

Unit 8 (Continued)

Liberation Ideologies

Gerald Taitaiake Alfred (b. 1964) is an activist, Kanien'kehaka (Mohawk) philosopher, and professor in the departments of Indigenous Governance and of Political Science at the University of Victoria. Alfred received his PhD from Cornell University and served in the US Marine Corps. Jeff Corn tassel is a writer, activist, and the director and professor of Indigenous Governance at the University of Victoria. He is from the Cherokee Nation and received his PhD in political science from the University of Arizona. In the article here, the coauthors criticize "postmodern imperialism" and review possible counteractions and resurgences for Indigenous peoples.

Key Terms and Reading Questions—Alfred and Corn tassel

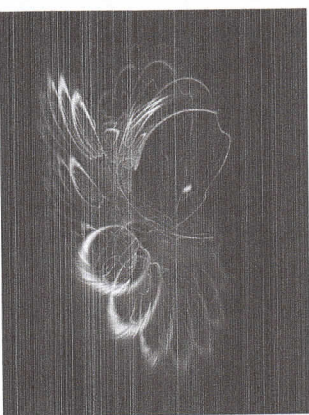
As you read Taitaiake Alfred's and Jeff Corn tassel's "Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism," consider the meaning and use of the following terms and answer the subsequent questions:

- Colonization
- Postmodern imperialism
- Political-legal construction of identity
- Domestication of indigenous issues
- Zones of refuge

1. What characteristics do indigenous peoples across the globe share?

2. How is "postmodern imperialism" different from imperialism?

3. How does the state disconnect an indigenous person from his or her community?



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4. According to the Fourth World viewpoint, how are colonial elites “shape-shifters”?

5. According to the authors, what does it mean to “be indigenous”?

POLITICS OF IDENTITY – IX¹

Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corn tassel

Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism

INDIGENOUSNESS IS AN IDENTITY CONSTRUCTED, SHAPED AND LIVED in the politicized context of contemporary colonialism. The communities, clans, nations and tribes we call *Indigenous peoples* are just that: Indigenous to the lands they inhabit, in contrast to and in contention with the colonial societies and states that have spread out from Europe and other centres of empire. It is this oppositional, place-based existence, along with the consciousness of being in struggle against the dispossession and demeaning fact of colonization by foreign peoples, that fundamentally distinguishes Indigenous peoples from other peoples of the world.²

There are, of course, vast differences among the world's Indigenous peoples in their cultures, political-economic situations, and in their relationships with colonizing Settler societies. But the struggle to survive as distinct peoples on foundations constituted in their unique heritages, attachments to their homelands, and natural ways of life is shared by all Indigenous peoples, as well as the fact that their existence is in large part lived as determined acts of survival against colonizing states' efforts to eradicate them culturally, politically and physically. The challenge of 'being Indigenous', in a psychic and cultural sense, forms the crucial question facing Indigenous peoples today in the era of contemporary colonialism – a form of post-modern imperialism in which domination is still the Settler imperative but where colonizers have designed and practised more subtle means (in contrast to the earlier forms of missionary and militaristic colonial enterprises) of accomplishing their objectives. Contemporary Settlers follow the mandate provided for them by their imperial forefathers' colonial legacy, not by attempting to eradicate the physical signs of Indigenous peoples as *human bodies*, but by trying to eradicate their existence as *peoples* through the erasure of the histories and geographies that provide the foundation for Indigenous cultural identities and sense of self. The geographer, Bernard Nietschmann, has demonstrated the need for critical translations of the artificial, state-created identities (such as 'ethnic group') that are imposed on original peoples in this colonizing process of redefinition from autonomous to derivative existence and cultural and political identities. State-imposed conceptions of supposedly Indigenous identity read to Indigenous peoples, from perspectives rooted in their own cultures and languages, not as moves towards justice and positive integration (as the strategy is framed in colonial discourses) but as indicators of an on-going colonial assault on their existence, and signs of the fact that they remain, as in earlier colonial eras, occupied peoples who have been dispossessed and disempowered in their own homelands.³

For example, in Canada today, many Indigenous people have embraced the Canadian government's label of 'aboriginal', along with the concomitant and limited notion of postcolonial justice framed within the institutional construct of the state. In fact, this identity is purely a state construction that is instrumental to the state's attempt to gradually subsume Indigenous existences into its own constitutional system and body politic since Canadian independence from Great Britain – a process that started in the mid-twentieth century and culminated with the emergence of a Canadian constitution in 1982. Far from reflecting any true history or honest reconciliation with the past or present agreements and treaties that form an authentic basis for Indigenous-state relations in the Canadian context, 'aboriginalism' is a legal, political and cultural discourse designed to serve an agenda of silent surrender to an inherently unjust relation at the root of the colonial state itself.

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¹ 'The Politics of Identity' is an on-going series edited by Richard Bellamy.

² This article draws on analyses and concepts developed in Taiaiake Alfred, *Wasase: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*, Peterborough, ON, Broadview Press, 2005.

³ Bernard Nietschmann, 'The Fourth World: Nations Versus States', in George J. Demko and William B. Wood (eds), *Reorienting the World: Geopolitical Perspectives on the 21st Century*, Philadelphia, Westview Press, 1995, pp. 228–31.

The acceptance of being 'aboriginal' (or its equivalent term in other countries, such as 'ethnic groups') is a powerful assault on Indigenous identities. It must be understood that the aboriginalist assault takes place in a politico-economic context of historic and ongoing dispossession and of contemporary deprivation and poverty; this is a context in which Indigenous peoples are forced by the compelling needs of physical survival to cooperate individually and collectively with the state authorities to ensure their physical survival. Consequently, there are many 'aboriginals' (in Canada) or 'Native Americans' (in the United States) who identify themselves solely by their political-legal relationship to the state rather than by any cultural or social ties to their Indigenous community or culture or homeland. This continuing colonial process pulls Indigenous peoples away from cultural practices and community aspects of 'being Indigenous' towards a political-legal construction as 'aboriginal' or 'Native American', both of which are representative of what we refer to as being 'incidentally Indigenous'.

There are approximately 350 million Indigenous peoples situated in some 70 countries around the world. All of these people confront the daily realities of having their lands, cultures and governmental authorities simultaneously attacked, denied and reconstructed by colonial societies and states. This has been the case for generations: but there are new faces of empire that are attempting to strip Indigenous peoples of their very spirit as nations and of all that is held sacred, threatening their sources of connection to their distinct existences and the sources of their spiritual power: relationships to each other, communities, homelands, ceremonial life, languages, histories ... These connections are crucial to living a meaningful life for any human being.

In this article, we discuss strategies for resisting further encroachment on Indigenous existence by Settler societies and states – as well as multinational corporations and other elite organizations controlled by state powers and elements of the imperial institutional network – and we focus on how Indigenous communities can regenerate themselves to resist the effects of the contemporary colonial assault and renew politically and culturally. We ask the fundamental question: how can we resist further dispossession and disconnection when the effects of colonial assaults on our own existence are so pronounced and still so present in the lives of all Indigenous peoples?

Colonial legacies and contemporary practices of disconnection, dependency and dispossession have effectively confined Indigenous identities to state-sanctioned legal and political definitional approaches. This political-legal compartmentalization of community values often leads Indigenous nations to mimic the practices of dominant non-Indigenous legal-political institutions and adhere to state-sanctioned definitions of Indigenous identity. Such compartmentalization results in a 'politics of distraction'⁴ that diverts energies away from decolonizing and regenerating communities and frames community relationships in state-centric terms, such as aforementioned 'aboriginality'.

Given that Indigenous identities are (re)constructed at multiple levels – global, state, community, individual – it is important to recognize these multiple sites of resistance to state encroachment. The quest for definitional authority goes well beyond state borders; the United Nations, the World Bank group, the International Labour Organization, as well as other global actors, also attempt to determine who is Indigenous.⁵ However, as Taiaiake Alfred has pointed out, '... demands for precision and certainty disregard the reality of the situation: that group identity varies with time and place'.⁶ How effectively have researchers and theorists accounted for the dynamic nature of being Indigenous?

Theories rooted in Indigenous cultural and spiritual principles, such as the 'Fourth World' and 'Peoplehood' schools of thought seem to offer promise. Yet it is ultimately our lived collective and individual experiences as Indigenous peoples that yield the clearest and most useful insights for establishing culturally sound strategies to resist colonialism and regenerate our communities.

⁴ Graham Hingangaroa Smith, 'Protecting and Respecting Indigenous Knowledge', in Marie Battiste (ed.), *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, Vancouver, BC, UBC Press, 2000, p. 211. For examples of classic colonial-liberal discourse with liberatory pretences, see Patrick Macklem, *Indigenous Difference and the Constitution of Canada*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2001; Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and 'The Politics of Recognition'*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992; and Will Kimlycka (ed.), *The Rights of Minority Cultures*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995.

⁵ For more on the global nature of Indigenous identity construction, see Jeff Corntassel, 'Who is Indigenous? "Peoplehood" and Ethnonationalist Approaches to Rearticulating Indigenous Identity', *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics*, 9 (2003), pp. 75–100.

⁶ Taiaiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 85. For the explanation of his concept of Indigenous identity, one that is often characterized as a sort of strategic essentialism – meaning that it is multi-faceted and flexible, yet rooted in Indigenous cultural ground – see also Alfred's *Heeding the Voices of Our Ancestors: Kahnawake Mohawk Politics and the Rise of Native Nationalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995.

Colonial Powers as Shape Shifters

It is important to identify all of the old and new faces of colonialism that continue to distort and dehumanize Indigenous peoples – often pitting us against each other in battles over authentic histories. Colonialization is the word most often used to describe the experience of Indigenous encounters with Settler societies, and it is the framework we are employing here. However, there is a danger in allowing *colonization* to be the only story of Indigenous lives. It must be recognized that colonialism is a narrative in which the Settler's power is the fundamental reference and assumption, inherently limiting Indigenous freedom and imposing a view of the world that is but an outcome or perspective on that power. As stated earlier, we live in an era of postmodern imperialism and manipulations by shape-shifting colonial powers; the instruments of domination are evolving and inventing new methods to erase Indigenous histories and senses of place. Therefore, globalization in Indigenous eyes reflects a deepening, hastening and stretching of an already-existing empire. Living within such political and cultural contexts, it is remembering ceremony, returning to homelands and liberation from the myths of colonialism that are the decolonizing imperatives. In their seminal treatise, *The Fourth World*, Manuel and Posluns explained the effects of contemporary colonial processes:

The colonial system is always a way of gaining control over another people for the sake of what the colonial power has determined to be 'the common good'. People can only become convinced of the common good when their own capacity to imagine ways in which they can govern themselves has been destroyed.⁷

From such a Fourth World viewpoint, the 'common good' becomes whatever it is defined as by shape-shift-ing colonial elites. Nietzsche documents a number of shape-shifting strategies imposed by Settler states that confront Indigenous peoples on a daily basis – such as creating a bogus 'we are you' agenda, calling for a vote to legitimize the occupation, referring to state camps as 'economic development' and 'new communities', and offering amnesty to resistant military leaders and their forces in order to co-opt their movements.⁸ While some of these shape-shifting tactics may on the surface appear to be subtle, they, like other brutal forms of oppression, threaten the very survival of Indigenous communities.

Consider the government of Bangladesh's official position, that all of their state inhabitants are 'Indigenous' and 'Bengalee', despite the existence of 16 different Indigenous communities (collectively referred to as Juma) in the area of the country known as the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) alone. In order to implement this 'we are you' mythology, Bangladesh, with the assistance of international aid agencies, has engaged in a tactic of 'swamping' by initiating a massive ethnic Bengalee settlement of the CHT region since 1971. Consequently, the area has been purposefully overloaded with over 400,000 Bengali Settlers who have dislocated the much smaller Juma population (approximately 50,000) from their homeland. From comprising just three per cent of the population of the CHT in 1947, Bengalee Settlers now constitute roughly half the total population of the area.⁹

Such new faces of colonialism encroach on Indigenous sacred histories, homelands and cultural practices in somewhat familiar ways, but use diplomatic language and the veneer of free trade to mask ugly truths. The great North African anti-colonial writer Frantz Fanon described this process as an ongoing dialectic:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, dis-figures, and destroys it. This work of devaluing pre-colonial history takes on a dialectical significance today.¹⁰

⁷ George Manuel and Michael Posluns, *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*, New York, Collier Macmillan Canada, 1974, p. 60.

⁸ Nietzsche, "The Fourth World", pp. 236–37.

⁹ James Minahan, *Encyclopedia of the Stateless Nations, Volume II, Oxford, Greenwood Press, 2002*, pp. 845–50; Rajkumari Chandra Roy, *Land Rights of the Indigenous Peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh*, Oxford, IWGIA, 2000.

¹⁰ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, New York, Grove Press, 1963, p. 210.

It is these perverted logics and lies that must be confronted now, just as troops were fought courageously with guns and bombs in previous eras of the struggle for Indigenous freedom. When lies become accepted and normal, the imperative of the warrior is to awaken and enliven the truth and to get people to invest belief and energy into that truth. The battle is a spiritual and physical one fought against the political manipulation of the people's own innate fears and the embedding of complacency, that metastasizing weakness, into their psyches. Fanon pointed out that the most important strength of Indigenous resistance, unity, is also constantly under attack as colonial powers erase community histories and senses of place to replace them with doctrines of individualism and predatory capitalism: 'In the colonial context... the natives fight among themselves. They tend to use each other as a screen, and each hides from his neighbor the national enemy'.¹¹

As Fanon illustrates, these battles occurring amongst ourselves distract us from the bigger picture of decolonization and sap the crucial energy and solidarity that are essential to effective confrontation of imperial power in whatever form it presents itself. Large-scale Indigenous efforts to confront state power by mimicking state institutions (via land claims and self-government processes) only deepen these divisions. For a long time now, Indigenous peoples have been on a quest for governmental power and money. Contemporary forms of post-modern imperialism attempt to confine the expression of Indigenous peoples' right of self-determination to a set of domestic authorities operating within the constitutional framework of the state (as opposed to the right of having and autonomous and global standing) and actively seek to sever Indigenous links to their ancestral homelands.

In Canada, for example, the so-called British Columbia Treaty Process (on-going for over a decade) has been structured to achieve the legalization of the Settler society's occupation of unceded and non-treaty lands that make up 90 per cent of the territory in that province, to have the Indigenous peoples 'surrender their Aboriginal title to the Crown, whereupon it becomes vested in the province'.¹² The secondary goal of the process is to achieve a set of binding agreements that accord the federal and provincial government legal supremacy over First Nations' governments. In fact, the Nisga'a Nation's agreement, implemented in 2000 – which was the culmination of a negotiation that began much earlier than the current treaty process but which was conducted under the same mandate and objectives – was voted on by only 40 per cent of the Nisga'a people and makes no mention of the word 'treaty' anywhere in the text of the document.¹³

A similar process of 'domestication' of Indigenous issues is taking place in the United States, during this era of widespread institutionalization of the Indigenous-state compacts to legalize gaming enterprises on tribal lands, a process Corntassel refers to as 'Forced Federalism'.¹⁴ As preconstitutional and treaty-holding nations, Indigenous peoples in what is now called the United States have historically been considered to transcend all local non-Indigenous government jurisdictional claims in matters of their homeland's autonomy. However, since the passage of the 1988 Indian Gaming and Regulatory Act (IGRA), and the further integration of Indigenous governments into the state system through the forced federalism process, non-Indigenous governments and officials have increasingly asserted their jurisdictional authority over Indigenous people and the territories of Indigenous nations that exist within arbitrary boundaries established by the colonial state.

How can we refocus and restore the original objective of Indigenous autonomy and nation-to-nation relations between original and immigrant peoples to its orienting primacy? In advocating a break from the colonial path, Nez Percé/Chicana scholar Inés Hernández-Ávila speaks of the power of Indigenous languages in articulating a transformative agenda in Mexico that is 'dignifying, validating and ensuring the continuance of their peoples' languages and cultures'.¹⁵ Hernández-Ávila's interview with Feliciano Sanchez Chan, a Maya/Yucateco,

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 306–7.

¹² Taiaiake Alfred, 'Deconstructing the British Columbia Treaty Process', *Balayi: Culture, Law and Colonialism*, 3 (2001), p. 49.

¹³ Ibid., p. 41

¹⁴ Jeff Corntassel, "'Deadliest Enemies' or Partners in the 'Utmost Good Faith': Conflict Resolution Strategies for Indian nation/state Disputes in an Era of Forced Federalism", *Ayaangwaamizin: International Journal of Indigenous Philosophy*, 3 (Summer 2003) pp. 141–67. For a further elaboration of this argument, see Jeff Corntassel, *Forced Federalism: Contemporary Challenges to Indigenous Nationhood*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, forthcoming.

¹⁵ Inés Hernández-Ávila, 'The Power of Native Languages and the Performance of Indigenous Autonomy: The Case of Mexico', in Richard Grounds, George E. Tinker and David E. Wilkins (eds), *Native Voices: American Indian Identity and Resistance*, Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2003, p. 56.

highlights the need for 'zones of refuge' that are immune to the reaches of imperialism and globalization. These zones of refuge are places where:

knowledge has been historically guarded, exercised and sustained. These zones of refuge represent safe (physical and psychological) spaces where Mesoamerican cultural matrices continue to find expression, even as the advocates of the imaginary Mexico persist in their obstinate project of erasure and substitution.¹⁶

This is a powerful conceptualization of a strategic and cultural objective that remains consistent with traditional goals yet stands against the integrative goals of the contemporary colonial agenda. In addition to creating zones of refuge and other breaks from colonial rule that create spaces of freedom, we will begin to realize decolonization in a real way when we begin to achieve the re-strengthening of our people as individuals so that these spaces can be occupied by decolonized people living authentic lives. This is a recognition that our true power as Indigenous people ultimately lies in our relationships with our land, relatives, language, and ceremonial life. As the eminent Lakota scholar Vine Deloria, Jr. asserts, 'What we need is a cultural leave-us-alone agreement, in spirit and in fact.'¹⁷

Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom

Indigenous pathways of authentic action and freedom struggle start with people transcending colonialism on an individual basis – a strength that soon reverberates outward from the self to family, clan, community and into all of the broader relationships that form an Indigenous existence. In this way, Indigenousness is reconstructed, reshaped and actively lived as resurgence against the dispossessing and demeaning processes of annihilation that are inherent to colonialism.

There is no concise neat model of resurgence in this way of approaching decolonization and the regeneration of our peoples. Nor are there clear and definite steps that we can list for people to check off as milestones on their march to freedom. But there are identifiable directions of movement, patterns of thought and action that reflect a shift to an Indigenous reality from the colonized places we inhabit today in our minds and in our souls. Derived from experience of Indigenous warriors old and new who have generated an authentic existence out of the mess left by colonial dispossession and disruption, these pathways can be thought of as the direction of freedom whether we have in mind the struggle of a single person or conceptualizing an eventual global Indigenous struggle founded on the regeneration of ourselves and our communities.

These are the mantras of a resurgent Indigenous movement:

- *Land is Life* – our people must reconnect with the terrain and geography of their Indigenous heritage if they are to comprehend the teachings and values of the ancestors, and if they are to draw strength and sustenance that is independent of colonial power, and which is regenerative of an authentic, autonomous, Indigenous existence.
- *Language is Power* – our people must recover ways of knowing and relating from outside the mental and ideological framework of colonialism by regenerating themselves in a conceptual universe formed through Indigenous languages.
- *Freedom is the Other Side of Fear* – our people must transcend the controlling power of the many and varied fears that colonial powers use to dominate and manipulate us into complacency and cooperation with its authorities. The way to do this is to confront our fears head-on through spiritually grounded action; contention and direct movement at the source of our fears is the only way to break the chains that bind us to our colonial existences.
- *Decolonize your Diet* – our people must regain the self-sufficient capacity to provide our own food, clothing, shelter and medicines. Ultimately important to the struggle for freedom is the reconstruction of our

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁷ Vine Deloria, Jr., *Custer Died for your Sins*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1988, p. 27.

own sick and weakened physical bodies and community relationships accomplished through a return to the natural sources of food and the active, hard-working, physical lives lived by our ancestors.

- *Change Happens one Warrior at a Time* – our people must reconstitute the mentoring and learning-teaching relationships that foster real and meaningful human development and community solidarity. The movement toward decolonization and regeneration will emanate from transformations achieved by direct-guided experience in small, personal, groups and one-on-one mentoring towards a new path.

These mantras and the pathways they represent will be put into practice by every person in their own way, in response to the particular context and set of challenges that form each person and community's colonial reality.

Bringing it all together, *being Indigenous* means thinking, speaking and acting with the conscious intent of regenerating one's indigeneity. Each Indigenous nation has its own way of articulating and asserting self-determination and freedom. For example, in Kanien'keha, the word is *Onkwehonwenéha*, which translates as the 'way of the original people'. Tsalagi (Cherokee) have the tradition of *Wigaduwaga*, which translates into 'I will always be up above in all things that influence me in life; in the uppermost; for us to follow or emulate'. The Lyackson people have the term *Snuw'uw'ul*, Hopis say *Hopit Pötskwani'at*, and Maori say *Tino rangatiratanga*.¹⁸ As Indigenous peoples, the way to recovering freedom and power and happiness is clear: it is time for each one of us to make the commitment to transcend colonialism as *people*, and for us to work together as *peoples* to become forces of Indigenous truth against the lie of colonialism. We do not need to wait for the colonizer to provide us with money or to validate our vision of a free future; we only need to start to use *our* Indigenous languages to frame our thoughts, the ethical framework of *our* philosophies to make decisions and to use *our* laws and institutions to govern ourselves.

¹⁸ See, for example, Roger Maaka and Augie Fleras, 'Engaging with Indigeneity: Tino Rangatiratanga in Aotearoa', in Duncan Ivison, Paul Patton and Will Sanders (eds), *Political Theory and the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 89–109.

Name

Reflection Exercise: A Fourth World View

After reading Taiaiake Alfred's "Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism," choose one of the mantras on page 613 (also listed below) and describe a specific political action that a person could take against "postmodern imperialism":

- Land is life
- Language is power
- Freedom is the other side of fear
- Decolonize your diet
- Change happens one warrior at a time

The political action that follows is: