

Thinking Through Anti-Racism and Indigeneity in Canada

Enakshi Dua

As we – anti-racist activists and people of colour – witness the daily struggles of First Nations people for recognition of treaties, control over indigenous lands, the right to education, health, housing and employment, and the struggle for sovereignty, the question that faces many of us is how we can support such activism. “People of colour”, those racialized as minorities, is a contested concept. While the term reinscribes racial and national categories that are socially constructed, limitations in linguistic resources often makes it difficult to avoid using such categories for analytical purposes. Increasingly, over the past five years anti-racist activists have identified the struggles of First Nations people as an important site for anti-racist activism. Such activism is encouraging as for many decades anti-racist scholars and activists had often ignored First Nations struggles. Such activism is also crucial as without active engagement with the struggles of First Nations peoples the project of anti-racism remains an incomplete project (see Lawrence and Dua, 2005). I will argue in this article, however, that engaging with First Nations struggles is not a simple process, and requires further thinking through, critical dialogue and political action.

Particularly problematic is that most often our engagement with First Nations struggles is based on a politics of commonality – that as people who have been racialized as outsiders to the imaginary of the nation, as “minorities”, or as the “other”, people of colour share a common experience of racism with First Nations peoples. While such feeling of commonality can reflect a genuine commitment to address the ways in which First Nations people continue to be colonized, at the same time, such notions of solidarity can work to undermine indigenous struggles. First, such undifferentiated claims of solidarity erase the particular ways in which First Nations people face racism – through the processes of ongoing colonization (see Lawrence and Dua, 2005). Secondly, such claims of commonality erase the differences between how people of colour have been racialized and how First Nations peoples have been colonized. Third, understanding the historical and contemporary differences between the processes of racialization and the processes on colonization requires addressing the thorny issue of how people of colour have been positioned as settlers. Importantly, claims of

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solidarity erase the ways in which people of color have been positioned as settlers with a “white” settler nationalist project. As a result, I would suggest that we need to carefully examine the way in which people of colour to identify, ally and take part in First Nations movements. I fear that by not doing so we reinforce the ongoing colonization.

Recognizing that people of colour also occupy the position of settlers within this geographic space that has come to be Canada can be unsettling for people of colour. How can people of colour be considered settlers in a nationalist project that has so profoundly been constructed through a politics of whiteness? Does the recognition that people of colour also embody the status of settlers, in turn, erase the way in which they have experienced such profound racism in Canada? Do people of colour not share the historical experiences of colonization – especially those groups that were enslaved? Indeed, the ways in which people of colour have historically and continue to experience racism is profound. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century Black and Asian-Canadians were prohibited from migrating to Canada, denied citizenship, the ability to purchase property, to have access to publicly funded education. Their labour was super exploited to “build” railways, agriculture, fishing, forestry etc. People of colour continue to experience profound and debilitating racism including increased likelihood to experience poverty, discrimination in the labour force, lower wages, discrimination in health and education, and racial profiling. My point is not to diminish the profound significance of such racism. Rather it is to suggest that we need to build an anti-racist project that does not undermine First Nations struggles. Being true allies requires thinking through the way in which people of colour are positioned, and must be accountable, within a white settler nationalist project.

I would like to give three examples of the complicated ways in which people of colour occupy the liminal position of settlers within Canada. First, is through the way in which our lives take place on stolen land. As Bonita Lawrence has pointed out, decolonizing Canada begins by acknowledging “land theft and dispossession” (Lawrence, 2002). As an inhabitant of Canada, I live in and own land that has been appropriated from First Nations peoples through both exploitative treaties as well as non-treaty land. The schools that I attended, that my child attends, the community centers, hospitals, stores, beaches, vacation spots, roads, airports that I use are on

a complex web of treaty and non-treaty land. Let's take the example of the Greater Toronto Area, the space in which I reside. Currently, an Ontario native band has asked the federal government to compensate it for property that includes the City of Toronto. This land claim stretches back to 1787 when one of King George III's representatives claimed to have signed a treaty at the Bay of Quinte with the Mississaugas. The British government claimed that the Mississauga's surrendered all their land north of Lake Ontario. However, the deed remained unsigned, and was later revealed to be a blank deed to which were attached the totems of three of the Chiefs. In 1805, the land was re-surveyed and a new deed drawn up and the Crown again approached the Mississaugas nation. At this time, the king's men offered 10 shillings – or 120 pennies – for roughly 100,000 hectares, property that currently covers all of Toronto and part of its suburbs.

The Mississaugas, who now live on a 2,400-hectare reserve west of Toronto, point out that the land was never properly surrendered. Bryan Laforme, chief of the New Credit First Nation, has asked the Canadian government to fulfill its legal responsibility by settling this land claim. Band councillor, Sandra Bonham has pointed out that such compensation would be used to improve life on the reserve, such as employment, education and housing. Notably this same situation is replayed all over Canada. Thus, as people of colour we need to address how our lives upon these lands are predicated on the processes of disruption, violence, and dispossession instigated by French and British colonists. For anti-racist activists this requires thinking through how people of colour are embedded in Canadian colonialism.

A second example of how people of colour are implicated as settlers involves thinking about the way in which citizenship rights are deployed. For people of colour who have citizenship, they have rights and privileges that have been denied to First Nations peoples collectively, and such rights have been deployed to deny First Nations rights to self government. Let me give an important example. In 1991, those with citizenship rights participated in constitutional reform referred as the Charlottetown Accord. The Accord, which was the result of ongoing talks around constitutional reform, especially as it relates to Quebec as a distinct society and to the self-government of First Nations peoples, was defeated in a national referendum in 1992. The Charlottetown Accord proposed constitutional changes that contained important features for First Nations peoples: recognition of First Nations

governments as a third order of government in Canada, a definition of self-government in relation to land, the environment, language, and culture, as well as representation in the Senate. Although the Accord was the result of years of negotiations between First Nations leaders and the Canadian government, the government had these changes ratified through a national referendum.

In essence, all Canadian citizens, including people of colour, were invited to decide on whether the Canadian government should honour its commitments to First Nations peoples. We do not know how or even whether, people of colour voted with respect to the Accord. that denied efforts on the part of First Nations peoples to fundamentally reshape Canada's approach to decolonization. However, this illustrates the complexities for people of colour living in a settler society, and the ways in which they become implicated as citizens in the ongoing colonization of First Nations peoples. Those with citizenship rights in Canada were in a position to make decisions on First Nations sovereignty, which should have been made by First Nations peoples. Most importantly, antiracist groups failed to note this, and to offer a counter political strategy.

My last example of how people of colour are implicated in the ongoing colonization of First Nations people refer more to anti-racist activists and scholars. Through much struggle we have produced a body of knowledge that deconstructs the nation and challenges racism. However, a survey of much of this body of work illustrates that rarely do anti-racist scholars and activists include the ongoing colonization of First Nations people. And on the rare occasion where they do, such accounts fail to acknowledge the differences between the processes of racism and the project of ongoing colonization (see Lawrence and Dua, 2005). Let me take examples from my own writings. In 1999, I edited a collaborative book project, in which a number of anti-racist feminist scholars explored the intersections of 'race' and gender. At the time, I felt that we were doing a good task of centering First Nations issues. We began the anthology by examining the ways in which First Nations women had been historically racialized and gendered. There was another article that examined questions of First Nations self-government. In looking back I would suggest that we failed to make the ongoing colonization of First Nations people foundational to the text. We did not ask those who wrote on work, trade unions, immigration, citizenship, family etc, to

examine how these institutions/relationships were influenced by colonization. While more recently I have turned to cultural theory, critical race theory and post-colonial studies, my fear is that these approaches also fail to also fail to center the ongoing colonization of First Nations peoples. As a result, these bodies of knowledge are framed in ways that contribute to the active colonization of First Nations peoples (for an elaboration of this argument see Lawrence and Dua, 2005).

Acknowledging these aspects does not mean that we need to erase our own histories and struggles with racism. Clearly our access to land, citizenship and knowledge production is precarious. Nor does it imply that Blacks, Chinese-Canadians, Japanese-Canadians, South Asians-Canadians, Muslim-Canadians etc are all settlers in the same way. Clearly for those racialized as “minorities” our relationship to land, property, consumption, space, citizenship and knowledge production in Canada is shaped by different histories of racism, class, gender, ability and sexual orientation. However, it does mean that we need to engage with anti-racism differently. We need to centre decolonization within anti-racism. The first step is to begin to unravel the way in which we are part of the process the ongoing project of colonization. This, in turn, requires that we engage with First Nations activism differently. This involves listening and learning from First Nations leaders. Only then can we become meaningful allies.

Enakshi Dua is an associate professor of women's studies at York University in Ontario, Canada. Email: edua@yorku.ca.

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