Yang's words, "decolonizing the Americas means all land is repatriated and all settlers become landless. It is incommensurable with the redistribution of Native land/life as common-wealth" (2012, p. 27). For Tuck and Yang, decolonization is also incommensurable with other civil rights and social justice projects. In practice, decolonization can build solidarities among struggles against racism, capitalism, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression. It still has a distinct identity and a sovereign agenda centered on the repatriation of land. Decolonization can therefore be unsettling in its uncompromising demands. This is what makes it a distinct political project.

A difficult question follows from this uncompromising position. What happens to people who have already established themselves as part of a land and culture and can no longer return to the places from which their ancestors came? Would it be just to ask people to pay the price for violence in which they did not directly participate? Decolonization will have to confront such questions and find a way forward that does not address one injustice through the creation of another.

Personally, I see decolonization as evolutionary progress that unfolds over time instead of a single revolutionary moment in which everything returns to precolonial conditions. This also requires us to reconsider what progress means. Does progress mean developing more land into settler colonies and displacing Indigenous communities from the little that remains with them? Can progress involve recognizing the atrocities of the past and making that recognition part of everyday public discourse? If decolonization is understood as an evolutionary process, it will unfold gradually through carefully developed strategies. Settlers will first have to recognize that the land they own once belonged to someone else.

In recent decades, we have witnessed the growth of this consciousness within academic spaces. I consider this a form of progress. It may take time for such consciousness to move beyond academic spaces and enter everyday public discourse across the planet. Its presence in public life would still represent a significant step toward strengthening decolonization as an evolutionary strategy. Yet, as the Kiribati case makes clear, gradual change cannot excuse delay where communities face immediate threats to their land.

The radical demand for the repatriation of land may be desirable, although its immediate realization may prove difficult in societies where the descendants of settlers have formed complex social and cultural attachments to the places they inhabit. Introducing decolonization as an unavoidable part of public discourse can still encourage recognition of past atrocities and the development of more just policies. The dismantling of white privilege, colonial legal structures, racial capitalism, and exclusionary environmentalism can begin once the past is removed from the mesmerizing categories of progress and understood through the violent histories of displacement and dispossession.

Recognizing that the land settlers have come to call home was taken from others can make a material difference. Such recognition can create support for substantive land return to Indigenous communities. Not all may regard partial land return as sufficient. Returning some land could still provide a beginning. I do not think that the descendants of settlers have to experience another form of dispossession in order to contribute to decolonial struggles. They can stand behind Indigenous and Black communities in their struggles against oppression, racism, inequality, and displacement. They will have to abandon their savior complex and support these struggles without assuming control or leadership.

One way of doing this is to question white privilege and reject the exclusionary politics it produces. Refusing

to participate in exclusionary conservation practices and challenging the politics of space that distributes toxicity unevenly among underprivileged communities are some of the actions through which settlers can begin to confront the structures from which they benefit. Such actions cannot substitute for land return. They can help create the ethical and political conditions through which land return becomes possible.

Conclusion

The growing appeal of decolonization has generated important academic and political debates. It has also made decolonization vulnerable to misappropriation. Within academia, decolonization can become a fashionable discourse that generates conferences, papers, and theoretical debates without changing the conditions it claims to challenge. Indigenous knowledge can also be extracted through databases, patents, and development projects that remove knowledge from the land and communities through which it was formed. These forms of appropriation weaken decolonization by separating knowledge, practice, and land. Decolonization cannot survive this separation. There is no decolonial theory without practice or practice without theory. There can also be no decolonization of knowledge without confronting the material dispossession of Indigenous peoples. The case of Kiribati further shows why environmental justice cannot be separated from land justice. Compensations cannot reproduce an inhabited land after the relations sustained through that land have been destroyed. The right to assistance after displacement cannot replace the right not to be dispossessed.

Decolonization remains difficult to practice because colonialism is built into the political, economic, legal, and epistemological organization of modern life. Its difficulty is also one of the reasons it becomes vulnerable to easy appropriation. Evolutionary decolonization offers a way to build public consciousness and create the conditions for land return. It cannot become so gradual that communities facing dispossession are asked to wait for the rest of the world to become ready for justice. Practicing decolonization, however, requires commitment. It requires the rejection of appropriations that retain decolonial language while emptying it of struggle and practice. A decolonization detached from land may retain its language while losing the struggle itself.

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