

In Review: *Colonial Unknowing and Relations of Study* by Alyosha Goldstein, Manu Vimalassery and Juliana Hu Pegues and *A response to “on Colonial Unknowing”* by Alex Trimble Young

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On Relationships/Relationaities

This essay delineates the dissonance between Vimalassery, Pegues, and Goldstein (2016 & 2017) and Young (2017) about “colonial unknowing”, whether settler colonialism functions as a stand-alone analytic; operates as an ‘event’ and or in conjunction with other modes of power. In their 2016 issue of *Theory and Event* Vimalassery, Pegues, and Goldstein borrow from Jodi Byrd’s conception of *Colonial Agnosia* to posit “colonial unknowing” as active disavowals (or white innocence) that upholds the persistence of colonialism to structure social and political life of all racialized and colonized people(s). The authors argue substantively that settler colonialism is not discrete and needs to be examined as relational; as part of the complex, mutually inclusive continuum of racial capitalism, franchise colonialism, and imperialism such that, we see, to borrow from Audre Lorde, that all oppressions (related to nation, gender, race, sexuality, ability among others) are linked.. The current institutional deployment of settler colonialism as a stand-alone analytic, they argue, risks reproducing, reinforcing, reinscribing first world hegemony foreclosing interconnections between structures of violence and among Third World subjects wherever they are located. Colonial unknowing is therefore conceptualized as “epistemological orientations that work to preempt relational modes of analysis” (1). Rather than centering the specificities of the contestations of indigenous claims to sovereignty within

contexts in the global north, they argue the breadth of marginalization, oppression and dispossession can only be fully elucidated through Third World and POC intersectional feminist frameworks that adequately interrogate the complex interplay of native dispossession, anti-blackness, queer phobias, ableism and class struggles from global perspectives.

The authors engage Patrick Wolfe's groundbreaking work on settler colonialism but atypically point out the ways his structure/event, native/settler conceptions have been engaged with rigidity to the extent that,

[they] limit the analysis of settler colonialism into a descriptive typology, orienting our vision narrowly within the technical perspective of colonial power (in the white Commonwealth countries) away from geographies from below, such as a hemispheric perspective of the Americas, with their multiple and distinct modes of colonialism, thus replicating the condition of unknowing (4-5)

Young uncritically responds to this essay, taking the authors to task on their claim that settler colonialism has been institutionalized and risk inhibiting efforts to understand different forms of empire as constitutive. Rather than engaging the astute observations Vimalassery et. al (2016) make about blind spots related to internalization and normalization of colonial epistemologies- "what counts as evidence, proof [and reasonableness]" (2); situated complicity; and "failures to comprehend the realities of colonialism by those who might most benefit from these [colonial] conditions" (2), Young focuses his critique on the necessarily interdisciplinary nature of settler colonial studies; diversity of scholars; citational practices and Vimalassery et. al. (2016) contention that Wolfe's work has been taken up "reductively to occlude settler colonialism as constitutively entangled with broader Imperial formations".

In requesting "evidence" for their various claims, Young unwittingly helps Vimalassery et al. to make their point about the colonial ways of knowing that have seeped into the very

institutions/formations that seek to dismantle it. In their response, Vimalassery et. al. (2017) reiterates: “colonial unknowing is always itself a response, an epistemological counter-formation, which takes shape in reaction to the lived relations incommensurable knowledge seeks to render impossible or inconceivable” (1). The authors’ aim, which Young arguably missed, was to, for example, show how colorism, rural poverty and urban blight, consumption patterns, and various manifestations of cis-heteropatriarchy in the global south accompany settler colonialism “within the broader global entanglements of empire” (1). Further, the deployment of settler colonialism which they critique disavows the experiences of indigenous people in Africa and the Americas. The willful ignorance which they call attention to is exemplified by the ways theories such as Rostow’s *Modernization* and to a lesser extent Gunder Frank’s *Dependency* and Immanuel Wallerstein’s *World Systems Theory* both willfully and unwittingly posit underdevelopment in the Caribbean and Africa as endemic and/or endogenous. Without waxing too much on the very idea of “development” as lineal progress being a European conception with its white supremacist values, such theories often fail to analyze how “underdevelopment” or “undevelopment”; poverty and other ‘social ills’ accompany the expansion of empire whether through annexation, settler colonialism, colonization, pointillism or imperialism.

Whether by examining the industrial capitalist period of the 1830s or the early 20th century dominated by imperialism vis-a-vis structural adjustment programs/international aid through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) - the international division of labor unmistakably constrained activities of the colonies. What was observed was hegemonic control over colonies relegating them to producers only of primary goods but

consumers of industrialized goods which they could not even afford. In this sense, development and underdevelopment were opposite faces of the same coin or reciprocal conditions of a global system of capital accumulation. This intersects with conditions of settler colonialism in the global north where populations not killed through genocidal practices exist purely as laborers/producers and their communities are characterized by high levels of violence, unemployment, poverty, and other features commonly associated with the Third-World. As Vimalassery et. al. argues colonial unknowing is characterized by a failure to comprehend the realities of colonialism by those who might most benefit from the conditions and this is why as Frantz Fanon and Aime Cesaire have argued elites in the third world nations have made decisions which have suited them and their narrow self-interest and thereby made the underdevelopment and imperial reach (through for example multinational corporations) even greater.

Following Lisa Lowe, whose arguments in *The Intimacies of Four Continents* reverberates throughout (even if not always referenced) both their 2016 and 2017 essays, they point to a world system that is capitalist with all countries belonging to it; the first world as the global bourgeoisie and the third as the global proletariat. It is only by fully understanding their status through deliberate engagements across field formations with the histories, experiences, resistance, and survivance practices of racialized people through a decentering of whiteness and its ways of knowing that Vimalassery et. al. see decolonization as possible. They write “decolonization is necessarily a process of questioning, contemplation, play, and study” (8; 2016)

The essays penned by Vimalassery et. al. raise some critical questions and reflections on discursive and non-discursive formations that decolonization projects must grapple with. Beyond the analytic's risk of occluding significant features of empire, they ask that we consider "what socio-spatial imaginaries and committant critical modes might become visible if we thought from spacial forms [such as circles, spirals and not line]" (5; 2016) ; "What if we move from survivance to survivant, as a way to think, in a destabilizing, defamiliarizing, that is, in a queer way, about indigenous modes of contemplation and habitation?" (8; 2016); and "what possibilities emerge if we envision relations not always already mediated through whiteness?" (2; 2017).