



A Feminist Approach to Decolonizing Anti-Racism: Rethinking Transnationalism, Intersectionality, and Settler Colonialism

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In this paper, I consider three organizing concepts that prompt challenges to decolonizing anti-racist feminism: intersectionality raises questions about how far this lens can go beyond identity and left-liberal discourse to address issues of class inequity; transnationalism prompts issues about whether the nation is a site of liberation or oppression; and settler colonialism raises questions about how best to navigate power differentials within the margins. By putting feminist, critical race, and Indigenous approaches into conversation, I contend that we must rethink the concepts of transnationalism, intersectionality, and settler colonialism in the service of dismantling manifestations of settler-colonialism.

Introduction

In 2005, Mi'kmaw scholar Bonita Lawrence and South Asian scholar Enakshi Dua published "Decolonizing Anti-Racism," which has since provoked an explosion within some anti-racist circles, both in academia and social-activist spaces. Their article critiques people-of-colour for failing to address colonial forces affecting Indigenous peoples in settler nations, identifying people of colour as settlers who benefit from Indigenous dispossession. My goal in this paper is to offer a response to this debate that is informed by feminist theory and also seeks to decolonize feminist and anti-racist praxis. I contend that in responding to colonial manifestations of anti-racism, feminists must wrestle with three specific anxieties: 1) the tension among feminists between the nation as a site of liberation or conversely as a site of oppression; 2) how to navigate differentials of power within various interconnected forms of heteropatriarchal and neoliberal racisms and colonialisms; and 3) the simultaneity of being a member of an oppressed group and being structurally implicated in Othering. In various ways, these issues are emerging organically in social justice movements, rather than the academy, where some are already making connections across different kinds of anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and decolonial agendas. While my larger study of different colonialisms and racisms tracks the ramifications of these tensions for political coalitions and actual sites of collective organizing, this paper considers some theoretical challenges that Indigenous struggles pose for non-Indigenous feminisms. As bell hooks has argued, theory that seeks to be transformative often begins from a place that strives to make sense of what is happening and to "imagine possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently" (1994, 61). My aim is to make sense of the tensions over decolonizing racisms that have ensued in anti-racist feminist spaces and open up ways to imagine possible alternate futures. One way to do this is for feminists to revisit three organizing concepts to comprehend our contradictory roles in settler-colonial projects so that the latter can be dismantled: transnationalism, intersectionality, and settler colonialism.

How can feminist conceptions of transnationalism, intersectionality, and settler colonialism address tensions over decolonizing racism? A underlying impulse in asking this



question is how to avoid depoliticizing or reducing feminist concepts to hegemonic agendas, and instead critically engage intersectionality, transnationalism, and decoloniality in ways that are not collapsed amorphously around difference and that do not reproduce the very forms of power they aim to dismantle. In responding to these questions, I aim to offer a “decolonizing anti-racist *feminist* approach” to power and identity that integrates considerations of intersectionality, transnationalism, and settler colonialism. I emphasize the feminist dimension of my project as a way to signal that I am building on, extending, and reformulating the project of “decolonizing anti-racism” outlined by Lawrence and Dua. Fundamentally, this paper questions what is theoretically and politically at stake in a decolonizing anti-racist feminist approach to power and identity.

Decolonizing Anti-Racism?

People of Colour as Settlers

Lawrence and Dua’s call to decolonize anti-racism starts from a critique of anti-racist theory and practice, which they argue tends to exclude Indigenous peoples and perspectives and “is premised on an ongoing colonial project” (2005, 123). This exclusion, they contend, effectively makes settler domination an Indigenous issue rather than one concerning people of colour (as well as whites) and effectively advances contemporary colonial agendas (Lawrence and Dua 2005). They argue that decolonization politics in particular is often equated with anti-racist politics or seen as merely one component of rather than foundational to a larger anti-racist struggle (Lawrence and Dua 2005). The failure to make Indigenous presence and experiences foundational to anti-racism, analyses of slavery, and diaspora and migration studies also has the effect of falsely placing colonialism in the past and missing the multiple projects of continuing settlement on Indigenous lands. Indigenous experiences and issues are distinct from that of other non-whites because of the practiced and ongoing forms of direct military-state intervention; policies specifically formulated to destroy Indigenous peoples, their culture, and identity, including their access to land; policies and practices of genocide, displacement, and assimilation directed specifically at Indigenous peoples (Lawrence and Dua 2005); the legal system, including the rule of law, which pre-empts Indigenous sovereignty; and because “returning the land is never on the agenda” despite legal decisions regarding land claims and treaties (Lawrence and Dua 2005, 125).

As such, Lawrence and Dua conclude that Indigenous peoples are not just another interest group whose claims should be measured against the needs of ethno-cultural groups, but rather are colonized peoples whose subjugation continues not only through structures of whiteness but also the settlement of people of colour in Canada (and other settler nation-states like the US and Australia). They argue that:

[P]eople of color are settlers. Broad differences exist between those brought as slaves, currently working as migrant laborers, are refugees without legal documentation, or émigrés who have obtained citizenship. Yet people of color live on land that is appropriated and contested, where Aboriginal peoples are denied nationhood and access to their own lands. (Lawrence and Dua 2005, 134)

This position has been at the centre of controversy in anti-racist academic and activist circles.



People of Colour are not Settlers

Nandita Sharma and Cynthia Wright (2008-9) agree with Lawrence and Dua on the importance of attending to the specificities of oppression faced by non-whites, the failure of a civil-rights and multicultural approach, and the need to produce liberatory strategies of critique that do not reproduce the ruling strategies of colonial modernity and state formations. Though their analysis emphasizes a critique of racial and neoliberal hegemonies, I focus on their work because it effectively denies the constitutive feature of settler colonialism, namely the relevance of Indigenous dispossession.

Sharma and Wright (2008-9) refuse the idea that all migrants are settler colonists and also critique the goal of Indigenous (and nation-state) nationalism because, as they argue, nationalisms reproduce colonial logics and are linked to “neoliberal practices that have further globalized capitalist social relations and to the related neo-racist practices” (2008-9, 123). For Sharma and Wright, inequities between variously forced, less-than-voluntary, or even fully voluntary migrants and/or their descendants should not position people of colour as settler colonists; to position migrants of colour as settler colonists is to conflate migration and colonial processes. As such, they critique Lawrence and Dua’s position because it requires that “the only way not to be a ‘colonizer’ is to remain on the land with which one is associated [...] [even though] ironically, migration is often one response of people who have been colonized and dispossessed of their prior livelihoods” (Sharma and Wright 2008-9, 123).

Sharma and Wright rightly punctuate that different migration processes and contexts should not be conflated (Lawrence and Dua also note this), and that migrants have various forced and voluntary trajectories of movement across geopolitical and cultural borders. However, Sharma and Wright then use this variation to dismiss the significance of settler colonialism, specifically because they do not account for the ways in which the ability to settle in a new place may be premised on structures of continuing colonialism premised on Indigenous dispossession. Ultimately, they conclude that the naturalization of Indigenous connection to the land fosters neoliberal and neo-racist modes of belonging through autochthony (i.e., the state of being native to a particular area) and is contrary to challenging ruling practices and relations.

While there are a number of possible critiques of the arguments advanced by Sharma and Wright, I focus here on their conceptions of power, settler colonialism, and nation. Rather than reading Lawrence and Dua’s call as one of accountability within the margins, Sharma and Wright adopt an Oppression Olympics framework, whereby groups are positioned as if they are competing for the mantle of the most oppressed, without disrupting hegemonies of power. Put differently, Sharma and Wright must erase the colonizing processes and effects of Indigenous difference in order for migrants of colour to hold the mantle of the most oppressed. In doing so, they fail to attend to the relational and relative degrees of differentiation among and between migrants of colour and Indigenous peoples that are produced in the service of the settler nation. Sharma and Wright also repeatedly suggest that Indigenous peoples are obstacles to migrant freedoms (Saranillo 2013), and wrongly imply that Indigenous liberation is intrinsically about expelling non-Indigenous peoples. They imply that Lawrence and Dua have created this binary, but they repeatedly deny and depoliticize the differences between Indigenous peoples and other non-whites; for example, they assume the differences between Natives and non-Natives are a “dualistic hierarchy established by neo-racist thought” (Sharma and Wright 2008-9, 6) and they deny historical Indigenous continuity of title because such claims too are deemed to be neo-racist. In other words, for migrants of colour to be assigned their due attention in liberation struggles, Sharma and Wright need Indigenous peoples to disappear, which is an inherently



conservative and imperialistic logic. As Heidi Stark (2014) notes, Sharma and Wright fail to recognize that one “ruling strategy” is to naturalize the erasure of Indigenous dispossession; moreover, the liberation goals advanced by Sharma and Wright are presupposed by the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands and cultures.

Further, Sharma and Wright wrongly assume that settler colonialism is defined as “the forced movements of enslaved Africans, the movement of unfree indentured Asians, or the subsequent Third World displacements and migrations of people from across the globe, many of them indigenous people themselves” (2008-9, 121). Rather, settler colonialism can operate without the forced movements and displacements of migrants of colour as its constitutive features are the attempted/actual eradication of Indigenous peoples, unhindered access to land, and the naturalization of colonial state-based sovereignty as legitimate. The problem for liberation struggles is thus not so much about whether migrants are settler colonists, but rather how migrations and the movement of non-whites are enabled and regulated by a global system of nation-states and corporations in the service of settler colonial projects *and vice versa*. Accordingly, anti-racist work should be directed against hegemonies of migration and Indigenous dispossession as interconnected manifestations of white-supremacist capitalism, of which some hegemonies are based on societal and state-produced colonial hierarchies that privilege non-Indigenous peoples, including people of colour, at the expense of Indigenous peoples. Thus far, as Lawrence and Dua note, there has largely been an erasure or conflation between racisms and colonialisms even in some anti-racist circles, which ultimately overlooks, for example, the variations of racisms and colonialisms against Blacks, Muslims, Chinese peoples, and Indigenous peoples. Sharma and Wright also express concern about solidarities, but it seems to rest on a blatant conservative denial of uneven colonial processes of settler dominance.

Finally, Sharma and Wright’s claim that all nationalisms are deemed antithetical to decolonization is deeply rooted in western colonizing ontologies. Critiques of nationalism are of course important—I agree with Third World feminists that some nationalisms can be exclusionary, neoliberal, and exploitative, especially of women. However, Sharma and Wright make two assumptions about nationalism that preclude its liberatory potential: first, that autochthony is “deeply embedded within the processes of capitalist globalization” (2008-9, 124), and second, that nationalism inevitably replicates nation-state formations of exploitation and regulation. These assumptions are themselves bound to western ontologies of nation, whether liberal or Marxist, in which it is assumed land is always a commodity whether privately owned or collectively/commonly shared, that man can/must master nature in/as the nation, and that decolonial conceptions of nation about sharing land are not available. These colonizing and indeed patriarchal ontological frames limit Sharma and Wright because they do not imagine social identities outside of “ongoing practices of ruling” (2008-9, 126); they deem sovereignty to be intrinsically about “planetary expansion and dominance of capitalist social relations” (2008-9, 128); and they start from the premise that those who seek nationalisms (including Indigenous peoples) “also share—or strive to share—the racist control of people’s mobility across and through spaces claimed by various ‘nations’” (2008-9, 128). Not only do Sharma and Wright conflate Indigenous nationalisms with Eurocentric modalities of nationalism, of which expulsion, exclusion, containment, and management of non-white subjects is a constitutive feature, they close off decolonial conceptions of nation and land and, in doing so, they depoliticize nationalism, contrary to their claim.

In contrast, there are existing ontologies of nation that refuse hierarchies of power and still open decolonial modes of governance. For example, Glen Coulthard (2014) grounds his



critique of colonial recognition in Indigenous conceptions of nationhood that centre land as an “ontological framework for understanding relationships” that are non-exploitative and based on material survival, constitutive meanings of identity, and relationships between humans and between humans and the environment (60). Decolonization for Coulthard is about considering “land as a system of reciprocal relations and obligations,” not as a struggle *for* land (2014, 78). By ontologically closing off conceptions of nation that transcend the nation-state, Sharma and Wright do precisely what they critique by effectively depoliticizing forms of nationalism advanced by marginalized peoples. Moreover, they conflate immigration and colonialism because they dehistoricize nationalizing and transnational imperial processes (Saranillio 2013) while simultaneously depoliticizing linkages between practices of immigration and colonialism that advance modes of nation-building. Ultimately, while I take seriously their point that migrants variously arrive in circumscribed contexts (whether “freely” or involuntarily), contra Sharma and Wright, it is the differential impact of settlement on Indigenous peoples and on people of colour, and not just the intention of migrants of colour, that should matter to decolonizing and anti-racist feminist practices. The differential impact of settlement does not serve migrants of colour any more than it does Indigenous peoples (although for different reasons), for the effect is to consolidate colonial and racializing formations of the nation-state. As such, settler colonialism has to be confronted directly rather than downplayed.

Some Middle Ground?

Scholars such as Melissa Phung (2011), Robinder Sehdev (2011), and Beenash Jafri (2012) seek some middle ground between categorizing people of colour as settlers and attending to the different racial and colonial forces of power that govern their lives. Phung (2011) agrees with Lawrence and Dua that people of colour are settlers, but aims to identify ways to mitigate the complicity of settlers of colour, who she argues are not easily equated with white settlers. She asks, if being a settler means coming to Canada or being Canadian, then how are all settlers equal when not all Canadians are equal or come to Canada in same way? Whereas white settlement was based on colonial administration, land cession, treaties, land acquisition, and control, Phung importantly notes that people of colour engage in the process of indigenization of white settlers when they work towards achieving, and manage to achieve, upward class mobility on terms set by dominant European-based norms. As an example, Phung notes that in settler-labour narratives of the early 19th century, Chinese labourers were scripted as hard workers and also through discourses of the “yellow peril” (Phung 2011, 294). For Phung (2011), not all settlers are the same; instead, she argues that there are variations in history, representation, and material experiences. In the end, while she does not explicitly develop a typology of settlers, the implication of her conclusion is that there are degrees of being a settler. Sehdev adopts a critical race lens informed by Indigenous traditions to add nuance to the category of “settler” with the goal of promoting solidarities between Indigenous and non-white, non-Indigenous peoples. From Sehdev’s perspective, any rights of people of colour to belong “on this land [Canada] is made possible by treaty, and it is therefore incumbent on us to reconsider our strategies for social justice with treaty in mind. We have played a crucial part in nation formation, but this is a settler nation whose borders extend to absorb Aboriginal people without regard for their sovereignty” (Sehdev 2011, 265). While white hegemony sees people of colour as outside of the nation or inconsequential to it (unless there are economic benefits) and colonial processes in Canada negatively affect people of colour, Sehdev argues that the impact is significantly different for Indigenous peoples. There are, for example, material benefits for people of colour for not being part of the Indian residential-school legacy, which radically



alienated Indigenous people from their families, cultures, communities, forms of knowledge, and connections to the land. In particular, she continues, while non-Indigenous people of colour are not sovereign on this land and did not enter treaties, when they submit to the authority of the state (even as they contest that authority), they are represented by the Crown through treaty (Sehdev 2011, 268).

Whereas white Europeans and colonial agencies have adopted a linear understanding of treaties, often disregarding or pulling back on treaty commitments, Sehdev draws on Indigenous scholarship to argue for the need to adopt an Indigenous conception of treaty, such as that of the Two Row Wampum (Gus Wen Tah) (2011, 270). The Two Row Wampum is based on mutual peace, respect, and friendship, and contains a spiritual dimension. In this conception, treaties are meant to educate everyone and shape the terms of communication, not serve as tools of genocide and settler colonialism. While Sehdev is careful to note that non-Indigenous peoples may not fully understand Indigenous protocols around treaty (2011, 266), her point is that people of colour are called upon to ensure the domination of Indigenous peoples by the Canadian state. This occurs through participation in technologies that link colonialism to racism, such as parading ethnic diversity in the service of Euro-Canadian self-congratulation and Canadian myths of multiculturalism.

Jafri follows Phung and Sehdev, but specifically argues that a distinction between “settler complicity” and “settler privilege” is useful in locating racism against people of colour while also accounting for a differential settler location from racialized subjects marked as white. She states:

When people refer to “settler privilege,” they are referring to the unearned benefits to live and work on Indigenous lands, and to the unequal benefits accrued through citizenship rights within the settler state. However, for people of colour the benefits of being a settler are accrued unevenly. These privileges or social advantages are contingent on things like nationality, class, gender, and migration status. When we account for systemic inequities, underemployment and the racialization of poverty, for most people of colour there are few “benefits” associated with being a settler. Thus, if we follow the logic of a settler/non-settler binary, an argument about people of colour having settler privilege quite easily falls on its face. Many people of colour are settlers without (or with limited) settler privilege. (2012, n.p.)

Since complicity does not circulate in the same ways as privilege, Jafri insightfully argues that rather than approaching settlerhood as an object that subjects possess, it is better understood “as a field of operations into which we become socially positioned and implicated” (2012, n.p.). As Jafri rightly notes, the distinction between settler privilege and settler complicity reformulates the focus from the moral character of non-Indigenous individuals to the strategies and relations that produce social and institutional hierarchies.

Feminist Questions and Anxieties

In outlining these emerging schools of thoughts, I seek to map what is at stake for liberation struggles. Specifically, my assessment of the tensions that have arisen from these fraught debates indicates that at least three questions arise for feminists committed to decolonization and anti-racism across geopolitical and embodied borders:



- How should feminists navigate the sometimes conflicting political goals of being included within the nation-state, dismantling the nation-state as a site of disciplinary and repressive power, organizing at the level of non-state nations, and mobilizing at the transnational level?
- How should feminists respond to considerations of difference between and among gendered racisms and colonialisms that are created and governed by state-based practices and global hegemonies, specifically to account for varying degrees of penalty and privilege in the margins?
- What decolonial obligations arise for non-Indigenous feminists, including feminists of colour with their own colonial and imperial legacies, when living on the traditional lands of Indigenous peoples in this era of patriarchal neoliberalism and white-supremacist-nationalist frames of security and terror?

I contend that these questions require feminists to revisit three key organizing concepts and forms of politics, respectively: transnationalism, intersectionality, and settler colonialism.

Transnationalism

Does the “transnationalism” of transnational feminism foster liberatory agendas or does it inhibit them? Like most political concepts, transnationalism is contested, but two dominant frames seem to have emerged: first, transnationalism “from above,” a process deployed by multinational corporations, financial institutions, global media, and other elite-controlled macro-structural actors seeking to overcome the borders of nation-states for the extension of a neoliberal global market and sometimes with an agenda of universal human rights (Lionnet and Shih 2005, 5-6). Second, transnationalism “from below” describes “the sum of the counterhegemonic operations of the non-elite who refuse assimilation to one given nation-state” (Lionnet and Shih 2005, 6). Some scholars theorize transnationalism beyond this binary of above and below. Lionnet and Shih theorize transnationalism as “the creative interventions that networks of minoritized cultures produce within and across national boundaries” (2005, 7). The transversal movements of culture are, for Lionnet and Shih (2005), about the multiplicity or creolization of minority experiences within and beyond nation-states without the necessary mediation of the centre.

While there is no singular transnational feminist theory, transnational feminisms generally reject “transnationalism from above” and tend to operate instead at the ground-up and/or meso-levels of crossing borders. Transnational feminisms have emphasized the liberatory potential of solidarity across borders of the nation-state and cultural contexts, without assuming a global sisterhood that reifies the First World-Third World dynamic (Mohanty 2003). Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty (1997) state that a feminist transnational approach is:

- 1) a way of thinking about women in similar contexts across the world, in *different* geographical spaces, rather than as *all* women across the world; 2) an understanding of a set of unequal relationships among and between peoples, rather than as a set of traits embodied in all non-U.S. citizens [...]; and 3) a consideration of the term “international” in relation to an analysis of economic, political, and ideological processes that would foreground the operations of race and capitalism. (xix, original emphasis)



Alexander and Mohanty (1997, xii) specifically emphasize that a transnational feminist approach links the local, regional, and national to larger, cross-national processes and that the people, rather than the state, should be the chief agents in defining the global economic and political processes that structure their lives.

While there is some contention among feminists about the relationship between transnational feminism, global feminism, Third World feminism, and postcolonial feminism (for example, see Mendoza 2002 and Herr 2014), in general, transnational feminism is characterized by the following: it is directed by non-elites; it centres the multiplicity of feminisms across national borders; it is critical of the patriarchal and masculinist nation and of western feminisms that presume commonality of oppression; it emphasizes that women from the Global South should have epistemic privilege of their experiences and, in the case of some feminists, the voices of Third World immigrant women in the West are equally important; and it requires historical specificity of different women's social locations. Overall, these feminist interventions into theories and practices of transnationalism have centered around mutually constituting relations of heteropatriarchal, capitalist, racial, and colonial authority, as well as the possibilities of transformative change that arise from feminist practices of resurgence and resistance oriented towards coalitions across borders.

Yet, I contend, even some critical feminist conceptions of transnationalism are subject to colonizing formations that specifically ignore or downgrade Indigenous feminist forms of nationhood, and thus undermine feminist praxis that is attuned to multiple, inter-related oppressions and resurgences. Indeed, as Herr (2014) notes, in contrast to Third World feminisms that tend to be neutral or supportive of some nationalism, some transnational feminists—for example, Grewal and Kaplan (1994; 1999)—claim that all forms of nationalism are inherently oppressive for women. This assumption, I argue, hinges on how we understand nations and the specificities of struggle. I want to foreground two ways that feminists can re-conceptualize transnationalism while also guarding against conceptions of nation that depoliticize and/or erase differing avenues of liberation. Both are place-based, and I theorize them from my particular location as an anti-racist feminist of colour of Sikh origin living in the settler-colonial nation of Canada, whereby my understandings of colonialism are deeply informed by my own family's historical struggle against British colonialism in India and colonial racism against South Asians in Britain (where I grew up) and Canada (where I now reside).

The first feminist re-conceptualization of transnationalism involves an anti-colonial approach to nation. In Canada, struggles over nation necessarily invoke contestation between the sovereignty of the *settler nation-state* (Crown sovereignty) and *Indigenous nations* (Indigenous sovereignties). These competing conceptions of nation operationalize a centre-periphery dynamic and are ontologically incompatible because the nation-state itself is a settler-colonial structure and form of governmentality. As Andrea Smith (2008) states: Whereas nation-states are governed through domination and coercion, indigenous sovereignty and nationhood are predicated on interrelatedness and responsibility. In opposition to nation-states, which are based on control over territory, these visions of indigenous nationhood are based on care and responsibility for land that all can share. (311-312)

In this anti-colonial feminist approach to nation, the nation-state is a site of struggle, but it is also decentered because insurgent and resurgent models of governance do not look to settler nation-states for liberation. This approach also does not see Indigenous men as the root cause of problems facing Indigenous women; rather, the problem is the imposition of colonial heteropatriarchal structures in/as the nation-state.



My claim is that this anti-colonial approach to transnationalism need not be limited to movement across borders of nation-states (i.e., nation-state to nation-state), but can also be put to work to attune our attention to the battleground of the settler-colonial nation-state and Indigenous nationhood in the wider global context of white supremacy and capitalist flows of migration and labour. As Alexander and Mohanty noted in the 1997, the nation-state matters because the state (particularly the postcolonial state) facilitates the transnational movement of capital within national borders and is, therefore, instrumental in the reconfiguring of global relationships; and because capitalism and these processes of recolonization structure the contemporary practices of postcolonial and advanced capitalist/colonial states. (xxiii) Accordingly, an anti-colonial approach to transnationalism requires feminists to undertake two kinds of projects: one, to disrupt the presumed/naturalized legitimacy of heteropatriarchal settler nation-states; and two, to identify linkages across various gendered formations of the nation. For example, we must make links between a critique of transnational corporations that exploitatively extract natural resources on traditional Indigenous territories with state support, global markets that exploit Third World women's labour for the benefit of the West, and Indigenous and women of colour organizing against these modalities of gendered colonialisms and racisms, some of which are grounded in Indigenous conceptions of nationhood. Transnationalism might also be re-conceptualized in a second, decolonial way, so as to shift from the feminist transnationalist tendency to assume that nations (and not just nation-states) need necessarily be transcended. Specifically, rather than conceptualizing transnational relations in terms of nation-states and through a binary of centre-periphery, nationhood can be conceptualized beyond the scope of the state and through a centre-to-centre dynamic of relationality. This conception is a formation of nation that Sharma and Wright ontologically preclude. Here, I am specifically signaling that while transnationalism studies generally has been directed towards the immigrant as the archetypal transnational subject as well as decentering the nation, Indigenous studies, including some Indigenous feminisms, is invested in conceptions of nation rooted in culture, language, and land.

For example, Bauerkemper and Stark (2011) emphasize that Anishinaabe nationhood is inseparable from the people's relationship to and protection of the land, and that transnational relations between Indigenous nations can "cultivate productive obligations toward one another through socio-familial structures that transcend political and territorial lines" (2011, 3). While they indicate some dangers of nationalism, Bauerkemper and Stark locate transnational in the connections and interactions among various Native nations: "In our use, the phrase 'Indigenous transnationalism' describes the linkages, cross-references, and movement of ideas, practices, and obligations between indigenous nations" (2011, 8). This conception of nation is consistent with transnational feminists who emphasize the relationships between marginalized peoples, but it also challenges transnational feminisms that decentre the nation, where relations *between* Indigenous nations are key to facilitating the production and maintenance of Indigenous peoplehood. For Bauerkemper and Stark (2011), Anishinaabe nationhood is intrinsically transnational because cultural practices of diplomacy, intellectual traditions, kinship networks, stories, and customs are rooted in intranational alliances among Anishinaabe peoples and international treaties with other Indigenous nations as well as colonial states. This form of *lateral transnationalism* both challenges the inevitability of settler nation-states and also locates nationhood as a potential site of liberation.

Yet as history has shown, nationalism itself is not free of power. Masculinist and heteropatriarchal forms and practices of nationalism, including anti-colonial nationalisms, have adversely affected cis-women, queer, trans, and two-spirited peoples in different ways (Arvin,



Tuck, and Morrill 2013; Green 2008; Alexander and Mohanty 1997); as such, transnationalist feminists are right to remain suspicious of nationalism and nation-states. However, contrary to Sharma and Wright (2008-9), who contend that it is necessary to free liberation struggles from nationalist discourse, I argue that the specificities of nation and the global have to be contextualized to assess their liberatory potential: nationalism is not intrinsically good or intrinsically bad across all struggles for justice. Intersectionality can serve as a theoretical and political tool to navigate the specificities of subjectivity and subjugation and the specificities of collective action against hegemonies of nation and power. However, this requires intersectionality to go beyond liberal frames of identity and not be limited to legal battles against state agendas.

Intersectionality

Like other research paradigms and political projects, intersectionality is contested and burgeoning (Dhamoon 2011; Hancock 2007; Hankivsky 2014; McCall 2005). An intersectionality-type lens generally refers to “the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axes of differentiation—economic, political cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential—intersect in historically specific contexts” (Brah and Phoenix 2004). An intersectional-type framework starts from the premise that distinctive systems of oppression such as racism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity need each other in order to function; they are co-produced and productive of unequal material realities. Further, individuals and groups can simultaneously experience privilege and disadvantage because of how forces of power intersect and interact (Crenshaw 1991; Collins and Chepp 2013). In addition, this lens foregrounds various standpoints and the relationship between them, so as to underscore that social issues are related (Collins and Chepp 61). Finally, my approach to intersectionality focuses not only on specific intersections/interactions, but also on critiques of what Patricia Hill Collins (2000, 18) calls “the matrix of domination.” The matrix of domination is “the overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained” (Collins 2000, 228-9). As a research paradigm and political tool, intersectionality (or at least some version of this focus on the co-constituting forms of power) has gained wide support among some feminists of colour and Indigenous feminists as a way to counter oppressive and exclusionary forms of white western feminisms that presume a homogenous form of patriarchy and a universal sisterhood.

Yet some feminist theorizing of intersectionality can also elide into dominant frames of politics that generate anxieties about feminist goals and collective action. Here, I build on critiques that illuminate how intersectionality does not always go beyond narrow forms of identity and left-liberal discourse to address issues of class inequity because of its origins in legal discourse, which requires categorization of identities (see Bhandar 2013; Brown 1997; Dhamoon 2011; Monture-Angus 2007; Puar 2007). The preoccupation with intersecting identities (and categories) has, in my view, been at the expense of sustained critical feminist focus on the relations of penalty and privilege within and across national borders. Certainly some nonwhite feminists (Third World feminists, postcolonial feminists, anti-racist feminists, Black feminists, Indigenous feminists, Latina feminists) have identified the importance of differing degrees and forms of penalty and privilege (one need only look to the work of bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Hill Collins, Chandra Mohanty, and Andrea Smith), but differentials of power *among* marginalized peoples has not gained the same prominence as the



fact of intersecting, interlocking, multi-dimensional forms of power and identity. Yet such uneven degrees and forms of penalty and privilege among marginalized subjects are constitutive of a matrix of domination.

To make the connections across different forms of racism and colonialism, feminists can supplement and reconfigure intersectionality by integrating other concepts and tools. One such complementary and expansive concept is that of “cacophony,” developed by Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd (2011) in *Transit of Empire*. Byrd (2011) challenges scholars of postcoloniality and racialization to activate Indigeneity as a condition of possibility in ways that implicate diasporic subjects in the colonization of the Americas (xxxix). Byrd (2011) urges those concerned about racialization and colonization to “cacophonously understand that the historical processes that have created our contemporary moment have affected everyone at various points along their transits with and against empire” (xxxix). Byrd’s (2011) use of cacophony is helpful for a feminist approach to decolonizing anti-racism. She evokes cacophony to counter how “U.S. colonialism and imperialism domestically and abroad often coerces struggles for social justice for queers, racial minorities, and immigrants into complicity with settler colonialism” (Byrd 2011, xvii). Cacophony is an analytical interpretative tool for Byrd, one that can reveal the interstices between dynamic differentiations that function within imperialism at the site of indigenous worlds (2011, 54). She states that we need:

an act of interpretation that decenters the horizontal struggles among peoples with competing claims to historical oppressions. These vertical interactions continually foreground the arrival of Europeans as the defining event within settler societies, consistently place horizontal histories of oppressions into zero-sum struggles for hegemony and distract from the complicities of colonialism and the possibilities for anticolonial actions that emerge outside and beyond the Manichean allegories that define oppression. (Byrd 2011, xxxv)

By vertical struggles, Byrd means the interactions between the colonizers and colonized, and by horizontal interactions she means the different minority oppressions that converge and diverge. Cacophony helps us trace “how colonial discourses have functioned in geographies where there are multiple interactions among the different colonialisms, arrivals, and displacements at work” (Byrd 2011, 67). These different voluntary and forced arrivals and departures of nonwhites are intrinsic and systemic to the settlement of different and differential people of colour on Indigenous lands, which should be a concern for feminists of colour. However, this process of systemic implication is not one-dimensional; that is, the dispossession of Indigenous peoples is not a meta-structure. Thus, further to Byrd, and as intersectionality-type theory and practice reveals, there are multiple co-constituting horizontal struggles of gendering, sexuality and desire, capitalism, and ableism that interact with the cacophony of colonizer-colonized and other minority oppressions. This idea is consistent with Black feminist insights that there are “varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone’s lives” (Collins 1990, 230). This understanding of power is important for at least two reasons for a feminist theory of decolonizing anti-racism. First, because gendered processes of differentiation are inseparable from other systems of colonial and racist domination (and resistance), marginalized peoples are systemically (even if unintentionally) operating within, across, and through a matrix of interrelated forms and degrees of penalty and privilege; a feminist praxis of decolonizing anti-racism must therefore address these systems of power if we seek to disrupt the matrix of domination. Second, there



are power relations between various incarnations of oppressed-oppressor and variations among colonial- and racial-gendered processes of subject formation that have to be central to any liberatory political organizing. As such, a feminist praxis of decolonizing anti-racism cannot obscure one struggle at the expense of others because they mutually (albeit differently) structure white-supremacist capitalist heteronormativities.

An intersectionality-type lens can thus be deployed to emphasize that we are all differently and differentially implicated in the conditions that structure and uphold a matrix of domination. As such, there is a falsity to the idea that any subjects are innocent of exercising power (Fellows and Razack 1998). It is this idea of marginalized peoples being structurally implicated in hegemonies of power that often gets obscured by feminist theorizing of intersectionality. Yet some versions of intersectionality can be put to work to develop a feminist praxis of decolonizing anti-racism. Such praxis has to address how state agents and corporations operationalize various processes and practices of settler colonialism to regulate different Indigenous peoples and people of colour relative to one another, which I address next.

Settler Colonialism

Settler colonialism raises questions about the epistemic and material violences that implicate non-Indigenous peoples in Indigenous dispossession, that is, how feminists of colour (anti-racist feminists, Third World feminists, transnational feminists, postcolonial feminists) might navigate subjectivity and collective action in the context of heteropatriarchal racial capitalism and their concurrent structural (even if unintentional) implication in settler colonialism.

Patrick Wolfe (2006) approaches settler colonialism as a logic and imperative constituted by extermination. He argues that settler colonialism deploys the discourses of race, religion, and civilization—as do colonialism, imperialism, and empire—but the primary motivation for elimination in settler colonialism is access to territory. Territory, Wolfe states, is “settler colonialism’s specific element,” whereby the dissolution of native societies is necessary in order to erect a new colonial society on expropriated land (2006, 388). In the early stages of settler colonialism, both the Industrial Revolution and agricultural development required colonized land and labour as well as military force. As a practice of coming to a land to stay there, Wolfe rightly positions settler colonialism as a structure not an event (2006, 388). In the case of Canada, this structure is naturalized and given legitimacy when European settlers are remade as indigenous to the land, “the original founders.” Further to Wolfe, this particular form of genocide secures land not only through a politics of termination (i.e., literally killing “the Indians”), but also through practices of relocation (e.g., residential schools and reserves) and containment (e.g., forced private ownership of land, requirements to carry “Status Indian” cards).

While transnational, postcolonial, and women of colour feminists have advanced our understandings of coloniality, imperialism, and racialization to identify the gendered, white supremacist, and capitalist dimensions of power beyond foundational denials of settler colonialism by such scholars as Sharma and Wright, the focus on settler colonialism remains under-theorized within mainstream and even women of colour feminisms. Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill (2013) specifically identify five challenges to gender and women’s studies that arise when Native feminism addresses the connections between settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy. First, feminists should not *only* look to inclusion in the models of governance and community that settler nations are founded on (Arvin, Tuck, Morrill 2013, 16); they should



also look toward disrupting Eurocentric systems of creating and managing binary-based gender roles, modern sexuality, and the nuclear family. Feminist projects of decolonizing anti-racism must look beyond legal rights and towards a radical rejection of the nation-state as a site of liberation. Second, beyond including Indigenous women-identified people, inclusion into gender and women's studies and the settler nation-state should be problematized because these sites of struggle are too often based on hierarchies of otherness (Arvin, Tuck, Morrill 2013, 18). Third, feminists need to be proactive in their critiques of settler colonialism and not rely on Indigenous peoples to teach them (Arvin, Tuck, Morrill 2013, 19), which, I suggest, requires feminists to decolonize anti-racism by building alliances without appropriating Indigenous feminist theories or trying to "save" Indigenous women-identified peoples from their supposed Indigenous male oppressors. Fourth, feminisms broadly need to recognize the persistence of Indigenous epistemologies (Arvin, Tuck, Morrill 2013, 21); from my view, this acknowledgement specifically adds to feminist praxis of decolonizing anti-racism because it advances another dimension for challenging constructions of land as extractable capital and denials of Indigenous sovereignty and further invites feminists to transcend the man/nature divide and integrate cosmological, ecological, and spiritual worldviews into theory. Finally, Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill urge women and gender studies scholars to question how this field of study and the academy at large "may participate in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples lands, livelihoods, and futures" (2013, 25); this challenge requires a feminist praxis of decolonizing anti-racism that disrupts the disciplining logics of gendered colonialism and that specifically confronts whose land we are on when we do academic and activist work.

Clearly, feminists must contend with certain anxieties if we want to decolonize anti-racism, specifically in terms of the legitimacy of the nation-state as a site of liberation, the goal of inclusion, epistemological privileges in the mainstream and margins, how to build alliances attuned to power differentials, and how we, as feminists confronting local and global inequities, might benefit from dispossession. Further to Arvin, Tuck, and Morrill, some feminist tools can also serve to attend to these challenges transformatively, even if only partially. In particular, my usage of feminist insights of intersectionality turn attention to the interactive *processes* of dispossession and settler governmentality, whereby settler colonialism is not only a structure but also a process, an activity for assigning political meanings and organizing material structures driven by forces of power. This process-oriented approach emphasizes that the dispossession of lands is temporal and ongoing, dynamic and continuous, and that the productive capacities of settler colonialism function to make and consolidate hierarchies of Otherness (e.g., among gendered people of colour, among Indigenous people, and between people of colour and Indigenous peoples across borders of the nation-state).

In addition, feminist intersectionality-type frames can challenge the reductive elements that presume that settler colonialism is a meta-structure of sorts, and instead focus on global capitalist colonialisms that construct and organize gendered subjects differently. This reconceptualization in some ways addresses Sharma and Wright's criticism that there are variations in migratory journeys and arrivals; however, my argument starts from the position that Indigenous peoples have a unique sovereign connection to land and territory. Moreover, from a decolonizing anti-racist feminist perspective, settler colonialism too is subject to an interlocking effect, as social formations of domination are not singularly reducible. Settler colonialism is not a meta-structure; however, when viewed as such, it becomes a system that is deemed to determine all other relationships and ideas, including its culture, institutions, rituals, and governing structures, such that formations of capitalism, imperialism, sexuality, and



patriarchy are seen as derivative of this meta-structure rather than as co-constituted and varied in operation and effect.

A feminist account of intersecting forces of power can be deployed to illuminate that settler colonialism is a) composed of a series of structures and processes, and b) also part of a series of structures of domination or a matrix of domination, rather than a meta-structure of sorts. In other words, settler colonialism is both generative of and generated by intersecting and interactive forces of power. Intersectionality foregrounds the multiple intersecting manifestations, mechanisms, and adjoining socio-political processes of settler colonialism, including land dispossession and repossession, patriarchy, ableism, heteronormativity, capital accumulation, and white supremacy. In foregrounding the multiplicity and interconnectedness of varying degrees and forms of difference, a more complex conception of settler colonialism emerges. The stability of settler colonialism as a natural, stand-alone, one-dimensional, primary structure is decentered while still centering a critique of the work of power, including the gendered dispossession of Indigenous lands and sexist neoliberal and neo-racist migratory structures and processes. In short, the mechanisms and effects of settler colonialism are always-already intersectional, which must be reflected in feminist conceptions of coloniality and racism.

The implications of this interconnectedness are significant for a feminist praxis of decolonizing anti-racism across nation-state borders. Precisely because oppressions are interconnected, collective action has to confront multiple dimensions of the matrix of domination simultaneously, including how different migratory processes and colonialisms serve hegemonies of state-based nation-building and global systems of capitalism. Furthermore, collective organizing necessitates alliances and coalitions, not only across groups and issues, but also *within* groups, precisely because there are varying forms and degrees of power at play in the margins as well as between various relational centres and peripheries. In addition, there must be active refusal of the Oppression Olympics in which groups compete for the mantle of the most oppressed (e.g., genocide against Indigenous peoples versus migratory processes between the Global South and Global North) because this ultimately consolidates tactics, discourses, and institutions of domination.

Conclusion: A Feminist Approach to Decolonizing Anti-Racism Across Borders

I have identified some key anxieties that feminists must confront in decolonizing anti-racism in the current context of global neoliberalism. Specifically, *transnationalism* prompts urgent issues about how to navigate gendered, capitalist, colonial global forces of neoliberalism and racism, settler formations of the nation-state, and non-state forms of nationalism simultaneously. *Intersectionality* provokes issues of whether the gender-race-class mantra will be displaced to account for colonialism “in the margins.” Yet we must ask how far intersectionality can seriously go beyond narrow forms of identity and left-liberal discourse to address heteropatriarchal, racist, and colonial forms of class inequity across and within geopolitical borders and, I would add, other systems of discipline that remain under-theorized, such as ableism. *Settler colonialism* raises questions about the epistemic and material violences that implicate non-Indigenous peoples in Indigenous dispossession, and how feminists of colour (Third World feminists in western and non-western places, transnational feminists, postcolonial feminists, and anti-racist feminists) might navigate subjectivity and collective



action in the context of colonial formations of heteropatriarchal, racial capitalism and concurrent systemic implications in settler colonialism.

There are, however, tools within some strands of feminist theory and practice that can help navigate the above issues in order to address the anxieties that inevitability arise in decolonizing anti-racism. Specifically, by putting critical anti-racist, feminist, and Indigenous perspectives into conversation with one another, I have proposed that a feminist praxis of decolonizing anti-racism can mitigate the depoliticization of critical concepts and hegemonic agendas by re-conceptualizing and integrating key insights of transnationalism, intersectionality, and settler colonialism. This intervention indicates the following political praxis:

Transnationalism

- Actively intervene in the contestation between the sovereignty of the nation-state and Indigenous nations, while confronting different gendered racisms;
- Support anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist lateral transnationalisms that go beyond the nation-state and a centre-periphery dynamic.

Intersectionality-type frameworks

- Disrupt the interacting multiplicities of gendered racisms and colonialisms that aggregately consolidate white supremacy, colonialism, racism, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism through such systems as migration and settler colonialism;
- Disrupt the cacophonies of power that interact across subjects and local and global contexts in the service of consolidating and extending a matrix of domination;
- Confront the systems of implication in which interactive modes of domination organize marginalized subjects through relative and relational forms and degrees of penalty and privilege.

Settler colonialism

- Be open to the rejection of the nation-state as a feminist site of liberation;
- Build alliances by learning and actively engaging with multiple struggles across hegemonic borders of gender, sexuality and desire, race, coloniality, labour, dis/ability, the movement of bodies, capital, territory, and land;
- Question the presumed ontologies and epistemologies that frame practices of liberation and goals of collective organizing, including the divide between human and non-human life forms;
- Confront the temporality of various gendered colonialisms across space and recognize the continuity of settler dispossession as a site of patriarchal, imperial governance that is connected to past and present colonialisms, both locally and globally;
- Be responsible towards the interconnectedness of struggles at local, national, and transnational levels and the differences within and across social categories, including women of colour, Third World women, and Indigenous women.

These are guiding principles for a feminist praxis of decolonizing anti-racism, rather than a checklist. Precisely because a matrix of domination is constantly shifting, appropriated, and being re-made in response to various centres of power and the resistances of denigrated peoples, feminists will inevitably collapse into depoliticizing and hegemonic frameworks, for we cannot confront all aspects of the matrix at the same time. This pitfall should not make us despondent,



but should instead confirm that different kinds of critical feminisms can and should undertake different political projects that take seriously transnational, intersectional-type, and settler-colonial forces of power across geopolitical, spatial, temporal, material, and embodied borders.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark for reading the paper and providing insightful and reassuring comments. Thanks also to the organizers of the symposium on “Negotiating Feminist Perspectives: Intersectionality, Transnationality, and Decoloniality” in the Women’s and Gender Studies Department at Syracuse University, where an earlier version of this paper was presented.

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feral feminisms

**Complicities, Connections, & Struggles:
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of Settler Colonialism**

issue 4 · summer 2015

*A Feminist Approach to Decolonizing Anti-Racism:
Rethinking Transnationalism, Intersectionality,
and Settler Colonialism*
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