

## Notes Regarding Difficult Knowledge, from One Settler to Other Settlers (On US Imperialism and Settler Colonialism in Hawai‘i)\*

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Colonialism is not a type of individual relation but the conquest of a national territory and the oppression of a people: that is all.

Frantz Fanon<sup>1</sup>

We draw a distinction between *Portuguese colonialism* and *Portuguese settlers* just as we draw a distinction between a cart and its wheels. A cart cannot run without wheels. Colonialism cannot function without settlers.

Amilcar Cabral<sup>2</sup>

Aloha. I am a *sansei* whose grandfather journeyed to Hawai‘i in 1898 from Iwate Prefecture in northern Japan. After the nation’s unifier Tokugawa Ieyasu seized the Ōsaka Castle in the early 1600s, my ancestors fled Ōsaka and settled in the Iwate area where they lived for 400 years. Prior to that they lived in the Ōsaka area for hundreds of generations. My genealogical heritage in Japan is long, while it consists of only 5 generations in Hawai‘i. In comparison, the Hawaiian Islands and the continental land mass now called the United States are the genealogical homeland to Native Hawaiians, Alaska Natives, and Native Americans. These peoples have lived in these areas for thousands of years in communities and nations. When my ancestors arrived, they entered a colonial space. Today is no different—we, who do not have Hawaiian ancestry, remain settlers (non-Hawaiians) in the islands’ colonial space. The

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<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Toward an African Revolution: Political Essays*, trans. by Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 81.

<sup>2</sup> Amilcar Cabral, “Message to the Portuguese Settlers in Guinea and Cape Verde,” in *Unity and Struggle: Speeches and Writings*, trans. Michael Wolfers (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), 160-162.

United States continues to occupy Hawai'i and portions of the North American continent in violation of international laws and against the consent of Native nations.

This article, including my genealogy, was originally a presentation for a panel discussion organized by the Leeward Community College's (Leeward CC) Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) committee in November 2023. The event's purpose was to reach out to settler faculty and staff to talk about US imperialism and settler colonialism as a way to understand the role of settlers in "Indigenizing the college." Leeward CC is part of the ten-campus, public-university system of the University of Hawai'i (UH) where one of the system's strategic imperatives is to "Indigenize the university."<sup>3</sup> However, a problem with this initiative is the misconception settlers have of the United States as a "democratic, immigrant nation" rather than a settler colonial one. This print version reproduces my original presentation with its focus on Leeward CC but also explores the implications of settler colonialism for our work as educators elsewhere in Hawai'i. I also place key terms in bold to emphasize their importance.

#### To My Settler Colleagues at Leeward CC

My hope is that this essay will offer tools for a more insightful analysis of contemporary Hawai'i. Using the terms US imperialism and settler colonialism will give a global understanding of our lives and jobs as community-college faculty and staff, historically framed by the 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom by the US military. Whether we work in our classrooms or offices, these terms help locate ourselves in these islands such that we can recognize our true role in "Indigenizing the college." Yes, we have specific responsibilities in this project: Hawaiians have their tasks of nation-building and cultural and language revival, while we settlers have our own duties to perform. However, before engaging in these roles, we need to

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<sup>3</sup> University of Hawai'i, [Strategic Plan, 2023-2029: Hawai'i's University for Today and Tomorrow](#) (accessed on October 24, 2023)

familiarize ourselves with imperialism and settler colonialism: how the political identities of “Indigenous” and “settler” are tied to this historic event 130 years ago.

### Difficult Knowledge

The settling of the US West is not an easy topic to discuss when examining the violence committed against Indigenous peoples and their national lands, as well as the impact those actions have upon our contemporary society. Educator Deborah Britzman coined a term called **difficult knowledge** to describe those moments and their implications. She defines difficult knowledge as

The study of experiences and the traumatic residuals of genocide, ethnic hatred, aggression, and **forms of state-sanctioned—and hence legal—social violence**. The study of another’s painful encounter with victimization, aggression, and the desire to live on one’s own terms.<sup>4</sup>

Hence, difficult knowledge includes “state-sanctioned” events/histories and their aftermaths that we struggle to accept. Who wants to believe that their government did not have their or their fellow countrymen’s interests at heart, when that state passed a genocidal law to benefit certain groups and damage others, and when the repercussions from that law would last for decades and centuries (unless changed)? Hence, that law and its impacts become difficult knowledge. For most of us US settlers, we do not want to recognize that our government committed illegal acts to establish itself. Difficult knowledge is troublesome for both sides. The beneficiaries of a genocidal law will not want to see how they have benefited from its passage, and the victims may not want to see how the law was passed for their demise.

### Difficult Knowledge: US Imperialism

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Dion is a Canadian Indigenous scholar (Leni Lanape-Potawatami) citing Britzman in her article, Susan D. Dion, “(Re)telling to Disrupt: Aboriginal People and Stories of Canadian History,” *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 59 (my emphasis).

US imperialism is difficult knowledge for most Americans because we have been ideologically educated to believe the United States is a benevolent, democratic, and free society. Just as importantly, we are taught that our country was established on the “empty lands” of North America. However, any research will tell you that this perspective does not accurately describe the United States and its history.

To understand US imperialism, we need to first define imperialism, for which I’m summarizing the work of various scholars and activists in the field. **Imperialism** is

the process whereby the dominant politico-economic interests of one nation expropriate for their own enrichment the land, labor, raw materials, and markets of another people.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, imperialism is the economic and military competition between powerful nations to dominate the globe and control other countries:

In the act of imperialism, the invading nation violates the sovereignty of the other country and its people. The right of all peoples to be self-determining is part of the International Bill of Human Rights<sup>6</sup>

**US imperialism** is the foundational idea or the centerpiece of US foreign policy. In the creation of our country, the United States seized Indigenous peoples’ national lands to establish its own national land base. Without occupying Native lands, the United States of America cannot exist. Land is a fundamental requirement to establish any nation.

Of note here is that imperialism is a one-sided relationship that benefits only the dominant country. The act of imperialism not only violates the sovereignty of the invaded country, but it undermines the ability to establish a global democracy among nations.

US imperialism functions in this one-sided manner. The United States has signed 374 treaties with Native nations. Treaties are only signed when the signatory entities recognize each other as sovereign independent nations. Yet the United States violated these treaties by

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Parenti, *Against Empire*, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995), 1.

<sup>6</sup> The International Bill of Human Rights is composed of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*; *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*; and *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*.

invading Native nations and taking Indigenous national lands.<sup>7</sup> The same is true in the case of Hawai'i. Four treaties had been signed between the United States and the Hawaiian Kingdom. However, the US military overthrew its ally and friend, the Hawaiian Kingdom, in 1893, to secure a post in the Pacific to remain competitive against the Europeans for control of Oceania and Asia.

### Difficult Knowledge: Settler Colonialism

Colonialism follows the actions of imperialism. It is a political and social structure that ensures that the invading country maintains control over its confiscated new land. Key to grasping how this structure operates is the distinction between classic colonialism and settler colonialism as explained in the work of Patrick Wolfe and other scholars.<sup>8</sup> They evaluate **classic colonialism** as the imposition of a foreign country's infrastructure (social, political, economic, cultural systems) upon another people's land base, homeland or nation to exploit the latter's resources and its people for the benefit of the foreign country. Examples of classic colonialism include British India, the Spanish Philippines and later the American Philippines, and the Belgium Congo.

This body of scholarship also identifies **settler colonialism** as occurring when settlers (foreigners) create politically sovereign orders over another people's ancestral lands/national territories without their consent. Settlers make the foreign land their own home/state and therefore erase the idea of the Indigenous peoples as the rightful owners of the land (often

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<sup>7</sup> National Museum of the American Indian, "[Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations](#)," *Smithsonian* (accessed on 20 Oct. 2023).

<sup>8</sup> See writings by Patrick Wolfe (endnote no. 11), and Lorenzo Veracini (endnote no. 11).

through genocide).<sup>9</sup> Examples of settler colonialism are the United States, New Zealand, Australia, Israel, and parts of Russia and China.

The difference between classic colonialism and settler colonialism is that classic colonialism involves a cyclical process. There is a temporality to the operation because when it is over, the colonizer returns home. In contrast, settler colonialism is a linear process.<sup>10</sup> Settlers in a colony have no plans to go back to their homeland. Returning is considered a failure. Australian scholar Wolfe summarized this project the best: “Settler colonizers come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event.”<sup>11</sup>

Wolfe further fleshed out the meaning of “come to stay” with a term he coined as the **logic of elimination**.<sup>12</sup> This phrase refers to the erasure or removal of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands so the new settler government can exist. It comprises a removal in order to replace what previously existed. Wolfe argues that the logic of elimination is the organizing principle in settler societies. This means that the idea of erasure is embedded in every settler society’s social institution. For example, the United States recategorized Indigenous peoples to become *ethnic* groups (not global political bodies belonging to nations). Internationally, however, Indigenous peoples have the right of self-determination and thus possess a national identity. Ethnic groups do not have this same right. Even though the United States calls Hawaiians and Native Americans “Indigenous,” under colonization, the US settler government does not treat them as colonized citizens of nations.

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<sup>9</sup> Article II of the UN’s *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* defines genocide as any “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” A group does not have to be annihilated to be considered genocide. Five points are listed in Article II under genocide including “mental harm” or “deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.”

<sup>10</sup> Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2010), 99.

<sup>11</sup> Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4, (December 2006): 388.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 387-409.

A few examples of the logic of elimination in the United States include the idea of “empty land” (that no one lived on the lands prior to the Europeans), or “manifest destiny” (that the lands were “divinely” given to the settlers). Even the commodification or presentation of Indigenous cultural practices or artwork can be part of the logic of elimination if it obfuscates the idea of a national identity. In Hawai‘i, hula is the national dance of the Hawaiian nation and needs to be respected just as the ballet of Russia constitutes its national dance.

Both Hawai‘i’s 1898 “annexation” and its 1959 Statehood vote resulted from this logic of elimination. It allows the United States to use the islands’ strategic geo-political value for its own purposes. For example, the 1898 annexation of Hawai‘i allowed the US to violate its domestic laws by lowering the required Congressional vote count needed to make Hawai‘i a territory of the United States. Furthermore, the 1959 Statehood vote violated international laws by offering only one choice (inclusion in the United States, whether in the form of remaining a US territory, or becoming a US state), rather than offering the three voting options of independence, free association, and integration. In addition, all Americans who lived on the islands were allowed to vote, rather than limiting the right to vote to those who lost their nation (Hawaiian Kingdom citizens and their descendants).

### Now What?

Because the United States has not done anything to address the abrogation of Native national lands, where does this leave us? We have no choice but to continue to live in a settler-colonial society. Our state of Hawai‘i and the University of Hawai‘i system which includes Leeward Community College are settler-colonial institutions where the logic of elimination shapes our guiding and working documents.

Settler colonialism is considered an important term and a clarifying concept for it signifies the presence of US imperialism in the islands. It locates our relationship to the lands we live on. This means Hawaiians who are Indigenous are living on their ancestral lands while

settlers are not. We would be traumatized if this same type of displacement (enabled by settler colonialism) occurred to our families on our ancestral homelands elsewhere in the world. So for settlers, acknowledging the United States as a settler-colonial state will not put us in conflict with the decisions of our great-grandparents, grandparents, and/or parents who left oppressive conditions in other parts of the world for political and economic “opportunities” in America. They sacrificed for our “betterment,” and we admire and respect their courage to leave their homeland and stake out a new life in a foreign land. However, we must make a distinction between honoring our families’ courageous decisions to relocate and recognize how this relocation took place within an American settler system. There is no family dishonor in admitting that the “American Dream” is in fact a predatory dream and reality. Our gain has been accomplished at the expense of another peoples’ ancestral lands.

#### Indigenizing and Decolonizing Leeward CC

We cannot undo the past. Nor do we have the skills and resources to overturn the state of Hawai‘i government in the present moment, even if we had the inclination to do so. However, we can use our knowledge of US imperialism and settler colonialism to understand contemporary Hawai‘i and the implications of this political structure in our everyday lives. The crimes of the state do not have to be our crimes if we work to mitigate the violence committed against Hawaiians and their lands.

I am sure when participating in various committees or work situations, settlers have wondered why Hawaiians raise issues that seem to demand more privileges for themselves and less for other ethnic groups. The reality is that they are testifying to the presence of settler colonialism in our institutions and to how these structures are continually erasing their national culture and voices. We settlers who have benefited from the predatory colonial structures cannot always see the violence committed against Hawaiians, because our groups are not the



targeted people. We don't have ancestral lands here in the islands that the United States covets for its own gain.

Hawaiians have asked us repeatedly to learn their history and support their initiatives. So what does "Indigenizing the college" mean? Isn't it the responsibility of Hawaiians to tell us what to do? From my settler perspective and my perspective alone, the answer is yes and no:

Yes, Hawaiians will Indigenize the college through their physical presence (faculty, staff, students) and through increasing the hire of Hawaiians in all areas. Their mere presence will attract Hawaiian students. They will determine how their culture and cultural values will be used in this college setting and if and when they are appropriate.

No, Hawaiians are not obligated to keep educating us over and over again, because we remain clueless to the larger structure of settler colonialism. We must put in the intellectual effort to understand the difficult knowledge of US imperialism and settler colonialism in Hawai'i. We do not want to be actively or willfully ignorant of difficult knowledge in these islands.

For settlers, we have a two-part task which happens simultaneously, by learning and doing:

- 1) Our responsibility is to educate ourselves about settler colonialism and to recognize it and the logic of elimination in our state apparatuses.
- 2) Our obligation is to decolonize the university system through altering/tweaking governing policies. This is equity work on the nation-state level so we can create a more humane and ethical world for Hawaiians...and for ourselves.

For example, what can we do to create spaces and resources so Hawaiian faculty and staff can do what they need to do? Please note that our Hawaiian colleagues are not just working on uplifting our college. For many of them, their primary responsibility is to uplift their people as a nation. They are doing this all within a settler-colonial structure that is simultaneously working to erase them as a nation. As settlers, we do not carry that heavy weight. Even if Hawaiians decide not to do anything for Leeward CC, we settlers still have the obligation to alter the colonial institutions and system to support the vision of Hawaiians. After all, we are residing on Hawaiians' ancestral lands and benefiting from their loss.

To clarify an important point about settler colonialism, settlers cannot decolonize themselves because we are not colonized here in Hawai'i. The United States has not taken our ancestral lands in these islands. We may be oppressed, but not colonized. Only Indigenous

Hawaiians can decolonize themselves in this place, because they are the only people whose ancestral lands were taken in these islands which are now occupied by the United States. However, we as settlers can work to decolonize colonial institutions like the educational institutions where many of us are employed.

(A caveat: in our zeal to participate in correcting wrongs, we must be careful that we do not re-colonize or reinforce the present colonial power strategies with shiny new words like “Indigenizing” and “de-colonizing” without understanding how they can be misunderstood and misused by ourselves as settlers. It takes a commitment to educate ourselves about difficult knowledge in the islands and the implications of settler power in our lives.)<sup>13</sup>

### Facing Difficult Knowledge: A Deeper Dive

Since the presentation of this paper at Leeward CC in November 2023, the EDI committee organized a follow-up “unlearning” committee where faculty and staff discuss settler-colonial issues and learn more about their settler roles in “Indigenizing the college.” One of the difficulties in sustaining meaningful conversations is the need to continually examine the ways in which difficult knowledge and its traumatic residuals have shaped our lives. Settlers must recognize that we have been ideologically educated by the United States to believe our country is a nation of immigrants. This includes the claim that we have the right to be here on these lands and just as importantly, that a benevolent, democratic, free US society has welcomed us here (however grudgingly). We must “unlearn” the lessons of a “nation of immigrants” because we all know that the Native nations and peoples of these lands never invited us to live on them.

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<sup>13</sup> See Simon Barber’s review of *Imagining Decolonisation*, an anthology on decolonization in Aotearoa (New Zealand). In his review, Barber “thinks alongside” the book’s contributors (including Moana Jackson) and their work to create “new concepts” for decolonization in Aotearoa. They argue in different ways that it is not about replacing Pākehā (settler) with Māori (Indigenous) using the same colonial structure. Rather the idea is to move toward a new way of doing things where Māori people are acknowledged as the people of the land and their knowledge base of doing things is respected. Of course this means the Pākehā need to acknowledge “usurping authority and imposing a way of doing things alien to this place and its indigenous people.” Simon Barber, “Imagining Beyond Decolonization,” [Counterfutures: Left Thought and Practice Aotearoa 10](#), (2020): 156-167. (accessed on March 15, 2024)

When I was first researching settler colonialism, Hawaiian sovereignty leader and intellectual, the late Haunani-Kay Trask, advised me to read the works by revolutionaries in other regions of the world (Asia, Africa, Middle East, Latin America) so I would begin to understand that Indigenous peoples are fighting against colonialism. Their issues are characteristically different from the settler problem of oppression (race, class, gender) within the United States. For Native peoples living within the United States, their struggles against a settler-colonial nation can be classified as a state-to-state relationship. No matter how small or large the Indigenous issues are (restoring lands, obtaining educational scholarships, or finding adequate housing), those matters involve problems caused by one nation dominating another.

In contrast, the oppression that settlers experience are internal matters within the state. Addressing and resolving such “domestic” issues as race, class, and gender oppression are never linked to the existence of the United States as a nation, nor do we express doubt about its legitimacy. As settlers, we often challenge domestic policies and even foreign policies, but we rarely raise objections about the establishment of the country itself. After all, the United States welcomed many of us. Hence, if settlers embrace the United States as a “nation of immigrants,” there is an implicit agreement that ignores its imperialist origins and misdeeds toward Native peoples. Those predatory actions are re-imagined within the immigrant national narrative where they are acceptable and accepted. For example, we buy into the historical simplification that the pilgrims and early European settlers in the US continent were merely searching for new lands so as to set the foundations for a democratic and free society. Thus, the continuance of the US imperialist state and all of its past and current crimes are rarely disputed by settlers.

Facing difficult knowledge can be overwhelming especially when we first learn about US imperialism and settler colonialism. However, focusing critically on the national narrative of a “nation of immigrants” can help bring clarity to the problem or at least point to why some settlers are not sympathetic to Native struggles within the United States. National narratives are state ideologies in the form of the stories that our leaders and society’s elites tell us about who

we are and how to think about issues. These national narratives serve to justify the actions of the state and/or public and private leadership, whether the stories are true or not. As settlers in the US, we are trained to embrace the romance of a nation of immigrants, because that idea explains why we are here and how we are not to blame. When using this ideological story, there is rarely a reference to Native peoples or the confiscation of their lands for our gains.

Fortifying this story of a nation of immigrants are concepts such as democracy, equality, and more recently, multiculturalism and equity. These powerful ideas distract our attention and imagination away from the taking of Indigenous land to concepts about equal rights and privileges for all. When Americans work to help those who are disenfranchised, it is always to “bring them up” to the level of everyone else. Never to supersede the majority but to always remain on an equal footing with the rest of society.

I am not saying that democracy, equality, multiculturalism, and equity are not important. However, when they are employed as weapons to obfuscate the predatory acts of US imperialism and settler colonialism, then those lofty goals function as predatory tools to keep settlers distracted and Indigenous peoples colonized.

For example, the hiring of a faculty position in academia is always fraught with conflicts for many reasons. When Indigenous peoples advocate for an Indigenous position within an institution or department, settlers often think “but we just hired an Indigenous person with the last hire. Why do they want another faculty member?” Settlers are judging the request for another Native faculty as asking for more than their fair share. Equality and multiculturalism inevitably guide settler thinking against Indigenous interests (“we just hired one, we don’t need another”). However, when using the analysis of settler colonialism, one can easily see that Indigenous faculty are fighting for the survival of their people, culture, and knowledge base. It is a small way to begin addressing the huge loss of their nations. They would not be fighting so hard if we settlers, were not living on their ancestral land. In contrast, when settlers push for more diverse faculty of color and gender, our issues are to gain more rights and representation

for our groups within the institution of higher education. It is not about our survival as a people, culture, and nation.

Therefore, settlers need to understand how the seemingly benign nation of immigrants narrative is in fact serving as an instrument of war against Indigenous peoples who are colonized within the United States. Supporting Indigenous peoples has nothing to do with “raising” people to the level of equality or equity. That is the wrong way to understand or analyze the power structure in the US. To erode US imperialism and settler colonialism, it is not about who is up or down but about restoring Indigenous peoples’ lands and their way of life as they see fit. If they need five faculty positions or more, let’s work within our system to accomplish this. In the end, it is about recognizing the predatory interests of the imperialist United States and our obligation as settlers to counter the settler colonial system because it is the right thing to do if we want to live in a better world for all. It is about acknowledging the crimes of the state and not allowing them to be perpetrated as justifiable acts. But this can only happen if we work to counter US imperialism and settler colonialism. Thank you.